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# *We'll Prescribe You a Cat*

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*Translated from the Japanese  
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doubleday



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 had 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 non-locals found them confusing. Shuta had been meandering around the neighbourhood for some

time. Just when he was about to give up, he spotted the narrow opening to the alleyway.

*Why do Kyoto residents put up with 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 later, 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, but 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 a lengthy medical admission form 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 curtain 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, nasal voice and a comforting Kyoto cadence which 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 rumour 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 searched 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 non-starter. 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.

'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 prescribe him similar medication. 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 showed much interest. 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 curtain. The pale nurse from earlier entered. There was a lustre 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. Grey, 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 own 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 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 up. '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 TV set.* He looked around nervously for any hidden cameras. Then he made his way to the window from which 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 demeanour 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 set-up. This level of forethought 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?*