
Opening Extract from...

King Death

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I.

I am writing in Japanese because it will be easier for me. My English is okay but not good enough to tell this complicated story. And this story happened in English, except what happened in my head. When I write my diary, that is in Japanese. Japanese is for being very clear and also private.

At first through the window we could see nothing but the lit-up windows of houses. Then, closer to sunrise, traces of the houses themselves began to appear – and the empty fields around them.

We were returning from a long weekend at Brighton with Skelton's parents. He couldn't sleep and I didn't want to talk.

It was already over between us, though neither he nor I had said anything. There had been no horrible argument. The weekend was perfectly pleasant and completely dead.

Skelton's father had driven us to the station in time to catch the early train. I think he felt when we said goodbye that he probably would not see me again. At that moment, I liked Skelton's father. He seemed a better man than his son.

Apart from ourselves, the carriage was empty. A year before, this would have made us joke about having sex. But we did not make jokes like that any longer.

I felt like a dead body, and was trying to move as little as possible to preserve this. Sometimes I looked at my reflection, to see how dead it was.

There were more houses and fewer fields, and then there were only houses and the fields were parks that we didn't see because they were hidden behind houses.

The train stopped at London Bridge station. It is important now that I am very precise. The time was 5.34 a.m. exactly, because the train was on time.

We heard footsteps along the platform and then the doors beeping before they all closed. There were still very few people around, though one or two got into our carriage.

Skelton was sitting with his back to the driver. I always prefer to travel forwards, so I can see things coming.

There were some routine shouts, and the train started to move. At first it went over something like a bridge. To the right was the cathedral of Southwark. In the summer it has stones that look golden but on a spring morning they are gentle gray like the rest of London. But I was looking out of the window on the left-hand side of the carriage. Skelton was looking that way, too.

The next thing the train reaches, after coming off the bridge, is the glass roof of Borough Market. Since the time I am writing about, this has been replaced by a modern imitation of itself. It is now something clean and easy to clean. But what I saw was Victorian, covered in lichen and with some of the long oblong panes cracked. I liked them very much. They were zigzag waves on a sea of green glass and the train was a ship ploughing through them.

The next thing I remember is the heart. I saw it sliding down the incline of the roof until it touched the lead guttering and was out of sight.

As soon as I lost sight of it, the rain began to fall. Welcome to London, I thought. The date was May first.

I expected the train to stop. To see a heart like that, naked, was such an extraordinary thing. The train didn't stop.

'It was human,' I said. I am not an expert on biology, but I knew for absolute certain. Not for one second did I doubt it.

'What?' Skelton asked.

'You saw it,' I said. 'Just outside the window.'

'It was probably just a piece of meat,' he said. 'Something from the market.'

'On the roof?'

'Some rats must have carried it up there.'

I didn't like to think about rats. Maybe they had, but it was still a human thing. We couldn't just leave it there for other rats to come along and eat.

'We need to go and see.'

'I can't,' Skelton said. 'You know I've got a session, and I have to go home and get changed first.'

A good example of why our relationship would soon have to end.

'You do that. Fine. I will go back by myself.'

The train was now waiting for permission to cross the bridge. I was impatient for the next stop.

'Do you think anyone else saw?' Skelton asked.

'That's not important,' I said. '*We* saw, so we must do something.'

'If it's what you think it was, we should just call the police.'

The train finally started to move again.

'It is our responsibility,' I said. 'And if you don't want it, it is my responsibility.'

We could see the waters of the Thames river, not brown and not green, but a colour.

'I saw,' said Skelton. 'I saw just like you did.'

The train began to slow. I picked up my weekend bag from the seat beside me. Skelton had an old-fashioned suitcase.

When the doors unlocked, I pressed the button and stepped onto the platform. Then I saw what I wanted: a train on a platform heading in the opposite direction, back to London Bridge.

With my bag clutched to my chest, I ran. Skelton was behind me, slower because of his suitcase and slower generally.

We ran down the stairs, across under the tracks and up onto the other platform. A few commuters were around but they didn't watch us – two people running for a train, big deal.

The doors began to beep, but I got there in time to climb in and hold them open with my shoulders.

Skelton arrived and tried to pull them apart. He wasn't strong enough. My shoulders were hurting a lot, so I stepped back into the carriage. The doors shut the whole way. Skelton was still on the platform.

Immediately, the train began to move. Skelton looked towards the driver, as if he might take pity and change his mind. Then Skelton's face passed out of sight.

I crossed to the other side of the compartment, so I could gaze out the window and see if I could see the heart. Skelton could either go to work or come and try to find me. It didn't matter which.

I felt very excited, almost as if I were going to try to save someone's life.

The train went too slowly. I had enough time to read every piece of graffiti between Blackfriars and London Bridge – or it seemed like I did.

I was disappointed when we went back over Borough Market. This train was on a different set of tracks – further away from the roofs. The gutter where the heart had fallen was out of sight.

There was a window, quite near by the place, painted English green. It issued from the top floor of an old brick house. If I could find the front entrance, perhaps this would be a way out onto the roofs – down the rail tracks.

I kept my eyes on the spot of the heart for as long as I could. Just before it went round the corner I saw a large crow come down and land exactly there.

Even before the carriage stopped I was already pressing and pressing the button to open the doors. And when they did open, I got out on the platform and began to walk very quickly towards the exit. I did not wait for Skelton on the next train. To see the crow had caused me painful anxiety about the safety of the heart.

At the end of the platform was a long passage sloping down past advertisements for crime novels and other happy things. When I got to the bottom I turned left and approached the ticket barriers.

A minute later, I was crossing Borough High Street. Above my head was the bridge I had crossed twice in the past fifteen minutes. By following the tracks with my eyes, I was able to see the direction I should go.

The big problem was how to get up onto the roofs. The authorities would not want people to reach there with ease, obviously. I could see no stairs or ladder.

Borough Market was empty, no stalls, and no traders. I walked quickly through to the other side. My footsteps sounded loud in the high space. A dirty light came down through the Victorian glass.

On the corner of Stoney Street was the Market Porter, a nice old-fashioned pub. I had been there with Skelton for a drink of real ale.

A train came past, up in the air, coming from the right direction. Hurry up, I thought.

I walked down Stoney Street, under the rail bridge. And then the house with the green window upstairs was directly in front of me.

It did not look very loved. The front door was painted dull black. In the windows, instead of curtains or blinds, were flattened cardboard boxes – and some of the panes were broken. The faded print said the boxes were once for Sony videocassette recorders.

I thought about calling Skelton on his cellphone. He could find this house if I described it. Maybe he knew it already, by sight. But I was more and more worried about the crow, so I immediately knocked on the door.

No-one answered.

I knocked louder.

Still no-one answered.

'Hello!' I shouted. 'Is somebody there?'

I banged hard on the door with my fist, and it opened – a little. On the inside was a chain. It would be easy to reach around and unhook it.

'Hello!' I shouted through the dark gap. 'I need to speak to you.'

I listened but could hear nothing.

I reached my hand inside, and felt somebody grab it. Nails went into my wrist. What I was most afraid of, although I do not know why, was that the hidden person would bite one of my fingers off.

'Hey,' said an old woman's voice, very rough. 'Let go.'

'No, *you* let go.'

My hand came free. I pulled it out of the dark slit, very glad to have it back in one piece.

The chain clicked against the wood, and the door opened on a very sad face. I am not very tall, only 150 centimetres, but the young girl in front of me was half a head shorter. There were purple circles under her eyes, which had absolutely no life in them.

'What d'you want?' the girl asked. Her voice was still that of an old woman. It seemed to come from a long distance away, like a historical radio broadcast.

'I need to get up onto the roofs.' I pointed up, to make myself clear. 'I saw something on them.'

The girl looked to my left and right. 'You alone?'

'Yes,' I said. 'But I have a friend who may come in a minute.'

For a second time she looked around me.

'You sure you don't want nothing else? You don't have to give me some story about the roof. What d'you want?'

'No. I need to get up there. Quickly.'

She stepped back into the dark, pulling the door open. 'Be quiet,' she said. 'Don't wake them.'

I followed her across the room. My feet kicked hard things out of the way.

'Stairs,' she said. 'Be careful. They're rotten.'

There was more light on the first landing. We kept going up. Another floor, and then the green window with scaffolding around it.

'It's safe,' said the girl.

It felt strange to climb out onto the roof I had seen from the train.

I saw a crow try to take off, the heart hanging from its beak. The girl must have spotted it too.

'No!' I said.

The girl understood what I meant because she jumped across to the train tracks.

At first I thought she was fleeing, but then I realized you had to go the long way round.

I got onto the tracks and ran after her. She was fast. I was faster. We went over the high bridge. My feet splashed in the spaces between sleepers as I overtook her.

The crow lifting the heart only got about a metre into the air before the other crow attacked it. Black feathers beat against black feathers, beak tried to peck eyes, and the heart fell down.

The girl showed me how to get onto the roofs of the market. We climbed over a low place in the wall.

I was still maybe ten metres away from where I needed to be.

The two crows descended together. Both beaks caught hold of the heart. Together, they took off vertically. They had seen me and were scared.

I jumped up to try and grab the dangling heart. My fingers felt the touch of it, but then the crows went higher.

The girl joined me.

We watched helplessly as the two crows flew up and up, five metres, ten.

Then one of the crows tried to pull away, stealing the heart from the other. It failed – beak lost its grip.

For a moment, I thought the other crow would now just fly away. But the heart was too heavy for it.

As it began to fall, I knew it was out beyond the edge

of the roofs. I was desperate to catch it, though, so I ran without thinking.

My hands were above my head when the heart fell into them.

I tried to stop, and almost did, but my momentum was tipping me forwards, over the edge.

If the girl had not grabbed the belt of my raincoat, I would have fallen fifteen metres onto wet pavement – or onto the head of Skelton, standing there, looking up.

2.

Her ultra-pale skin, Kumiko's, I can't compare with anything else. She was thirty-three around the time of the heart, so despite being perfect her face wasn't flawless – near the corners of the eyes, sadness had caused it to pucker. Her father and her mother were recently dead, of cancer and a stroke. We made two visits to Osaka to bury them. When I touched it, Kumiko's skin, I could sense in its smoothness and give both coming age and gone youth. Perfect. Her lips were full, her eyes heavy-lidded and her hair – her hair was like black oil flowing over a stone.

As we travelled up from my parents', we sat in a kind of exhausted but not uncontented silence. Weekends like that, however well they go, always put some kind of strain on a relationship. I thought we'd come through pretty well. My father and Kumiko obviously enjoyed one another's company. With my mother it was a little more difficult, but then it had always been like that. I was her only child.

Whatever she or my father thought, it didn't really matter. Kumiko and I had been going out for three years, living together for two; I loved her, and was planning to ask her to marry me – on Christmas Eve. Of course, all my plans were disrupted by the heart.

When I first saw it, lying on the glass roof of Borough Market, I have to say I felt deeply unnerved. I'm

not claiming to be psychic, or to have foreseen everything that happened afterwards, but I knew it was very bad news. I got that pricking-of-my-thumbs feeling. Part of me hoped that Kumiko hadn't seen it. Her dark eyes, though, miss almost nothing – and I'm prepared to admit that it may have been a slight turn of her head that caused me to focus my hazy early-morning gaze.

She was convinced, right from the first moment, that what we had both seen was part of a person. When I suggested it was far more likely something from one of the butchers' stalls in the Market, she just shook her head. 'No,' she said.

With Kumiko being so definite, I put up little resistance to the idea of us going back and investigating. Undoubtedly there was a thrilling element to such a discovery. No-one else in the compartment, the one or two dozing people, seemed to have noticed.

I did wonder, even then, how the heart could have got there – always assuming it *was* a heart. Perhaps someone had dropped it whilst making their escape across the roofs. Or perhaps it had been thrown from one of the late-running trains. Or perhaps, as I suggested, rats or pigeons had carried it up from street level.

As we crossed the Thames, I was distracted enough to look at the faded red pilings sticking out of the water. These, visible from the left-hand side of the train, are all that remains of the original Blackfriars Bridge. Whenever I saw them, I always imagined myself leaping from piling to piling – then sitting down on the one furthest out and waiting for London to take notice of me. It might take a desperate act such as that; nothing else, so far, had worked.

We ran across to a train just about to depart from the southbound platform. Being lumbered with a suitcase full of Kumiko's clothes, I wasn't as fast as I might have been – so Kumiko made it onto the train and I didn't. She held up her left hand to wave, then was shunted out of sight.

I have to say, I expected her to wait for me at London Bridge. As the train clattered past where we'd spotted the heart, I'd looked for but couldn't see it. Kumiko wasn't standing there on the platform. I could only assume she had gone straight to Borough Market in the certain knowledge that I would swiftly follow.

It took a couple of minutes to get out of the station, London's oldest, but soon I was under the roofs of the Market. I looked up, hoping to see the dark silhouette of the heart or Kumiko's shadow.

What I didn't expect to see was Kumiko herself, leaning impossibly out, with the heart in her hands – and two crows flying off in opposite directions above her.

Somehow, she pulled herself back from the edge.

I stepped into the street and could see the back of her head. Then she turned around and shouted directions to me. A house. Further along. Black metal door. Not locked.

It was easy enough to find.

There were holes in the floor and no light to see them by. The windows had been filled in with something completely opaque. I could hear glass crackling underfoot. It felt ridiculous, carrying my suitcase into there. But I didn't want to put it down.

The stairs were just about visible. I stumbled up one flight of them, onto a landing, then up another flight.

There were doors I was scared to go through. It got lighter, towards the top of the house. And then there was a window out onto scaffolding. It seemed the only way.

Once on the roof, I saw Kumiko immediately – her black hair. She was standing with another woman, both looking down at what she held in her hands.

'Hey,' I shouted. 'How?'

'You have to come along the tracks,' Kumiko replied.

Seeing she meant what she said, I put the suitcase down.

There were no trains coming. I sprinted as fast as I have in years.

When I got to Kumiko, she introduced me to the young woman.

'Becky,' she said. 'This is Skelton.'

'Good morning,' I said, and quite ridiculously we shook hands.

'Let me see,' I said.

The heart was too small for a cow's, too big for a dog's. There was no blood – in fact, the muscle looked quite anaemic. This reassured me that we weren't going to find a head round the next corner.

The rain was falling and Becky was shivering. She looked like she was very good at shivering.

'Are we calling the Police?' I asked.

'No,' said Becky. 'You can't.'

'Why not?' I asked. 'This might be a murder.'

'Skelton,' said Kumiko. 'Calm down. We're not stupid.'

'But …' I said. 'You should probably put it down. Forensic evidence …'

'We don't want the Police,' said Becky. 'Not in that house.'

I couldn't stop looking at the heart. Kumiko held it gently in cupped palms.

'How else are they going to get up here?' I said.

Kumiko's eyes told me quite definitely to shut up. 'Maybe someone died,' she said to Becky. 'It's important. If you need to tidy the house, or hide anything –'

'They'll want to ask questions,' said Becky. She swore a lot, but I'm leaving that out. 'We'll be arrested.'

'Then we won't call until you have gone,' said Kumiko. 'I'm sure the Police won't be interested in you.'

'It's our house. We're living there two years.'

'Look,' said Kumiko, and held out the heart. 'Imagine it is your best friend. What do you want to do? You can decide. If you say, "Go away," we will go away – and we won't call the Police. I promise. But if you do nothing, then it is your responsibility.'

A train went past, heading for London Bridge. I wanted to signal to them, 999, call the Police!

Becky tried to find a fingernail to bite, without success.

'I have to ask them,' she said, and nodded to the house.

'Good,' said Kumiko. 'We will wait. There is no hurry.'

I knew I'd be in serious trouble if I said anything, so I waited until Becky was over the tracks and back inside.

'You're leaving it up to *her* and her friends to decide –'

'Yes,' said Kumiko. 'I trust her. She won't do something wrong.'

'But we don't know who else is in there.'

'She will explain,' said Kumiko. Her confidence was astonishing.

'We should call the Police now,' I said. 'While she's away.'

'We will wait,' said Kumiko.

So we did. A half-dozen trains went past, but I avoided looking to see if anyone saw us. Kumiko stood facing away from the tracks.

Becky returned with a skinny-hipped man. He wore only a pair of jeans. They were not clean. 'That it?' he asked, as if there might be another human heart somewhere else on the roof.

'Call the Police now, if you like,' said Becky. 'The others have gone.'

Kumiko introduced herself then me. 'Jonesy,' said the man. He was about twenty years old. There didn't seem to be any trackmarks on his arms. 'Give us a bit to get our stuff together, okay?'

'You didn't see anything?' Kumiko asked Becky.

'No,' Becky said, too quickly. 'Saw nothing.'

She glanced at Jonesy. 'She saw nothing,' he confirmed.

I felt like the Police.

'We'll wait here,' I said. 'How long do you need?'

'Give us ten minutes,' Jonesy said.

We watched them go back through the door. 'Ten minutes,' Kumiko said. 'Just ten minutes.' She seemed to be thinking how sad this fact was.

'Let's go and stand inside,' I said. 'It makes no difference.'

'The crows might come back.'

I'd forgotten the crows.

We waited in the rain. By the time Kumiko let me call the Police, we were damp. By the time they arrived, we were soaked.

Then the questions began, the same ones, over and over again from different Officers – at first on the roofs and then down at the Police Station.

We were told, quite sternly, that we should never have gone trespassing on Private Property. If we had suspicions, we should have called the Police from the train. I didn't bother saying that, in those circumstances, they probably wouldn't have come, or not for hours, and by then the crows would have eaten the evidence, and they would have been left with no investigation.

They kept asking me if the heart had been still when I saw it. 'It made no movement at all, so far as you were aware of observing?' Then they would go away, only to return and ask me the same thing again. 'Are you one hundred per cent certain?'

'No,' I said. I thought about saying, 'I'm not one hundred per cent certain about anything.' And I thought, 'Except Kumiko.'

I had to wait another two hours before they were finished with her. It wasn't clear why they were more interested in what she had to say.

Meanwhile, I called my agent, to explain that I couldn't make the day's session. She said I hadn't really been needed, but that I should turn up bang on time tomorrow.

'It's a big break,' she said.

I bought some sandwiches and sat down on a wooden bench in reception, watching people come in to report crimes or ask for directions. I had the suitcase with me, and sometimes I put my feet up on it.

The first thing Kumiko said to me was, 'It *is* human.'

'Can we go home now?' I asked.

She nodded.

We walked slowly back to London Bridge. The Police had loaned me a blanket during the questioning but I

hadn't dried out completely. Even though I'd have looked stupid, I wished I still had it with me.

Kumiko ate her sandwiches as we waited on the platform. I knew better than to ask her what she was thinking.

When a train arrived, we got in and then stayed beside the doors on the left-hand side.

As we passed by the glass roofs, we could see that a small white marquee had been erected over the place where the heart lay. Two crows were perched on the edge of it. A Policewoman was looking in the opposite direction.

We got off the train at King's Cross Thameslink. Our flat was only about five minutes' walk. Kumiko didn't speak until we were up the stairs, through the front door and into the living room.

'I'm sorry, Skelton, but I am leaving.'

I didn't disbelieve her, even though it came as a total shock. All of a sudden, I felt very tired, and sat down on the sofa.

'Look, I'm sorry about my parents.'

'It's not your parents. I like your parents.'

'Can I at least ask why?'

'I don't want to say it. I don't want to hurt you more than I have to.'

'Is it because you think I didn't want to go back, this morning?'

'Yes, but not really,' she said.

Kumiko went into the bedroom and started to put things in her overnight bag. She moved confidently, as if she had already compiled a mental list of what she would need.

I went to the door to watch her. She was really doing this.

'Can we talk about it?' I asked. 'Can't we at least talk about it for five minutes?'

She looked once more around the bedroom, then came towards the door carrying the bag. I stepped out of her way, and she went into the bathroom. Kumiko wore no make-up. Kumiko didn't need beauty products. She took only a spare tube of toothpaste, some floss and that was it. Her toothbrush was already in the bag.

'Someone will come round for everything else,' she said. 'Perhaps Grzegorz. It's your decision to pack it up or not.'

'No,' I said at last. 'Don't go.'

But then she was gone. And all in less than ten minutes.