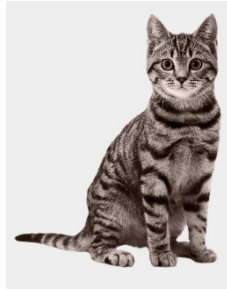


The Cat in the Manger
Italian tradition retold Linda Crowley



“Look, Mama, there is a tiny cat at our door!” Anna exclaimed. “I’m going to give him some milk. May we keep him? Please, Mama?”

The innkeeper’s wife sighed. “No, Anna, my dear, She cannot stay here. You know what your father has ordered.”

“No cats.” Anna hung down her head. “He says they make him sneeze, then he cannot do his work.”

“That’s right. Now give the little kitten some milk and send him on his way.” She brought a saucer full over to Anna. “Oh, he is a pretty little thing, isn’t he? The dark stripes on his ginger coat give him a wild look.”

Toby looked at them and mewed silently. Milk would taste good. In fact, anything would taste good right now. He was tired and hungry and just needed a warm place to snuggle up and sleep, but the Roman dogs that patrolled the streets at night hadn’t allowed him to rest.

“Mama,” said Anna “I could take him to those new people we sent to Middad Edan this evening. Maybe they could use a tiny kitten for company.”

“That would be a nice thing to do. And while you are at it, you can take over this loaf of bread. We didn’t need everything I baked today.” Anna took the carefully wrapped loaf and noticed it was still warm. Her mother undoubtedly pulled it aside for the couple when she first saw them begging for a place to stay. Doris was like that, unable to turn her back on the pleas of the needy, whether they be human or cat.

Doris picked up a small pile of linens she had set out, and the two of them headed to Middan Edan, the stable where sacrificial lambs were born. The little ginger kitten followed along, seeming to know they would take him someplace safe.

The evening light was fading, but Joseph had lit a lamp, lighting up the dark stable. He was standing over his wife as she lay in a pile of straw in the back. Mary let out a groan as another contraction squeezed her.

“Here now,” Doris bustled. “This is a woman’s job. You men leave while I take over.” The stir of feet caused the little kitten to crouch down and hide, but he kept his eyes open, watching everything. Suddenly the ox jumped sideways and spooked the donkey. Toby’s eyes darted to the disturbance. A mouse! A mouse was under the manger and had startled the ox. Toby jumped from his hiding place and made quick work of the mouse. Peace was soon restored to the animals while Toby did a careful check to make sure no other mice were in the hay.

Just then, a tiny wail came from where Mary lay. “It’s a boy,” Doris cooed as she wrapped up the baby. “We’ll just lay him here in the manger while you rest.” She laid the infant down and tucked a blanket around it, but Toby could sense the baby was still cold.

Quiet as only a cat can be, he jumped up and curled next to the baby, offering his own warmth to the newborn. Then a purr began to rumble in his breast. It was a great big purr like he had never done before. The baby smiled and relaxed.

A few minutes later, Mary herself came over to the manger to touch her beloved son. “My little lion,” she said to Toby.” I see you have come to protect baby Jesus. All the world will know of your goodness”. Mary traced an ‘M’ on Toby’s head. “They will see my initial and know my favor has rested upon you.” Even though he couldn’t see it, Toby felt the mark and purred in thanksgiving.

And that, my kittens, is why all tabbies ever since have carried the M on their foreheads.