**The special birthday**

The missus calls me Maximilian the Magnificent. I’m black from head to toe and have the heart of a lion, but I was the runt of the littler, and on the small side even for a cat.

The missus is in a tizz. She makes lists and loses them. She picks me up and cuddles me several times a day.

 I know what this means, of course. She’s going away for a few days. She’s had her carry-on bag out of the cupboard and on the chair in the window so that she can put things into it, and take them out again.

 I’m not bothered. Yes, I realize she’s going to stay with a friend for some kind of birthday party but she does arrange for a neighbour to come in and feed me, and she always comes back in a flurry of excuses and gives me another toy to play with.

 The main thing is that she’ll remember to leave the heating on in the house while she’s away because we’re having one of those cold snaps which make me want to get under the duvet, instead of sleeping on top of it.

 The missus gives me a kiss, says she’s feeling guilty about leaving me, and off she goes. The house is very quiet. Sometimes she forgets things and has to return for them. But no. Not this time.

 I’m not lonely. Not I. I have plenty to do. I can visit various houses in the neighbourhood and they give me a titbit here or there. But somehow, I haven’t the heart for it.

 The neighbour comes to give me my evening meal. She’s talking on her phone, saying there’s a mouse infestation up the road. She checks that someone’s buying some traps to deal with it. She’s worried about it, because of the forthcoming birthday.

 I’m interested in the mice bit. I haven’t seen any mice recently, and wouldn’t mind having a go. So which house is she going to? I follow her when she leaves. Down the road she goes towards the park, and then into that big building on the corner that’s usually deserted. This evening there’s lights on inside, and people coming and going with buckets of greenery. Are they making a garden inside?

 Even from the front door, I can smell mice. My neighbour checks the traps while chatting away to a couple of people who are decorating the place with their ivy and what not. Candles, too. Quite pretty, if you like that sort of thing.

There’s a huge Christmas tree at the back. I avoid it. I know from experience that they’re not as good to climb as the real thing.

 Mice! They’re everywhere. I can hear them, and smell them. I’ll get round to them in a minute. I’m intrigued by some half-sized people beside the Christmas tree. They don’t move. Cautiously, I creep near and discover that they’re quite dead. Like dolls. There’s a man and a woman, all dressed up warmly against the cold wind outside, and they’re looking down into a box half filled with straw. I don’t get that.

 A mouse runs across the bare foot of the doll man, and I deal with it.

 My neighbour walks up carrying a baby doll which she puts in the box. The other women come, too, talking about who’s got keys and who’s locking up and who’s coming early next morning.

 There’s the snap of a mousetrap closing, and they all laugh. Then they turn off the lights and leave the building, closing and locking the heavy door behind them.

 I didn’t reckon on being shut in and am a little annoyed. But not particularly concerned. I can see in the dark much better than humans, and there’s streetlights outside which shine through the big windows above.

 There’s the rustle of mice. And another snap as a second trap does its work. Well, if I’m going to be shut in here tonight, I might as well get on with the job and clear the place of vermin.

 So I do just that. It takes some time, but finally all is quiet.

 I don’t like the half-sized figures much, but they are so definitely dead that they don’t really worry me. There’s more light around them now the moon has risen.

 I jump up to the box. Did my neighbour actually put a doll inside?

It’s not a doll. It’s a baby and it’s naked. And very cold.

 It’s eyes are wide open and looking up at me.

 How could they leave the baby like that, with nothing to keep it warm?

 The eyes see me. Asking something of me? I don’t understand. And then I do. I stretch myself out over the baby to keep him warm. He is very cold at first, but then he warms up.

I feel his loneliness and try to comfort him. I’m being rocked in a cradle, or on water . . . and then there’s love pouring out of him, filling the whole building, the whole world . . . and then a sharp pain . . . the agony of that pain . . . and then everything is golden and peaceful and there’s a thread of music . . .

 A voice says, ‘Well done, Max.’ And I sleep.

In the morning I wake as someone turns the key in the lock and enters the building.

I jump down to the floor. The baby doesn’t need me any longer.

People crowd in, turning on lights, and the organ begins to roar. I leave the building and trudge home, to find my neighbour has left me a special feast for the Birthday.

I leap up onto the missus’ bed and nestle down. She’ll be back today or tomorrow. She’ll tell me all about her trip away and ask if I’ve missed her.

And I will dream of a blue and gold sky and a big man holding me in his arms, saying ‘Well done, Max.’