

Millie's Hometown Christmas

by Seth Sjostrom



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You could follow her paw prints in the snow, rising from the bank of the Washougal River. Slipping past the steel railway bridge, she followed the faintest sounds that beckoned her ears, the slightest scents that tickled her nose.

The curious black Labrador retriever pranced through the snow along the trail that led straight into town. A car rushed by, its tires spinning up slush in its wake, flinging cold and wet at the already shivering dog. With a shake, she cast off as much as she could, intent to find out what tantalizing aromas and joyful sounds were tempting her.

The streets were lit brighter than they normally were; the trees strung with sparkling lights. Moving past the big factory, the noises and aromas grew more intense. A curious dog by nature, she was entranced by the activity of the busy downtown streets.

People buzzed by with steaming drinks and tempting confections, causing her already excited nose to work overtime. Her empty stomach growled as she followed her nose.

Hitting a busy street with big cars that gave her fright, she tucked close to a group of humans that were crossing. A little girl squealed, "A doggy!"

Her heart swelling for attention as the human's pitch indicated, she was disappointed when the larger human swept the girl away, "That dog is a mess. Who knows where it's been!"

Thwarted from a friendly touch, she had made it safely across the busy street. A building sea of human legs filled the sidewalks, heading towards the smells and sounds that summoned the dog. She thought they must have been summoned too.

Snaking in and out of busy footfalls of the crowded walkways, she came to a colorful street strewn in wonderful décor. More trees strung with lights, wreaths adorn with bows and vibrant red flowers dotted the buildings along the narrow fare.

The people seemed to be the more joyful, the closer they crowded, breaking into song as they circled around a tall tree. Unlike the others, this tree was not festooned with lights. It was a dark sentinel of which the people crowded around.

One sweet child, curly hair ablaze in red, took notice of her. Giggling, she tore bits of treat and sent it flying in her direction. A welcome blessing, she gobbled each piece as they tumbled through the air towards her waiting snout.

A few other children, less intent than their parents to stare at the darkened tree, took up the task and sent bits of their confections and pieces of popcorn, too, cascading down.

For a moment, she felt warm. Filtering among the people, receiving attention and delightful nibbles from the children, she pretended she had what she always wanted, a family.

Sitting in a particularly festive collection of children and their families, she lifted her head high in the air, her tail gently and happily sweeping the street.

Suddenly, the people's voices became one. Singing a harmonious song that seemed to bring great joy to them, they held hands and swayed. An older girl couched by and wrapped her arm around the dog. Her heart swelled with the loving touch. Mouth open, tongue dangling, she smiled as broad a smile as any dog could.

When the singing hit a wonderful crescendo, the darkened tree swirled to life in a brilliant display of light that brought great cheer to the crowd. Erupting in ovations, they admired the tree.

Following their eyes, the dog did too. She stared at the brilliant tree, knowing in her heart there was something special about what it meant, even if she didn't quite know what.

Soon the grasp around her tightened into a hug. She had felt it before. It was nice, but it also meant goodbye. Sure enough, the arms uncoiled, the child stood and grasping their parent's hand. The girl was off into the sea of legs that once carried people to the spot near the tree but were now carrying them away. The people were going home.

The dog's head dipped as the streets began to empty. She followed families, especially those with children in hopes she could go home too. Inevitably, they would reach the family's car and she would be left with a pat on the head or a weary wave goodbye.

Retreating, she held her nose to the ground, searching for left behind morsels. Passing shops with owners locking up, they paused to give her a pat. Some magically had dog treats at the ready. All were preparing to go home.

Past the hardware store, the salon, the school pride store, the studio, she'd receive a friendly word, a quick rub. They all had families to get home to. Past the newspaper, the restaurant, and the antique shop she got more of the same. Her hopes peaked at the friendly cafe. The corner shop employees cooed and gathered, treats from inside were found, but still, the people had to go home.

As the snow drifted down from the sky, bedazzling her jet-black fur with sparkling little crystals, she walked, head down. Taking refuge under a tree, in front of the old theater, she sat. Looking around the once crowded streets now bare, she dropped her head, following her sinking heart.

Suddenly, footsteps stopped next to her and a man knelt down. "Well, what's this?" the man asked, not really expecting a reply. "No place to go and all of your friends have left, is that it?"

She wagged her tail solemnly.

The man recognized her from wandering the tracks by the river. "You don't have a home, now do you? Well, you do now. But you'll need a name too."

The man scanned up and down Main Street, his eyes finally lighting upon the great mill at the end of the treelined road. With a chuckle, he rubbed her neck, "How about Millie?"

The dog wagged her tail vigorously, her eyes looking deep into the man's eyes.

"What do you say, Millie? Let's go home."

Through the soft wafting snow, past the glittering trees, the pair made prints in the snow, together.