

MURDER

Osamu Nonoguchi's Account

The incident took place on April 16, 1996, a Tuesday.

I left my house at three thirty in the afternoon to go to Kunihiko Hidaka's place, which was only one station away by train. From the train station, you then had to take a bus, but even after adding in walking time, I could make the trip in twenty minutes.

I would often drop in on my friend for no particular reason; however, today was different. This time I had a purpose in mind. If I didn't go today, I might not have the chance to see him again for quite some time.

His house was in a residential development and was one of the many upmarket houses on his street. Some of the

others would even qualify as mansions. The area had been forest once, and many of the owners had kept some of the original trees as part of their landscaping. The beech trees and oaks were tall enough to cast shade on the road.

Though roads in this part of town weren't particularly narrow, they were all one way. I guess that this was simply another indication of the residents' status.

I wasn't particularly surprised when, a few years ago, Hidaka bought a house in this neighbourhood. Anyone in the area with any ambition at all dreamed of living here someday.

Hidaka's house wasn't one of the mansions, but it was definitely large for a couple with no children. Though the peaked gables on the roof gave it a Japanese look, it had bay windows, an arch over the front door, and window boxes hanging from the second storey that were clearly Western in design. The house was the result of the application of ideas from both husband and wife, I reckoned, although, considering the low brick wall around the house, the balance seemed skewed in the wife's favour. She once admitted to me that she always wanted to live in an old, European-style castle. Hidaka's wife was odd like that.

Correction. His late wife.

I walked alongside the wall, which had been laid so only the long sides of the bricks faced the street, and pressed the intercom button by the gate.

There was no answer. Then I noticed the Saab was missing from the driveway. *Guess he's stepped out*, I thought.

I was wondering how to pass the time while waiting for him to return when I remembered the cherry tree in Hidaka's garden. The buds had been about thirty per cent open the last time I was there, which was ten days ago. I wondered how the buds were coming along.

I let myself in through the gate, figuring it wasn't too much of a transgression. The path to the front door split into two along the way, with the offshoot leading towards the south side of the house. I followed that one to the garden.

A number of the cherry blossoms had already fallen, but enough were left on the tree to make it worthwhile viewing. That is, it would have been, if it hadn't been for the woman, a woman I didn't know, standing in the garden, looking down at the ground. She was dressed casually, in jeans and a sweater, and had something white and crumpled in her hand.

'Hello?' I called out.

She seemed startled and looked up at me quickly. 'Oh, I'm sorry.' She showed me what was in her hand: a white hat. 'The wind caught it and carried it into the garden. I didn't see anyone home – I'm sorry.'

She looked to be in her late thirties. Eyes, nose and mouth small and unremarkable. A plain-faced woman with

an unhealthy cast to her skin. For a moment, I wondered about her story, if the wind had really been blowing hard enough to carry a hat.

‘Is there something interesting on the ground there?’ I asked.

She smiled. ‘The grass was growing in so nicely, I wondered how they were taking care of it.’

‘I wish I could tell you.’ I shrugged. ‘This is my friend’s house.’

She nodded. It seemed to me that she’d already realised I didn’t live here. ‘Sorry for the intrusion,’ she said quickly, then walked past me to the front gate.

About five minutes later I heard a car pulling into the driveway. It was Hidaka. I walked around to the front door to see his navy-blue Saab backing into the garage. Hidaka noticed me standing there and nodded. In the passenger seat, his new wife, Rie, smiled and bowed her head.

‘Sorry,’ he said, getting out of the car. ‘I just stepped out to do some last-minute shopping, and the traffic was terrible. Have you been waiting long?’

‘I was enjoying your cherry blossoms.’

‘What’s left of them.’

‘It’s a beautiful tree.’

He grinned. ‘Yeah, it’s great when it’s in bloom, but after that? It’s a real pain. That tree’s right next to my office window and you should see the caterpillars.’

‘Then it’s lucky you won’t be working here for a while.’

‘Anything to escape caterpillar hell. Come on inside. We still haven’t packed all the cups so I can at least offer you some coffee.’

We went in through the arched entrance.

Practically everything in the house was already boxed up. Even the paintings had disappeared from the walls.

‘You almost done packing?’ I asked.

‘All but the office,’ Hidaka said. ‘Not that we did much of it ourselves. We had the removal company come in a few times.’

‘Where’re you going to sleep tonight?’

‘I made a reservation at a hotel. The Crown. Except, I might end up sleeping here anyway.’

We went into his office. It was a decent size and looked oddly vacant with just a computer, a desk, and a small bookshelf remaining.

‘I take it you’ve got a deadline tomorrow?’

Hidaka frowned and nodded. ‘Yeah, it’s the last in a series. I have to send it to my publisher by fax tonight, if you can believe that. That’s why I haven’t turned off the phones yet.’

‘How many pages do you have left to write?’

‘Thirty or so. I’ll make it.’

We sat in a couple of chairs facing each other by the corner of the desk. Rie came in, bringing the coffee.

‘I wonder how the weather is in Vancouver. It’s got to be colder than here,’ I said to both of them.

‘It’s a completely different latitude, so it’s definitely colder.’

‘But it’s nice that it’ll be cool in the summer,’ Rie added. ‘I never liked having to run the air-conditioning all the time.’

‘I’d like to think that a cool breeze through the office will help me get more work done, but we both know that’s not going to happen,’ Hidaka said with a grin.

‘You should definitely come visit us, Osamu. We’ll take you on a tour,’ Rie offered.

‘Thanks. I’ll take you up on that.’

‘Please do.’ Rie bowed slightly. ‘I’ll leave you two to it, then.’ She headed out of the office.

Hidaka stood, coffee cup in hand, and went over to the window. ‘I’m glad I got to see the cherry tree in full bloom at least.’

‘Hey, if it blooms nicely next year, I’ll take a picture and send it to you in Canada. Do they have cherry trees over there?’

‘No idea. I know there’s none near the place I’ll be living, at least.’ He took a sip of his coffee.

‘That reminds me. There was a woman in your garden a little while ago, before you got here.’ At first, I’d been hesitant to tell him.

‘Oh, yeah?’ Hidaka frowned.

I told him about the woman, and his suspicious frown turned into a wry smile. ‘Did her face look like one of those round-headed, wooden *kokeshi* dolls?’

‘Yeah, now that you mention it, it did.’ I laughed.

‘Yeah, her last name’s Niimi. Lives down the street. She might look young, but she’s definitely over forty. Rie thinks she’s married, but that her husband works in another city and they have one of those long-distance-marriage arrangements.’

‘You seem to know her. Are you friends?’

‘Hardly.’ He opened the window and closed the screen. A warm breeze blew in, carrying with it the smell of leaves. ‘Quite the opposite, actually. I believe she has a grudge against me.’

‘A grudge? What for?’

‘A cat. Her cat died the other day. Apparently she found it lying by the road. When she took it to a vet, he told her he thought it had been poisoned.’

‘What does that have to do with you?’

‘She thinks I’m responsible. That I put out a poisoned meatball and her cat ate it.’

‘Seriously? Why would she think that?’

‘Oh, that’s the best part.’ Hidaka pulled a magazine off the bookshelf and opened it. ‘Take a look.’

It was an article, entitled ‘The Limits of Patience’, and

Hidaka's photo was next to the title. The essay was about a cat that had a habit of wandering onto the author's property and bothering him. Every morning, he found cat mess in the garden, pawprints on the bonnet of his car, and his potted plants shredded. He'd seen a white-and-brown-speckled cat around, knew it was the culprit, but could do nothing about it. He'd tried everything he could think of but nothing worked. An old wives' tale says that cats are afraid of their reflections, so, in desperation, he lined up plastic bottles filled with water in the hope that the cat would see itself in these makeshift mirrors and be scared away. But that didn't work at all. The gist of this short article was that the limits of his patience were tested daily.

'And the deceased was a white-and-brown-speckled cat?' I asked.

'Something like that, yeah.'

'I see. No wonder she thinks you're the culprit.'

'Last week, she comes over with this dark look on her face. She didn't accuse me of poisoning her cat outright, but she implied it strongly. Rie told her she was crazy and sent her packing. I thought that was the end of it . . . but if she's been snooping around in the garden, I must still be her prime suspect. She's probably looking for poisoned meatballs.'

'Persistent, isn't she?'

‘Oh, women like that always are.’

‘Doesn’t she know you’re moving to Canada?’

‘Rie explained that we were moving to Vancouver in a week, so why would we worry about a cat we only had to deal with a little while longer? She may not look it, but when it comes to a fight, Rie can really dig in.’ Hidaka laughed deeply.

‘Well, she has a point. I can’t see any reason why you guys would bother to kill that cat.’

For some reason, Hidaka didn’t respond right away. He just grinned, looking out of the window. He finished his coffee before saying, ‘I did do it, you know.’

‘Huh?’ I said, unable to grasp his meaning immediately. ‘Did what?’

‘I killed the cat. I killed it with poisoned meatballs that I put out in our garden. I didn’t really think it would work, at least not as well as it did.’

I thought he was pulling my leg until I saw his face. He was smiling, but it wasn’t the kind of smile that went with a joke.

‘Where did you get the poisoned meatballs?’

‘That part was easy. I just mixed in some pesticide with cat food and left them out in the garden. A cat will eat anything, you know.’ Hidaka put a cigarette in his mouth and lit it, taking a leisurely drag. The smoke dissipated in the breeze coming in through the window.

‘But, why?’ To tell the truth, I was a little disturbed by this revelation.

‘I told you we haven’t found a tenant yet?’ His cold smile faded.

‘Uh-huh.’

‘Our estate agent’s still looking, but when he was here the other day, he said something that bothered me.’

‘What’s that?’

‘He didn’t think it made a good impression to have all those plastic bottles lined up in front of the house. It would make people think we had a problem with strays, which would make it hard to rent.’

‘So just throw away the bottles. They didn’t work, anyway.’

‘Yeah, but that wouldn’t solve the basic problem. What happens if someone comes here to check out the place and there’s cat shit all over the garden? If we’re here, we can clean it up, but what happens once we leave? I can’t have the place smelling like a litter box.’

‘So you killed the cat?’

‘Hey, the owner’s as responsible for what happened as I am. Not that she seems to understand that at all.’ Hidaka stubbed out his cigarette in an ashtray.

‘Does Rie know?’

The corner of his mouth curled up in another smile and he shook his head. ‘Are you kidding? Women love cats. If

I told her the truth, she'd think I was the devil incarnate.'

I sat in silence, at a loss for how to respond. Just then, the phone rang and Hidaka picked it up.

'Hello? ... Oh, hi. I was wondering when you'd call ... Yes, all according to schedule ... Hey, okay, you caught me. I was just about to start ... Sure, I should be able to get it done tonight ... Right, I'll send it along as soon as it's finished ... No, actually, this phone will be out of service after noon tomorrow. I'll have to call you ... Yes, from the hotel. Right, bye.'

He hung up and gave a little sigh.

'Your editor?'

'Yes. My articles are usually late, but this time the stakes are a little bit higher. I mean, if he doesn't get it from me tonight, then he won't have it in time. I'll be out of the country by the day after tomorrow.'

'Well.' I got up from my chair. 'I should probably get going then. I don't want to throw you off schedule.'

The doorbell rang. 'It's probably just a salesman,' Hidaka said, but then we heard Rie walking down the hallway, followed by a knock at the office door.

'Yeah?' Hidaka called out.

She opened the door and peered in, a dark look on her face. 'It's Ms Fujio,' she said quietly.

Hidaka's face clouded over like the sky before a storm. 'Not her again.'

‘She says it’s something she needs to talk to you about today.’

‘Great.’ Hidaka chewed his lip. ‘She must’ve found out we’re moving to Canada.’

‘Should I say you’re busy?’

‘Yeah,’ – then, after a moment of thought – ‘no, I’ll see her. Might as well get it over with now so I don’t have to think about it later. You can let her in.’

‘If you’re sure . . .’ Rie glanced in my direction.

‘Oh, don’t worry about me,’ I said. ‘I was just leaving.’

‘Well, this is a fine pickle,’ Hidaka said with a sigh after she’d left the room.

‘Is that Fujio as in Masaya Fujio?’

‘Yeah, it’s his sister. Her name’s Miyako.’ Hidaka scratched his forehead beneath the longish locks of his hair. ‘If she just wanted some cash, that’d be easy enough. But a total recall? Rewrites? Give me a break.’

More footsteps sounded in the hall. Hidaka’s mouth snapped shut. I heard Rie apologising for the lack of lights. A knock.

‘Yes?’ Hidaka said.

‘Ms Fujio,’ Rie said, opening the door.

Behind her stood a woman in her late twenties. She had long hair and was wearing the kind of suit that college leavers wear to their first job interview. For an unexpected visitor, she had paid a lot of attention to her appearance.

‘So, I’ll see you later,’ I said to Hidaka. I was about to tell him I’d come to see him off the day after tomorrow, but checked myself. I didn’t know for sure if Ms Fujio knew he was leaving and didn’t want to rock any boats. Hidaka nodded quietly.

Rie walked me to the door. ‘Sorry to rush you out like this.’ She pressed her hands together apologetically, one eye closed in a wink. She was short and slender enough that the expression made her look like a young girl. It was hard to believe she was over thirty.

‘That’s okay. I’ll come and see you off the day after tomorrow.’

‘Oh, it’s all right. We don’t want to trouble you. I’m sure you’re busy.’

‘No, it’s no trouble at all. See you.’

‘Goodbye,’ she said, and stood watching me as I walked through the gate and turned the corner.

I was back at my apartment doing a bit of work when the doorbell rang. My place was a lot different from Hidaka’s: a large studio apartment in a five-storey building. The room was divided down the middle, with one side functioning as a combined workspace and bedroom, while the other, slightly larger side served as living room, dining room and kitchen.

I didn’t have a Rie of my own, so when the doorbell rang, there was no one to answer it but me.

I looked through the peephole, then opened the door. It was my editor, Oshima.

‘Punctual as always,’ I said.

‘It’s the only thing I have going for me.’ He held out a nicely wrapped box from a famous Japanese sweet shop. ‘Here, a bribe.’

He knows me too well.

‘Sorry you had to come all the way out here.’

He shook his head. ‘It was on my way home.’

I motioned him in and poured some tea. Then I stepped into my office and brought out the manuscript that had been lying on the desk. ‘Can’t say how good it is, but it’s done. Here.’

‘Let me take a look.’

He set down his cup and reached for the manuscript, beginning to read immediately. I opened a newspaper. It always made me uncomfortable to have people read my stuff in front of me.

He was about halfway through when the cordless phone on the dining-room table began to ring.

I got up and answered it. ‘Yes, Nonoguchi speaking.’

‘Hey, it’s me.’ Hidaka’s voice was somewhat muted.

‘Hey there. What’s up?’ What I really wanted to know, though, was what had happened with Miyako Fujio.

He paused for a moment. ‘You busy?’

‘Well, I’ve got someone here right now.’

‘Right. How long before you’re free?’

I glanced at the clock on the wall. It was just after six.

‘Not long, I think. What’s up?’

‘Eh, it’s not really a phone conversation. There’s something I want to ask you about. Think you could come over?’

‘Sure, no problem.’ I almost asked if this was about the Fujios, but I resisted. I’d almost forgotten Oshima was sitting right next to me.

‘How about eight o’clock?’

‘Sure thing.’

‘Great, I’ll be waiting.’ He hung up.

I put down the phone and Oshima started to get up from the sofa.

‘If you’re busy, I can head off—’

‘No, it’s fine.’ I waved him back to his seat. ‘I made an appointment to meet a friend at eight. I’ve got plenty of time. Please, read.’

‘I see. Well then.’ He sat back down and resumed reading.

I made another attempt to distract myself by reading the newspaper, but I couldn’t stop thinking about Hidaka. He’d written a novel a couple of years earlier, *Forbidden Hunting Grounds*, which was about a woodblock artist. It was supposedly fiction but its main character had been based on a real person: Masaya Fujio.

Fujio had gone to the same middle school as Hidaka and me, and a lot of what the three of us had done and seen together ended up in the book. This would have been fine, especially since he changed everyone's name, but the novel revealed some things that Masaya Fujio wouldn't have been particularly proud to see in print. All of the various misadventures of his student life were detailed pretty much as they'd happened in real life, including the shocking finale, when Masaya was stabbed to death by a prostitute.

The book became a bestseller. Anyone who'd known Masaya could easily guess who the model for the novel's main character had been. Of course, someone in the Fujio family eventually saw it.

Masaya's father had already passed away, but his mother and sister made a fuss. They said it was obvious that Masaya was the model for the book and that they had never granted permission to Hidaka to write such a book about him. The book was a violation of their family's privacy, and a stain on Masaya's reputation. They demanded that all copies of the novel be pulled from the shelves, and that the novel be extensively rewritten before it was republished.

As Hidaka had said, it didn't seem to be about money. Though there was still some doubt as to whether the demand for rewrites was sincere, or simply a negotiation tactic.

Judging from his voice on the phone, the negotiations hadn't gone well. Still, I wondered why he'd called me. Maybe he was really in a fix. Maybe things had somehow got worse. I wondered how I could help.

As I sat there lost in thought, Oshima finished reading the manuscript. 'Seems good to me. Laid-back, a bit nostalgic. I like it.'

'That's good to hear.' I was genuinely relieved. I took a long sip of my tea. Oshima was a good kid, not the type to offer empty praise.

Normally, we would then have discussed what was to come next, but I had agreed to go and see Hidaka soon. I looked at the clock. Six thirty.

'You okay for time?' Oshima asked.

'I'm fine, but I was thinking – there's a decent restaurant near here. Why don't we eat while we talk?'

'Sure. I have to eat, too, after all.' Oshima put the manuscript in his bag. If I remembered correctly, he was almost thirty, but still single.

The restaurant, one of those family places, was only a two- or three-minute walk from my apartment. We talked over casserole and mostly we just chatted about this and that. But I brought up the subject of Hidaka.

When I did, Oshima looked surprised. 'You know him?'

'We went to the same primary school and middle school. We grew up right around the corner from each other and

not far from here. You could walk to our old neighbourhood from here, though, of course, neither of our houses are still there. They were torn down to build apartment buildings years ago.'

'So, you were childhood friends.'

'We keep in touch.'

'Wow.' Oshima was obviously impressed. I could see the envious longing in his eyes. 'I had no idea.'

'Actually, he was the one who brought my work to your magazine.'

'You don't say.'

'Yeah, your editorial director asked Hidaka to submit a piece but he turned them down, saying he didn't do children's fiction. Instead, he brought me in to meet with the editor-in-chief. You could say I owe him one.' I lifted a forkful of macaroni to my mouth.

'Huh! I hadn't heard that. It'd be interesting to see what Hidaka would do with children's literature, though.' Oshima looked up at me. 'What about you, Mr Nonoguchi? Have you ever thought of writing something for adults?'

'Someday, maybe. If the opportunity presents itself.' I meant it.

We left the restaurant at seven thirty and walked to the station together. We were going in different directions, so I said goodbye to Oshima at the platform. My train came soon after that.

I reached Hidaka's at exactly eight o'clock. I first noticed something was wrong when I got to the front door. The house was completely dark, and even the porch light was off.

I tried the intercom button anyway, but there was no reply.

At first, I thought I'd misunderstood him. Hidaka had definitely asked me to come at eight, but maybe he hadn't meant for us to meet at his house.

When there was no answer at the front door, I left and started walking back towards the station. Along the way was a small park with a payphone by its entrance. I pulled out my wallet and stepped into the booth.

I got the number for the Crown Hotel from directory enquiries and then called and asked for Hidaka. The reception desk put me through immediately and Rie answered, 'Hello?'

'It's me, Nonoguchi. Is Hidaka in?'

'No, he hasn't come to the hotel yet. I think he's still at home. He still had some work left to do.'

'I don't think he's there.' I explained that I'd been to the house and it didn't look like anyone was home.

'He said he wouldn't be here until pretty late.'

'So maybe he just went out for a bit then?'

'That doesn't sound right, either.' Rie went quiet. 'Look, how about I come and take a look,' she said after a minute.

‘I should be there in about forty minutes. Where are you now?’

I told her that I could kill time at the local café and then meet her at the house when she got there. After hanging up, I left the phone booth, but before going to the café I decided to take one more look at Hidaka’s place. When I got there, the lights were still all out. But this time, I noticed that the Saab was parked in the driveway. That bothered me.

The café was a speciality coffee shop and one of Hidaka’s favourite places to go when he wanted a change of scene. I’d been there several times, and the owner recognised me and asked after Hidaka. I told him I was supposed to meet up with Hidaka, but that he’d been a no-show. We talked about baseball for a good half hour before I paid my tab and left, walking quickly back towards the Hidaka residence.

I got to the front gate just as Rie was getting out of a taxi. I called out to her and she smiled at me. But when she looked at the house, her face clouded over. ‘There really isn’t a single light on.’

‘I guess he’s still out.’

‘But he didn’t say he’d be going anywhere.’

She walked to the front door, pulling the keys out of her bag. I followed along behind her. The door was locked. She unlocked it, went inside, and started turning on lights. It was cool inside the house. Empty.

Rie walked down the hallway to Hidaka's office. This door was also locked.

'Does he always lock the office door before leaving?' I asked.

She shook her head as she fished another key from her bag. 'Not much recently.'

She opened the door. The lights in the office were off, but it wasn't completely dark. The computer was on, and a pale glow came from the monitor. Rie felt along the wall for the light switch, then she abruptly stopped.

Hidaka was lying in the middle of the room, his feet pointing towards the door.

Rie froze for a few seconds, then dashed over to him. But before she reached him, she stopped in her tracks, frozen again, her hands pressed to her mouth.

Gingerly, I approached. Hidaka was lying face down with his head twisted so I could see the left side of his face. His eyes were half-open. They were the eyes of a corpse.

'He's dead,' I said.

Rie slowly collapsed to the floor. The sobs came welling up the moment her knees touched the carpet.

While the police were examining the scene, Rie and I waited in the living room. At least, it used to be the living room; now that both the sofa and the table were gone, it felt a little bare. Rie sat on a cardboard box filled with

magazines, while I paced in circles like a bear, occasionally poking my head out into the hallway to see how the investigation was proceeding. Rie was crying the whole time. I looked at my wristwatch: 10:30 p.m.

Finally, there was a knock and the door opened. Detective Sakoda came in – a calm fellow, approaching fifty. He seemed to be in charge of the investigation.

‘Might I have a few words?’ he asked me after glancing at Rie.

‘Sure, anything.’

‘I’m fine to talk, too.’ Rie dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief. Tears were still in her voice, but her words were clear. I remembered what Hidaka had said earlier that day, about her being able to dig in when it mattered.

‘It won’t take long.’

Detective Sakoda asked us to tell him everything that had happened that day up until we found the body. I started first and, as I talked, I realised my story would have to include Miyako Fujio.

‘Around what time did Hidaka call?’ Detective Sakoda asked.

‘It was a little after six, I think.’

‘And did he mention Ms Fujio when you spoke?’

‘No, he just said he wanted to talk to me about something.’

‘So it could’ve been about something else?’

‘It’s possible.’

‘Any idea what that might have been?’

‘No, not at all.’

The detective nodded, then turned to Rie. ‘Around what time did Ms Fujio go home?’

‘After five, I think.’

‘And did you speak with your husband after that?’

‘A little.’

‘How did he seem?’

‘Upset. The talk with Ms Fujio hadn’t gone so well. But he told me it was nothing to worry about.’

‘And it was after that when you left the house and went to the hotel?’

‘That’s right.’

The detective nodded. ‘Okay, so you were planning to stay at the Crown Hotel tonight and tomorrow night, then leave for Canada the following day? But your husband had some work to finish, so he stayed behind at the house.’ Sakoda looked over his notes as he spoke, then looked back up at Rie. ‘Who knew that your husband would be at home alone?’

‘Well, myself and ...’ She looked at me.

‘Of course I knew. And I expect that someone at the magazine, *Somei Monthly*, would have known as well.’ I explained that Hidaka had been writing a serialised novel for them and it was the next instalment that he was staying

behind to finish. 'Still, that hardly narrows down your suspects.'

'I'm just collecting facts,' Detective Sakoda said, smiling ever so slightly.

He then asked Rie whether she'd seen any suspicious people around their house lately. She said no. That was when I remembered the woman I'd seen in the garden earlier that day. I wondered if I should say something, but ultimately kept silent. Who would commit murder to avenge a cat?

When the questions were finished, the detective said he would have one of his men take me home. I would've preferred to stay with Rie, but it sounded as if they had already called her parents and someone was coming to pick her up.

As the shock of discovering Hidaka's body gradually faded, I could feel a wave of exhaustion coming over me. I felt bleak inside when I thought of walking all the way to the station and taking the train all the way home. I decided to accept the offer of a lift home from the police.

A crowd of police were still outside the room, mostly walking back and forth in the hall. The door to the office was open, but I couldn't see inside and I assumed the body had already been removed.

A uniformed officer called out to me and led me to a police car parked outside the front gate. It was the closest

I'd been to a police vehicle since the time I was pulled over for speeding. A tall man was standing next to the patrol car. If he was a police officer, he was in plainclothes, but the way the streetlights fell on him made it hard to see his face.

'Long time no see, Mr Nonoguchi,' he said.

'Do I know you?' I stopped, squinting at the man's face.

He stepped forward out of the shadows. It was a familiar face, with narrow eyebrows and close-set eyes. I knew I knew him, but it took a moment for the memory to surface.

'Do you remember me?'

'I do! Er ...' I thought for a moment. 'Kaga, right?'

'In the flesh.' He bowed politely. 'It's been a while.'

'It certainly has.' I nodded back to him. I looked at him again. He had good features, and age had improved them. It had been at least a decade since I'd seen him, maybe longer. 'I'd heard you'd joined the police force. Never imagined our reunion would be under these circumstances.'

'I was surprised, too. When I heard who discovered the body, I wondered if it was someone else with the same name. At least until I saw your business card.'

'Nonoguchi isn't the most common surname out there, I know.' I shook my head. 'What a coincidence!'

'We can talk in the car. I'll give you a lift. Sorry it's not

a private car.' He opened the rear door for me. The uniformed officer got into the driver's seat.

Kaga, fresh out of university, had come to work at the middle school where I used to teach social studies. Like most new teachers, he was passionate about the job. An accomplished kendo practitioner, he'd taken over the school's kendo club, and he made quite an impression on the other teachers.

He'd quit teaching after only two years for a number of reasons, though as far as I could tell, none of it was his fault. Still, I suspect he wasn't cut out to be a teacher in the first place. However, I'm sure his departure from the school had more to do with the way things were going for him at the time.

'Which school are you at now?' Kaga asked, soon after the car started down the street.

Kaga. That's what I'd called him when he was a new recruit at the school. I'd have to remember to call him *Detective Kaga* now.

I shook my head. 'I was working at a middle school in my hometown until just a little while ago. I left back in March.'

Kaga looked surprised. 'You don't say? What are you doing now?'

'Well, it's not glamorous, but I'm a writer. I write stories for children.'

‘No kidding! Is that how you knew Kunihiko Hidaka?’

‘Not exactly.’ I explained our past. Kaga nodded with every detail. I wondered if Detective Sakoda hadn’t told him anything, since I’d certainly included this in my earlier statement.

‘So you started writing while you were still teaching?’

‘That’s right. But not much. Just a couple of short stories a year. When I finally made up my mind to try my hand at being a real writer, I realised I had to quit my job.’

‘I see. That’s quite a decision.’ Kaga sounded impressed. I wondered if he was comparing my choice to his own. Of course, even he had to realise there was a big difference between switching professions in your early twenties and doing it when you’re much older, with four decades already under your belt.

‘What sort of novels did Mr Hidaka write?’

I looked at him. ‘You mean you haven’t heard of Kunihiko Hidaka?’

‘Sorry. I’ve heard the name, but I’ve never read any of his books. I don’t read many books these days.’

‘I’m sure you’re busy.’

‘No, just lazy. I know I should read more, two or three a month.’ He put a hand to his head. *Two or three books a month* had been my catchphrase back when I was teaching composition. If Kaga had been making an intentional reference, it was a good one.

I gave him the abridged version of Hidaka's career, starting with his debut ten years ago. Then there were the awards and his rise to the bestseller lists. I also mentioned that he wrote works of literature as well as pure entertainment.

'Did he write anything I might be interested in?' Kaga asked. 'Like murder mysteries?'

'Only a few, but yeah.'

'Tell me the titles so I can look them up.'

I mentioned Hidaka's novel *Sea Ghost*. I'd read it a long time ago and didn't remember it all that well, but it was definitely about a murder.

'Do you know why Hidaka wanted to move to Canada?' Kaga asked when I was finished.

'I think he had a few reasons, but mostly, I think he was just tired. He'd been talking about going overseas and taking it easy for several years now. The decision to move to Vancouver was Rie's.'

'Rie is the wife, yes? She seemed young.'

'They just got married last month. It was his second marriage.'

'And his first wife, are they divorced?'

'No, she died in a car accident. That was five years ago already.'

The realisation that Hidaka was no longer in this world hit me again, hard. I wondered what he'd wanted to talk to

me about this evening. I wondered if I had just ended my unimportant meeting and gone to see him right away, I might have saved him. I knew there was no point in thinking about it, yet the regret was hard to keep down.

‘I heard there was some trouble with a Mr Fujio, someone he’d used as the subject of one of his novels?’ Kaga said. ‘Can you think of any other troubles he might have had? Anything from his novels or personal life?’

‘Nothing I can think of.’ I realised for the first time that this was an interrogation. Suddenly, the complete silence from the police officer driving the car made me uncomfortable.

‘By the way,’ Kaga said, opening his notebook, ‘do you know anyone by the name of Namiko Nishizaki?’

‘What?’

‘I have two other names, too: Tetsuji Osano and Hajime Nakane.’

‘Oh, right,’ I said, finally understanding. ‘Those are characters in *The Gates of Ice*, the serialised novel that Hidaka’s writing.’ I wondered what would happen to the serial now. I supposed they’d have to abandon it mid-story.

‘It seems he was working on it right up until the moment of his death.’

‘Ah! His computer was left on, wasn’t it?’

‘The document he was writing was open.’

‘I see.’ Something occurred to me. ‘How much of the novel had he written?’

‘What do you mean by how much?’

‘How many pages?’

I explained that Hidaka had told me he had to write thirty pages that night.

‘It was more than a couple of pages,’ Detective Kaga said.

‘I wonder if you could nail down the time of death by the number of pages he’d written. You see, he hadn’t even started working on it when I left the house.’

‘Yes, we considered that. But as you well know, writing is a start-and-stop kind of thing. It’s hard to estimate the time based on his progress.’

‘That’s true, but you could at least figure out what his maximum speed was, and then come up with a shortest-possible time estimate.’

‘Interesting,’ Kaga said. ‘What do you think Hidaka’s maximum speed was, then?’

‘Good question. He told me once that he averaged four pages an hour.’

‘So even if he was rushing, you’d say a reasonable top limit might be about six pages?’

‘That sounds about right.’

Detective Kaga fell silent. He seemed to be doing some calculations in his head.

‘What is it?’

‘It’s hard to say.’ Kaga shook his head. ‘I’m not even sure if the document he had up on the screen was the part of the serial he was working on.’

‘You mean he might’ve been looking at an earlier part of the novel.’

‘Yes. We’re going to visit the publisher tomorrow to try to find that out.’

I quickly turned the situation over in my mind. According to Rie, Miyako Fujio had gone home around five o’clock. It was after six when the phone call from Hidaka came. If he’d been writing during the time that we knew he was alive, he could’ve written five or six pages, max. That meant the question was, how many more pages had he actually written?

‘I understand you might not be able to disclose this,’ I said to Detective Kaga, ‘but do you have an estimated time of death?’

‘You’re right, I can’t disclose that – or at least I shouldn’t.’ Kaga chuckled. ‘But I suppose it doesn’t really matter. We’re still waiting for an autopsy for the final results, but we’re pretty sure it happened sometime between five and seven o’clock.’

‘Except, he called me after six.’

‘True. Which would make the time of death somewhere between six and seven o’clock.’

Wait.

That meant that he'd been killed right after he talked to me on the phone.

'How was he killed?' I said, half to myself. Kaga gave me a wondering look. He must've thought that was a strange question for the one who discovered the body. But it was true, I didn't remember seeing anything that would tell me how he'd died. To be honest, I was frightened. I don't think I even looked that closely at him.

I explained myself and Kaga nodded, understanding. 'That's also something we need to wait for the autopsy to be sure of, but all indications are that he was strangled.'

'You mean someone choked him? Like, with their hands, or a rope?'

'A telephone cord. It was still wrapped around his neck.'

'What?' I had no recollection of seeing the telephone.

'He had one other injury, besides. It appears he was struck on the back of the head. We believe the weapon was a brass paperweight. We found it on the floor next to him.'

'So someone hit him on the back of the head, knocked him out, then strangled him?'

'That's the most likely explanation.' Detective Kaga lowered his voice. 'I'm sure there will be an announcement soon, but please don't repeat any of this before that, okay?'

'Sure, of course.'

The car finally arrived at my apartment.

‘Thanks for the lift. That was much better than having to take the train.’

‘Not at all. Thanks for the chat. It was very helpful.’

As I started getting out of the car, Kaga stopped me. ‘Tell me the name of the magazine.’

‘His serial is being published in *Somei Monthly*.’

Kaga shook his head. ‘No. I meant the magazine *you’re* writing for, Mr Nonoguchi.’

I grinned sheepishly and blurted out the name. Kaga wrote it down in his notes and we said our goodnights.

Back in my apartment, I sat vacantly on the sofa for a while. I tried thinking back over the events of the day, but none of it felt real. It was the kind of day you seldom experience, if ever. The thought came to me that, even though it had been tragic, it was almost a shame to have such a day end by merely going to sleep. Not that I would be able to sleep, anyway. Not tonight.

Then I had an idea. I should record my experience. I should write the story of how my friend was killed.

That is the story behind these notes. I’ve decided I will keep writing them until the case is solved and the truth is out.

Hidaka’s death was in the morning paper. I hadn’t watched TV the night before, but I guessed the story was probably out by the eleven o’clock news.

The newspaper had a simple headline on the side of the front page, with the article continued inside. There was a big picture of Hidaka's house and, right next to it, a publicity shot of him that was probably taken for some magazine.

The article laid out the facts more or less accurately, with one notable exception. Concerning the discovery of the body, it read, 'Hearing from an acquaintance that the lights in the house were out, his wife, Rie, returned home to find Hidaka dead in the first-floor office', which might make people think that Rie was the only one there. My name wasn't mentioned anywhere.

According to the article, the investigators were looking into two possibilities. One was that Hidaka's death was pre-meditated murder, and the other that it was incidental manslaughter. The front door had been locked, so the journalist assumed the criminal got in through the office window.

I closed the paper and was about to start making breakfast when the doorbell rang. I looked at the clock and it was just after eight. It was unusually early for callers. I almost never use my door intercom, I simply go and open the door, but today, I picked it up.

'Yes?'

'Mr Nonoguchi?' The voice belonged to a woman, breathing hard, as if she had been running.

'Yes, who is this?'

‘Sorry to drop by so early. I’m from Channel Eight News and I was hoping we could talk to you about what happened last night.’

That was a surprise. My name wasn’t in the papers, but the TV newspeople had clearly got wind of the fact that someone else was present when the body was discovered.

‘Erm . . .’ I considered my response. I didn’t want to say anything lightly that might come back to haunt me. ‘What exactly is this about?’

‘The author Kunihiro Hidaka was murdered in his home last night. We heard that you were there with his wife when the body was found. Is this true? Mr Nonoguchi?’

Channel Eight News was one of those variety news shows. Her tone was overly deferential, almost sycophantic. I rolled my eyes. Still, it wouldn’t do to lie.

‘Yes, that’s true.’

Even over the intercom, I could feel the excitement on the other side.

‘And why were you visiting Mr Hidaka’s house that night?’

‘Sorry, I can’t discuss this with you. I’ve told everything to the police.’

‘We heard that you contacted the wife, Rie, after seeing something strange about the house. Can you comment on what you thought was strange?’

‘Please, talk to the police.’ I hung up the intercom.

I had heard that TV news crews could be extremely rude, but this was my first time experiencing it for myself. Why couldn't they understand that I didn't want to talk to anyone so soon after finding my friend dead?

I decided I wouldn't go outside and risk running into another TV crew. I felt that I should pay Rie a visit or maybe just check on the house, but it would be impossible to get near the place today.

I was warming up a mug of milk in the microwave when the doorbell rang again. Again I picked up the intercom.

'Hi, this is Channel Four News. I was hoping I could talk to you?' This time it was a man's voice. 'Mr Nonoguchi, every person in the country is waiting to hear more details about what happened.'

This kind of bombastic statement would, under other circumstances, have made me chuckle.

'Look, all I did was find him. I don't know anything else.'

'But you were friends with Mr Hidaka, correct?'

'That's true, but I can't talk to you about anything that happened last night.'

'If you could come out and tell us anything about Mr Hidaka, that would be fine.' The man was persistent.

I sighed. I was worried less about the imposition and more about the trouble it would cause my neighbours if news crews were camped outside my door all day.

I hung up the receiver, went to my door, and opened it. A forest of microphones were thrust into my face.

In the end, my entire morning was spent fielding interviews, and I didn't even get to eat a proper breakfast. Finally, a little after noon, I retreated back inside my apartment. I was eating some instant udon noodles and watching TV when I saw a close-up of my face on the screen. I choked on my noodles. I couldn't believe they were already showing the footage they had taken just a couple of hours before.

'You were friends from primary school, correct? What sort of person would you say Mr Hidaka was?' the female reporter asked in a shrill voice.

On the screen, I seem to be thinking far too deeply about the question. I had noticed at the time that my silence was uncomfortably long. I guessed they hadn't had the time to edit out this awkward pause in the footage. You could see the reporters around me growing impatient.

'He had a strong personality,' the me on the screen said at last. 'He was a real individual. Sometimes you'd think he was the most amazing guy, then other times you'd be surprised by his coldness. But perhaps you can say that about anyone.'

'Can you give an example of what you mean by his coldness?'

‘Well ...’ Then the me on the screen shook his head. ‘No, not off the top of my head. And this really isn’t the time or the place.’

Of course, in my head I was picturing Hidaka killing that cat, but it wasn’t the kind of thing to announce on the public airwaves.

After a series of increasingly inappropriate questions, the female reporter asked, ‘Is there anything you want to say to Hidaka’s killer?’

This was it, her home-run question.

‘Not at this time,’ I answered. You could tell she was disappointed.

After that, they cut back to the studio, where a reporter talked about Hidaka’s novels. Behind the many varied worlds he had created, the reporter said, were the complicated human relations of the author himself. This clearly suggested that his death might be related to the intersection of his literary and private lives.

The reporter talked about the recent troubles Hidaka had had with his novel *Forbidden Hunting Grounds*. How the family of the man who was the model for the book’s main character had raised objections. Apparently word hadn’t yet got out that Miyako Fujio had been to Hidaka’s house the day he died.

Then they went to a panel of celebrity guests they’d brought into the studio, and they started talking about

Hidaka's death. I got a sour taste in my mouth and turned off the television.

I wished the NHK would cover the situation. For accurate information about something big, one of their networks was usually the best option. Unfortunately, the death of Hidaka wasn't momentous enough for a publicly funded station to put together a special programme.

The phone rang. I'd lost count how many times it had already rung that day, but I still picked up on the off chance it might be something to do with work.

'Yes, Nonoguchi speaking,' I said a little roughly.

'Hi, it's me.' The firm voice at the other end was without a doubt Rie.

'Oh, hi. How did you do last night?' It was a strange question, but I couldn't think of anything else to ask.

'I went to stay at my parents' house. I thought I should probably call people, tell them what happened, but I just didn't have it in me.'

'I can imagine. Where are you now?'

'Home. I got a call from the police this morning, and they said they wanted to go over the scene with me and ask me a few more questions.'

'Has that happened already?'

'Yes. Though some of the detectives are still around.'

'What about the media? They giving you any trouble?'

'Of course. But some of the people from Hidaka's

publisher and some television people that knew him came over, and they're handling the questions. It's taken a load off my shoulders.'

'I see.' I was going to say that was good, but swallowed my words. It didn't seem like the right thing to say to a woman who'd lost her husband the night before.

'How about you, Mr Nonoguchi? They must be pestering you endlessly. I didn't see it myself, but one of the people from the publisher said you were on TV. I was worried, so I called.'

'Oh, don't worry about me. I think they've finally settled down.'

'I'm really sorry you had to go through this.' I could hear her apology was sincere, and I was impressed with her mental fortitude. By rights, she should have been one of the saddest people in the world right then, but she was taking the time to worry about me. *She really does have a backbone*, I thought again.

'Please let me know if there's anything I can help with. Anything at all,' I told her.

'I think I'm okay. Some of my husband's relatives are here, and my mother, too.'

'Okay.' I remembered that Hidaka had a brother two years older than him, and that the brother and his wife had taken in his mother. 'Well, if there's anything, don't hesitate to ask.'

‘Thank you so much. I’ll talk to you later.’

‘Thanks for calling.’

I hung up, but my thoughts remained on Rie. I wondered what she would do now, how she would live. She was still young, and I’d heard that her family was well-off, with money from the freight business, so she probably wouldn’t struggle. However, I figured it would probably take quite some time for her to recover from the shock. After all, they’d only been married a month.

Before meeting Hidaka, Rie had been a passionate fan of his novels. They’d met through her work and had started dating soon after. That meant that last night she lost two important things: one was her husband, the other was the author Kunihiko Hidaka’s new novel.

I was still lost in thought when the phone rang again. They wanted me to appear on a variety news programme. I turned them down on the spot.

*

Detective Kaga arrived a little after six that evening. I answered the doorbell with a despondent certainty that it was the press again and found him on my doorstep instead. He wasn’t alone. He’d brought another, slightly younger detective with him, named Makimura.

‘Sorry to bother you. I had two or three more questions.’

‘I expected as much. Come on in.’

Detective Kaga didn’t even move to take off his shoes but asked, ‘Were you in the middle of dinner?’

‘No, I haven’t eaten yet. I was thinking of getting something, though.’

‘How about we eat out? To tell the truth, we’ve been so busy conducting interviews that we didn’t have time for a proper lunch. Did we?’ He looked to his partner, and Detective Makimura obliged with a sheepish smile.

‘Okay, sure. Where would you like to go? There’s a pretty good pork-cutlet place near here.’

‘We’re fine anywhere.’ Then Kaga hesitated as though he’d just thought of something. ‘There was a family restaurant just down the street, right? The one you went to with Mr Oshima, your editor.’

‘That’s right. Do you want to go there?’

‘Actually, yes. It’s close, and they have free coffee refills.’

‘Sounds good,’ Detective Makimura chimed in.

‘It’s fine by me,’ I said. ‘Let me get my jacket.’

I went to get changed, leaving them at the door. I wondered why Kaga wanted to go to that restaurant. Did he have some reason for wanting to see it? Or was it just because it was close and he could drink coffee?

I hadn’t come to any conclusions by the time I joined them in the hallway.

At the restaurant, I ordered shrimp Doria. Detective Kaga and Detective Makimura ordered lamb steak and meat loaf respectively.

‘So, about that novel,’ Kaga said once the waitress had left. ‘The one that was left open on Mr Hidaka’s computer screen? *The Gates of Ice*, was it?’

‘Right. You were wondering whether the open file was something he’d written yesterday or something already published that he was looking over, right? Did you figure it out?’

‘We did. It looks like it was new material, written yesterday. We talked to the editor at *Somei Monthly*, and he said it fitted perfectly together with what had been written before.’

‘So he was working hard until he was killed.’

‘There was something odd, though.’ Detective Kaga leaned slightly forward and rested his right elbow on the table.

‘Something odd?’

‘The number of pages. We worked out how many pages the file would be when printed out, and it came to twenty-seven-odd pages. Even if he had started writing immediately after Miss Fujio went home at five o’clock, that seems like too many. Based on what you told us yesterday, he could only write four to six pages in an hour.’

‘Twenty-seven pages? That is quite a lot.’

I went back to Hidaka’s house at eight o’clock, but even if he’d been alive and working right up to the moment I arrived, he’d have to have written nine pages an hour.

‘So,’ I said, ‘maybe he was lying?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Maybe he’d already written ten or twelve pages when I saw him before. Maybe he just wanted to act like he hadn’t started yet – you know, maintaining appearances and all that.’

‘That’s what the editor at the publisher suggested, too.’

‘Thought so.’ I nodded.

‘But Hidaka had told Rie when she left the house that he wouldn’t make it to the hotel until rather late. Despite that, by eight o’clock, he already had twenty-seven pages written. Since each instalment of *The Gates of Ice* was around thirty pages, he was almost finished. I understand writers are often late, but do they ever finish early?’

‘I suppose. Writing isn’t a purely mechanical operation. You can spend hours at your desk without writing a single page. But when inspiration strikes, sometimes it’s hard to stop writing.’

‘Was Mr Hidaka that kind of writer?’

‘He was. Which is to say, I think most authors are that kind of writer.’

‘I see. I wouldn’t know anything about that.’ Detective Kaga settled back into his seat.

‘I’m not sure why you’re so hung up on the number of pages he’d finished before he was killed,’ I said. ‘The basic facts are, when Rie left the house, his story wasn’t finished, but when the body was found, it was almost finished. All that means is that he did some amount of work in the time before he was killed. Right?’

‘Maybe so.’ Detective Kaga nodded, but he still looked unsatisfied.

Kaga, my former colleague, now a detective, seemed unable to let even the slightest detail go without thoroughly working through it. I suppose that was part of the job.

The waitress brought our food and talk ceased for a while.

‘By the way,’ I asked eventually, ‘what happened with the remains? You mentioned there was going to be an autopsy?’

‘Yes, they did it today.’ Detective Kaga looked over at Makimura. ‘You were there, right?’

‘No, not me. If I was, I wouldn’t be eating this now.’ He frowned as he stabbed his meat loaf with a fork.

‘True enough.’ Kaga smiled wryly. He turned back to me. ‘What about the autopsy?’

‘I was just wondering if they had determined a time of death.’

‘I haven’t read the reports myself, but I heard they had a pretty good estimate.’

‘Are they sure it’s accurate?’

‘It depends on what they based the estimate on. For example—’ Kaga began, but then he shook his head. ‘No, I should save that for later.’

‘Why?’

‘I don’t want to ruin your shrimp Doria,’ he said, indicating my plate.

‘Indeed.’ I nodded. ‘Let’s let that one rest for now, then.’

Detective Kaga nodded to indicate I’d made a wise choice.

While we ate, he said nothing about the case. Instead, he asked about the children’s books I was writing. He wanted to know what the current trends were. What were people reading? What did I think about the decline in reading overall?

I told him that the books aimed at children and teens that were selling were the ones that the Ministry of Education had promoted as ‘library recommendations’, and that the decline in reading among children was largely the fault of their parents.

‘Parents these days don’t read books themselves, but they feel they should make their children read. Since they aren’t readers, however, they have no idea what to give

their children. That's why they cling to the recommendations from the Ministry of Education. Those books are all insufferably boring and, as a result, the kids learn to hate books. It's a vicious circle, with no end in sight.'

Both of the detectives listened to my story with the appearance of rapt attention while they ate. I secretly wondered whether they had the slightest interest at all.

Coffee came after the meal. I ordered myself a hot milk.

'You smoke, right?' Detective Kaga said, gesturing towards an ashtray.

'No, no thanks,' I said.

'What, you quit?'

'Yeah, about two years ago. Doctor's orders. It was wrecking my stomach.'

'I see. Sorry, we should have sat in the non-smoking section. I guess when I think of authors, I always imagine them smoking. Mr Hidaka was a pretty heavy smoker, too, wasn't he?'

'That's right. Sometimes I thought he was fumigating his office to keep the bugs out.'

'How about last night when you found the body? Was there still smoke in the room?'

'I wonder . . . I was a little upset, as you can imagine.' I took a sip of my milk. 'Now that you mention it, I think there was a little smoke.'

‘I see.’ Detective Kaga brought his cup to his lips. Setting it down, he slowly pulled out his notebook. ‘Actually, there was one other thing I wanted to check with you. About when you went to Hidaka’s house at eight o’clock?’

‘Yes?’

‘You said that since no one answered the intercom, and all the lights in the house were off, you called the hotel where Rie was staying, correct?’

‘That’s right.’

‘So, about those lights.’ Detective Kaga looked straight at me. ‘Are you sure they were all off? All of them?’

‘They were off, without a doubt.’ I stared right back.

‘But you can’t see the office window from the gate, can you? Did you go around to the back garden?’

‘No, I didn’t. But you can tell from the gate whether the lights are on in the office or not.’

‘Really? How’s that?’ Detective Kaga asked.

‘There’s a large cherry tree right in front of his office window. If the office lights are on, you can see it clearly.’

Detectives Kaga and Makimura nodded. ‘That makes sense.’

‘Was that a big problem?’

‘No, we’re just dotting our i’s here. If we don’t get every detail in the report, our boss gets mad at us.’

‘Sounds tough.’

‘It’s like any other job.’ Kaga smiled in a way that reminded me of when he’d been a teacher.

‘So how is the investigation going? Have you made any progress?’ I looked at each of the detectives in turn, before settling on Detective Kaga.

‘Well, we’re really just getting started,’ he said softly, as if trying to suggest they weren’t supposed to talk about it.

‘On the news,’ I said, ‘they were saying it might have been a happenstance murder. That someone might have just broken in, found him there, and had to kill him.’

‘Well, it’s not entirely out of the question,’ Detective Kaga said.

‘By which you mean it’s out of the question.’

‘Pretty much.’ Detective Kaga had one eye on his partner. ‘Personally, I feel it’s highly unlikely.’

‘Why’s that?’

‘Well, typically, someone breaking and entering with intent to steal will go in through the front door. That way, if they’re discovered, they might be able to talk their way out of it. They also tend to leave via the front door. But as you know, the front door to Mr Hidaka’s house was locked.’

‘And thieves don’t generally lock up behind themselves?’

‘The deadbolt on the front door can only be locked from the inside when it’s closed, or from the outside with a key. The Hidaka house had three keys, and Rie had two of

them. The third one was in Mr Hidaka's trouser pocket.'

'But some robbers still come in through the window, don't they?'

'That's true, but they tend to be the ones who've done the most prior planning. They case the place first, learning when the residents are out, making sure they can't be seen from the street, and so on, before they act.'

'And nothing suggests that might've happened?'

'Well,' – Detective Kaga smiled, showing white teeth – 'if anyone had cased the place, they'd have realised there was very little left in that house worth stealing.'

My mouth opened in a perfect *O*. Detective Makimura was smiling slightly.

'Personally ...' Detective Kaga began, then stopped as though hesitant to say more. He started again. 'I think it was someone who knew him.'

'Well, that's troubling.'

'Just between you and me.' He raised a single finger to his lips.

'Of course.' I nodded.

He glanced at Detective Makimura. The junior detective then picked up the bill, stood up, and headed over to the cash register.

'Oh, no, I'll get it.'

'No need.' Detective Kaga held out a hand to stop me. 'We were the ones who invited you out after all.'

‘But they don’t pay for your meals, do they?’

‘No, not for dinner, unfortunately.’

‘Sorry about that.’

‘No worries.’

‘Still.’ I looked over at the cash register. Detective Makimura was paying.

Something about what he was doing was strange. He was talking to the woman at the cash register. She glanced over in my direction, then turned back to Makimura and said something.

‘Sorry,’ Detective Kaga said without even glancing towards the cash register. He was staring directly at me and his expression hadn’t changed. ‘We’re just checking your alibi.’

‘My alibi?’

‘Yeah.’ He nodded. ‘We’ve already checked with Mr Oshima, your editor at Dojisha Publishing. But we have to corroborate as many details as we can. That’s just how we do things. I hope you understand.’

‘Is that why you wanted to come here?’

‘If we didn’t come at the same time of day, there might be a different person working the register on that shift.’

‘I see,’ I said, deeply impressed.

Detective Makimura returned. Kaga nodded to him. ‘They overcharge us for anything?’

‘Not a thing.’

‘That’s good for a change,’ Kaga said, looking towards me, his eyes narrowing in the suggestion of a smile.

When I told him I was keeping a record of the last couple of days, Detective Kaga was interested in seeing it. We’d already left the restaurant and were walking back towards my apartment. If I hadn’t said anything, we would probably have parted ways there.

‘I figured I wouldn’t have another experience like this in my life, so I should probably write it down. I think it’s just part of being an author.’

The detective thought about that for a while, then said, ‘I wonder if you’d let me read your account?’

‘Read it? You? I don’t know. I didn’t write it with the intention of having someone read it . . .’

‘Please.’ He bowed his head to me. Next to him, Detective Makimura did the same.

‘Enough of that. What will people think when they see two policemen bowing to me by the side of the road? Besides, I’ve already told you everything.’

‘I’d still like to see it.’

‘Well, if you insist.’ I scratched my head. ‘Can you come up to the apartment? I have it all in a file on my word processor, so you’ll have to wait while I print it out.’

‘Not a problem,’ Kaga said.

The two detectives accompanied me up to my apart-

ment. As I was printing out the manuscript, Detective Kaga came and looked over my shoulder. 'You use a word processor?'

'I do.'

'I noticed that Mr Hidaka was using a regular computer.'

'Well, he uses it for other things besides writing. Email, games, all kinds of things.'

'You don't use a computer, Mr Nonoguchi?'

'A word processor's enough for me.'

'And how do you deliver your manuscripts to the publisher? Do they come and pick them up?'

'No, usually I send them by fax. Right over there.' I pointed to the fax machine sitting in the corner of my room. I only had one phone line so my cordless phone was attached to the fax.

'But your editor did come over yesterday to pick up your manuscript.' Kaga looked up. Maybe it was just my imagination, but I thought I saw a keen gleam in his eyes. I remembered what Detective Kaga said about Hidaka's killer having known him.

'There were a number of things we needed to talk about in person, so I asked him to make a special trip out to see me yesterday.'

Kaga listened to my response in silence, nodding, but said nothing more.

When the printout was finished, I handed it to him,

saying, 'Actually, there is one thing I haven't told you yet.'

'Really?' Detective Kaga didn't look particularly surprised.

'You'll see once you've read this. I didn't think it had anything to do with the case, and I didn't want to cast suspicion on a stranger.'

What I was talking about, of course, was Hidaka and the cat.

'I understand. I know that happens.' Detective Kaga thanked me profusely, and the two detectives headed off.

Well now.

I began writing today's entry straight after Kaga and his companion left. The continuation of what I handed to them, that is. I know he might want to read this, too, but I will try not to dwell on that as I write. Otherwise, what's the point?

Two days have passed since Hidaka's murder. The funeral took place at a Buddhist temple several kilometres from the house. A throng of publishing-industry people were in attendance, and the queue to offer incense was long.

The TV crews were there as well. While the reporters were wearing their serious faces, they were, like snakes hunting, looking around for any dramatic scenes. If any of the mourners even looked as if they might be in danger of

tearing up, the cameras would be on them in a flash.

After I had offered my incense, I stood by the reception tent, watching the mourners as they arrived. There were a few celebrities. I recognised some actors who had played some of Hidaka's characters in the movies made from his novels.

A reading of scriptures and a brief talk by the head priest followed the offering of incense. Rie was wearing a black suit, prayer beads clutched in her hand. When the priest was done, she stepped forward and thanked the others for coming, then spoke about her enduring affection for her husband. I heard some sniffing in the otherwise quiet crowd.

Not once in Rie's talk did she mention or express any hatred towards the killer. To me, that was a surer sign of her wrath and sadness than any other.

The coffin was carried out, and as the mourners began to shuffle home, I noticed someone I'd been expecting to see. She was walking alone.

I called out as she left the temple, 'Miss Fujio?'

Miyako Fujio stopped and turned, her long hair whipping round. 'You are ...?'

'We met in Hidaka's office the other day.'

'I remember.'

'My name is Nonoguchi, I'm Hidaka's friend. And I was a classmate of your brother's.'

‘So I heard. Hidaka told me after you left.’

‘I was wondering if we could talk? Do you have time?’

She looked down at her watch, then off into the distance. ‘Someone’s waiting for me.’

I followed her eyes. A light-green van was parked along the side of the road. The young man sitting in the driver’s seat was looking in our direction.

‘Your husband?’

‘No, not that.’

Then her lover, I assumed.

‘We can just talk here. There’s a few things I wanted to ask you.’

‘Like what?’

‘I wanted to know what you talked about with Hidaka that day.’

‘What we always talked about. Recalling as many of the books as possible, admitting his wrongdoing in public, and rewriting the story so it had nothing to do with my brother. I had heard he was leaving for Canada and wanted to know exactly how he was going to show his sincere apologies once he’d left.’

‘And what did Hidaka say to that?’

‘He said he would still respond in good faith, but he had no intention of compromising his own beliefs to do so.’

‘So he wasn’t going to go along with your requests?’

‘Apparently he felt that as long as the intent was not an exposé, but the attainment of art, that some intrusion on his subjects’ privacy was unavoidable.’

‘But you didn’t agree.’

‘Of course not.’ Her face softened slightly, but nothing you could remotely call a smile appeared.

‘So you didn’t get what you wanted that day.’

‘He said that as soon as he was settled in Canada, he would contact me, and we could continue where we left off. He promised. He did look like he was busy getting ready to relocate, and I didn’t see any point pushing it, so I agreed and left.’

I myself couldn’t imagine anything else Hidaka could’ve said.

‘And you went straight home?’

‘Me? Yes.’

‘You didn’t stop anywhere along the way?’

‘No.’ She shook her head. Then Miyako Fujio’s eyes opened a little wider and she stared hard at me. ‘Are you checking my alibi?’

‘No, of course not.’ I dropped my eyes. If I wasn’t checking her alibi, what was I doing? I started to wonder myself.

She sighed. ‘A detective visited me the other day and asked the same questions you’re asking me now. Except he was a little more obvious about it. He wanted to know if I

bore any malice towards Mr Hidaka.'

'Right.' I looked up at her. 'What did you tell him?'

'I told him I bore him no ill will at all. I just wanted him to respect the dead.'

'So it's safe to say that you didn't like *Forbidden Hunting Grounds*? You feel it offends the memory of your brother?'

'Everyone has secrets. And everyone has the right to keep them. Even if they're dead.'

'What if somebody felt those secrets were moving? Do you think it's such a bad thing to share that emotion with the world?'

'Emotion?' She stared at me curiously. Then she slowly shook her head. 'What about a middle-school student who rapes a girl could possibly be moving?'

'Some things have to be said as the backdrop to a moving story.'

She sighed again. For my benefit. 'You're a writer, too, aren't you, Mr Nonoguchi?'

'Yes, well, I write children's books.'

'And are you so eager to defend Hidaka because you're an author yourself?'

I thought a moment before answering, 'Maybe.'

'What a terrible profession.' She looked back at her watch. 'I'm sorry, I have to go.' She turned and walked towards the waiting van.

*

I went back to my apartment building, where I found a piece of paper in my mailbox.

‘I’m at the restaurant where we ate the other day. Give me a call. Kaga.’

A phone number I assumed was the restaurant’s was written at the bottom.

I changed out of my mourning clothes and went straight to the restaurant without calling. He was sitting by the window reading a book. I couldn’t see what the title was.

He noticed me and started to stand. I waved him back down into his seat. ‘Don’t bother.’

‘Sorry to call you out here like this.’ He lowered his head. He was aware that today was Hidaka’s funeral.

I ordered another hot milk from the waitress and sat down.

‘I know what you’re after. This, right?’ I pulled some folded sheets of paper out of my jacket pocket and put them down in front of him. These were the most recent notes, which I’d printed out before leaving home.

‘Thanks so much.’ He reached out and unfolded the pages.

‘Actually, could you not read it here? If you read the earlier notes, you know that I wrote about you, too. It would be embarrassing for you to read it in front of me.’

He grinned. ‘Of course. I’ll just put these away for now then.’ He refolded the pages and put them in his jacket pocket.

‘So,’ I asked after a sip of water, ‘I hope my notes are a little bit of help?’

‘Oh, they are,’ Kaga said immediately. ‘There are things you can’t pick up about the atmosphere of the case just by listening to stories, but when you see it all written down, it’s easier to grasp. I wish the witnesses in my other cases would write down everything like this.’

‘Well, I’m glad.’

The waitress brought my hot milk. It came with a spoon to scoop off the layer of froth on the top.

‘What did you think about the cat?’ I asked.

‘I was surprised. You hear about cats causing trouble, but I don’t think I’d ever heard about somebody taking it quite so far in dealing with one.’

‘Are you investigating the owner?’

‘I made the reports to my boss, and someone else is on it.’

‘I see.’ I drank my milk. I didn’t feel great about casting blame on someone else like that. ‘Well, other than that, I think everything in my notes is exactly as I told it to you.’

‘It was.’ He nodded. ‘But it’s the details that have really helped.’

‘What kind of details?’

‘Well, like the part where you were talking to Mr Hidaka in his office. You wrote that Hidaka smoked one cigarette

during that time. If we hadn't read your notes, we never would've known that.'

'Yes . . . but just so you know, I'm not really sure it was only one. It could've been two. I just remember that he was smoking, so I wrote it like that.'

'No, it was one cigarette,' he said with finality. 'No mistake.'

'Okay.'

I had no idea what that had to do with anything. Maybe it was just another example of the odd way that detectives saw the world.

I told Detective Kaga about speaking to Miyako Fujio after the funeral. He seemed intrigued by this.

'I never did get it out of her,' I said, 'but does she have an alibi?'

'Someone else is looking into that, but it looks like she does.'

'I see. So I guess there's no point worrying about her too much then.'

'Did you suspect her?'

'I wouldn't call it suspicion, but she did have a motive.'

'You mean the intrusion into her brother's privacy? But killing Mr Hidaka wouldn't fix that.'

'What if she realised he wasn't going to be sincere about his apology, got mad, and killed him in the heat of the moment?'

‘But Mr Hidaka was still alive when she left the house.’

‘She could’ve come back later?’

‘Intending to kill him?’

‘Yes.’ I nodded. ‘Intending to kill him.’

‘But Rie was still in the house.’

‘She could’ve waited for her to leave, then sneaked in.’

‘So Miyako Fujio knew that Rie would be leaving the house before her husband did?’

‘It might have come up in conversation.’

Detective Kaga interlaced his fingers on the tabletop. He tapped the tips of his thumbs together repeatedly as he thought. After a while he said, ‘Did she come in through the front door?’

‘How about the window?’

‘So a woman in a suit came in through the window?’

He grinned. ‘And Mr Hidaka just sat there, watching her?’

‘She could’ve just waited until he’d gone to the toilet. Then waited behind the door for him to come back.’

‘The paperweight in her hand?’ Detective Kaga swung his right fist up and down.

‘I suppose so. Then Hidaka walks in,’ – I made a fist of my right hand, too – ‘and she smacks him in the back of the head.’

‘I see. And after that?’

I thought back on what Detective Kaga had told me the

other day. 'Then I guess she strangled him. With the telephone cord, right? Then she fled the scene.'

'How did she leave?'

'Out of the window. If she'd gone out of the front door, it would've been unlocked when we got there later.'

'That's true.' He reached out for his coffee cup, noticed it was empty, and left the empty cup sitting there. 'But why didn't she go out of the front door?'

'I don't know. Maybe she didn't want people to see her? Perhaps it was a psychological thing. Of course, if she has an alibi anyway, this is all just fanciful conjecture.'

'True enough. She does have an alibi, which would indeed make the story you just told entirely fanciful conjecture.'

Something about the deliberate way he repeated my own words struck me as odd. 'You can go ahead and forget it then.'

'Still, it was an interesting scenario. I was wondering if you could make another guess for me.'

'I'm not terribly good at this, but of course. Fire away.'

'Why did the killer turn off the lights in the room before leaving?'

'Isn't it obvious?' I said after a moment's thought. 'She wanted people to think no one was home. That way, even if anyone turned up, they would just leave. It would delay

the discovery of the body. Which is, in fact, what did happen.'

'So the killer wanted to delay the discovery of the body?'

'Don't all killers want to do that?'

'Maybe,' he said. 'If that was the plan, then why was the computer left on?'

'The computer?'

'Yes. When you came into the room, the screen was on. It was in your account.'

'That's true. Maybe she didn't care whether the computer was on or not.'

'I tried a simple experiment after leaving you the other day. We turned off all the lights in the room and left on the computer monitor. It turns out it's quite bright. You can see it dimly through the curtains even standing outside the room. If she really wanted to make it look like no one was home, she would've turned off the computer.'

'Maybe she couldn't find the switch. People who aren't familiar with computers don't know about that sort of thing.'

'She could've at least turned off the monitor. The switch is right there on the front. And if she didn't know that, she could've pulled out the plug.'

'I guess she forgot.'

Detective Kaga stared at me for a moment, then nodded. 'That's probably it. She probably forgot.'

Having nothing else to say to that, I remained silent.

He stood, thanking me again for my time. 'Will you be writing about today in your account as well?'

'I expect I will.'

'Then I'll be able to read it?'

'Fine by me.'

He headed towards the cash register, then stopped midway. 'Did you really think I wasn't cut out to be a teacher?'

I remembered writing something along those lines in my account. 'That's just my opinion.'

He looked down again, gave a brief sigh, and walked out.

I wondered what Kaga was thinking.

If he'd already figured out something about the case, I wondered why he didn't just tell me.