

LBRIS

We know
books

We'll Prescribe You Another Cat

SYOU ISHIDA

Translated from the Japanese

By E. Madison Shimoda



doubleday



Moé Ohtani suddenly became aware that the ground beneath her was dank and soggy. She scanned her surroundings. Unknowingly, she had wandered into a dimly lit alleyway. Just a moment ago, she had been walking down the lively Kawaramachi Street. One of Kyoto's premier shopping districts, the street was always bustling with tourists and young people, and the crowds only grew larger from evening into the night. Usually, on her way back from lectures, Moé and her friends would join the throng, hitting up cafés and shops. But today, she was alone.

Yes, she had headed west on Takoyakushi Street to avoid the crowd but somehow ended up in an unfamiliar location. Standing in a cul-de-sac, she didn't recognize the narrow, old-fashioned block that towered before her. The door was open, revealing a hallway extending into its depths.

Where on earth . . . ?

She had been so out of it. It was precisely why she'd been called unreliable and accident-prone. Still, this was the first

time she'd actually got *lost* because she had been distracted. She let out a deep sigh.

The best way to avoid seeing her boyfriend would be to wander around a bit. She could go to a friend's place, whine and fuss, and act like she hadn't noticed anything. She'd ignore her phone. Yes, she could continue to be oblivious. Would that delay the break-up? Or would he end things anyway with a text? It would probably hurt less that way.

She stood still, eyes fixed on the gloomy building. If only her situation would change while she stood right here in this shadowy alley. If only some higher power could wave a magic wand to prevent the impending break-up. Anything would do. She wanted to run away from it all, to look the other way. But her pointless time-wasting only amplified the pain.

For the first time in a while, she was about to see her boyfriend, but the thought brought no joy. If anything, she almost wished it wouldn't happen. She sniffled and turned her back to the building.

Just then, a small voice called out, 'Hey, you there!'

She spun around, but there was no one in sight. 'Hey!' the voice called again.

It was coming from somewhere above her head. There was an open window on the fourth or fifth floor. Quite high up. To her surprise, she spotted someone peering out.

'Over here!'

It was hard to see clearly against the backlight, but it sounded like a man. His voice was nasal and high-pitched; he seemed to be wearing something white.

She held her breath as she watched him hang his entire upper body out of the window.



‘Be careful! That looks dangerous!’

‘No, no, I’m not a dangerous person. I’m a good person.’

She couldn’t make out his expression, but he seemed to be laughing.

The man’s cadent Kyoto accent drifted down. ‘Since you’ve made it all this way, please come up. I’m on the top floor, the second unit from the back. Don’t hesitate.’

‘N-not at all. I’m not hesitating—’

‘Shall I come down to you? It’s a bit of a stretch, but it’s not impossible for me to jump from this height. No, wait, it’s too far. Ahh, no, actually, I think I can manage it. Let’s give it a try. Nothing ventured.’ The man pitched forward.

‘Wait!’ Moé screamed.

She darted into the narrow building, dashed up the stairs to the top floor, then over to the second unit from the back, where she rapped on the door. Like the building, the door – metal and heavy-looking – showed its age, its paint peeling off in patches. Despite her persistent knocks, there was no response. But the man’s absent-minded way of speaking, his gentle Kyoto dialect that made her feel he was letting his guard down with her, had definitely beckoned her in.

She placed her hand around the doorknob and tried to turn it. Nope, it was stuck. She applied more pressure, and then suddenly, it began to yield. Using both hands, she found a solid grip on the doorknob and pulled.

As the door began to give, she peered through the crack. Unlike the musty vibes of the rest of the building, the unit within was well-lit. In front of her was what looked like a reception window. *This place must be a clinic*, she thought

as she craned her neck further inside. She spotted a comfortable chair, but no one was around.

'Excuse me?' she called out.

No reply.

That man! What happened to him? Her heart raced. He didn't actually jump, did he? She strained her ears. *It's so quiet.* Reluctantly, she stepped back to close the door when a female voice pierced the silence.

'What's going on, Dr Nikké?'

The voice ringing out from the depths of the unit was unmistakably angry.

Peering through the half-open door, Moé spotted the back of a woman in a nurse's uniform. Her hands rested on her hips.

'Going out of your way to call down to the street like that. Do you have nothing better to do? Are you feeling bored?'

'You don't have to get so mad.' It was the man from earlier. 'I mean, she came all the way to the entrance and was about to turn back. It's okay if I listen to her for just a bit, don't you think?'

'No, it's *not* okay. Your important patient with an appointment hasn't come by yet, but you keep letting people cut the line left and right.'

'Yes . . . But he seems to be taking a long time to get here, and I don't have anything to do.'

'So you *are* bored.'

Still peeking around the door, Moé spotted the man. Aged about thirty, clad in a white lab coat, he sounded like a mild-mannered, kind doctor. He looked up, and their eyes met.



‘Oh! Come on in.’ The doctor smiled, looking relieved by the interruption.

The nurse turned around to look. *What a beautiful face*, thought Moé. Her eyes were cool, her skin a porcelain hue. She seemed slightly older than Moé – around twenty-five. Her look, with deeply furrowed brows, was decidedly unwelcoming.

‘Um, I—’

‘Please come in. Take a seat,’ said the doctor.

Before Moé could push open the door to the examination room, the nurse strode out, nose in the air.

Stepping inside, Moé cast a look around the sparsely furnished space – just a desk, two chairs and a computer. Not a single piece of medical equipment in sight.

‘Don’t mind her. Chitose can be a bit harsh sometimes, but she has a gentle side, too. This is Nakagyō Kokoro Clinic for the Soul. As you can see, it’s just the nurse and me running it, so we really aren’t taking any new patients. But we’ll make an exception for you since you’ve come this far.’

Clinic for the Soul? Moé was taken aback.

‘I don’t have any problems that are serious enough to consult a psychiatrist.’

Ignoring Moé’s wide-eyed look, he chuckled. ‘But you went out of your way to come here, didn’t you?’

‘I didn’t come here on my own. You called me in, and I got curious.’

‘Some people won’t even come in, even when you call out to them. But you, you came here on your own. You climbed the stairs with your own two feet; you turned the doorknob with your own hands. If you truly didn’t want to, you would not have bothered. Now, let’s see.’

The doctor spun towards his desk and began typing into his keyboard.

Before Moé could prepare herself, the session had begun. She had never thought about seeing a psychiatrist. She hadn't even been to the mental health centre at her university. She'd never for a moment felt the need to share her troubles with a third party.

'Your name and age?'

The doctor's smooth Kyoto dialect drew her in and broke down her defences.

'Moé Ohtani. I'm almost twenty.'

'What brings you in today?'

'Well . . .'

Do I look troubled? Do I look like I have problems? It was true that, until moments ago, she had been brooding, but only over trivial matters. Things were a bit tough, that was all. She figured if she kept those feelings locked away in her heart, they would eventually fade away.

She was about to say everything was fine when she caught the doctor's eye. He didn't seem at all on edge; rather, he appeared ready to be entertained by a fun story. His gaze was mysterious – attentive – but it was as if he was observing her from a remove.

'I don't want to be separated from the person I love,' Moé murmured.

'I see.' The doctor paused. 'We'll prescribe you a cat. Chitose! Please bring in the cat!' He directed his request towards the privacy curtains in the back of the room. The nurse drew back the curtain, looking displeased.

'Dr Nikké, this cat requires special attention.'



'Ahh, yes. You're absolutely right. As one would expect, you're always on top of things, Chitose. Excellent! This clinic wouldn't function without you.'

'Hmph. What a lie,' said the nurse, though she didn't sound entirely displeased.

She placed a pet carrier on the desk and retreated behind the curtains.

Just what is going on?

Moé sat in a daze as the doctor turned the plastic crate around. Through its mesh sides, she had a perfect view of its contents.

'Um, a *cat*?'

'Correct. This is a cat,' said the doctor. He sounded proud.

Moé stooped to get a closer look.

Brown with black stripes. Large, triangular ears standing to attention. A compact face with a sharp muzzle. It was a dignified and beautiful cat.

'It's gorgeous.'

'You think so? Shall we take it out?'

The doctor clicked open the carrier. The cat emerged in a smooth motion like a rolling wave. It wasn't very large, but the patterns on its coat were so striking that Moé instinctively brought her hand to her cheeks.

'Wow. It's leopard print. How adorable.'

The leopard-print cat was sitting upright like an ornament. Its large pupils were fixed on the doctor.

'Yes, it looks like the pattern beloved by aunties of western Japan. When an auntie wears leopard print, people say it looks flashy, but it's funny how cute it is on a cat. This

one is still a baby. It'll get bigger, so the auntie vibes will only grow more intense. Take this cat home for a week.' The doctor brought his ear towards the cat. 'Hmm? What's that?'

He dipped his face lower and touched the cat's nose to his.

'Not aunties of western Japan? Just aunties from Osaka, you say? I see. It's not right to lump all of western Japan together, is it? So sorry. I was wrong to do it.'

It was as if they were having a conversation. When the doctor smiled, the cat slinked backwards into the carrier.

'Now, please take this Osaka-auntie-style cat for a week. I'll write you a prescription. Pick up what you need at the reception desk before you head out. Ohh, and also . . .'

The doctor handed Moé a small slip of paper and a booklet – a simple notebook meant for keeping track of prescriptions. Moé had one just like it at home. But as she took the journal from the doctor's outstretched hand, she creased her brow. The words 'Medication Record' on the cover had been crossed out with a black pen and replaced with 'Cat Record', scrawled as if by a child's hand.

'Please track what the cat consumes and produces.'

'Consumes . . . and um, produces?'

'What goes in must come out – that's a basic principle. Please be meticulous about the specifics. Make sure the intake and outgo process runs smoothly.'

'*Wait a second.* You're not suggesting I take this cat home, are you?'

The doctor raised his eyebrows in surprise. 'That's exactly what I'm suggesting.'



Moé was dumbfounded. Looking after a cat was no simple task, not something she could do on a whim.

‘Nope. I can’t. It’s impossible.’

The doctor chuckled. ‘Ms Ohtani, you don’t need to hold back.’

‘I’m not holding back. It’s just . . . I’m not confident I can take care of a cat.’

She hung her head in apology, but the doctor ignored her. He placed the pet carrier in her arms.

‘Here you go. Now, you’re officially a part of the Osaka-auntie crew. Isn’t that great?’

There were so many things that were not great about this. They were in Kyoto, not Osaka. And she didn’t even like leopard print. But the doctor just grinned. Half dazed, Moé left the examination room with the carrier in hand. The waiting room was still empty except for the lone chair.

‘Please come this way, Ms Ohtani.’ A pale hand waved at her from the reception window. ‘I’ll take your prescription now.’

The process seemed much the same as in any other clinic, though a doctor wouldn’t normally lure patients from a window or offer them a cat. Moé passed the piece of paper to the nurse, who handed her a weighty paper bag in return.

‘These are supplies. There’s also an instruction leaflet inside, which I advise you to read carefully.’

The bag contained two bowls, a plastic tray and various packets. Moé pulled out the leaflet and started reading.

‘Name: Kotetsu. Male. Four months old. Bengal. Feed a moderate amount of cat food in the morning and at night. Water bowl must always be full. Clean kitty litter as needed. Will urinate 2 to 4 times a day; will defecate 1 to 2 times a day.’

Monitor the colour, odour, shape and volume of each excrement. To prevent urinary-tract issues, it's important for both felines and humans to have stress-free elimination. That's all.'

She read it over multiple times, then looked over at the nurse, who had already turned her gaze towards other paperwork.

'"Elimination" refers to the cat's toilet habits, correct?'

'If there's anything you don't understand, please speak to the doctor. Now, take care.'

'I mean, the shape and odour—'

'Take care.'

'It's referring to the cat's poop, right?'

'Take care.'

Resigned, Moé left the clinic, cradling the crate with the cat inside. The walls of the old building and its endless hallway drew her back to reality. A higher power had not waved a magic wand to solve her problems. Instead, a doctor had prescribed her a cat.



Moé lived in an apartment rented by her father so she could attend college in Kyoto. The apartment was spacious and elegant, with a hallway leading into a kitchen-diner and a bedroom – a luxury for a college student living alone.

It had been three hours since she got back to her apartment. Moé couldn't tell if things were normal or potentially problematic. Perhaps the cat had not approached the litter box because something was off.



'Is something bothering you?'

Moé clutched a cushion to her chest, keeping her distance from the cat, who sat primly grooming himself.

When she got home, the first thing she considered was where she would allow the cat to roam. She couldn't risk him snacking on something disagreeable in the kitchen. So the bedroom it was, she'd decided. But as soon as she'd closed the door behind her and popped open the pet carrier, Kotetsu had darted under the bed at an ungodly speed. Dropping to her knees, she called to him while he stared back at her. His ears, sharp triangles, remained alert. At the centre of each eye was a thin black streak.

Perhaps calling out is the wrong tactic. Moé filled the bowls with food and water, placed them close to the bed, then continued to watch quietly until the cat began to Commando-crawl out from under the bed, one paw at a time.

He devoured his food noisily and then sat.

Growing up, Moé's grandparents had owned a cat, so she knew all about their cuteness and caprice. Their cat had been pudgy and fluffy, and whenever she'd attempted to hold him, he effortlessly slipped from her grasp. But since she hadn't actually had to look after him, she now felt more anxious than nostalgic about having a cat in her home.

According to the instruction leaflet, Kotetsu was a four-month-old Bengal. He sported a light-brown coat with black stripes around his face and upper arms. He had rosettes all over his back: rich brown fur ringed with black – exactly like a leopard's spots. The glossy, short fur made the pattern pop.

She researched Bengal cats on her phone. The breed was known to be friendly and affectionate and to possess