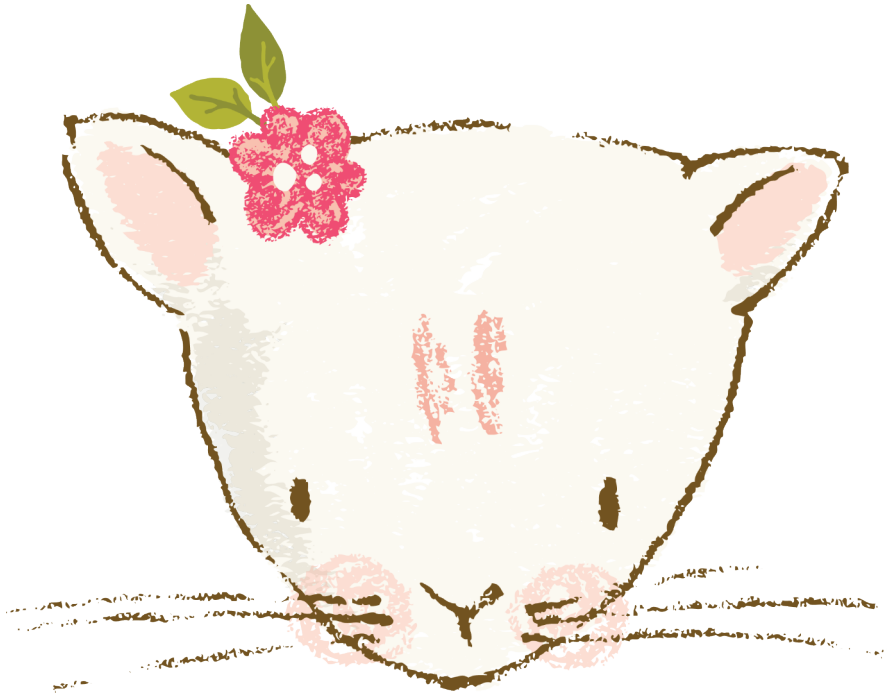


Name: \_\_\_\_\_



## *Christmas Angel*

She was a mottled grayish color, allowed herself to be held perhaps three times in her entire feline life, had a snaggle tooth on the right side of her mouth, and smelled faintly of cat urine at all times. As a cat, she was possessed of charms that were uniquely her own.

My father didn't share in these sentiments. In fact, he found her odd charms so off-putting that he rarely even called her by her Christian name. Angelina. She was always just "the gray one". And even though he squinted at her through slitted eyes, ever watchful for some sign of cat misbehavior, she always regarded him with serene indifference. Angelina was entirely nonplussed by his cold shoulder.

I believe their relationship was damaged fairly early on when she was still a kitten. They got off on the wrong foot...or toe rather.

Even as a kitten Angelina had a curious predilection for biting toes - proffered or not. I'm not sure how the discovery was made, but my siblings and I got in the habit of offering up our toes for a scenting and a nibble as she would pass. She seemed to prefer the big toe and routinely would rub her little face against the extended digit, then bite. Not hard, mind you, but a nip nevertheless.

Apparently, Angelina's love for toe biting extended beyond our juvenile games during the daylight hours in the kitchen. She would find bare toes at any hour of the day...or night. And bite.

Since Angelina preferred the company of my mother, we children never had to worry about toe-biting in the night. My father was not so fortunate. Shortly after her arrival, the gray one squirmed underneath the blankets of their bed in search of a comfortable place to sleep. And in the middle of the night, she squirmed over to my father's feet, found a toe, and bit it.

Apparently, covers were thrown asunder, there was a fair amount of profanity, kicking feet, and Angelina was summarily banished from their room at night. Did this mean that peaceful slumbers returned for my father? Absolutely not.

# Something to Teach

The cat was not to be deterred. At night, she stationed herself outside my parents' bedroom, and would lie on the floor, paw extended underneath the door frame, and scratch. Methodically. Endlessly. She was like a little kitten metronome.

In this battle of wills, we wondered who would cave first. The father or the cat?

In the mornings, red-eyed from exhaustion, my father would recount how she had interrupted his sleep with her incessant pawing. Who would give up first? My sleep-deprived father? I've heard that P.O.W.'s could be broken by exhaustion. I think that's what happened to Pop because, eventually, he decided to risk his toes in favor of more restful sleep, and gave in. Angelina returned to her spot underneath the covers, and, for a while, there was relative peace.

It did not last.

In addition to her predisposition to biting toes, Angelina also liked to groom herself on the kitchen countertops. There was a wide window which allowed for excellent sunlight, and she enjoyed nothing more than extending an unlovely long shank and grooming it with her little pink tongue. Seeing her lounging on the same countertops where we prepared food sent my father into an irrational rage. There would be a sudden torrent of profanity as he lunged toward Angelina, and she would scramble to safety, only to return to her favorite grooming spot as soon as the coast was clear.

After having just scraped around in the litter box, of course.

This was the life that Angelina lived. Quietly tormenting my father while enduring only the little human attention and affection that she would allow the rest of the family to shower upon her little feline self. She seemed perfectly content with the Cold War that was her relationship with my father.

And then something happened. Something that shook our world. It made me and my siblings question the world that we knew.

It was Christmas morning, and the living room was filled with boxes, wrapping paper, and ribbons. A cat's delight. Angelina spent most of the morning inspecting the boxes, batting at ornaments, chewing on stray ribbons, and hiding underneath this or that. She was in cat heaven.

After the presents had been opened, there was a transition period before we sat down to a Christmas morning meal. A brief time where we attempted to restore some semblance of order to the house. My mother appreciated an orderly household, so the task of moving boxes, used wrapping paper, and other holiday detritus to the garage, fell upon my brother and I. Angelina weaved in between our legs, hoping for a toe to bite, as we carried double armfuls of trash to dump. But when we opened the door to the garage she found something else.

Some tiny mammal, perhaps a mole, had sought the warmth of our garage, like a Little Match Girl from days of yore. And just like the Little Match Girl, this tiny creature was about to meet its maker on Christmas morning. Although reared gently in our household, something within the dark recesses of her feline mind took over and Angelina dashed into the garage and snatched up the innocent creature in a heartbeat.

My brother and I stood dumbfounded.

What happened next was even more earth-shattering. We must have made some sounds of surprise because my father appeared, like Father Christmas down the chimney, and hurried to Angelina and her prize. My brother and I watched in awed surprise and shock as our father knelt, and began gently stroking the gray one's back.

She was purring so loudly that we could hear it even from several feet away.

"There's a good girl," our father cooed. "What a very good girl you are."

He kept praising her while gently prying the prey from her mouth. Angelina continued to purr like mad even as my father released the mole to scurry away to safety, picked her up, and carried her inside.

## Something to Teach

It was a Christmas miracle.

Later, Angelina sat atop the kitchen countertop, hind leg fully extended like an unsightly flag pole, and not-so-quietly licked herself. Pop walked in to the kitchen and stopped dead in his tracks. She paused, mid-lick, and stared at him. For a long moment, I thought he was going to lunge, but he didn't. His eyes narrowed, and I could see the traces of profanity ready to explode from his lips, but the Christmas spirit must have moved him. He muttered something under his breath, shook his head, and walked through the kitchen into the living room.

Even now, years later, we speak of this tale in hushed tones because my father disputes its veracity. But my brother and I know. We know of the Christmas miracle that took place between our father and a cat. We knew that our little Christmas Angel had a special place in his heart.

We all knew it...and so did she.

*End*