

# **KOKO-CHAN**

**By Jerold London**  
**(with inspiration from Kazuo Ishiguro and Lydia Daniels)**

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**Tyger Tyger, burning bright,  
In the forests of the night;  
What immortal hand or eye,  
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?  
– William Blake, Songs of Experience**

**O the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs of fall  
Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed. Hold them cheap  
May who ne'er hung there.  
– Gerard Manley Hopkins, No worst, there is none**

# KOKO-CHAN

## TIME AND PLACE

Present.  
A park.

## CHARACTERS

JACK DAWKINS, a child.

SIR, Jack's father.

KAI, a story-teller.

... in the dialogue indicates a thoughtful break.

## SCENE – SUNDAY AFTERNOON

SIR and JACK are slowly walking through a park together. They have just lost Diana (Sir's wife and Jack's mother), and are grieving together by walking and not talking about it (their grief). Body language, however, speaks of their love, and their loss, and their support for one another.

**JACK**

Sir?  
What's that bird?

**SIR**

Which one?

**JACK**

The one with green wings over there.  
[pointing] On the wall. Is it a dove? Or a pigeon?

**SIR**

You know, this is the first time I've seen one like that here. It's like ones in Japan I saw. Called ... what?... Koko, I believe. Or something like that.

**JACK**

Koko?

**SIR**

I think that's what they call them.  
They were painted a lot by a Japanese artist, who painted for the Emperor.

**JACK**

Who was that?

**SIR**

I can't remember his name, offhand. Sorry, Son.  
He painted in Nagasaki. I do know that. During the war. For the Emperor.  
But for him he painted mostly paintings of Amaterasu, not birds.

**JACK**

Amaterasu?  
Who's Amaterasu?

**SIR**

She's the Japanese goddess of the sun. Said to be an ancestor of the Emperor.

**JACK**

I had a dream about Nagasaki last night.

**SIR**

About Nagasaki? What makes you think that?

**JACK**

I believe it was. I was climbing up long, tall hills, up streets past Japanese houses.  
Paper, and crowded close together, all the way to the top.

**SIR**

How do you know it was Nagasaki?

**JACK**

Isn't that where the atomic bomb fell, over all those hills? I saw the flash.

**SIR**

You did?

**JACK**

I was looking for somebody, but I didn't know who. To save them.  
Maybe that painter, before the bomb dropped. What was he like?

**SIR**

The painter?

**JACK**

The one who painted the Koko bird.

**SIR**

I really don't know anything about him.

Except that he died when the Bomb fell. And his housekeeper did, too.

**The two of them find an open park bench and sit down. KAI is sitting at the end of the same park bench, by himself.**

**JACK**

Tell me more about Nagasaki.

I love hearing you tell about places you've been.

**SIR**

Oh Jack, I never got to Nagasaki. It's on a different island. Way south.

The only big cities I saw were Tokyo, and Kyoto, and Osaka.

But before the war Nagasaki was considered in a league with Kyoto as one of the most beautiful cities in the country.

Famous for its splendid harbor where the Dutch and the Portuguese brought Christianity to Japan, centuries ago.

When Japan closed itself up the way it did to the rest of the world, and made Christianity punishable by death, everyone assumed it was gone.

Forever. But after Admiral Perry opened Japan up again, they discovered thousands and thousands of Japanese Christians still secretly practicing their religion in Nagasaki and the hills around it. Three hundred years later....

**JACK**

[*beat*] Anything else?

**SIR**

It's in a valley between mountains covered with forests.

And there's a cable car up the side of Mount Inasa,

to a point where you can see the whole harbor, and out to sea.

Probably one of the most peaceful places anywhere in Japan.

Children go up there on days off with their parents,

and picnic, and take pictures, and draw....

**JACK**

[*beat*] Anything else?

**SIR**

No. Sorry.

Not that I can think of.

**Pause.**

**KAI**

Pardon me, may I?

**SIR**

I'm sorry. What?

**KAI**

I beg you to forgive me, but I heard you talking to your son.  
And if it would not be an intrusion, I know Nagasaki quite well.  
I lived there as a child.

**JACK**

How wonderful! Can you tell us about it? A story, maybe?

[to SIR] That's all right, Sir, isn't it?  
He's not a stranger you can't talk to, is he?

**SIR**

It's perfectly fine, if the gentleman doesn't mind.

**KAI**

You would like a story about Nagasaki?

**JACK**

Oh, very much! Please.

**KAI**

I have a favorite, my mother used to tell me.  
It's about a young girl, and her three kittens....  
Some very sad memories after the war, I'm afraid.  
Maybe so sad, I am thinking, to tell you now.

**SIR**

**Taking Jack's hand, and speaking to him.**

We've had our sadness. Together. Recently. Haven't we?  
[then to KAI] I'm sure it's all right for him to hear.  
And if it gets too sad, we'll let you know....

**The three of them take a moment.**

**SIR**

We appreciate your kind offer. Go ahead.

**KAI**

Thank you.

The story is about Koko, and her life after she came to live in Nagasaki, and her kittens.

**JACK**

Koko? Same name as the Japanese bird Father told me?

**KAI**

I'm afraid the bird must have a different name in Japanese. Perhaps, *hato*? Or *kin-bato*?... No offense intended, Sir.

**SIR**

None taken, I assure you. My knowledge of Japanese birds is most limited, I fear. Please go on.

**KAI**

Koko was her name Mother told me. She knew her. I never did. But sometimes thinking about my mother's stories I call her Koko-Chan. The warm feelings Mother gave me talking about the young girl when she lived in Nagasaki. It was almost I did get to know her. Please forgive me.

**SIR**

Not a problem.

**KAI**

Koko's mother brought her to Nagasaki when she was about your son's age. Five years after the Bomb was dropped. They lived in an abandoned house by a river on the outskirts of town, where a small village was completely destroyed in the explosion. All that remained were a house and a bridge down the way. No people. The house was an old, wooden cottage with a tiled roof sloping to the ground. From it, up the hill, ran a wasteland. Acres of rutted, dried mud, charred ruins, and ditches filled with stagnant water and other things people feared. At the top were four, large concrete apartment buildings that marked the line of reconstruction....

[*beat*] Often, when I tell the story, I let Koko-Chan do some of the talking.

Is that all right with you?

My young girl's voice is not the best, I fear.

**SIR**

Of course. Of course. It's your story; and I'm sure we can manage with her voice.



**KAI**

Thank you.

[*beat, then in Koko's voice*] When I was young I lived in Tokyo with my cat who ate spiders, when she was hungry. After we moved to Nagasaki she had three kittens: Akio, Rin-Chan, and my favorite, Haru-Chan. My best friends. We played by the river in tall grass near the willow trees. Barefoot. But I had to be very careful close to the water. I'm afraid of water. Afraid I'll drown. I'm always afraid. Sometimes we played in the house, but Mother didn't like that. It made things untidy she said. It was only a small place, and no electric. The cats, the trees, and the river were all I had to talk to all day, when Mother went into Nagasaki and left me by myself. I love climbing trees, and painting pictures. And I don't mind being alone. I'd rather be alone. Sometimes, when people talk to me, and I want to be alone, I just stare at them.

**JACK**

Didn't she go to school? Didn't they have schools in Japan?

**KAI**

Of course they did.

**JACK**

Then didn't she *have to go to school*, like we do?

**KAI**

She was supposed to. But some poor people didn't send their children to school, as they were meant to.

**JACK**

Her mother wasn't a nice person, was she?

**KAI**

Possibly she was, once.  
But war does terrible things to people.

**JACK**

What was it like?

**KAI**

The war?  
For months in Tokyo people lived like rats in tunnels and ruined buildings.  
Attacks came every night, and the heat of things on fire was nearly unbearable.  
Many got burned, and scarred. And there was hardly enough food.  
It wasn't how Koko's mother grew up.  
Everything they had was lost in the war.  
And finally her mother brought Koko to Nagasaki to live. By the river.

**JACK**

If Koko was so afraid of water, why did her mother move by a river?

**KAI**

There was nowhere else she could afford to go.

**JACK**

Were there any children around?

**KAI**

Occasionally children would venture down through the mud and ditches.  
Even though it was strictly forbidden by their parents.  
But not to play with her. Only to tease her.  
About her shoes and her bare feet.  
About her shabby clothes and mussed hair.  
And they called her mother names.  
Cruel things to call a person's mother.

**JACK**

Brats can be so very awful. I guess, even in Japan.

**KAI**

When they called her mother the names they did she would throw stones at them.  
Sometimes they would laugh and run away.  
Sometimes they would try to hit her with their fists,  
but she was better at fighting than they were.  
And one time two boys came and stole her kittens.  
They put them in a sack and ran.  
She ran after them, screaming, but they only laughed at her,  
and tied the sack, and ran to the bridge.

**JACK**

Oh no! Don't hurt the kittens, please.  
I love kittens.

**KAI**

“Don’t come close, or we’ll throw them in the water,” they yelled at her.  
“They’re my kittens, give them to me,” she said as she approached them.  
That’s when they threw the bag over the side of the bridge into the river.

**JACK**

No! No! Why?

**SIR begins to raise his hand.**

**KAI**

It’s okay. It’s okay.  
Koko-chan, without even thinking about it, jumped off the bridge to save them.  
The water came up quickly over her head.  
She felt its grip and struggled, afraid.  
Until she felt two strong arms around her, pulling her out of the water.  
And the kittens, too. They all were saved. Alive.  
The fathers of the boys had followed them.  
Fathers have a sixth sense about their sons when they know something’s afoot.

**Pause.**

**JACK**

[to KAI] Sir? Can you tell me why Koko was so afraid of drowning?

**KAI**

I don’t think I can share that part of the story with you. Sorry.

**JACK**

I think I know. I think I just saw it, in my mind.

**KAI**

You did?

**JACK**

It was during the war, wasn’t it? A true story.

**KAI**

[*beat, then hesitantly*] Yesss.... Some very awful things happened in Tokyo when she was only five. Terrible things she saw before the war ended.

**JACK**

And one morning, before anyone was up, she ran away. Through the streets.

**KAI**

That's true.

**JACK**

Her mother chased after her. Down an alley that had a canal at the end.  
And a woman was kneeling, up to her elbows in water.  
I can see it.  
And when she heard Koko coming, she turned and smiled at her.  
A smile like she was in a daze. Or maybe gone crazy. Or blind.  
And she lifted her arms up to show Koko what she'd been holding under the water.

**KAI**

O my God!

**JACK**

It was a baby, wasn't it. A drowned baby.

**KAI**

[to SIR] Dear God! How could he possibly know?

**SIR**

His mother just died. He talks to her every day. In heaven, he says.

**JACK**

Drowning a little baby?  
War does that to people?

**KAI**

There are two kinds of people I've told this story to.  
Those who see such a tragedy and whose hearts nearly break for a woman driven  
by desperation to kill her own baby.  
And those who are afraid the woman is coming to drown *them* or *their child* next.

**SIR**

[*reflectively*] And maybe a third.  
A person who himself has been walking in a daze.  
To see only his self tragedy, and forget what others have gone through.

**KAI**

[*in Koko's voice*] I can grow up later, and understand why.  
If my kittens don't die now.  
I need them with me.

**SIR**

Diana believed in that manner of thinking.  
Translucent love she called it.  
She would have risked her life for Jack. Maybe for the kittens. I don't know.  
And we lost her, the angel she was. And miss her desperately.

**JACK**

Drowning a little baby?

**SIR**

How can you reach a person like that's mind?  
All you can ever do is try to appreciate what *they* are going through,  
and picture things in the world as they are to them.

**KAI**

In peace, sons bury their fathers.  
In war, war buries everything.

**SIR**

I've been blinded by Diana's cancer and my grief.  
I lost my faith. Almost my heart.  
But Jack's faith has brought it back.  
And your story has helped ... in some unfathomed way.  
Thank you, Sir. Thank you very much.

**KAI**

A man can give his heart away to the woman he loves,  
yet return, in time, to the child they both love.

**SIR**

It's the one thing she said to me that was the most important.

**JACK**

I see something else.

**KAI**

What? What do you see?

**JACK**

Koko-Chan goes to school. With friends.  
Japanese forgive, when they understand.

**SIR stands.**

**SIR**

Sir ... it's been an honor.  
I am John, and this is my son, Jack.

**KAI and JACK stand.**

**KAI**

The honor is mine. My pleasure meeting the two of you.  
My name is Kai.

**SIR and KAI shake hands.**

**JACK**

Goodbye, Mister Kai. But may I ask one last question?

**KAI**

Of course.

**JACK**

Did Nagasaki forgive us for dropping the Bomb?

**KAI**

[*beat*] We forgave, and became friends....  
I don't understand all things in life all that clearly, Son.  
Certainly not war.  
Not even forgiveness....

[*beat*] Until we meet again.

**As SIR and JACK exit, JACK turns and waves.**

**KAI bows, and then sits back down on the park bench watching them leave.**

**END**