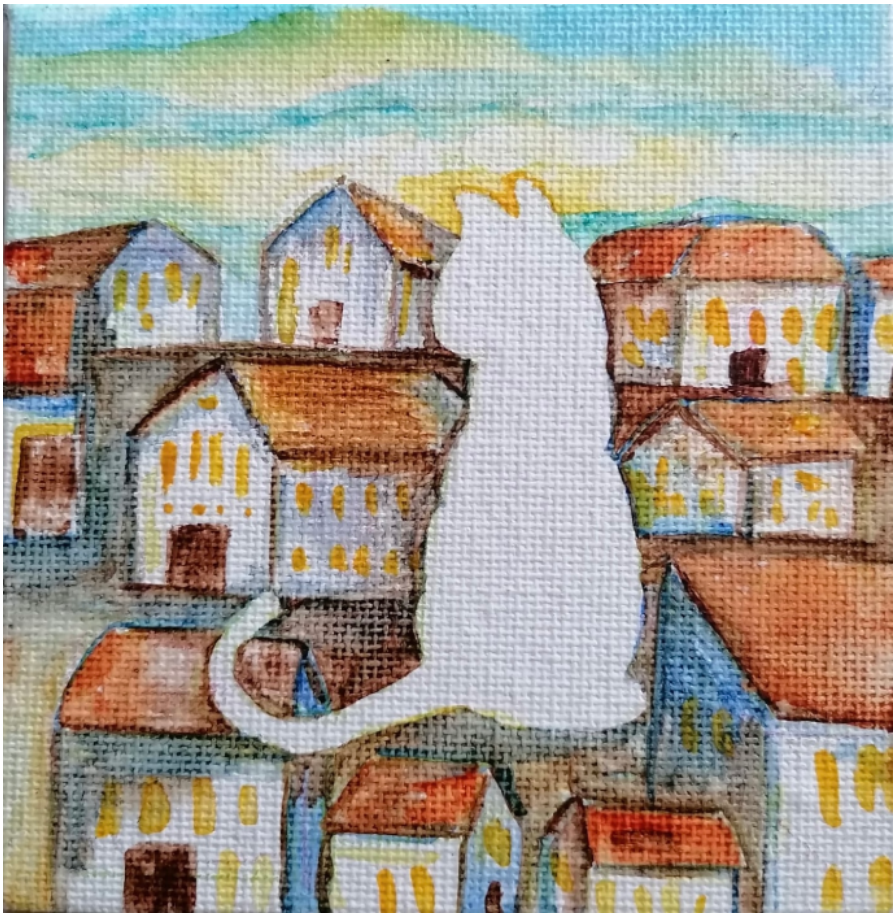
ESSAY

Memories of Tenten

by Mayumi Yamamoto



"Cat" by Atzin Garcia

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1

It was more than twenty years ago.

My encounter with Tenten happened by chance on the university campus where I taught in those days. She seemed to have lived in the international student house as an undocumented resident. Students must have fed her because her coat was shiny. She looked quite healthy and was friendly with humans. She freely walked in and out of the building, tailing students who opened and closed the doors.

One day, I visited a student there, and she followed me up to the third floor, waiting for me in front of the room until it was time for me to leave. When I opened the door, I found her just outside, upright in a *sei-za* sitting position, with a formal air not unlike an obedient child staying put while awaiting further instructions from her mother. Calmly, and without a sound, she looked up at me. I was deeply impressed by her. Then, I called my daughter to tell her that there was a cat following me and that her fur pattern was similar to that of Q-chan. My daughter responded immediately with pleas to bring the cat home.

Q-chan had been a neutered cat who used to loaf around in our house. Officially, he belonged to our neighbour, Michiyo-san, but he had a stressful relationship with his co-resident cat, who was bigger and stronger. That was the reason why Q-chan roamed around his neighbourhood and mostly stayed with us, sleeping on a chair in our kitchen.

We kept *katsuobushi*, thin shavings of dried bonito, not for our own dishes, but for Q-chan. They were his favourite. When I met Tenten, we had already experienced the long absence of Q-chan and wished him to show up once again. Q-chan had suffered from cat AIDS. Gradually, it became difficult for him to eat *katsuobushi* because of several canker sores. And finally, he disappeared and never came back again.

After the conversation with my daughter, I finished work as fast as possible and returned to the international student house. This time, Tenten had company — another undocumented resident. They seemed to be close friends. But I knew which one should be for us, because the other one was not similar to Q-chan at all *in my eyes*.

In reality, Tenten and Q-chan had very different fur colours and patterns. Tenten was a brown tabby with a very unique kinked tail, and Q-chan had been black and white. I can't help but wonder now why my memory failed me in something as obvious as their respective fur colours. It seemed my memories of Q-chan were abruptly effaced by Tenten. But I wasn't conscious of it at that moment. Neither was my daughter until we ascertained the truth in photographs later on.

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There was a big tree in front of the student housing's main gate, and the tree was surrounded by a circle of small flowers where the two cats played together. Both of them were quite at ease with me because they didn't run away when I was getting closer, sitting side by side while gazing at me curiously.

Although I behaved friendly to them too, I had already made up my mind to bring Tenten home irrespective of her will and wish. So, I seized Tenten swiftly without hesitation and sat in the taxi waiting for us. Tenten must have been surprised or even scared but I was too excited to have her as my own to consider her feelings. Tenten sat quietly and motionless on my lap. And I thought to myself that we got a cat at the right time. Actually, Tenten was a substitute for Q-chan, whom we had lost less than a year before.

Our house was a typical Japanese style wooden building that had several entrances — twelve sliding doors along a long corridor facing a small *nihon teien* (a traditional Japanese garden). The cats in our neighbourhood often passed through or lingered in our *nihon teien*, at times sitting on a rock, but it was never their venue for a gathering. So, there were no quarrels at all. That might be because they could find lots of insects and small animals such as frogs, snakes, and lizards in our garden, since we left weeds to grow with abandon. There were some trees which must have been too tempting to resist for a talented climber. We believed that our garden was a kind of heaven for cats. We didn't have the slightest doubt that Tenten was delighted in our garden, and happier here than on the university campus.

A few days after taking Tenten home, I showed her to a veterinarian. He checked her health briefly, and estimated her age to be between one and one-and-a-half. He advised me to have her spayed as soon as possible because she was already mature enough to get pregnant. However, a few days after our visit to the veterinarian, she disappeared. She went out of the house and didn't come back.

I kept several doors slightly open so that Tenten could go in and out freely. That had been our way of welcoming Q-chan into our house. So, we didn't change our style when Tenten arrived. I have to confess that we appreciated her for being just another Q-chan in the very beginning. We were not ready to give her her own unique identity. That was why we didn't pay special attention to her as a newcomer. We just left her to do whatever she liked. Then, she left.

Tenten didn't reappear the next day, nor the following. We believed that Tenten had permanently left us. Finally, we realised what we had done to her. She had been getting along quite well at the international student house. She had a friend. I didn't ask her why she followed me the other day. Neither did I ask her if she would like to come with me.

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In fact, I kidnapped her. She must have tried to go back to the campus, which was around two kilometres away from our house. In between, there was a river. To reach the campus, she would have had to use the bridge to cross all by herself. A passing car from the heavy traffic might have run over her and killed her.

My daughter cried day after day. It had been less than two weeks since we stayed together with Tenten at that time. However, even such a short time of togetherness made us extremely sad, and we prayed for Tenten to be back.

Exactly one week passed. On the seventh day after she left, she returned. She was grimy, thinner, and starving. We were ecstatic to see her reappear in front of us. She jumped into the corridor through the narrow space I made by sliding the door open. We received her without asking anything. She didn't explain, either. She ate food from *her* plate and drank water from *her* bowl, which we had kept to welcome her. It was the day she chose to become a part of our lives. She became our treasure.

2

Within a week after Tenten returned to our house, and decided to finally live together with us, I took her to the hospital for spay surgery. After the surgery, the veterinarian informed me that Tenten had been pregnant with three babies when he performed the operation.

Tenten had to wear an Elizabethan collar for a week to protect her wound. But she hated wearing it. She made every effort to remove it — in vain. It was not exactly her choice to reside with us — much less to have a spay surgery. From her viewpoint, a human whom she happened to meet and followed, took her away by force, and aborted her unborn babies against her will. Physically, her wound was cured after a few weeks, but the wound in her soul must have remained uncured for long.

Then, Dai-chan arrived. Actually, he was discovered by our neighbour, Michiyo-san, on a sidewalk while she was on her way to the office. When Michiyo-san found Dai-chan, he was with his sister. Michiyo-san picked them up and brought them to her house. She named the bigger one Dai-chan. "Dai" means "big" in English.

Michiyo-san assumed that only a few days had passed since their birth because they hadn't opened their eyes yet. They could have been left behind by their mom, or abandoned by an irresponsible human, who kept their mom as a pet. Michiyo-san tried to save their lives by feeding formula milk with a dropper every three to four hours overnight. Despite her dedication, the smaller one died after a few days. But Dai-chan survived. He was slightly bigger, and proved to be strong enough in his struggle to live.

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Soon, Michiyo-san faced a problem. Dai-chan had never defecated once since he'd been discovered. Humans can feed kittens but cannot help them defecate. Usually, it's their mom who helps in their first-ever defecation by licking their bottoms to stimulate a bowel movement. Michiyo-san tried using tissues rolled into soft sticks for the same purpose, but they weren't effective. So, Michiyo-san visited us to solicit Tenten's assistance.

But Michiyo-san didn't have to ask Tenten to lick Dai-chan, nor explain what kind of trouble was tormenting the kitten, because Tenten started licking his whole body upon sight. We felt relieved. And I wondered how miraculous her maternal instinct worked. Tenten was assumed to be around two years old back then. When Michiyo-san and I witnessed the reaction of Tenten towards Dai-chan, we were very impressed, moved, and too much absorbed in our conversation to notice that Tenten had already hidden Dai-chan. She must have kept him somewhere safe where we couldn't steal him from her.

After some time, Tenten sat beside us, alone. She was poker-faced, as if she was assuring us that everything was okay with Dai-chan. But we panicked. Since Tenten wasn't lactating, the kitten was surely going to die. I asked Tenten where he was, but she didn't answer. Apparently, she was very cautious and vigilant. We searched for Dai-chan. Since we knew the habitual behaviour of cats, it wasn't very difficult to find him. He was hidden in a traditional Japanese closet where I kept several folded *futons* (Japanese mattress and blanket). Tenten had stashed him away at the back of the closet, behind the pile.

I imagined how desperate Tenten must have felt as she witnessed us removing him from her makeshift asylum. She must have felt helpless, and hopeless. But I didn't want to lose her trust anymore. So, I asked Michiyo-san to bring him every day. Michiyo-san promised Tenten that she could meet him daily.

Michiyo-san kept her word and brought Dai-chan to our house every day without fail to ensure that he was all right. She was even ready to offer Tenten more time to spend with him. Tenten seemed to be satisfied. I was satisfied, too, observing Tenten's affectionate childcare. Although Tenten was not his biological mother, she cared for him very much.

After a few months, Dai-chan started walking to our place by himself. We bore a small hole into the fence that divided our backyards, just big enough for him, still a kitten, to easily pass through.

Although he lived with our neighbours, he appeared in our house almost every day to stay with Tenten. Soon, he grew big and strong enough that he could jump up the tree just behind the fence, and cross over into our garden. Then, he became a daily commuter. It could be because Tenten had taken care of him ever since a few days after he was born.

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Ultimately, he grew into adulthood and became almost two times bigger than our tiny Tenten, but never stopped his daily visit. When we moved to another city, we soon learned from Michiyo-san that he kept showing up at our place, sitting or walking beside the exterior wall of our former corridor with twelve sliding glass doors. He shifted from one locked door to another, to see if any door could be opened. He was looking for his mom.

3

Our new residence on the fifth floor has a balcony instead of a garden, and a corridor which is much shorter than the previous one. The wooden corridor is the perfect place for cats to make soft percussive sounds with their paws. I used to hear her walking in the corridor and notice that she was there.

It is said that cats are exceptional in controlling the weight of their footsteps. I believe it's true, because Tenten could walk very quietly, even silently, and leave me unaware of her presence until she settled just behind me. And every time she walked down the corridor to where her bowl, plate and litter box were kept, her soft footsteps had a gentle and steady rhythm.

When Tenten stepped loudly on purpose, it meant she was vigorous and in a mood to play with me. To attract my attention, she trod heavily or walked fast with a dribbling sound from one corner to another. She sometimes dashed at full speed, then glided on the polished wooden corridor until she steadied her body with all four limbs extended a bit outward and paws pressed hard against the floor, like a skillful skater on smooth ice. She had always been confident running around without slipping on the floor. In fact, she was a great sprinter.

If the closet was open, she willingly climbed up to the top of the pile. It didn't matter if something fell down when she jumped up, although she slightly minded my reaction. She glanced at me. I told her in my mind that I knew it wasn't intentional. Then, I put it back where it had been before without saying a word. Though she was never careful enough, neither was she a repeat offender. She was an excellent jumper. I always admired her for her extraordinarily powerful leap. She could even reach the roof of the veranda and cross over to the next roof. In other words, it was very infrequent and only inside the closet when she dropped something inadvertently due to her explosive jump.

Like most cats, she loved observing the world while hiding herself. The higher the place, the more preferable to her. At the top, she exhibited herself as a spirited girl. If the place was set back away slightly from our sight, that would be the best. Seeing her behave as a typical cat, I *did* realise that we belonged to different species. I often forgot this fact because we could

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mutually understand what the other felt or yearned for with no effort. At times, we conversed verbally; oftentimes, mind to mind.

Now she is nowhere but I still feel as if she is there, because even now I often hear her soft footsteps. Her paws tapping on the corridor. Her light tread. It's always at the break of dawn when I feel Tenten's presence.

Early this morning, I felt her presence in the corridor beside my bedroom while I was drifting in light sleep. There was the soft sound when she moved swiftly down the corridor for meals — hushed but audible enough just for me to hear her arrival every break of dawn. I wasn't sure whether the sound was real, or if it was just my imagination spurred by my desire to meet Tenten again. To the right side of my bedroom are *fusuma*, papered sliding doors, that open up to a short corridor. To the left is the balcony where I've long kept many small flowerpots. It always pleased me to see the plants grow and bloom from my bedroom through the sliding glass doors. And Tenten, basking in the sun, loved to walk amongst them and smelled the soil they held. I enjoyed the balcony for being Tenten's special place where she used to soak up the sun surrounded by flowers.

Now that Tenten's gone, I placed a conspicuously large cube planter in the middle of the flowerpots, where she sleeps eternally. My bed in the room and her planter on the balcony are positioned side by side, separated only by the sliding glass doors that stand as a partition between *my room* and *her balcony*. The partition reminds me that I can no longer reach out to her. So, I planted globe amaranth seedlings on her grave, with the hope that she will be reincarnated into flowers. Then, I can cherish her again. Hopefully soon, I'll see the grave blooming through the glass while I lie in bed, and hear her coming with soft footsteps.

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