

KOKO-CHAN & THE COAL BLACK CAT

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**But all at once
as if awakened, she turns her face to yours;
and with a shock, you see yourself, tiny,
inside the golden amber of her eyeballs
suspended, like a prehistoric fly.**

– Rainer Maria Rilke, Black Cat

KOKO-CHAN & THE COAL BLACK CAT

TIME AND PLACE

Present. A park.

Stage right or **stage left**: Kai's story of Koi, the mice, the farmer, and the poor old man can be pantomimed concurrently using actors in all black or all white, and puppets.

CHARACTERS

JACK DAWKINS, a child.

SIR, Jack's father.

KAI, a story-teller.

... in the dialogue indicates a thoughtful break.

SCENE – A FOLLOWING SUNDAY AFTERNOON

SIR and JACK are walking through the park together (as they do nearly every Sunday afternoon), when they see KAI sitting on his usual park bench. He sees them, and bows his head. They approach him.

JACK

Good afternoon, Mister Kai. We hoped we would find you here.

KAI

I was just thinking of you. Wondering how you have been.

SIR

We are doing well, Kai. Each passing week, thank you.
And how about you?

KAI

Remembering a friend, from my years in Japan.
And thinking about a cat I saw in the park yesterday.

**JACK and SIR sit down on the bench
next to KAI.**

JACK

The cat makes you think of your friend?

KAI

In a way, yes.
But in a strange way.

JACK

And also about Nagasaki?

KAI

Well, yes, Nagasaki too.

JACK

How?

KAI

I can tell you best with a story. Do you mind?

JACK

Mind?
I *love* your stories.

SIR

He does. We both do.
We talk about them for days afterwards.

KAI

I think most of my stories are lesson stories.
That makes them more important to me. Do you mind that?

SIR

Goodness! Not at all. That's part of why we like them so much.
They're good for us. For Jack, especially. To think about.

KAI

Do you remember Koko-Chan?

JACK

Of course.
The girl with the kittens who caught a wood fairy like a butterfly in her scarf.

KAI

You have a good memory, Jack.

JACK

I have many good memories of you, Sir. And telling us about Nagasaki.

KAI

Gives a slight bow of his head.

Thank you....

I think I might have mentioned that Koko-Chan, while she was growing up, visited that wood fairy about every week, for his stories and his advice to her.

JACK

Like me. And you.

KAI

Laughs.

Yes. Like us, Jack.

And she was just as full of questions as you.

Anyway, one week he told her about a curious black cat who lived in an enchanted forest north of Hiroshima.

About 300 miles from Nagasaki.

To be fair, the story began with a mother mouse, who lived in a barn with her six new-born pups.

Mice are named for their numbers.

But since mice can't count past nine, and since she'd had litters before, these babies were named "Many-Plus-One," "Many-Plus-Two," "Many-Plus-Three," "Many-Plus-Four," "Many-Plus-Five," and "Many-Plus-Six."

Or simply "Plus One," "Plus Two," "Plus Three," and so on.

Sadly, the farmer hated mice.

Actually, not the farmer himself. His wife hated them with a passion.

And was afraid of them.

So, he went looking for a cat.

But not just any cat, mind you.

A *black* cat that mice could hardly see.

A cat, black as night. Black as coal.

And in the enchanted forest, that was, say, fairly close to their farm, he found one.

Coal black.

And young.

And he fed her, and put her in a cage, and brought her back to the farm.

And into the barn.

And told her to get rid of all the mice she could find.

JACK

I'm glad I'm not a mouse.

KAI

Aren't we all?...

Mice, like most mammals, experience four, fierce emotions in their lives:
Personal survival, and the fear of death.

Hunger.

Having babies.

And protecting their babies with their lives.

The mice soon learned that the cat ...

Who was named Koi, which is a Japanese word that means dark.

Dark as night, which Koi was.

That Koi meant something else to them:

Death.

Just moving about in the barn was almost enough of a fright to kill them.

Koi made no sound, as she crept up.

And then, out of nowhere, her razor sharp claws would pierce them.

And hold them helpless, till her teeth ended their lives.

Living in the barn was like living in Hell for the mice, never knowing when an attack would come.

Any shadow that might flicker.

Any crumb of a sound that might drop.

Anything different would race their feeble hearts against their ribs.

And one-by-one they disappeared, until only Plus Four and her mother remained.

All three of her brothers and both of her sisters were caught, killed, and eaten.

Then her mother.

At that moment Plus Four did something no mouse has ever done.

She started squeaking a defiant squeak,
and marched right through the barn. Out in the open.

Calling to Koi.

Defying Koi's claws and teeth.

Telling Koi to come kill her, as well,
for without her mother and her sisters and her brothers,
she had nothing left to live for.

It did something to the cat.

It appealed to something deeper inside her.

Something more meaningful than teeth, and claws, and a killing instinct.

And Koi went to the mouse,

picked Plus Four up in her mouth like a baby kitten of her own,
carried her to where she knew they had their nest, and left her there.

But Plus Four bounced out.

And started squeaking again.

JACK

Why did she do that?
Did she want to die?

KAI

If everyone you ever cared about gets killed,
and everywhere you go is fear,
all some people want to do is to stop living.
Life goes empty. And that is where Plus Four was, and Koi felt it.

JACK

What did Koi do?

KAI

She went to the mouse, and carried her to her own bed.
A cushion on the floor of the barn.
And she put her paws gently around it, and held it close to her the way she would
a kitten.
You see, Koi never had any kittens.
And something inside took over her cat mind.
And she protected Plus Four as though she were her own....

JACK

[*beat*] What happened then?

KAI

After a few days the farmer found them together, and was disgusted.
He put Koi back in the cage,
took her to the enchanted forest, and left her there.
Alone. Inside the cage. Locked.
Koi could not get out; and in days she would die.
The third night it started to rain, and Koi began to cry out, almost sounding like a
human baby in the woods....

In the enchanted forest at that time was a poor old man in a small cottage with
only his meager savings to live on.
And it was the one night of the week when he treated himself to a supper of meat,
milk, and a whole loaf of bread just before going to bed.
The other nights he lived on less bread, no milk, and half the amount of meat.
He had just sat down at his table when he heard Koi's cries.
Or thought he heard them.
He wasn't sure what he heard.

JACK

O please! Let him save the cat.

KAI

The old man rose from the table, picked up the lantern that was lit, and went out into the rain.

After a bit of a search he found Koi, locked in the cage, and brought her into the cottage, cage and all.

He released her and began drying her off with a towel.

He could see how cold and hungry she was,

and he went to the cupboard for a saucer, and filled it with milk.

Koi hungrily lapped up the milk, and then gazed at the man.

He filled the saucer again, and again she lapped the milk up in moments.

The next time he added a piece of bread he tore from the loaf.

And again Koi consumed the saucer's contents in seconds.

They continued like that until all the milk and most of the bread was gone.

Still shivering from the cold, Koi began to rub herself against the old man's ankles, and to stare up at the table where the meat was lying on a plate.

"All right," said the old man. "We'll share the meat. I'm hungry, too, you know."

As things went, Koi got the lion's share of the meat as well.

After the meal, she walked over to the hearth to warm herself by the fire.

It was a small fire, and the old man added another log.

By the end of the evening he'd used all the wood he had laid by.

Koi was purring; and the old man was well pleased, too.

It's not often you find a stranger whose life you can save.

At midnight the old man went to bed, tucking himself under the covers.

And soon enough he felt Koi jump onto the bed with him.

She slid down, next to his chest, purring all the time.

The next morning the rain had stopped.

The sun was shining brightly.

Koi ran to the door, and the old man let her out.

"Hope to see you soon," he called to her, as she ran off.

She stopped, and turned to look back at him.

A question was in her golden amber eyes.

"Why?"

Why did you do it?

Why did you save my life?"

JACK

What did he say to her?

KAI

“Why not?
You were a stranger in need.
Now you are a friend.”

Koi turned, and ran down the path, further into the forest, and disappeared.

JACK

And he never saw her again?

KAI

No, he never did.
And yet ...
When the old man went back into the house, it seemed empty, and lonely without her.
That is, until he opened the cold box, and found the jug of milk filled to the brim.
The plate, too, had many slices of meat on it.
In the cupboard was a warm, full loaf of bread.
And wood was stacked high in the box by the fireplace.

JACK

How?
Where did it all come from?

KAI

I told you:
It was an enchanted forest.
And it gave the old man its magic for the rest of his life.
And, at times, he could swear he heard Koi purring next to him.
And could feel her warmth on his chest on a cold night.

JACK

That’s a wonderful story, Mr. Kai.

SIR

Yes, it is.
Thank you.

JACK

You said something. At the beginning.

KAI

What?

JACK

You said that the cat made you think of your friend. In Nagasaki.
How?

KAI

My friend had a cat once he loved.
She was totally black, like the cat I saw yesterday.
Like the cat in the wood fairy's story.
He named her Koi, too, not because of her dark color,
but because "Koi" in Japanese also means "love."

SIR

That's a strange coincidence.
That the same Japanese word means both "dark" and "love."
Almost like it was meant for a black cat.

KAI

It's also the word for our special breed of good-luck goldfish,
which are so popular in Japan, swimming in lotus ponds.
It all depends upon the way the word is written and is used.

JACK

Mr. Kai? Did you like your friend's cat?

KAI

Unfortunately, I got to feeling that he put it between us.
By the end, when we would talk, he'd say to the cat, the things he meant for me.
It was very difficult.

JACK

And you lost your friend because of that?

KAI

He wouldn't go out of his home anymore.
And, finally, he wouldn't let me visit him anymore.

JACK

Because of his cat?

KAI

It wasn't the cat's doing. It was a money matter.
We had a falling apart over money.
The most foolish reason to fall apart.

JACK

Money?

KAI

I worked night and day for my company in Japan.
Almost no time for friendships, or, really, for myself,
other than getting together after work, sometimes, with my employees.
For dinner and drinks.
He wanted to start a company of his own.
Not work with me anymore.
And I guaranteed a loan for him, to be able to do his dream.
But it failed. And he failed to repay the loan.
And I had to pay it all myself.

JACK

You lost money, and he lost face.

KAI

You are exactly right.
And the money meant nothing to me, compared to him.
And losing face meant everything to him.

JACK

Wasn't there something you could do?

SIR

I think we've asked our friend enough questions for today, Son.
Let's give it a rest.
Okay?

JACK

I didn't meant to.

SIR

Another time, I think.
Okay?

JACK

I'm sorry, Mr. Kai.
I didn't mean to.

KAI

As your father says, another time, maybe.

JACK

Life is complicated, isn't it?

KAI

Life is indeed complicated, Young Man.

Which is why wood fairies and story-tellers will all have their day.

SIR

It is time for us to be going. Thank you, Sir, and a pleasure as always.

JACK and SIR stand. KAI likewise stands.

KAI

The pleasure of your company is all mine.

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