The Dream Box

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I still remember the day I met Maple. He was a cute and cuddly puppy. We found him at the pet shop like most other Japanese families. At first he was quiet and shy. Now that he is fully grown, he is there for me like a brother. When I talk to him, he seems to understand. We are closer than ever. I could never imagine abandoning him.

Japanese people adore pets. We treat them like people. We see pets in baby strollers, going for swimming lessons, and even wearing designer clothing. Owning a pet is more popular than having a child. Statistics show that there are five million more pets than children under the age of 15. However, there is a much darker side to this obsession.

It seems buying a pet is no different to buying a handbag for many Japanese. But what happens to this “handbag” when it goes out of fashion? In 2011, according to the Environment Ministry, 220,000 cats and dogs were brought to animal shelters as a result of owners tiring of their pets and the associated problems. Few puppies are brought to shelters. Unfortunately, Japan’s concern with everything cute makes it too easy to discard adult dogs, and so, in 2011, only 13 % of unwanted pets found new homes.

Pets aren’t protected by our laws. Within only days, abandoned pets must be disposed of if no owner comes forward. To save costs, our animal shelters use the outdated and inhumane method of carbon dioxide gassing to terminate the lives of our unwanted pets. These gas chambers are called “dream boxes”.

Every day, frightened “death-row inmates” are locked in small rooms. Shelters argue that “dream boxes” allow animals to leave peacefully, as if falling asleep. In reality, as the toxic gas slowly enters the room, these once-adored pets experience cruel side-effects. Japan’s forgotten pets’ last moments are filled with breathlessness, severe nasal pain, and sheer panic. It’s not like a dream at all. For small dogs like Maple, it lasts five minutes. For bigger dogs, their last 30 minutes of life feels like a nightmare from which they can never wake. On average, 480 discarded pets experience this nightmarish death every day. Is this how we should repay our pets for their unconditional love? In my opinion, no.

Scientists have developed more caring methods abroad. A drip feed of sedative eases pets’ suffering as there are no distressing side-effects, unlike with carbon dioxide. The process is also much shorter as the pet quickly loses consciousness. Unfortunately, Japan is unlikely to adopt this system because of costs. However, even with this alternative, Japan’s problem of abandoned pets would not be solved.

So, what can we do? First, we should be encouraged to adopt an abandoned pet rather than just buying a puppy from a pet store. Next, we should face reality by volunteering at animal shelters. This experience will teach us how to care and be responsible for our pets. I wrote to the government imploring them to protect animals. But, my voice alone is not enough. Let’s stand together to save pets from the dream box.

My dream is to rescue discarded pets from the nightmare that is the dream box. I want to create a refuge where they can experience love and joy. For seven years I have loved and cared for Maple. He is my best friend and has supported me through my nightmares. Yet, Maple could have easily been another unwanted puppy. Like Maple, animals just want a loving home and family. They depend on us to save them. It’s their dream.