

NIKKI'S CHRISTMAS DINNER

Once upon a time there was a cat named Nikki who lived with a boy named TJ, a girl named Stacie, a baby named Alyssa, and their mother and father. Nikki was born in Hawaii, but her family moved frequently so she got to live in lots of different places. No matter where they lived, though, Christmas came every year. Nikki loved Christmas. There were lots of new smells, new foods, and even a tree inside the house. There was also a special excitement in the air - a feeling that came at no other time of the year. Nikki always knew that Christmas was coming when the family ate turkey for Thanksgiving. Sometimes the mother started preparing food several days before Thanksgiving, but Nikki didn't really get interested until early Thanksgiving morning, when the mother put the turkey in the oven. Soon the entire house was filled with the most delicious aroma imaginable. It was almost impossible to wait. Nikki often meowed at the mother, or at anyone else who wandered into the kitchen, begging them to take just a little bit of turkey out of the oven and give her a snack, but they never did. She had to wait until it was done, just like everyone else. Finally the time came when they took the turkey out of the oven. The dad carved the turkey while the mom made gravy. They covered the table with steaming bowls of mashed potatoes and gravy, green beans, dressing, sweet potatoes, dinner rolls, and of course a big platter of turkey. Best of all, they filled a little plate just for Nikki and let her enjoy a Thanksgiving dinner too. It was delicious. Sometimes she purred so loudly the family could hear her over the soft clink of the silverware and the conversation as everyone talked about how full they were, but they had just enough room left for a little more turkey, please. And another roll. And is there any more stuffing left?

On one particular Thanksgiving Nikki was living in northern Georgia. She ate her turkey dinner until she could eat no more, and then she lay down for a short cat nap. She dreamed about the turkey dinner she had just eaten, and about the Christmas turkey that was soon to come. When she woke up, she stretched lazily and then went outside for a little walk. She decided to go into the woods and see if she could find her

friend Trixie.

Trixie was an independent cat, meaning she didn't live with a family. In Hawaii where Nikki was born there were lots of independent cats, but there weren't very many in Georgia. Nikki was certain her family would welcome Trixie if she wanted to join them, but Trixie liked being an independent cat. Nikki first met Trixie when Trixie was little more than a kitten. They played together, and Nikki helped teach Trixie how to hunt. Now Trixie was grown up and she had to range far and wide to find food, so Nikki didn't see her very often. Still, it wouldn't hurt to look. Trixie often slept in a little hollow under a fallen tree, so Nikki went there to look for her. When she got close to the tree, an angry hiss stopped her dead in her tracks.

"Go Away!" a voice hissed from somewhere underneath the tree.

"Trixie, it's me." Nikki said reassuringly.

"Go away!" the voice hissed again. "I don't want to see anyone."

Nikki slowly backed away from the tree. Then she turned and walked back to the house. She couldn't understand what made her friend turn on her like that. Nikki knew she hadn't done anything mean to Trixie. Why was Trixie being mean to her?

Nikki often thought about her friend in the days that followed. At first she was worried. Was something wrong with Trixie? Had Nikki accidentally done something to upset Trixie? Or was Trixie just jealous because Nikki had a warm place to sleep and had good food given to her, while Trixie lived outdoors and had to hunt for her food? That wasn't Nikki's fault. Nikki had invited Trixie to join the family. It was Trixie's choice to live outdoors. As the days went on, Nikki began to worry less about her friend. At times she even felt a little angry at the way Trixie had turned on her. Then she got distracted by all the exciting things that were going on. The family decorated the house, put up the Christmas tree, and Stacie and her mother baked Christmas

cookies. Nikki thought about Trixie less and less often, and almost forgot about her altogether.

One morning, as Nikki was napping in front of the Christmas tree, TJ picked her up and began stroking her fur. “Good morning, Nikki!” he said. “We’re going to Grandma’s!” Then he stuck Nikki into a cat carrier and shut the door.

Nikki hated cat carriers! It wasn’t that they were uncomfortable, it was just that they robbed her of her freedom and wouldn’t let her go where she wanted to go. And sometimes bad things happened after they put her in a cat carrier, like going to the vet or being shoved into the cargo bay of an airplane. Fortunately, this wasn’t one of those times. TJ carried her out to the car, the entire family got in, and when they were safely under way TJ opened the door and let Nikki explore the car. Nikki wasn’t terribly fond of car rides, but it was a lot better than being cooped up in that cat carrier!

To Nikki, the car ride seemed to go on forever but that might have been because there’s not much for a cat to do inside a car. Finally they arrived at Grandmother’s house. Nikki was stuffed back into the cat carrier while they carried her inside, and then she got to explore. It was an interesting house. There were lots of nooks and crannies to explore, and lots of furniture to hide behind. The most distinctive thing about the house, though, and the thing Nikki smelled first when they came inside, was a dog. Nikki had never been able to understand why some people kept dogs. Grandfather called it a “hunting dog,” but Nikki didn’t see how anything that big and noisy could ever be a successful hunter. Mice could hear a dog from a mile away! Some of Nikki’s friends hated dogs, but Nikki tried to keep an open mind. When you looked at them objectively, dogs were big, clumsy, noisy, smelly, and stupid animals that bounded around the house, knocking things over and barking for no apparent reason. And those were the good dogs. Some dogs were also mean, vicious, and dangerous, but Grandma and Grandpa’s dog was friendly. It was excited to see Nikki. It jumped around the room, barking and wagging its tail, and crouching down on its front paws as it begged Nikki to play. The first time Nikki ever came to Grandmother’s house she

actually did play with the dog. Well, she wasn't exactly trying to play. She ran away, which was exactly what the dog wanted. The dog bounded after her, trying to play tag, and knocked over a potted plant and a table full of knick-knacks in the process. Now Nikki knew better than to run. She braced herself while the dog sniffed her, and she arched her back and hissed when the sniffing got a little too personal. Then she ignored the dog until it lost interest in her. Fortunately, a dog's attention span is measured in seconds, not minutes, so that didn't take long.

One thing Nikki didn't like about visiting Grandmother was that they never let her explore outside. They made her stay in the house the whole time they were there. This seemed especially unfair, as the dog was allowed to go outside whenever it barked at the door. Nikki tried meowing at the door, but TJ just said "No, you have to stay inside. We wouldn't want you to wander off and get lost." Nikki thought that was the dumbest excuse she had ever heard. If an animal as stupid as the dog could find its way back to the house, she wouldn't get lost! She decided if the people wouldn't let her out, she'd let herself out. She hid under the bed in the guest room, where she could look out the door into the kitchen and keep an eye on the back door. The next time the dog barked to go out, she got ready to run. As soon as TJ opened the door Nikki sprang forward, raced across the kitchen, and flew out the door. She bounded across the back step and leaped into the yard.

Kerwishhhh! Nikki sank up to her neck in soft snow. She'd never seen snow so deep. In Georgia they sometimes had a dusting of snow on the ground, just enough to make her paws cold, but this snow swallowed her up. She had to stretch her neck as far as it would go to keep her head above the snow. She thrashed about, trying to get a foothold so she could climb back up onto the step. Fortunately TJ saw her and rushed outside in his stocking feet to pick her up and carry her back into the house. Then he grabbed a towel from the bathroom and started to dry her off. She was so cold her whole body was shivering. She'd never been that cold before in her life! Why would anyone live in a place where it got so cold outside?

After her brief outdoor adventure, Nikki moped around the house for a few days. Then one morning she awoke to the unmistakable aroma of roasting turkey! This time Grandmother was fixing the turkey, but she paid no more attention to Nikki's pleading than TJ's mother did. The family opened presents while the turkey was cooking. Was it Christmas already? Everyone was acting like it was Christmas, but somehow it just didn't feel like Christmas to Nikki. Maybe it was because she was in a strange house. One thing made the day seem right. When the turkey was finally done, just before the family sat down to eat, Stacey made a plate of turkey, stuffing, and gravy and set it on the kitchen floor for Nikki. Then she hurried into the dining room to join the family for dinner.

Oh boy! Turkey! Nikki inhaled deeply to savor the wonderful aroma. Then she took a few quick licks of the gravy. Grandmother's turkey was just as delicious as any that TJ's mother made. Nikki took her first bite of turkey and chewed it in ecstasy. Then she heard the click, click, click of the dog's toenails on the kitchen floor. The dog reached over Nikki's head and with two quick slurps of his massive tongue he gobbled down the entire plate of turkey! There was nothing left but an empty plate, glistening with dog slobber.

Oh no! It couldn't be! All that marvelous turkey was gone! And the dog had practically inhaled it. It couldn't have taken the time even to taste it on the way down! Nikki meowed plaintively, but nobody heard her. Grandmother did give her a few scraps of turkey while she was cleaning up after dinner, but it wasn't the same. Her Christmas dinner was over.

The next morning they packed the car to go home. For once, Nikki didn't complain when they put her in the cat carrier. She was ready to leave the land of deep snow and thieving dogs. She was ready to go home. She moped around the car for the entire trip home, feeling sorry for herself. Then, when they got back to the house, she heard the father say something that gave her hope.

“I’m glad we planned this trip so we’d be back before Christmas.” He said. “Kids need to spend Christmas morning in their own home.”

Could it be that Christmas wasn’t over? Was it possible they’d have *another* turkey dinner? A few days later she got her answer. She awoke once again to the unmistakable aroma of turkey in the oven! This time there were no dogs. This time, when Stacie gave her an extra big plate of turkey, it was all hers. And yet, as she was enjoying her first few mouthfuls of this wonderful feast, something didn’t seem quite right. Suddenly, she thought of Trixie. Did Trixie have a dinner like this? Had Trixie ever had a dinner this good? Nikki remembered how hungry she’d been when the dog had eaten her turkey. Was Trixie hungry? Then she remembered how cold she’d been when she fell in the snow. It was cold outside now, with a dusting of snow. Was Trixie cold?

Nikki chewed her next bite thoughtfully, as she wondered if there was anything she could do to help Trixie. Then she got an idea. She rushed upstairs, into the mother’s closet, and burrowed into the pile of sewing supplies. Eventually she found a loose square of fabric left over from a quilt the mother had made years ago. Nikki carried the fabric downstairs, put it next to her plate, and piled it high with turkey and stuffing. Then she folded the corners together so it made a little bag she could carry in her mouth. She carried it under the kitchen table, and hid there watching the kitchen door. TJ and Stacie had been playing outside in the snow when their mother had called them in for dinner, and Nikki guessed they’d go back outside after dinner. Nikki was right. As soon as they’d finished cleaning up after dinner, they pulled on their hats and coats and rushed outside to play in the snow. They were in so much of a hurry they didn’t close the door all the way. Nikki managed to push it back open and carried her treasure outside.

“Trixie?” she called as she approached the fallen tree.

“Go away!” a familiar voice hissed.

“I brought you some dinner” Nikki said as she set the bundle down on the ground. “Merry Christmas!” Then she turned and began to walk back to the house.

“Nikki?” Trixie called to her before she had gone very far. “I’m sorry I told you to go away. Won’t you come back and share this dinner with me?”

“I . . . I’ve already eaten” Nikki said as she started back toward the tree. This was true, but it wasn’t the whole truth. Nikki had only eaten a few bites before she bundled the rest up for Trixie.

“Oh please.” Trixie answered. “There’s more here than I can eat. Won’t you have some?”

So they both shared the turkey. Nikki thought it was the best Christmas Dinner she had ever eaten. After they’d eaten every last bite Trixie turned to her and asked “Would you like to see why I’ve been telling everyone to go away? Follow me.” She crouched low and then slipped down into a hollow space under the tree. Nikki followed her.

It was dark under the tree, and a lot warmer and cozier than Nikki had expected. Even before her eyes adjusted to the dark, she could hear the soft mewing of kittens. Then she saw them. Six tiny little balls of fur, cuddled against their mother. “They were born three days ago.” Trixie explained. “I started chasing people away from the den long before they were born, just to make certain they were safe. I knew you would never hurt my kittens, but somehow I still couldn’t keep myself from chasing you away, too.”

“They’re beautiful” Nikki said. “Merry Christmas, Trixie.”

“Merry Christmas” Trixie answered. “This is the best Christmas ever.”