

JENNIFER'S CHRISTMAS EVE

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Cold, so cold.

Breath freezes to ice on the blanket edge. A wonderful warm spot on her chest where Ginger cat lies, his whiskers tickling under her chin. She takes her worn hands from the warmth of Ginger cat, rolls free of the blankets and pulls on the old woollen gloves before struggling to her feet.



Cold, so cold.

She peeks through the flap of plastic bags. Under a grey sky thick, white, bright frost covers everything, even the branches of the great pine trees which hide the little shelter of sticks and plastic bags among their roots.



There's a soft hopeful meow, but Ginger cat will have to hunt for his food today; her own stomach aches from two days without.

Cold, so cold.

No one's around to spot her shelter, so swiftly out into the street and a slow shuffle up the hill. Over the top and down towards the town. She doesn't want to go there but she needs to eat. The sky brightens to a cloudless blue, but the brightness brings no warmth. The cold seeps deeper. She needs to rest and there's benches down at the centre. The street shops are still closed but a little Asian man is opening up the shopping mall. He holds the door open and smiles at her as she goes in. The voice whispers in her head "Don't speak. Don't speak."

Carefully, carefully down the stairs. The security men don't like street people in the mall. A quick look. Then a dash for the toilets all gleaming silver white, so nice to use. Then Mother's voice. "Jennifer, wash your hands." Jennifer Brown. That was she; she lived at the Manse on Brownlee road. No! That was wrong. That was long ago. The water is wonderfully warm on her cold hands.

A security guard appears. "You! Out of here. The mall's not open yet. And its not open for you. Ever." The voice whispers: "Don't look. Don't speak." She pulls on her gloves and edges past him but his strong hand squeezes her shoulder. A new voice comes. "Paul! Not so rough. You're hurting her. She's only an old lady. I'll see her out, you finish the round."

Soon the mall door is opening and it's back onto the cold street. The man speaks again: "Now, stay away from the mall. Its Christmas Eve and we have enough to do."



There's more people about. She walks slowly. What's that wonderful smell? Hot and sweet and savoury; her stomach squeezes small and her mouth waters. She



follows the scent down the street and stands in front of the pasty shop feeling the warmth from the window. Perhaps they'll give her some leftovers from yesterday. A young man is beside her. Holding out a bag; hot and plump and greasy.

"Here. For Christmas. They're just fresh made."

She risks a glance at him and he smiles. She takes the bag and looks away, feels the warmth seeping through her gloves and walks back to the bench outside the TV shop. Opening the bag, a glorious scent, the first crumbs of hot pastry melting on her tongue then a blissful mouthful of hot meat and pastry together. Chewing slowly to make it last. Swallowing. The pleasure of it filling her stomach. Then another bite. On the big TV in the window Coronation Street comes on but she can't hear the words. There's warmth now from the sun and the frost is gone.

She empties the last crumbs from the bag into her mouth and slowly stands up.

She walks down the hill, stopping at Hoopers window display, full of toys and elves and strange, moving devices. Memories tumble in her head. Standing here with John, newly married. Talking about bringing their own children someday to look at the window. She rocks. Tears trickle down. There never were any children and John had died fighting far away.

"Oh John. Why did you leave me alone?" Parents edge their own children away.



It was getting dark now and cold. The great, grey church is full of people for the Christmas service but its ok to stand at the back and sing when everyone else does.



She mustn't speak but its ok to sing. Soon the people leave and she moves down to the crib, the hot waxy smell of burning candles tickling her nose.

She stoops and picks up a candle stump from the floor. A sound from the high altar.... A priest is coming down the steps. "You have to go now. There's another service at midnight, but now you have to go." A voice full of professional kindness and doing good. "You can take one of the shopping bags at the door."

Cold, so cold, but she'll soon be home.

Down the hill, a quick look round and into the bushes. She opens the flap of plastic bags and everything's where it should be. Ginger cat sits up, stretches and pushes his furry head against her hands. She checks her booty from the church: some fruit, two tins of ham, sardines and a fruit cake. She lights the candle stub, putting it inside a little jar to keep it safe. Arthritic hands spasm pulling at the lid of the sardines and fishy oil spills on her fingers but Ginger cat's rough tongue rasps it all away.



The sardines are soon finished and they settle down. She pulls the blankets over them, Ginger cat's soothing purr fills the little shelter.

Her mother's voice echoes. "Jennifer, it's Christmas Eve. Say your prayers."

It's too cold to get back up so she just lies there and folds her hands.

"Jesus, thank you for my pasties and the candle. It's been a nice Christmas.

"Look after the little Asian man, and the boy in the pasty shop and Ginger cat."

She was barely awake, perhaps just this once she could ask for a Christmas present.

"Please, Jesus, don't let it be so cold tonight."



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