

AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR

Syuu
Ishida

A Novel

We'll
Prescribe
You a Cat

Cats are
always the
purrfect
cure.

TRANSLATED BY E. MADISON SHIMODA

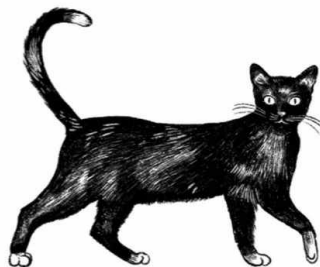


We'll
Prescribe
You a
Cat



Syou Ishida

Translated from the Japanese by
E. Madison Shimoda



Berkley
New York

BERKLEY
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Originally published in Japan as *Neko Wo Shoho Itashimasu* by PHP Institute, Inc., in 2023.

Publication rights for this English edition arranged through The Appleseed Agency Ltd., Japan.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Syou, Ishida, 1975- author. | Shimoda, E. Madison, translator.
Title: We'll prescribe you a cat / Syou Ishida; translated from the Japanese by E. Madison Shimoda.
Other titles: Neko o shohō itashimasu. English | We will prescribe you a cat
Description: New York: Berkley, 2024.
Identifiers: LCCN 2024008204 (print) | LCCN 2024008205 (ebook) | ISBN 9780593818749 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780593818756 (ebook)
Subjects: LCGFT: Novels.
Classification: LCC PL880.4.Y68 N4513 2024 (print) | LCC PL880.4.Y68 (ebook) | DDC 895.63/6—dc23/eng/20240505
LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2024008204>
LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2024008205>

Ebook ISBN 9780593818756

Cover design and illustration by Adam Auerbach
Interior illustrations by Alissa Levy
Book design by Alison Cnockaert, adapted for ebook by Maggie Hunt

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Contents

[Bee](#)

[Chapter 1: Bee](#)

[Margot](#)

[Chapter 2: Margot](#)

[Koyuki](#)

[Chapter 3: Koyuki](#)

[Tank and Tangerine](#)

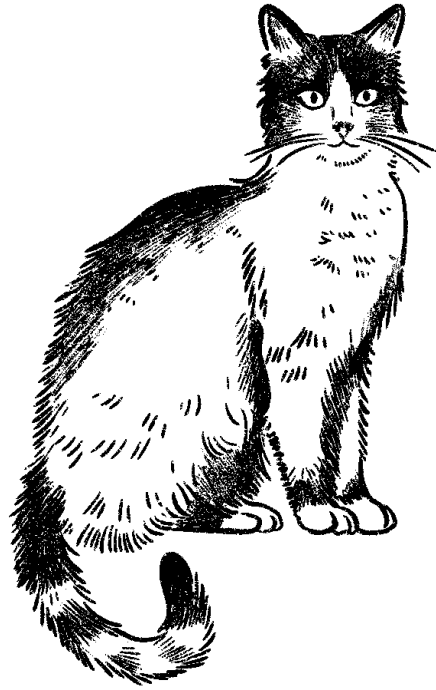
[Chapter 4: Tank and Tangerine](#)

[Mimita](#)

[Chapter 5: Mimita, a Scottish Fold](#)

[About the Author](#)

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Bee



Bee

Shuta Kagawa stood at the end of a shadowy alley, gazing up at a multipurpose building. After getting thoroughly lost, he had finally arrived. The structure looked like it had been built to fill the narrow gap between two apartment blocks.

“Is this it?” he mumbled.

He’d doubted there could be anywhere that his phone’s navigation app couldn’t find, but this place proved otherwise. From the alley, the sky looked distant and hazy, and there was no sunlight. The air felt humid; the building looked old and grimy.

“What’s up with the address anyway?”

East of Takoyakushi Street, south of Tominokoji Street, west of Rokkaku Street, north of Fuyacho Street, Nakagyō Ward, Kyoto.

This kind of address was unique to Kyoto. Instead of official street numbers, it gave the names of the streets that intersected in four directions. The instructions were so vague that most nonlocals found them confusing. Shuta had been meandering around the neighborhood for some time. Just when he was about to give up, he spotted the narrow opening to the alleyway.

Why do Kyoto residents bother with such cryptic directions?

To Shuta, who hailed from another prefecture, Kyoto’s street names were like a code. Even something as simple as an address had an obliqueness that seemed designed to keep outsiders away.

He lingered for a moment in the dark alley, let out a deep sigh, then gathered himself, determined not to be disappointed just yet. Just because the building was in a sketchy location didn’t necessarily mean the tenants were sketchy, too. Maybe the apartment buildings had been constructed around this building after it had been built, and you couldn’t say there wasn’t a kind of hideaway feel to the place.

The entrance to the building was open, no elevator, just a staircase at the back. It was dimly lit, or maybe it just felt that way because there were so few people around. He walked down the hallway, eyeing the signs on the doors. It seemed like some sort of commercial building full of shady businesses.

Soon, I might be making scam phone calls to elderly people from an office in a building like this, he thought, glimpsing his own future. He shook his head. He’d come here to make sure that didn’t happen.

He climbed the stairs to his destination, Nakagyō Kokoro Clinic for the Soul, situated on the fifth floor. An old, solid-looking door swung open with unnerving ease. He took a quick peek inside—the clinic was surprisingly well lit. There was a small reception window by the entrance, which appeared unattended.

“Hello?” Shuta called.

Silence. He wondered if he’d arrived during a break. He stood with his arms crossed. Not having the clinic’s contact details, he hadn’t been able to make an appointment.

“Hello?” he called out again, a little louder this time.

He heard the muted tapping of slippers against the floor, and a nurse appeared, a pale woman in her late twenties.

“How can I help you?” she asked.

“I don’t have an appointment, but I was hoping I could see the doctor,” Shuta said.

“You’re a patient, I see. Please come in.” The nurse spoke the Kansai dialect with a leisurely intonation unique to Kyoto. Her accent was quite pronounced for someone so young.

There was a sofa at the back of the waiting room, but the nurse led Shuta right past it and directly into the examination room. It was smaller even than his company’s smoking room and modestly furnished with a desk, a computer, and two chairs.

Is this really the famous clinic? Shuta grew more anxious. Every psychiatrist’s office he’d ever known had been spacious and well appointed. Not only were those clinics *not* located in old, uninviting buildings, but they saw patients by appointment only. Patients were also required to complete lengthy medical intake forms that took nearly an hour to fill out. He appreciated being able to see the doctor so easily here, but, come to think of it, he hadn’t even given them his health insurance details.

The curtains in the back flew open, and a youngish, slight man in a white lab coat appeared.

“Hello, there. This must be your first time at our clinic.” He spoke with quite a high, nasally voice in a comforting Kyoto cadence that didn’t come across as overly familiar.

“How did you hear about us?”

“Um...” For a moment, Shuta was at a loss for an explanation. He considered lying but decided to be honest. “I heard about you indirectly. A former colleague told me about his younger brother’s wife’s cousin’s company’s client’s client who sees you and recommended this clinic.”

He had found himself here on the basis of some information that was less reliable than dregs from a rumor mill. All he’d been told was the clinic’s name and that it was located on the fifth floor of a building with a cryptic address.

This wasn’t his first time at a psychiatric clinic. He’d had several previous sessions six months ago. Even then, he didn’t have high hopes of any improvement, but he felt he needed to make an effort to get better. He researched online for highly rated psychiatrists, seeing one after another until he’d been to every single psychiatrist near his home and office. That was how he’d ended up here. It was a last resort. He just hadn’t expected the clinic to be in such a desolate spot.

“Well, we’ve got a little situation here. Truth is, I’m not accepting any new patients right now. I run a small practice—it’s just the nurse and me.”

Shuta frowned. *I guess this place is also a no-go. They call their practices “Clinic for the Soul” or whatever, but when it comes down to it, few doctors care enough to help you with your problems. Well, fine, then.*

He was about to say this out loud when the doctor broke into a broad grin, and his eyes took on the gleam of a mischievous child’s.

“I’ll make an exception this time, since you’re a referral.”

The space, already so narrow that their knees almost touched, grew even more intimate. The doctor turned to his desk. Shuta watched as the doctor’s fingers flew across the keyboard as he typed into his computer.

“Name and age?”

All of a sudden, the session had started.

“Shuta Kagawa. Twenty-five years old.”

“So, what brings you here today?”

Shuta gave a little shiver. He’d seen this scenario play out before. Each doctor had given him the same answer.

That’s tough. You don’t have to work so hard.

It’s good that you came to see me. Thank you.

Then they would all prescribe him similar medications. It wasn’t the doctors but the sleeping pills that had helped.

“I…”

Insomnia, tinnitus, loss of appetite.

Whenever work crossed his mind, his chest constricted, his breathing turned shallow, and sleep eluded him. His symptoms were so common that the doctors never thought anything of them. This time, he was determined to explain his condition properly and overcome it once and for all. But before he knew it, his true feelings slipped out.

“I want to quit my job.”

“Is that so?” the doctor replied.

Shuta realized what he’d said. “Oh, no. I didn’t mean it like that. I don’t *actually* want to quit. I want to figure out how to carry on working at my current company. I work for a major brokerage firm—you know, the kind that you see in commercials. The thing is, it’s run like a sweatshop.”

“I see,” said the doctor. Then he broke into another smile. “We’ll prescribe you a cat. Let’s keep an eye on your condition.” He spun around in his chair and called out to the back. “Chitose, can you bring the cat?”

“Sure,” answered a voice from behind the curtains. The pale nurse from earlier entered. There was a luster in her eyes that Shuta hadn’t noticed before. She was beautiful in an understated way. Shooting Shuta a wry look, she asked brusquely, “Are you sure he’s right for this, Dr. Nikké?”

“Absolutely.”

What an odd place, and Nikké—what a weird name.

The nurse placed a pet carrier on the desk and silently slipped away. Inside the plastic crate was a cat.

Shuta was at a loss for words. He stared unblinkingly at the cat before him.

It is an actual cat. Gray, unremarkable, ordinary.

The cat sat partially in shadow, but its large round eyes shimmered with a golden hue. It looked warily back at Shuta.

“So, Mr. Kagawa, let’s try this for a week.”

“...”

“I’m writing you a prescription.”

“You’re writing me a prescription?”

“Correct.”

Shuta looked at the cat in the carrier.

“Is that...a cat?”

“It is.”

Shuta was starting to question his sanity.

“A real cat?”

“Of course. They’re very effective. You know the old saying: ‘A cat a day keeps the doctor away.’ Cats are more effective than any other medicine out there.”

That doesn’t make any sense.

The doctor handed Shuta a small piece of paper. “Here’s your prescription form. Please take it to reception, and you’ll be given what you need. I’ll see you again in a week. Now, I have another patient waiting...” He indicated the door as if to say *You can go now.*

Shuta snapped out of his daze. He felt laughter welling within him.

“I see what this is,” he said with a chuckle. “This is what they call animal-assisted therapy, right?”

The doctor didn’t respond but sat back in his chair with an inscrutable look.

“Is it part of your therapy to take your patients by surprise? Now I see why you haven’t posted any details about the clinic anywhere. I sure panicked for a moment there. Prescribing cats...That’s pretty interesting.”

He placed his nose close to the carrier and peered inside. The cat widened its eyes and returned his gaze. Shuta knew nothing about animals, but this cat seemed equally bewildered.

“The cat’s very cute, but it doesn’t seem to like me much.”

“Hmm? Let me see.”

The doctor leaned in so close that their cheeks almost touched. Shuta was startled, but the doctor seemed unconcerned. The tip of the doctor’s nose grazed the carrier’s mesh panel as he stared at the cat within.

“Hmm? What do you think, cat?” He placed his ear to the mesh panel. “Yes, yes. She says it’s all good.”

“She said no such thing. She looks scared to me.”

“Scared? Let me see.” The doctor placed his nose even closer to the carrier, so close that it made Shuta nervous. “What do you think, cat? You’re good, right?” He looked up at Shuta and smiled. “She says she’s good.”

“The thing is, cats don’t feel comfortable around people like me, who aren’t used to them. Even if it’s for the sake of therapy, it seems unfair to the cat.”

“Don’t worry. Cats are highly effective, even for those who aren’t used to them.” He straightened. “I have a patient waiting, so we need to wrap this up.” He picked up the pet carrier and placed it on Shuta’s lap.

“Wait, what?”

“I’ll see you in a week.”

The doctor waved his hand, leaving no room for further discussion.

Shuta stepped out of the examination room confused. It felt as though the doctor had forced him to leave. And the sofa in the waiting room was empty. He was standing frozen in bafflement when he noticed a pale hand beckoning to him from the reception window.

“Mr. Kagawa, this way, please.”

This feels like some kind of movie set. He looked around nervously for any hidden cameras. Then he made his way to the window, where the nurse was peering out at him.

“Please pass me the prescription form.”

Shuta did as he was told and watched as the nurse disappeared from the reception window.

The carrier shook unsteadily. It was extremely heavy, altogether a weird sensation for Shuta, who had not held a living creature since the days of classroom rabbits in elementary school. His admiration for the cat’s surprisingly calm demeanor brought a smile to his face.

The nurse returned with a paper bag. “Here you go.” She thrust it through the window. He shifted the pet carrier into one hand and grabbed the bag. The cat slid across the tilted carrier.

“Oops, sorry,” Shuta said to the cat. Then, to the nurse, “Excuse me—what’s in this bag? It’s quite heavy.”

“Supplies. There’s also a leaflet with instructions, which I advise you to read carefully.” In her mouth, the Kyoto dialect, typically known for its seductive lilt, sounded cold and aloof.

Shuta took a look in the bag and saw plastic bowls, a tray, and a pack of what appeared to be cat food—all essential items for looking after a cat. What an incredibly elaborate setup. This level of detail made Shuta feel uneasy.

“So we’re continuing with this charade. Isn’t this a bit too much?”

“If you have any questions, please ask the doctor. Take care.” The nurse dropped her gaze to her work.

“Excuse me—”

“Take care.”

“Um—”

“Take care.”

Shuta exited the clinic carrying the bag and pet carrier. It was a challenge to open the door with both hands full.

What in the world just happened?

At the end of the corridor, Shuta saw a man glaring at him. He looked as though he was about to ask him a question. Then he passed Shuta and opened the door to the unit next to the clinic.

It was an awkward task to navigate the stairs without tipping up the pet carrier. Once he stepped outside, he was hit with the moldy stench of the alleyway. It was the scent of reality. The burden in his arms was also all too real.

Shuta's colleague had told him that this was a great clinic. The colleague had heard that from his brother, who had heard it from his wife, who had heard it from her cousin, who had...As rumors passed from one person to another, they transformed. He took one step, then another, but the sketch didn't end. The nurse didn't come running after him, and a director didn't call out "Cut!" He was the victim of either some unspeakable medical malpractice or a ridiculous scam.

And here he was, a sick man, holding a cat. He found himself chuckling, his laughter echoing into the distance.



Transporting this living creature proved to be a challenge. Shuta couldn't traverse the crosswalk quickly enough, and it wasn't as if he could balance the carrier on his shoulder either. It took him more than thirty minutes to make it back to his apartment, and all the while the cat squirmed uncomfortably and his arms ached.

When Shuta finally placed the carrier on the floor, the cat seemed to sense it was no longer in motion and began to thrash about, rocking the carrier from side to side. Shuta opened the door, feeling sorry for the poor thing, but the cat didn't emerge.

"What's the matter, cat? You can come out now."

The cat remained out of sight. Worried, Shuta peeked into the carrier and saw it cowering in the back.

What's going on? Shuta rifled through the paper bag. He found two bowls of the same size and the packet of cat food, which made a rustling sound when he shook it. Dry kibble, it seemed.

"For now let's go with water."

He filled one of the bowls with tap water and placed it before the pet carrier. The cat still didn't emerge.

"Oh, wait. The instructions."

Keeping an eye on the carrier, Shuta scanned the leaflet.

Name: Bee. Female. Estimated to be 8 years old. Mixed breed. Feed moderate amounts of cat food in the morning and at night. Water bowl must always be full. Clean kitty litter as needed. Generally independent and can be left alone. Small items that can be swallowed and breakable items such as plates and cups should be stowed away in a cupboard. Keep an eye on potted plants. Do not let the cat wander out of the house. That's all.

Shuta reread the instructions, but there wasn't much detail.

“Oh, man. I’ve never had a cat before. I don’t know if I can take care of one for a whole week.”

How will the cat use this tray and cat litter? Will she instinctively know how to do her business in it without making a mess in the room? How much do I feed her? Will she scratch the walls?

Shuta was beginning to feel overwhelmed, but there was nobody he could turn to for guidance. He would have to do some research online. At least he knew the cat’s name.

He crawled on the floor, looked into the carrier, and was met with a pair of golden eyes.

“Bee,” he said. “Hey, come on out here, Bee. You’re a girl, aren’t you? You must be hungry. Let me feed you.”

It was evening, dinnertime for humans, and therefore, it must also be dinnertime for cats. As Shuta absorbed the information on the back of the cat food bag and browsed the Internet to find the correct portion size, he noticed the cat poke its head out.

“Oh! Here she comes.”

But the cat quickly withdrew. Shuta’s voice had startled her. He held his breath, and after a while the cat stuck half her head out again. She looked up at Shuta. They continued to stare at each other in a silent battle of wills. Was the cat being cautious, or was she testing him? Shuta’s legs were tingling from sitting in an awkward position, but he toughed it out with a little shiver.

Finally, a single limb appeared from the carrier, her paw hovering over the floor.

Please come out. My legs are pins and needles.

Just when Shuta was about to reach his breaking point, the cat gently lowered her forepaw. As she pressed her round foot against the floor, a crease formed above her ankle, resembling the chubby wrist of a baby. *Adorable.* She took one step, then another, and finally, her long tail slipped out.

This cat is surprisingly big. That was Shuta’s first thought. Bee wasn’t large, but he’d imagined cats to be much leaner, like the ones he’d seen in videos squeezing through narrow gaps between walls. This particular cat looked like a fluffy gray blanket. If she tried to squeeze into a crevice, the blanket would spill out.

Shuta gritted his teeth and stretched his legs slowly, so as not to startle the cat by standing up too quickly. He watched as the cat approached the water bowl. After sniffing the bowl, she began lapping up the water.

Shuta rubbed his numb legs and contemplated the cat in wonder. The soft sound of splashing water had never been heard before in this room. Having let her guard down, the cat glanced around. Her gaze landed on the unopened bag of cat food.

“Aha! Okay, hold on a second.”

After water, food. The cat was rather easy to read. Shuta opened the bag of cat food and poured some into the other container. The cat sat politely, observing the kibble rattle into the bowl. He’d been sure that the cat would pounce, but she stayed put and watched him with her round eyes, pupils dilated.

“Eat. It looks delicious. Go on.”

Shuta picked up a piece of kibble—it looked much like a human snack—and pretended to munch on it. The cat did not move an inch and threw him a look like, *What is this guy doing?*

Feeling like an idiot, Shuta lay back on his bed. He followed the cat's movements out of the corner of his eye, while pretending not to. Eventually, the cat crept closer to the food bowl and began to eat.

The room was filled with a soft crunching sound.

Bee had a large presence, but her movements were quiet. As Shuta lay there, he wondered if this was what all cats were like.

It felt strange to have a cat in this room, where he normally lived alone. As he took a fresh look at his space, he noticed the jumbled mess. Manga and video games were littered about since god knew when. On weekdays, he came home only to sleep, and even on his days off, he slept until noon. It wasn't as if he lacked things, but his home simply offered no joy. There was nary a potted plant in his apartment. If there had been one, it would have died long ago.

For the first time in ages, Shuta tidied his room. He picked up the plastic bottle caps and disposable chopsticks from his convenience store takeout containers scattered on the floor and threw them away. He moved the clothing and magazines to a corner. It had been a long time since he'd done much other than hop from psychiatrist to psychiatrist. The simple act of cleaning his room was oddly invigorating.

He spotted something on the table and made a dive for it. "Oh, this is the kind of thing the leaflet warned about."

The sleeping pills instantly turned into hazardous items. He gathered them up and stashed them in a drawer.

Bee had finished eating and was strolling around the room, sniffing every nook and cranny. She had an easy, light gait. There was something comforting about watching a cat going about on a little adventure.

Where do cats sleep? The clinic hadn't provided him with a cat bed. *It's not cold, but I might leave a fleece blanket out for her. Maybe she'll crawl into my bed.*

As Shuta lost himself in thought, time slipped away. Before he knew it, he had drifted off to sleep without needing to take his medication.



A few days later, Shuta was clutching the pet carrier in his arms and sprinting to the fifth floor. He burst into Nakagyō Kokoro Clinic for the Soul and breathlessly pushed the carrier through the small reception window where the unfriendly nurse from the last visit was sitting.

"Here. The cat. I want to speak with the doctor about it."

"Mr. Kagawa, your appointment is in four days. You still have four days' worth of the cat left."

"No, I do not. I am. Done with it." His shortness of breath was making it difficult for him to speak. "I just want to see the doctor. I'm happy to wait."

"Then, please head to the examination room."

"What, immediately? As I said, I'll wait."

“Please head to the examination room.” The nurse shifted her attention to a different task.

Shuta was flabbergasted. After dashing from his office to his apartment, he had placed the cat back in the carrier and rushed over to the clinic. He needed to vent his anger in order to feel some relief. Being seen by the doctor so quickly felt anticlimactic.

“Excuse me?” said Shuta.

“Please wait in the examination room,” the nurse said coolly.

Shuta picked up the pet carrier and made his way past the sofa in the waiting room before settling into the cramped examination room.

He felt the weight of the carrier pressing into his lap. The cat couldn’t seem to sit still. He knew it wasn’t the cat’s fault, but still, he was seething. The curtains flew open and the doctor appeared.

“Oh, Mr. Kagawa. You’re back. What brings you around today?”

When Shuta saw the doctor’s good-natured smile, he exploded. “I’ve been fired! From my job! Because of this, this cat!”

He clutched the edge of the carrier. The cat must have sensed the tension, for she hissed threateningly inside the carrier.

“Well, that’s good to hear,” the doctor said, laughing a little.

Shuta’s eyes widened.

“G-good to hear?”

“Didn’t you want to quit your job? You’ve solved your problem. I knew this cat was right for you. She’s very effective.”

The doctor beamed with satisfaction while Shuta tried to regain his composure.

Nope. It’s stupid even to be taking this seriously. In the first place, I haven’t been treated for anything. But I should at least make my grievances known.

Shuta lifted the carrier from his lap and placed it on the desk.

“I never wanted to quit my job. I came to you for help because I *didn’t* want to leave. It’s a prestigious company!”

The doctor tilted his head.

“Did you not say working for your company was like working at a sweatshop?”

“All companies are like that. No company, large or small, is perfect.”

Shuta was astonished with himself for defending his lousy company. But this was what his friends had told him. *It’s the same everywhere. At least you’re being well paid. You’re asking for too much*, they’d said. So he’d told himself the same and had held out somehow. He felt depressed just thinking about it.

“It’s downright unfair. I was fired, just like that. What was the point of putting up with everything all this time?”

“Well...” The doctor looked at his watch. “My next patient hasn’t shown up yet. If you want to talk, I’m all ears.”

Shuta felt exhausted all of a sudden. This clinic was unlike any other. His cries of pain and tears did not even earn a superficial show of sympathy. But maybe this was preferable to a

hollow pretense of concern. An inscrutable smile adorned the doctor's face as he sat, legs crossed in front of him.

"There were no issues when I first brought the cat home," explained Shuta. "Bee slept soundly. I fed her breakfast in the morning and went to work as usual."

Yes. It had been only that first night Bee had provided solace. After that, it was a repeat of the usual. A toxic workplace wasn't so simple for a cat to fix.



Cats were unexpectedly straightforward.

Shuta had smiled as he observed Bee eating her food. He'd wondered if he would wake up to find the room in utter chaos, but such concerns proved groundless. Shuta had found the cat curled up under the table. She hadn't been up to any mischief. When Shuta got up, Bee immediately came over to him. *Has she already grown attached to me after only one day? Or is she trained to be that way?*

As he made his way to the bathroom, he noticed the cat trailing behind him.

"What's up? Do you want some food?"

He looked down at Bee, who was rubbing her head against his shin. With her triangular ears flattened against her head, she nuzzled Shuta's leg with surprising strength. Just a few hours ago, Shuta had been afraid to touch the cat for fear of being scratched, but he couldn't ignore her now that she was being so affectionate.

He touched Bee's forehead with his fingers and found it silky. *What a peculiar texture.* He'd imagined the cat to have fur like fine bristles on a hairbrush, but the reality was entirely different. As the cat looked up, their eyes met, and he instinctively retracted his hand in concern. But the cat stretched her neck and pressed her cheek against him, then burrowed more insistently into Shuta's palm.

"Wow, you're so soft and fluffy."

But she wasn't floppy like a stuffed animal. She was firm and solid under his hand. *What does she feel like? A fluffy...tennis ball?*

Her fur looked short, but her coat was thick enough to run his hand through it. Her undercoat was downy and white. Upon closer inspection, her topcoat, which had looked plain gray yesterday, revealed a subtle blend of brown that formed a gentle marbled pattern.

What a beauty you are.

Bee pressed gently but persistently until he gave her more pets. After a few moments on his hands and knees, he went to prepare her food and water before attending to his own needs. It seemed that having a pet disrupted the flow of one's daily routine.

"Maybe it's not such a bad thing."

Shuta crouched down on his elbows to observe Bee up close as she ate. Thanks to a restful night's sleep, he felt lighter than he had in a long time. But the desire to avoid going to work lingered.

But if I can make it through today...

That was his morning mantra. If he could get through today, tomorrow would be easier. He

wasn't going to quit.

As Bee lapped at her water, he scratched her head, and her eyes fluttered shut as if she was basking in bliss. It truly felt like if he could just get through today, he would find his way.



“Mamiya has been at the bottom of our department for three weeks in a row. A round of applause for him, please!” Emoto’s husky voice echoed across the floor. Shuta felt his stomach flip as sparse hand-clapping broke out. It was a ritual to use the weekly morning meeting as a stage for public shaming. From behind his desk, Emoto, the department manager, was giving Mamiya a roasting in front of this team.

“He’s dragging all of us down. No matter how much we hustle, our department can’t hit our target numbers, all thanks to this guy. Living the dream, huh, Mamiya? Cashing paychecks while kicking back.”

Emoto, an Osaka native, spoke in the Kansai dialect instead of standard Japanese, even in professional settings.

Mamiya kept his head down and remained silent. None of the sales team members dared look him in the eye. Being called out in front was enough to shatter your spirit. Witnessing someone else get chewed out was stomach turning.

“Hey, Kagawa!”

Shuta flinched. “Y-yes?”

“You’re not far behind,” said Emoto. “How do you guys even dare to show your faces at work? If it was me, I would’ve quit a long time ago out of shame.”

Shuta clenched his fists. He’d learned that in these situations it was better to force a wry smile than to hang his head. He let out a nervous chuckle.

“You think this is a joke? Are you an idiot?” asked Emoto. “Usually, scrawny, pasty guys aren’t cut out for this work. Good salespeople are tanned from working outside the office. Look at me. This is a real man’s arm.”

Emoto revealed his nicely bronzed forearms. Shuta suspected it might be a golf tan, given how the arm was pale from the wrist down, but he kept his suspicions to himself. He laughed weakly.

Emoto clicked his tongue and walked over to someone else.

“You’re not thinking about asking for overtime, are you? With subpar performances like yours, I’m amazed you’re trying to squeeze the company for more money. Have you thought about the importance of contributing to the success of our company?”

Emoto berated everyone who didn’t have a strong sales record. He was known to smack people on the head with bundles of paper or with ballpoint pens. Nothing was more excruciatingly embarrassing. Shuta had been singled out before the team several times, and each time he’d shaken with shame. After he was offered up as a living sacrifice, people avoided speaking to him for a while—no words seemed adequate.

The air was shot through with fear—anyone could be next. Emoto was notorious for being a power-abusing manager, but there were others like him scattered across different departments. In

the sales department, employees who fell short of their quotas were essentially stripped of their human rights. Those who couldn't stand it quit.

Shuta had completed his off-site meetings but hadn't managed to bring in much new business that day. An elderly man had patiently listened to his long spiel, but ultimately, Shuta couldn't convince him to invest any more. Clients rarely purchased financial products during these sales visits, especially when conducted by junior salespeople like Shuta, who were almost always turned away at the door.

After joining the brokerage firm, Shuta learned that finance was all about collecting commission from customers. If you were lucky, the value of the products you recommended would increase, and the client would thank you. But it wasn't your job to make your customers any profit. The goal was to make them deposit more and more money.

The firm was located at the intersection of Karasuma and Shijō streets, an area teeming with people and jam-packed with banks, department stores, and other commercial buildings. When Shuta had first arrived in Kyoto, he'd been excited to work in such a prime location filled with skyscrapers. Now he lumbered through the streets, his painfully heavy gait drawing stares from passing tourists.

Shuta knew that as soon as he returned to his desk that day, Emoto was going to call on him, and he would have to report on his performance. He was probably going to be yelled at again. As he trudged down the street, someone tapped him on the shoulder.

It was his colleague Kijima. He, too, looked tired.

"Hey, Kagawa. Perfect timing. I've been wanting to catch up with you."

Kijima also worked in the sales department. He was around Shuta's age and was similarly mild-mannered. In the past, they'd both been underachievers and had frequently griped about work together. But lately, Kijima had begun to win bigger clients and no longer competed for the bottom spot.

They dropped into a coffee shop close to work. Shuta was relieved to have reason to take a detour. He'd been dragging his feet in everything lately.

"What happened to Mamiya today was awful, wasn't it?" muttered Kijima.

"Yeah, that guy's been a target lately. It's uncomfortable to watch," said Shuta, but deep down, he knew it was better to watch than to be attacked. He was grateful for Mamiya. Without him, Shuta would be the one forced to stand before everyone.

"You've been so lucky, Kijima. You've been doing great. You need to tell me how you're selling products with such low interest rates."

Shuta couldn't stop himself from making the snide remark. There was no point in learning new sales strategies now. He'd been through countless in-house training and role-playing sessions. The truth was this: successful salespeople possessed unique talent that set them apart from the rest. When companies ignored this fact and imposed the same quota on everyone, workplaces became toxic. Kijima, too, had complained about this until recently. But something felt different today.

Kijima cracked a smile.

"I'm quitting," he said.

“Whaaat?”

“Here, this is for you.”

Kijima opened his briefcase and took out an envelope stuffed with papers.

“What are these?”

“Documents that need to be given to our manager Emoto’s clients—income and expenditure reports, payment statements, receipts, and the like. They’re organized by client, so distribute them according to the list.”

“No, no, no. This is all wrong.” Shuta’s face contorted as he looked at the documents. “We’re strictly forbidden from handing statements directly to clients. And look at this.” His face twitched as he examined one of the documents. “This is a receipt. This isn’t a document the sales team should be casually handing out. I’m pretty sure it needs to be issued from the collections department or some other department that specializes in processing payments...to prevent fraud.” Shuta fell silent and broke out into a cold sweat.

A smile flickered on Kijima’s lips.

“I don’t get it myself, but according to Emoto, he has a special contact in the collections department and was granted authorization to issue receipts. He’s on a different level in his career than us grunts, so he said not to sweat the small stuff.”

“Is that right?” asked Shuta.

“That’s what I’ve been told.”

Kijima laughed coolly.

Shuta had never heard of such a thing, but he accepted that as a lower-ranking employee there were countless things he didn’t know, far outnumbering what he did.

“Well, if Emoto says so, I guess he must be right.”

“The people on the list are our loyal and valued clients. I just meet with them from time to time, and they throw some new business opportunities my way. It’s an easy job,” said Kijima.

“If it’s such a sweet gig, why are you giving it to me? Why are you even quitting? You’ve got an impressive sales record.”

“Remember how I used to stand in front of everyone during those morning meetings every week? Emoto said I was the dumbest employee to have ever walked on the face of the earth.” Kijima let out an embarrassed chuckle.

Shuta wasn’t sure how to react. Things had been exactly as Kijima described. And since he’d brought it up himself, Shuta could only nod in agreement.

“Yeah.”

“Just when I thought I was at my wit’s end, Emoto told me he was going to give me some of his clients. I was astonished that he would offer such a thing, but at the time, all I could think about was escaping from the morning meetings. I figured it wasn’t a big deal if all I had to do was deliver documents. Most of his clients are elderly, so I just have to make small talk with them when I drop by. Even today, I spent the morning visiting one of Emoto’s clients—a sweet old lady who looks forward to my visits.”

“There are good clients like that, aren’t there?” said Shuta.

“The lady remembered that I’m from Shikoku and went out of her way to prepare sweets from my hometown. While I ate them, she said, ‘Your parents must be so happy you work for such a prestigious company. You’re a perfect son.’”

Shuta felt like he’d been stabbed in the heart.

Kijima laughed at his speechlessness.

“At that moment, a thought came to me. *I’m no perfect son. I’m so bad at my job that I can’t even stand up to my boss.* Then, suddenly, I felt like an idiot for trying so hard to hold on. I thought, *I should quit now. I’m not going back. If I go back, it’ll be the same thing all over again.*” Kijima stood up. His clouded eyes were now clear. “I bet these files will be handed to Mamiya next. He’s in a lot of trouble and won’t be able to refuse.”

“Wait. I don’t want to do this.”

“Kagawa, you might appear meek, but unlike Mamiya or me in the past, you know you can’t keep going like this. I’m sure you have the courage to stand up to him.”

As Shuta sat there gawping, Kijima walked out of the coffee shop, leaving the documents on the table. Shuta didn’t know what to do, but he couldn’t leave them there. He stuffed the papers back into the envelope, tucked it into his briefcase, and headed back to the office.

When Emoto called on him, as always, Shuta was visibly distracted. Emoto gave an irritated click of his tongue.

“Hey, can’t you at least pretend to be motivated? And what’s up with Kijima? Can’t young people these days come back to the office according to schedule?”

It was long past closing time, but, as a matter of course, many were still in the office, working overtime for free. Shuta was restless. Hours passed, but Kijima didn’t come back.

“Hey. Someone call Kijima. How many hours does it take for him to visit a client?” shouted Emoto.

Everyone exchanged knowing looks. Someone on the team made the call, but no matter how many times they called, Kijima didn’t pick up. Eventually, a frustrated Emoto called Kijima himself. Still no answer.

Shuta watched Emoto seethe with rage. *Is Kijima serious about not coming back?* He gently nudged the briefcase of documents by his feet further under his desk.

When Kijima continued not to pick up, Emoto called him on his personal phone. Still no response. The team members were giving Emoto strange looks. Normally, their manager wasn’t the type to make a fuss over a team member not returning to the office.

Shuta quietly slipped out. His apartment building was near Kyoto City Hall and he usually took the subway, but he wanted some time to think, so he decided to walk home.

The best course of action is to return the documents to Kijima somehow. If that’s not possible, I’ll go to work early tomorrow morning and sneak them onto Emoto’s desk. The worst thing would be to take Kijima’s place and go round to the clients on the list. I don’t want anything to do with this. How did I end up in this position?

Frowning, he opened the door to his apartment. Bee sat waiting. She let out a soft meow.

“Oh no! I’m so sorry. I forgot all about you.”

Shuta dropped the briefcase in the doorway and crouched down. When he reached out, Bee walked up to his hand, closed her eyes, and nuzzled her head against his palm.

“I’m so sorry, Bee. I was planning to come home to you earlier.”

Bee’s water bowl was empty. Shuta bit his lip. He had really messed up. With his jacket still on, he filled her water and food bowls. Then he watched for a while as she ate.

“I can’t even look after just one cat...And you waited so patiently without even complaining. You’re a better soul than me.”

The furniture and walls showed no signs of damage or scratching. The thought that Bee had been a good girl, waiting for him without getting into any mischief, brought a lump to Shuta’s throat.

There was a faint electronic sound. His phone was ringing, but it wasn’t in his pocket.

“Right,” he muttered as he rifled through his briefcase. He’d hastily transferred everything from his desk into it before he fled the office.

It was his mother.

“Hello, Mom.” Shuta’s chest tightened at the sound of his mother’s voice. “No, I’m already home. I just got back...Yeah, no, I ate. Don’t worry.”

The phone calls from his mother were always the same. They never had anything important to discuss, and Shuta always gave the same answers.

“I’ve told you many times before: I’m not a midcareer recruit. I’m a recent college graduate with one previous job under my belt. We’re more valuable than recent grads with no experience. That’s how things are now.”

His mother was always worried about how Shuta was doing. After graduating from college, Shuta had secured a position at a medium-sized food company in his hometown. But he was assigned to work at a remote factory far away, where he was severely bullied, leading him to quit his job within six months. He remembered the shock of encountering the first major setback of his life.

He also remembered the disappointed faces of his parents, especially his father’s. Although his father didn’t express it in words, he must have been disappointed that his son, whom he’d sent to college, had so quickly become unemployed.

That was why he had been thrilled when he found a job at his current company, which was more prestigious than his last. He was able to save face with his parents. At least, that’s what he believed.

“It’s okay. Don’t worry. My current workplace is different from my old one. It’s a big-name company. Whole different league.” He gave a small, dry laugh. “They’re expecting a lot from me. Today, at the morning meeting, my supervisor said I was within striking distance of the top spot...Hmm?...No, it’s not great. Everyone else is also close to the top. Everyone’s doing their best.”

Everyone’s doing their best.

Everyone’s doing their best.

He paused to keep his voice from shaking. *Everyone’s doing their best. It’s not like I can’t do my best, too.*