

The Japanese Bestseller

“Utterly
charming . . . I would
read a hundred
of these stories.”

—Shelby Van Pelt,
New York Times bestselling author of
*Remarkably
Bright Creatures*

The Blanket Cats

Translated by
Jesse Kirkwood

Kiyoshi Shigematsu

Praise for *The Blanket Cats*

“Utterly charming. Like many animal-centered books, *The Blanket Cats* is actually an exploration of messy humans, and Kiyoshi Shigematsu treats with care the uncomfortable truths that often surface when we dare to interrogate our issues. Seven Blanket Cat customers are not enough. I would read a hundred of these stories.”

—Shelby Van Pelt, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Remarkably Bright Creatures*

“What I found most striking about *The Blanket Cats* is how Shigematsu masterfully contrasts the comforting imagery of cats nestled in blankets with the weight of real-life struggles. This is far from a simple feel-good story; its warmth feels earned, offering solace without slipping into sentimentality. In keeping with the current trend of ‘healing fiction,’ Kirkwood’s translation beautifully preserves the delicate balance between the book’s gentle charm and the real-world complexities it touches on.”

—E. Madison Shimoda, translator of *We’ll Prescribe You a Cat*

“A breath of fresh air in the genre of healing fiction. Boldly exploring the grey areas and struggles of life...It left me feeling hopeful that a small step in the right direction is what it takes to make things better.”

—Shanna Tan, translator of *Welcome to the Hyunam-dong Bookshop*

“Moving between tender sentimentality to deft, often cutting insightfulness through a series of artfully arranged vignettes, *The Blanket Cats* is a triumph. Seven cats go home with seven new owners for a strict period of three days and two nights, upending seven lives rife with complexity and consequence. Resulting from these unexpected, often messy encounters is a profound image: a kind of knowledge about our human need to be needed

that one can't fully understand without having owned a pet, whether for three days or for a lifetime."

—Jinwoo Chong, award-winning author of *Flux* and *I Leave It Up to You*

"Sweet and tender and hopeful, *The Blanket Cats* reads like a Matt Haig novel for cat lovers. I was completely and totally charmed by it."

—Annie Hartnett, author of *Unlikely Animals*

"A cozy must-read for cat lovers, these seven stories by Kiyoshi Shigematsu have been rendered masterfully into English by translator Jesse Kirkwood, who brings each unique feline to life, quirks and all. *The Blanket Cats* is an endearing book that meowed its way into my heart, curled up, and refused to leave. I am now eagerly hoping for more."

—Slin Jung, translator of *The Rainfall Market*

"There's more to the mysterious Blanket Cats than meets the eye. Shigematsu's canny felines are adept at bringing clarity to their temporary owners and giving them a subtle nudge in another—often unexpected—direction."

—Cat Anderson, translator of upcoming *The Curious Kitten at the Chibineko Kitchen*

The Blanket Cats



Kiyoshi Shigematsu

Translated by Jesse Kirkwood

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CHAPTER 1

The Cat Who Sneezed

1

Two nights, three days. That was how long you could keep them.

“You’re probably thinking that isn’t very long,” the pet shop owner would say to his customers once they’d signed the contract. He would deliver these words in an identical tone, and with an identical expression, every single time.

“Any longer and you start to get attached. Meanwhile the cat starts worrying it might never be coming back here. Doesn’t work out well for anyone, believe me.”

Buying them wasn’t an option. Nor, as a general rule, was hosting the same animal more than once in the span of a month.

“Three days. That’s it,” the owner said, driving the point home in the same quiet but firm voice as always.

They didn’t come cheap, either. For the same up-front cost—the fee plus a deposit several times that amount—you could easily buy one of the purebred kittens the owner sold through the more conventional “pet shop” side of his business.

And yet the customers kept coming. Each of the seven cats would return from its latest assignment and, after just a night or two at the shop, move on to another new home for the next three days.

They came with their own toilet, and you weren’t allowed to feed them anything except the special cat food supplied by the owner. In particular, he

insisted that, like any cat, they should never be fed onion, abalone, or chicken bones.

“Onion is poison to a cat’s bloodstream. It breaks down their red blood cells and turns them anemic. Abalone makes their ears swell up and turn bright red. In bad cases they develop dermatitis, and if you don’t do anything about *that*, their ears fall right off. As for chicken bones, they splinter when a cat bites them. Don’t want them piercing their throats or an organ, do we?”

The customers would react to his warnings in all sorts of ways—some took notes, while others gasped in surprise; some simply nodded in silence, while others barely even listened because, in their opinion, they’d heard it all before. When it came to looking after cats, people’s level of experience varied.

The owner welcomed customers who’d never had a cat before. But he was always sure to give them a particularly stern warning:

“The cat sleeps on its own. When it’s bedtime, you put it in this carrier, and you make sure the blanket is laid out just like it is now. And never ever wash the blanket—no matter how dirty you might think it is.”

Cats are not known to relish a change of environment. For any normal cat, this lifestyle would undoubtedly be stressful.

“Which is why...” said the owner, still using the same words as always, the same expression and tone of voice. It was quite possible that the precise duration of the explanation up to this point was identical every time, too. “They have the blanket.”

From an early age, each of the seven cats had always slept with their own rotating collection of blankets. As long as they were equipped with one of their familiar favorites, they could sleep soundly wherever they found themselves.

“It’s like that scene you see in old manga. You know, the kid who leaves home and stuffs his pillow into his bag for comfort.”

At this point, he liked to give a chuckle. The same chuckle every time.

Today, too, he chuckled right on cue.

“Well, here you go. She’s yours,” he said, picking the carrier up from the counter and holding it toward the customer. “Take good care of her, okay?”

The customer—who, like the owner, looked around forty—clutched the carrier close to his chest, a nervous look on his face.

“You don’t have to hold it like that, you know.”

“Ah...sorry.”

“You don’t have to apologize, either.” For the first time, the owner offered what seemed to be an unscripted smile.

The customer smiled back awkwardly, then shifted the carrier to his side.

“Sorry. It’s just I’ve never had a cat before...”

“Don’t worry—she’s well-behaved. Takes to people quickly. Go on, have a quick peek. She’s a cute little thing. Big round eyes.”

The customer did as the owner suggested. Still holding the carrier, he peered in through the small window in its side.

There she was, gazing right at him.

She was curled up on a beige blanket. The owner hadn’t lied: She had enormous, staring eyes.

A calico, just as he’d requested.

“She’s adorable.”

“Isn’t she?” the owner said with a satisfied nod. “Still only a year old, so she has that kitteny look about her—but she’s all grown up and well-behaved. A real charmer.”

The customer nodded, then stole another glance inside the carrier. The cat was still looking at him.

It mewed softly.

“Oh...” The customer looked up. “I forgot to ask her name.”

The owner nodded, as if he’d seen the question coming. “Well, what would you like to call her?”

“What? You mean I get to...?”

Another nod. “You get to name her whatever you like. Call out to her a few times and you’ll be surprised how quickly she picks it up.”

“Really?”

“Yep. I told you, she’s a clever one. And it makes sense for you to name her, don’t you think? She is going to be your cat—even if it’s just for three days.”

The owner chuckled, then cast his eyes over the form his customer had filled out, which he was about to type into the computer.

“Mr.... Ishida, is it? Well, for the next three days, this cat is a member of the Ishida family. So make sure you give her a nice name, okay?”

“Um...what do you call her when she’s here, at the shop?”

“Cali, as in ‘calico.’ Doesn’t seem much point in *us* giving them fancy names, see...In any case, talk it over with your wife or kids, and find a name that feels right for your family, okay?”

Just then the telephone rang. As the owner made to take the call, Norio Ishida bowed politely and left the shop.

On his way back to the parking lot, he turned around and took another look at the shop.

Alongside the ordinary-looking sign for the pet shop was another that read BLANKET CATS. Above the Japanese characters, the English words for the same thing had been squeezed in like an afterthought.

Blanket Cats. The phrase had meant nothing to him when he’d found the shop online, and still less when he’d walked in there. *Now I get it*, he thought. Cats that come with their own blanket. Blanket Cats.

The carrier felt surprisingly heavy in his hand. Doing his best to keep it steady, Norio made his way to his car.

The sky towered above him, expansive and blue. In the distance, the mountain ridges shaded off imperceptibly into the haze.

It was spring. The day before, the clouds of fine yellow sand that often blew in from China at this time of year had, once again, made landfall in western Japan.

For now, though, Tokyo remained out of the sand’s reach. Instead, the morning news had forecast high levels of cedar pollen in the city’s air.

The forests that covered the mountains on the outskirts of Tokyo were almost all cultivated cedar plantations. Norio himself wasn't allergic to their pollen, but a colleague of his who had a surgical mask practically glued to his face at this time of year swore that sometimes he could actually see it swirling through the air.

"Seriously," he had said, "you know those old yokai manga, where the smoke spewed out by factories turns into a monster that chases after people? That's what it feels like."

Norio grinned to himself, imagining the face his colleague might pull if he brought him out here to the suburbs, where the pollen was particularly fierce.

Just then, a tiny sneeze came from inside the carrier.

Hang on. Did cats really sneeze?

...What if *she* had a pollen allergy?

Surely not, he thought as he opened the rear door of his car.

"We'll be there in a minute, okay?" he said, setting the carrier down on the floor behind the front seat.

In response, the cat sneezed again. It wasn't as vocal as an *achoo*—more of a breathy *shoo*, like fabric rustling.

"Don't tell me you actually have a pollen allergy," he said, astonished.

But the cat simply carried on sneezing. *Shoo! Sha-shoo!*

• • •

Norio took the expressway across central Tokyo back to the satellite town in Chiba where he lived. For early on a Saturday afternoon, the Metropolitan Expressway was surprisingly empty. On the way to the shop, the journey had taken him almost two hours due to a traffic accident. But now, even with a break along the way, it took him less than half that to get home.

When he was almost there, he pulled the car up outside the nearby train station and called Yukie on the phone. He'd expected his wife to still be

home, but apparently that wasn't the case.

"It's so nice outside, and I was bored, so I went for a little wander."

She added that she'd just walked into a café near the station, where she'd been planning to pass the time until he got back.

"Right. I'll come to you, then."

"What, and leave the cat in the car?"

"Of course not. I'll bring her with me."

"Is that okay? Bringing a pet into a café, I mean."

"Should be all right if she's still in the carrier, don't you think?"

"I don't know. Hang on, I'll ask one of the staff."

The phone switched to the hold melody. Norio leaned back in his seat and gave an exasperated sigh.

It would only be three days. But Norio had never had a cat before—or any pet, for that matter.

Just as he was becoming convinced the café would be a no-go, the melody cut out.

"They say it's fine as long as we don't let her out."

"Right. I'll head over there now, then."

Once he'd hung up, he twisted around in his seat to look at the carrier. It was a pretty cramped little container, and yet the cat was just sitting inside it patiently. The sneezing that had continued for a while after they'd joined the expressway had stopped now.

Was this stillness due to her training, or was it just her personality? Or was she asleep? Or...maybe...

Feeling a tremor of panic, he jumped out of the car, opened the rear door, and lifted the carrier up to look inside. He heard a vague snarl, presumably in protest at this rough treatment, and the container shook violently.

"You're alive, then. All okay in there?"

Relieved, he placed the carrier on the rear seat, then gave another sigh. Three days was starting to sound like quite a long time.

“Just hang on a bit longer, all right?” he said, then opened up the hatch on the carrier. The least he could do was give her a bit of fresh air. *You better not run off*, he thought, preparing himself for the worst. But the cat remained curled up meekly on her blanket.

He remembered the pet shop owner’s words: *Only the top kittens get to be Blanket Cats*.

Norio wasn’t sure the cats themselves considered it much of an honor, but she did seem fairly well-behaved.

There was one other thing the owner had said.

Talk it over with your wife or kids. The cat’s name, that is.

He closed the hatch of the carrier.

“Mommy’s waiting,” he said to the now-hidden cat. On second thought, maybe “Mom” was better for Yukie.

I’d prefer “Dad” to “Daddy” myself, he thought. Though it would be up to the kid to choose.

The cat sneezed again.

Shoo-shoo-shoo! Three in a row this time.

“You sure you don’t have a pollen allergy?”

Shoo! Sha-shoo!

“Yeah, you definitely do.”

Shoo-shoo! Shoo!

“Well, at least you’re like Mom in one respect,” he murmured before swallowing a sigh.

• • •

Yukie was sitting by the window of the café. When she saw him approach, she removed her face mask and took a series of cautious breaths. After inhaling, exhaling, and twitching her nostrils for a few moments, she allowed her expression to finally relax into a smile.

“How are you doing?” asked Norio, pulling out the chair opposite her.

“My nose was ticklish earlier, but I think I’m all right for now.”

“Loads of pollen about today, apparently.”

“Yeah, they said on TV. Glad I didn’t go with you to pick her up.”

Norio held the carrier out, and Yukie carefully took it in both hands, then placed it on the seat next to her. She gently stroked the hatch.

“Hello,” she said in a rounded, mellow voice. “Nice to meet you.”

At some point, the cat had stopped sneezing.

“I want to see her, but I feel, like, weirdly nervous...”

“She’s a cute little thing.”

“A calico, right?”

“Yeah. One year old.”

“And she’s a girl?” she asked—before adding, almost apologetically: “Didn’t you want a boy?”

“I don’t mind. Anyway, calicos are always female.”

“What? Really?”

“Yeah. Apparently, with male chromosomes, it’s impossible to have the genes for both ginger and black hair. Occasionally a male will be born through some kind of genetic abnormality, but the odds are like one in a thousand. And the ones that are born aren’t exactly very...manly.”

“...What do you mean?”

“They’re infertile.” Norio glanced out of the window, where a mother and child happened to be passing. “You know, like someone else in your life.”

He’d meant it lightly, but he felt his voice tremble, and Yukie offered no reply.

The cat would sleep in the small Japanese-style room that adjoined the living room, they decided. It got plenty of sunlight, and the lack of furniture meant there was plenty of space. Even if the cat scratched the tatami mats, or the fusuma doors or the shoji panels—

“We can deal with that, right?”

“Yeah.”

It was settled. If anything, they were more worried about what the cat would make of the distinctive grassy smell of the tatami.

“If she doesn’t like the tatami room, she can sleep in mine, right?” Yukie had asked.

“I’m sure she’d prefer mine,” Norio replied. “Yours stinks of hair products.”

“Well,” Yukie pouted, “while we’re on the subject of smell, yours absolutely reeks of cigarettes.”

“Yeah, but I bought one of those air freshener sprays.”

“That’s cheating! Well, we’ll just have to spray my room, too.”

Norio nodded and smiled softly. If the cat was going to sleep in one of their rooms, of course it would be Yukie’s. He’d just wanted to tease her a bit.

“Well, it’s only three days,” he said, deliberately keeping his expression calm, his voice distant. He was hoping she’d tell him to lighten up. But she was playacting, too—and had decided to go for full-on childish excitement.

“Hey, do you think I can hug the cat straightaway?”

“Yeah, I guess. She’s super comfortable around people, apparently.”

“I bought a cat teaser. Think she’ll play with it?”

“Oh, definitely. I mean, she’s a cat, right?”

“Can she sleep with me?”

That, unfortunately, was a no-go. It said so clearly on the website. Separating the cats from their blankets was strictly forbidden.

When Norio had explained, Yukie had seemed pretty disappointed. But she'd soon gathered herself.

"In that case," she'd said, "I'll just have to sleep in the tatami room! I'm allowed to sleep *next* to her at least, right?" Her voice had been lively, her cheeks flushed, her eyes gleaming with excitement.

"Oh, sure," he replied curtly. "I mean, do whatever you want." He turned away from her, as if he'd had enough of the conversation. Really, though, he was just trying not to let her enthusiasm infect him.

It wasn't the cat's arrival that he was happy about. It was seeing Yukie so thrilled to have her in the house. When had he last seen that smile on her lips, that carefree look on her face?

Even now, the following morning, as she played with the cat in the tatami room, she wore the same smile.

By this point, though, Yukie wasn't just calling her "the cat." She'd given her a name.

"You really don't mind me naming her?" she'd asked at first, doubtfully.

And yet the moment she let the cat out of the carrier she'd exclaimed, without a moment's hesitation, "Hello, Anne!"

• • •

As in *Anne of Green Gables*, Norio had assumed. But Yukie's reasoning turned out to be a little different.

"I mean, I guess that might have influenced me. But it's actually short for Anju," she said, picking the cat up and stroking it on her lap.

"Anju as in...*Anju and Zushio*?"

"No!" she said with a laugh. "Why would I give her the name of the heroine from a tragedy?"

Good point.

Anju, she explained, was written with the characters for “apricot” and “tree.”

“Thirty-three strokes in total, when you include our family name. The most auspicious number for a girl’s name. It was pretty tough to get the strokes to add up right when we have so few in our surname.”

Anju Ishida. Norio traced the characters in the air with his finger, counting the individual strokes. Sure enough, there were thirty-three of them.

“Would have been easier if I’d given her a three-character name, like mine.” A name like Yukie’s, which was written with three separate characters, would have meant more strokes. “But then you’d feel left out with your measly two characters, wouldn’t you?” She turned to the cat and giggled. “Wouldn’t he?”

The sliding shoji doors of the tatami room were open, the soft afternoon sun pouring in. There was Yukie, sitting in the amber-tinged light, hugging the cat. Hugging Anne.

“She really is well-behaved, isn’t she?” she said.

“Yeah...”

“It’s like she’s always lived here, don’t you think?”

“I guess...”

“Nori, what’s wrong?”

Yukie turned to look at him, as did Anne on her lap. Even the look of surprise on their faces was the same.

“Are you angry?”

Norio looked away. “No, not at all.”

“But you’ve gone all mopey.”

“I told you, I’m fine.”

“Ah, I know,” she teased. “You’re just wondering when it’ll be your turn to hug her, aren’t you?” She gave Anne another squeeze. “Sorry, she’s all mine!”

Shoo! The cat sneezed again.

Shoo! Sha-shoo...

Achoo! This last one was Yukie. “Uh-oh, now I’m sneezing!”

The sunlight made the skin on her face almost transparent.

Norio looked up at the clock, deliberately avoiding the smile that spread momentarily across her face.

“I might pop out,” he said.

“Where to?”

“Thought I could buy her some toys and things. They had this climbing frame thing in the pet shop, plus a bunch of other stuff. Probably best to get her something like that, don’t you think?”

He half expected Yukie to say: *Isn’t that a bit excessive for a three-day stay?* But she didn’t.

“Shall we both go, and take the cat?” he asked.

“Hmm...” She frowned and paused. “No, I think I’ll stay here with Anne. I’d feel self-conscious taking her out.”

She was probably expecting him to say: *What is there to feel self-conscious about?* But he didn’t.

“I guess this must be how a new mom feels about taking their kid to the park for the first time,” she said.

Norio cocked his head and gave a pained smile, but said nothing as he walked out of the tatami room and began briskly gathering his things.

“I won’t be long,” he called from the hallway.

“See you in a bit!” she replied in her airy voice.

Anne, for her part, offered a pleading, drawn-out *meow*.

“Wow, you really are a clever cat!” he heard Yukie exclaim. He wondered what sort of face she was pulling. But he left without looking, like a man on the run.

Driving to the local hardware shop, he smoked one cigarette after another. It wasn’t the taste he was craving, but the feel of the filter, gripped tight between his lips.

It’ll be all right, he thought. *You worry too much,* he gently chided himself.

There was nothing to be anxious about. The cat they'd spent the last few days looking forward to had finally arrived in their home. Yukie was over the moon. Seriously, he thought, when was the last time he'd seen her that happy?

As for me...You know what? I'm having fun today. I really am.

Their weekends were normally quiet affairs. It wasn't that either of them was particularly taciturn, but compared to homes with kids tearing around from morning until night, the atmosphere in their apartment was so hushed you'd barely know anyone lived there. In fact, on several occasions, the deliveryman had slipped an "attempted delivery" note through their mail slot just because they'd taken a bit longer than usual to answer the door.

• • •

Their place had three bedrooms, as well as a combined living room, dining room, and kitchen. It was certainly big enough for the two of them—too big, if anything. When they were each ensconced in their separate bedrooms, over half the seventy square meters of the apartment was nothing but dead space. They'd never had kids. More specifically, they hadn't been able to.

Norio was the problem. Sex itself went smoothly enough; the issue was his sperm, which apparently were weak and extremely low in number.

They'd found out in their early thirties, on the very first day they'd gone in for infertility treatment. The chances of conception weren't quite zero, they'd been told, but near enough.

They couldn't say it hadn't hit them hard.

At the same time, no matter how depressed the news made them, there was nothing they could do. All they could change was how they felt about it.

Maybe we're fine the way we are, they'd told themselves through their thirties. They weren't bluffing; that was really how it seemed.

But now, on the cusp of their forties, they felt the hushed quiet of their lives morphing slowly into sadness. The harmonious monotone interior of