



## The cat's miaow

**Tama, stationmaster of Kishi station and vice-president of the Wakayama Electric Railway, died on June 22nd, aged 16**

AS SOON as she was born, Tama-chan ("Little Treasure") knew she was divine. Most cats presume it; she was sure of it. Her immediate situation—whelped by a stray in the workers' waiting room at Kishi station, on a rural railway line in western Japan—did not augur brightly. But as soon as her eyes opened, she saw what she was. Rolling languorously on her back, she admired her white underside; delicately twisting her neck to wash, she noted the black and brown bars on her back. She was a tortoiseshell, or a calico cat to Americans. They had been four in the litter; only she carried the propitious marks.

Tortoiseshells had long been prized in Japan. In another age she would probably have been a temple cat, leading a contemplative life among maple and ginkgo trees, killing mice and, in exchange, earning the regard of monks and pilgrims. Tales were legion of poor priests or shopkeepers who had shared their few scraps with the likes of her and had, in return, found riches. Or she might have been a ship's cat, since tortoiseshells had the power to keep away the ghosts of the drowned, whose invisible bodies filled the sea and whose flailing, imploring hands were the white crests of the waves. But Tama, being modern, preferred trains.

In 21st-century Japan the mystic power

of her breed was still invoked everywhere. Children wore tortoiseshell charms as amulets to keep them well. Nervous students cramming for exams put pictures of cats much like her on their bedroom walls. Most ubiquitous of all, the *Maneki-neko*, or beckoning cat (almost always a tortoiseshell), waved outside shops, restaurants and gambling parlours to draw customers in. These plastic cats stared rudely at one and all, where she appraised people with a green-eyed and sleepy gaze; their paws sawed up and down, where she made a virtue of curled immobility. In betting places they held up big gold coins to show they could bring good fortune. With a combination of punctuality, divinity and good manners, she achieved the same.

She was trained young by her mother, Miiko, outside the grocer's shop by Kishi station. They would laze there in the sun to bewitch passers-by into suddenly needing a bag of rice or a bottle of *mirin*, and in exchange the grocer, Toshiko Koyama, gave them food. The bargain seemed a good one; the grocer prospered. Tama, too, grew sleeker as she improved her powers.

From there, it was only natural that she should save Kishi station. The little halt sat on a line, nine miles long and with 12 somnolent stops, between Wakayama City and Kishigawa. By 2006 it was losing 500m

yen (\$4m) a year. It should have been closed, but the customers said no; so it was sold to the Wakayama Electric Railway, which laid off the last man at Kishi to try to save some money. Mr Koyama became informal station-keeper, and the next year Tama was appointed stationmaster.

### A train with whiskers

She kept strict hours: 9am to 5pm on weekdays, with only Sundays off. In exchange she was given a stationmaster's cap in her own size, always worn at a jaunty starlet angle; a stationmaster's badge; as much tinned tuna as she could nibble at; and eventually her own office, with basket and litter-tray, in an old ticket booth. The work was not demanding; if it had been, she would have disdained to take the job. But by snoozing most of the day on the ticket barrier, or rubbing against the legs of passengers as they arrived, she increased traffic on the branch line by 10% in her first year. People would travel just to be greeted by her smooth and lucky purr.

As the years passed more and more people came to the station, and rode on the train, because of her. Tourists flocked from all over Japan. The president of the *WER* thought she had probably injected more than a billion yen into the local economy. In 2009 a special bewhiskered cat-train, the *Tama-densha*, began to run on the line, covered with cartoons of her and with her image all over the seats. The next year the station was rebuilt in the shape of her head, with dormer windows for her eyes, and a café opened up with her portrait iced on cupcakes. A shop offered Tama bags, notebooks, key-fobs and figurines.

She took all this with equanimity. According to the Japanese principle of promotion by seniority, she rose effortlessly to super-stationmaster and honorary division chief. She was made an operating officer of the *WER* in recognition of her contribution to profits, the first female to be so honoured, and then became company vice-president. Each step was accompanied by gatherings of her devotees, presentations of certificates and extra stripes on her cap. Coolly tolerant, she allowed herself to be dressed in a velvet cloak with lace and white plumes, and to be hoisted in the air by jubilant *WER* executives.

At her funeral, attended by thousands at the station, the president of the railway company announced that she would be honoured as a goddess and buried in a Shinto shrine. Honour where honour was due. Meanwhile, her deputy Nitama ("Tama the Second") assumed her duties at the station; and the *Tama-densha* ambled on down the line, joined now by the Toy Train and the Strawberry Train, as her worshippers in suits continued to follow the moneymaking path pointed out by the beckoning cat of Kishi, Tama the Divine. ■