



Ahh .. Ahh ... Choo!

This week's story is certainly going to strike a nostalgic chord - for old-time readers, that is. They perhaps expected never to hear any more stories about Boots-chan, the cat who was such an important part of life here some years ago. But the fact that she passed away certainly doesn't mean that I have forgotten her, nor will I ever forget some of the things she did! And the day that she destroyed a very expensive kimono is near the top of that list!

During the years that I worked on the large series of prints based on Japanese poetry, I received not only a lot of attention from the general media (newspapers, TV, etc.) but also from more specialized media. Here in Japan there are a great many specialty magazines published each month: such arts as poetry, calligraphy, or painting all have publications for their devotees, and because of the importance of my Hyakunin Isshu theme in Japanese culture, I did many interviews for such publications over the years.

One such was for a magazine published by a group dedicated to maintaining the traditions of wearing kimono, both for men and women. The woman who led the group was quite famous - and hugely respected in her field. There was a recurring feature in the magazine in which she would visit an artist or craftsman, interview them, and then write a story. I was her choice one month, and I agreed to the request, and we arranged an interview.

It took place in the six-mat room of my home, where I had - at their request - arranged a printing bench on the floor, so that I could demonstrate the process for her during the interview. She and her assistants settled on cushions, I sat behind my bench, and we were getting along just fine.

At one point during our conversation I heard a light scratching sound at the door, and knew what it was - we were about to have a visit from Boots-chan, the cat ostensibly 'owned' by the people next door, but in reality a full-time resident of my place. She had free run of the building, and had learned how to scratch open the door to let herself into this room (as we very literally saw in A Story A Week episode #166).

Boots loved visitors. Anytime she saw a stranger here, she felt it her mission to make that person feel right at home, and they always received the full 'rub against the legs' treatment, or - if they were sitting down - a good lick on the face.

But today, that was not appropriate at all. And when I say 'not at all' I mean it. Boots-chan had a cold. For the past couple of weeks she had been dripping from her nose, and sneezing at odd moments. Whenever my children had a cold, I had to constantly remind them, "Don't behave like an animal; use a tissue and blow your nose properly!" But in Boots-chan's case, such an injunction ... well, she was an animal!

So as Boots strolled into the room through the door that she had just opened, and made a beeline for the woman on her cushion, I jumped up to grab her, "Boots-chan, not today, I'm sorry. Out you go ..."

The woman stopped me, "Oh, it's perfectly all right. I love cats!"

I demurred, "No, I'm sorry; she has a very bad head cold, and - believe me - you don't want to be getting close to her right now."

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She insisted, while reaching out to bring Boots onto her lap, "Oh, what a lovely cat. I can feel how friendly she is!"

I saw Boots-chan begin to lightly sway her head from side to side, and knew what was about to happen. I reached out in desperation to simply grab her from the woman, but I was too slow. Boots drew back her head, and sneezed - and ... there is no way to politely put this ... an explosion of white snot flew all over the front of the woman's kimono. Large gobs of it hung here and there, with dozens of smaller flecks everywhere else.

I grabbed Boots and unceremoniously tossed her out the door, and the woman, helped by her assistants, dabbed at the mess with tissues. She turned out to be a real trouper though, and didn't bat an eye. She brushed off my apologies, and we continued on with the interview as though nothing had happened.

I have no idea whether or not the kimono could be cleaned, or whether it was stained beyond further use. The magazine story was published a short time later, and - as you would expect - it contained no mention of the incident.

But I'm certainly not the only person who will never forget Boots-chan!

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