

## Watching for cats

by Lee LaMarche

The rain was light for September. Cooler than summer rain. Chiaki Ito rubbed her hands together and wrapped her purple comforter around herself. She sat down in front of the large windows and took a sip of tea. It was hot and the steam caused her glasses to momentarily fog. Chiaki pushed her back against the steel pillar that was woefully out of place in the center of her tiny apartment. At only 200 square feet it was one of the smallest apartments in the city, but it was on the second floor and the two walls that faced outward were floor to ceiling glass. They looked out at the old brick walls of a not-yet-converted-to-lofts warehouse. The walls were surprisingly graffiti-free for the city but that was probably because the area between the apartments and the warehouse was only around fifteen feet. Chiaki assumed it wasn't worth people's time if she and her neighbors were the only ones to see it. The brick facade was painted in one spot. In large, faded white were the words "Totalen Meats" and under them was also painted "Always fresh and clean since 1953". Chaiki did not enjoy meat but wondered what the building used to smell and sound like. As she relaxed in her blue Papasan chair she watched a small alley that led out to the thrumming Corliss Street. It was too narrow for cars, too littered with trash cans for bikes, and probably too scary at night for people. But it did have something that enthralled Chaiki. Cats. They had embodied everything good in her life even though she was not allowed near them. Her mother had always been adamant that cats such as bakeneko and kasha were hiding in plain sight. These magical demon cats were feared in folklore and Chaiki's mother was quite superstitious. Their neighbors would often leave bowls of milk outside their homes as a sign of welcome while Chaiki's family would spit over their shoulders when passing a cat in the street. It was something Chaiki had grown up with and so she loved at a distance.

As the rain trickled down the glass, Chaiki pushed her wire glasses up her nose. They had a habit of slipping. At one time she had tried on different, fun frames but they were expensive, and she had been quite frugal about expenses. In truth, she had a job at the campus library, but it was a student wage and it involved sitting at a blank metal desk in the magazine and newspaper department. She found the quiet to be optimal for studying. People who came to her section were often looking to pass an hour or two reading celebrity gossip. Chaiki would read architectural publications and fawn over experimental homes made with fascinating details. She remembered the time when she saw pictures of a heated driveway. The sheer gall of having one was strangely, comfortably cheerful. Her mother would have said the house was too opulent. It was enough space for fifty of Tokyo's ultra-small apartments. In fact, they would all have plenty of room. Chaiki supposed she was correct but still loved thinking about entrances made of volcanic rock or etched glass doors that portrayed scenes from the owner's family history. These fine details made an impression that made Chaiki want to build one of her own one day. She would even tell her mother to come and live in a luxury she had never seen before. But her mother would have said "you act as though you ran across a Daikoku, and he'd given you his mallet. You children think it cannot be taken away!" Again, her mother had two feet in the past and nothing going forwards. She believed that her family was lucky only to be someday doomed. Chaiki wasn't sure she'd agreed with her mother for at least ten years. She

even followed some of the traditions. But her mother had engrained some things a bit too deep. That was when she started worrying about things that couldn't actually hurt her. The cats in the alley were the one constant in her life. With family far away it seemed the most interaction they had was through tuition checks. Graduate school was expensive, but her family believed in education and its benefits. Her father was a supervisor with twenty people below him yet he spoke of what better vocation he might have found if he had gone to college. But Chaiki's parents had grown up in San'ya where people were poor and worried about themselves. Tokyo had jobs but many from San'ya could not find work as they were seen as unusable in any jobs that might help them get a leg up in the city. Now they were living in a far better part of the city, around educated people. They were a proud family, but Chiaki's parents always wanted a child to bring something more to the family. That was one reason they had sent her to the US.

The tea was hot, and the mug warmed her spirit. She scanned the alley for any feline visitors but, at first, there was no movement. Granted it was eleven o'clock in the morning, but cats never really seemed to go in for early mornings. Chaiki leaned back and scrunched her body into a warm pretzel, her eyes trained on the closest part of the alley. When she did, she momentarily saw movement. It was a quick flash of white. Chaiki leaned forward, scanning harder until a small white and grey striped cat head popped out from behind a disused pile of bricks. She smiled and waved at the cat as if they were old friends.

"Moka! Good morning. You look tired." Sure enough, the weary-eyed cat shook her head as if to clear cobwebs, stretched on an old tire, and began grooming herself. It was typical behavior. Her coloration made Chaiki think of an old tiger whose colors had faded over the years. But Moka was dwarfed by Chibi, whose fur was jet black and somewhat shiny. Chibi often sat above the other cats, sometimes on a disused window air conditioner or just on a full garbage can. Chaiki was enamored with Chibi. The way he confidently hunkered down like he was king of the alley. Some days Chaiki would say hello and welcome him to the alley and would swear he'd heard her. His golden eyes searching for the voice. It made her feel like they had a connection that, although she liked Moka, existed on a different plane. Mere moments later the final alley-dweller, Unagi, made her appearance. She had a low-slung body that loped and seemed like an old woman with hip problems. Chaiki wasn't sure if Unagi was the oldest or if she had lost a fight or two. The three cats did not fight amongst themselves, seemingly choosing a comfortable life. Chaiki had been interested in Unagi since she had turned up two months ago. Although she might have been around before and Chaiki hadn't noticed. The great thing was that they came out even on the rainiest of days. Today the rain was definitely coming down, but the cats were protected by protuberances further up the brick wall. Only Chibi craned his neck to wet his furry face and lick off the water. It was strange to watch. It did not seem like he was the brightest cat in the alley.

Chaiki watched them and thought for the millionth time that maybe she should make the walk to the alley and bring her three friends home with her. Surely, they'd be safe and more comfortable with her. The apartment was terribly small, and the cats would probably have trouble climbing the ladder to where her bed was lofted. She frowned and craned her neck back to look backwards up the ladder. One of her fears was breaking a leg and being unable to

climb. As for the cats? They did seem like they could figure out the apartment. But as she looked at them through the glass, she saw just how well they seemed to be doing in the protection of their alley. To them, she thought, it may have been like a protective hug from her father. Safe, secure, and calming. Chaiki was sure that's what it was. She loved sitting in her chair. Maybe they had the same routine reversed. Maybe they woke on rainy days to look at her from the rain and old metal trash cans. Maybe they saw her and felt comforted knowing that she was watching over them.

After an hour of the rain picking up in its intensity, Chaiki stretched her legs out from the covers and sipped the last of her, now cold, tea. She placed the mug on the small table beside her chair and stood. As she stretched her arms up, her t-shirt raised a bit so that her small belly became exposed for a minute. She had received the t-shirt as a gift from one of her American friends. It said "You love me? I love you. We are in love" and had an illustration of two green dragons embracing. It was far too large for her but that was why she loved it. After a moment she brought her arms back down and looked out through the glass. Chibi had slunk away and Moka was sound asleep, curled into an impenetrable ball.

Only Unagi was awake and alert.

Chaiki waved at her and smiled.

For a second it seemed Unagi's tail flittered as a response. Either way, it made Chaiki happy. She folded her blanket and put it in a wooden cubby then brought her empty mug to the sink, diligently washing it instead of letting the residual tea from the teabag become caked. She looked at her clock (another gift from a friend) that showed the time in English words rather than a regular clock display. When she had first arrived in the United States it had helped her to learn nuances of the language. Now she just kept it because she missed some of her friends and it held that sentimental value.

As she took out the clothing she would wear that day, a shiver of a smile spread throughout her body as she thought about her feline confidants across the way. The rain had settled into a comforting downpour and the windows had begun to fog a bit. No matter what she could always count on her friends to be there even when she could not see them. Maybe someday she would work up the courage to visit them in their alley. Until then, she was just happy to know that they were there.