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MAYUMI INABA

Mornings With My Cat Mii

TRANSLATED FROM THE JAPANESE BY
Ginny Tapley Takemori

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I

A Kitten on the Breeze



Our First Place

It was the end of summer, 1977. At least I think it was late summer. I found a cat, a little ball of fluff. A teeny tiny baby kitten.

Her face was the size of a coin, and was split by her huge wide-open mouth as she hung suspended in the dark. She was stuck in the fence of a junior high school on the banks of the Tamagawa River in the Y neighbourhood of Fuchu City in western Tokyo.

What direction was the wind blowing that night? It was most likely a gentle breeze blowing up to my house from the river. I followed her cries as they carried on this breeze. At first I searched the gaps in the hedge around my house and in among the weeds of the empty plots on my street. But her cries were coming from high up, not low down. I looked up and suddenly saw a little white dot.

The large expanse of the school grounds was shrouded in the dim light. Before me was a high fence separating the road and the school. Somebody must have shoved the kitten into the fence. She was hanging so high up that

even on tiptoe, I could barely reach her as she clung on for dear life.

With sharp pointy ears, innocent glistening eyes and a pink slit of a mouth, she was puffing her body up as much as she could to stop herself from falling, looking down at me fearfully. It was obvious that she hadn't dropped there out of nowhere or climbed up by herself, but had been put there deliberately out of malice or mischief.

'Come with me . . .'

I reached out my arms and the tiny kitten clung on to me with surprising strength. She was freezing cold, a helpless little thing. I hugged her to my chest and a sweet animal scent filled my nostrils. Her body was infused with the smell of milk and summer. The smooth feel of soft baby fur filled the palm of my hand.

She couldn't have been long born, yet she already had perfectly formed needle-sharp claws, and her nose and mouth and everything about her was tiny and adorable. As I stroked her, she leaned her entire body weight into me, helplessly light, and bumped her head against me a few times.

I didn't know where her mother was, or whether she had been dumped or had strayed from her mother and got lost before someone put her into the fence. All I knew was that she must have felt utterly desperate hanging up there, and I just wanted to give her somewhere cosy to rest at least for the night. Did I have any milk at home?

I'd have to find a box where she could feel safe . . . My mind full of such thoughts, I hugged her to my chest and rushed back home.

'A kitten,' I told my husband as I ran into the kitchen. 'She was crying outside.' I held her up by the scruff of her neck for him to see. 'Look how little she is!' My cotton shirt made a ripping sound as I peeled her away from my chest. In the light I could see she had a pretty face. She was a calico, with white, black and tan stripes on her head and patches on her back, and a belly that was pure white.

It was over twenty years ago now, but I can still clearly remember that tiny kitten's sharp claws. I'll never forget how she innocently butted her little head against my chest, either. Or the breeze that night. Those cries from the school fence would never have reached me without it. Maybe it delivered her cries to my window. Perhaps by some ghostly chance the breeze from the river had a magical power that night.

The breeze came in waves from the river up to the houses in my neighbourhood. Maybe it was the quality of the water, but to me it always seemed to have a refreshing smell of liquor, and it was so pleasant, neither too strong nor too cold, that in summer and autumn I wanted to keep my windows open all the time. Or maybe it was thanks to the power of my windows that I found my cat.

Three years or so after we moved to Tokyo, I abruptly

stopped making yellow curtains. In the little house we'd lived in before this one, I'd been obsessed with making yellow curtains and yellow cushions.

Our first house had been on the banks of the Edogawa in eastern Tokyo. It was a new residential development in which all the houses were two storeys, all the same shape with the same layout of rooms, all tightly packed together. The land had been carved up and sold off, with houses crammed in as tightly as possible with no space at all for anything like gardens, and so close together that if you put your ear against the wall you could hear the sound of the TV or voices next door.

Within a month of moving in, I realised the house was full of dust mixed with yellow sand. The sand relentlessly got into the cracks between the tatami mats, and in the rails of the sash window frames, and it turned my duster yellow in no time at all. After battling for weeks against this yellow dust brought on the breeze from goodness knows where, to counter it I finally decided to furnish the house with rugs made from yellow and orange fabrics, yellow curtains, and yellow and lemon-coloured cushions. If I covered everything in the same colour, the dust wouldn't be so visible any more. As a result, our house was filled to the rafters with pop colours and just stepping inside it felt like being in a meadow of poppies. Yet even such desperate measures didn't solve the problem of the yellow sand.

I was only cured of this yellow sickness when we

moved out west to Fuchu City. We were still living near a river here, but the breeze was completely different.

We had come to this house on the banks of the Tamagawa in the spring of 1975. It belonged to my husband's colleague A, who had been transferred by their company to another part of the country and had rented it to us so we could keep an eye on it. It was a comfortable house with a child's swing in the garden. It had a spacious south-facing living room separated from a bright kitchen by a counter, in addition to two Japanese-style rooms and a small storeroom.

All the rooms had windows with a good view outside. There was plenty of space between us and the surrounding houses, and you couldn't hear any noise through the walls.

Houses are strange. Inside they have voices, a sense of presence. Rooms have their own smell, but also air that is embracing and tender. Maybe the heart of the person who built a house permeates its every corner. Even though this house in Fuchu belonged to someone else, unlike our previous place it always had a pleasant aspect.

I stopped buying yellow fabrics. White suited our new place. The curtains were white, and the house looked prettiest with minimal furnishings. I didn't place any rugs on the floor. The sensation of bare feet on the wooden floors became the essence of home.

I grew accustomed to the sight of the swing swaying in the breeze and to the soft, warm touch of the grass

in the garden. Even though the sofa and most of the tableware and other contents of the kitchen cupboards belonged to someone else, after six months I already felt as though we'd been living there for years. I loved strolling along the river embankment at dusk on my days off, gazing at the surface of the water.

In early spring dogwood bloomed white and pink outside the houses, and wooded areas here and there were full of the white flowers of robinia trees. We'd moved into this house in spring but, before we knew it, it was already autumn and the landscape was changing rapidly.

I only realised that the trees in front of our house were robinias when the white flowers came into bloom. When I opened the windows, the curtains puffed up in the breeze carrying their dense fragrance. The blossoms made the whole neighbourhood feel cheerful. I had never lived anywhere with such a fragrant breeze before.

My days were now so peaceful I could scarcely believe I had once been possessed by the yellow sickness.

It was at this point that I met my cat. She would never have been able to sneak into my lightened heart the way she did had this place not been colourless and transparent. I was giddily happy, no longer irritated by the sand or continually running around with a duster. Maybe it was because my defences were down that I readily welcomed her into my life after our eyes met, our skin came into contact, and I set off walking without a second thought.

A KITTEN ON THE BREEZE

Kitten *tiny*
Claws *see-through* *like egg white*
Ears *moving* *listening*
Eyes *moist* *limpid*
The faint smell of liquor in the neighbourhood
 night
You've come from far away
Welcome *hello*
Me human *you cat*