



Down 'n Dirty

When we first arrived in Japan, we rented an apartment, and at the time we signed the lease the realtor went to pains to specifically draw our attention to the fact that there was a strict No Pets rule. This didn't bother us, because my then wife and I had our hands full with two very young daughters, and having a pet simply wasn't on the menu.

But you know what comes next of course, and when one day the girls brought home a tiny kitten that had been abandoned in a local park, Dad was caught between a rock (the lease) and a hard place (two crying little girls). We ended up keeping it, and as it turned out the realtor either never noticed, or decided to let it ride, and there were no long-term problems with the situation.

Once the kitten was nursed back to health, we had to make a decision on whether or not to let her have outside access. As the apartment was sited on a very busy main road, we were of course worried that she might be killed by traffic, but the thought of keeping her permanently cooped up indoors was one that none of us wanted to face. We decided that Mimi-chan should be allowed to take her own chances out in the wide world, even if it meant a relatively short life, and I rigged up a plank giving her access up and down from the ground onto our balcony (we had a first floor apartment). This was only necessary for a couple of weeks, as she soon gained the ability to jump up onto the balcony, and from then on came and went as she pleased, through a flap we made in one of the balcony doors.

And as you might expect, shortly after this was arranged, she disappeared one day, not coming back in the evening for her dinner. The kids were understandably upset, and I was sent out to canvas the neighbourhood in search of any traces. By next morning she still hadn't returned, and quite a gloomy mood settled on our house; it seems that our confidence in her ability to survive outdoors may have been misplaced. Late that afternoon though, one of the apartment children reported hearing a cat crying, with the sound coming from one of the air vents located in the building foundation.

We all gathered around it, and although we could hear nothing, the kids were certain that she must be under there. I protested that there was nothing we could do but wait, or perhaps put some food by the entrance - she would come out when she was hungry enough - but they thought that perhaps she must have become lost under there, as she would surely have come out by now.

Everybody - including the kids' mother - looked at me expectantly, and it was clear what they wanted me to do. I went back home, changed into the scruffiest clothes I could find, got our flashlight, and set out to meet my fate. The opening in the concrete wall was just barely wide enough for me to slide through, and the inside was pitch black. It was about 40cm or so high, not enough for me to crouch, and I could only slither forward over the dirt on my elbows, trying to keep from banging my head against the various pipes and objects hanging down from above.

The foundation was separated into sections by concrete partitions, each with more of the same narrow openings between them. I got as far as going through two sections before I couldn't take any more. I'm not particularly claustrophobic I think, but the combination of the 'weight' of the entire building above and the extreme confinement, started to get to me and I began to imagine myself being stuck under there, with the only

David Bull
Seseragi Studio
Nagabuchi 8-4-5 Ome City
Tokyo Japan 198-0052
<http://astoryaweek.com>

way for the emergency crews to get me out being to demolish the entire building or something. I headed back for the exit as quickly as I could, and wriggled free, trying not to let my face show any kind of panic.

It seemed as though that would be the end of the story - an unhappy ending - but it didn't turn out that way. Instead of looking 'down', we should have looked up!

Late that night, after we were all asleep, I was awakened by the kids' mother, "I can hear a kitten meowing!" We put on some clothes and headed outside. And I too could hear it, a very faint cry repeated at long intervals. She was definitely around here somewhere, but the cries were too faint to provide any kind of location.

And then I noticed something on the sidewalk in front of the building. One of the trees had a cluster of fallen leaves around it. Just *one* of the trees. What was the reason for that? Yes, there was Mimi-chan; way up near the top, clutching one of the high branches, unable to get down. I climbed up, grabbed her by the scruff of the neck, and brought her down, getting a good scratching in the process.

We decided not to let this experience alter our feelings on the outdoor access, and as it turned out, our decision was to be justified. Mimi-chan avoided cars - and I presume trees! - and had a long and rich life, passing away naturally at age 17.

And I've certainly made *my* last trip into the 'underworld'!

David Bull
Seseragi Studio
Nagabuchi 8-4-5 Ome City
Tokyo Japan 198-0052
<http://astoryaweek.com>