

## *Yasukuni Incident*

WHEN I STEPPED OFF THE SUBWAY, I hoped no one could smell the gasoline fumes coming from my backpack. If they could, they must have been too scared or confused to do anything. I went up the escalators, two steps at a time, anxious to get off the Metro line and into the open air.

Sweating in the oppressive Tokyo summer heat, I walked out onto the sidewalk of Yasukuni-dori. I could see a sort of heat-induced look of desperation in the eyes of the few late-evening passers by as I walked uphill towards the enormous torii that marked the lane up to the shrine. I approached the temple guardians, their sneering monster faces not frightening me in the least. Tonight, I thought, you should fear me.

I walked past the guardians, under the torii, into the lane of chestnut and cherry trees and memorials that leads up to the shrine gates. I'd scouted this path earlier in the day. A Caucasian can move about easily in Tokyo, conspicuously inconspicuous. I have played to the most common stereotypes here, tourist and English teacher, many times before, but of late, I've aspired to a new title: killer of gods.

Don't assume for a moment that I am an atheist. I am unsure of many things, but I do know that atheism is a Hell-worthy sin, whatever that Hell may be. Though the country attracts its share of lip-service gaijin Buddhists and Shintoists, Japan can be quite a spiritual place. It is not my fault that people ignore the kami or the Buddha, nor is it the fault of such beings.

The little gods talk to me and I listen, I chat. I've felt the gentle snoring of enormous mountains. I've gossiped with babbling waterfalls. In my nightly walks I've been on the verge of many great breakthroughs with incarnations of neon, plastic, and steel. I've let my friend, Inari, the prince of the foxes, lick my wounds clean and feed me his spirit flesh when I was on the verge of death. The little gods speak. I listen.

Inari, I've said, is fond of me. He and I go out sometimes, just to chat or pick up women. He especially likes to go to nightclubs dressed as a young Frenchman working in finance. You should see him, his nine tails just faintly out of sight, as he tries to hit on Japanese girls in his French-accented English. I asked him once what he does when he goes home with them. He smiled.

“First, I give them what they want. Then, I show them what they’ve done. Most forget the experience, write it off. A few are driven completely mad. They are my favorites, my darlings.”

I was set upon my current path as the fox prince and I were eating ramen one evening at a small shop. That night, the hints of his short, pointy red ears were sticking out on either side of the graying hair of a middle-aged construction worker. He slurped his noodles slowly and sighed often.

“What’s bothering you?” I asked.

He gestured to a small TV behind the counter. The news was running a story of yet another visit to Yasukuni Shrine by the prime minister. People from China and Korea had condemned his visit as being both culturally insensitive and morally reprehensible, with protests in Seoul and Beijing.

“Regardless of what you may think about his economic initiatives, he is quite a fool. He is as blind as most people, and this I don’t mind. But his publicity creates attention for a place that should not be.”

I had always avoided Yasukuni on principle. Japan’s World War II war criminals had been enshrined there, and while I didn’t know anyone who had been in the war or in China and Korea during the atrocities, I felt that it was not a place for a respectable Westerner to be seen. I had never thought of the place as having any spiritual bearing on the state of Japan.

I asked him what was wrong with Yasukuni, with the shrine itself.

“The kami you have spoken with in your time here have lived here for ages. We have watched earthquakes and typhoons shape the land since before the first men and women were created. We are responsible, trustworthy individuals, in our own way. Men who become kami are not, despite what the priests may tell you. The spirits of emperors and generals have tried to order us about, only to find us reluctant subjects. Men will always behave like men, selfish, ill-tempered creatures that they are, even when they become gods.” Here, he sighed and turned to me.

“You know, I’ve talked with Hideki Tojo twice. The first time was on the gallows, before he was hung. He begged me to chew through the rope, to strike down the guards and free him. I watched his neck snap and felt some sense of peace. I talked with him again in the early ’80s. I visited Yasukuni on a whim one afternoon and there he was, laughing, soaking up the false worship, sneering, feeling as though he’d cheated death. ‘Fox-man,’ he said, ‘it seems I did not need you after all.’ What a prick!”

I knew of Tojo, of course, but had no opinion of him. As one of those unsavory figures enshrined at Yasukuni, I could despise him on principle. He seemed worthy of hating because he has been hated. But as I left the noodle shop, I felt infected by this man turned god. His name stuck in the back of my head, the back

of my throat. I began to speak “Hideki Tojo” to myself when I was alone, seeing how much disdain could creep into my voice.

I visited graveyards and family shrines late at night, conversing with shades of those who had lived through the war and those who had not. So many stories I heard were similar.

“During the war, we Japanese were hypnotized by the military. Then, like the snapping of fingers, the atomic bombs came, and we were no longer hypnotized.” These shades and spirits were tiny, thin as sticks. I left them sake to drink and would walk home, silently angry.

MY GROWING OBSESSION began to filter into daily life. At the office, I somehow managed to turn any conversation even obliquely about politics into a rant about Yasukuni. One of my co-workers, Masahiro, finally called me on it as we were walking together to catch a train.

“Aren’t you worried about upsetting people the way you always talk about politics?” he asked, loosening his tie. “It’s a touchy subject, you know. Saito-ka-cho will be very upset if ‘The Gaijin’ starts alienating our clientele.”

“I’m not afraid to discuss such a terrible place. Besides, we shouldn’t accept money from right-wing assholes, right?”

“Keep your voice down, idiot! People will hear you.”

“You know what I mean.”

“Why does Yasukuni bother you so much? You don’t feel so passionately about other issues, all of which, I might add, you have hardly any stake in compared to one of us.”

“Are you implying my interest is unwarranted because I’m not Japanese? I think the people of Seoul and Beijing and Taipei might disagree.”

“Calm down. All I’m saying is I’m Japanese and I don’t care. Why? Because all the things that Yasukuni may have once stood for, good or bad, are in the past. It’s just a memorial. They have nice cherry trees in the spring and a big New Year’s festival. I don’t go there, but I don’t hold it against other people who do.”

“But you should care.”

“Why?” He stopped in front of the turnstile, waiting for my answer.

“Because people who did terrible things are enshrined there. They’re worshiped. Do you think someone like Hideki Tojo makes a respectable kami?”

He said nothing all the way to the platform, then turned to me as our train pulled in, yelling to be heard.

“But why does one man ruin the whole shrine? Don’t the actions of others enshrined there count for something?”

It was my turn to be silent now. From Tokyo to Ueno, I brooded, while Masahiro paged idly through a newspaper. Yet, as the doors opened to let the masses flood the platform, so too did my bias slip out.

“Tojo is merely a convenient example. I object to the deification of men.”

“Ha! It’s not even about politics, is it?”

“Men make poor gods.”

“Funny to hear that from a Westerner. Hey, is this Ueno? Why didn’t you tell me?” he asked angrily as he dashed away to catch his next train.

“Men make poor gods,” I muttered to no one.

I DECIDED TO BURN YASUKUNI to the ground the day I got up the courage to visit it. I walked up the same lane I later would creep up, watching school children on a field trip, unappreciative of where they were being taken. I could not bring myself to actually step onto the shrine grounds. I stared at the altar in the distance. How could they not see? Sinister figures in military fatigues, the rising sun visible on their uniforms, hovered just inside the shadows of the main building, while Meiji soldiers with ancient-looking rifles stood lookout nearby. I could not make out Hideki Tojo, but I knew he was there. I wanted to scream. I wanted to defile the altar. I hung my head and walked away, fuming.

Later that night, I siphoned gas from a parked car and convinced myself of the cleansing purity of fire. If I burned the shrine, the god-men inside would burn with it.

The gates of Yasukuni did not frighten me. I climbed a tree, my fingers digging into the bark, and pulled myself up to the top of the wall surrounding the compound. In the darkness I could make out figures standing before the steps to the altar, men in robes who I thought were the priests and caretakers of the wretched place. I tried to be as silent as I could, but my shifting weight made the wall creak, attracting the attention of the priests.

“What are you doing?” one of them hissed angrily. I tried to press myself down, but I lost my grip and tumbled to the ground. With the wind knocked out of me, I sat at the base of the wall and watched the gates open just wide enough for two figures to run out and grab my arms. Hauling me to my feet, they pulled me inside, limping, and closed the gates.

“What were you doing up there, gaijin? And what is that smell?”

“He has a bottle of gasoline in his backpack.”

“What did you intend to do with this?”

They pulled me into the light of a lantern and I saw their faces. The eyes of the priests were wide and bloodshot. Their cheeks looked thin, with the veins visible beneath the surface, even in the dim light. Their mouths were black, as

though flames had licked from the backs of their throats outward, around their teeth and lips, leaving behind ashes.

“I came here to burn this place,” I told them.

“Burn it? You fool, why would you want to do that?”

“To kill the devils you have enshrined here.” At this, they laughed, and I could almost hear the ashes falling from their mouths.

“The kami cannot be killed. They can be locked up, yes. Punished, yes. But killed? You think burning gas would kill a god? What arrogance!”

Just then, the assembled priests and I looked up to see the gates of Yasukuni open and a heavenly sight march up the lane and into the shrine grounds.

THE SHOGUN IS A MAN WHO INSPIRES LOYALTY, both in this world and the next. I know this from the stoic, unmoving faces of the ephemeral samurai who now fill the grounds of Yasukuni shrine; loyalists, I imagine, who protected him on his march from Toshogu. Some carry torches and lanterns of ghost-flame, casting about an eerie memory of flickering light, making my priestly captors look even more emaciated, haunted by their own faith.

When I try to get up and run, the man holding me shoves me to my knees and whispers, “If you run, his men will cut you down before you take ten steps.” I don’t know if the specter of a blade can cut flesh, but I take his word for it.

The oldest priest makes his way to the middle of the crowd of warriors, where a large, ornate shrine is being carried. I know the Shogun waits inside. I cannot hear what the priest says to Tokugawa, but as he bows and backs obediently away, I see that I am left alone among a sea of spirits and phantoms. All the priests back way to a respectable distance, then flee.

A pair of warriors with fearsome masks step forward and take me under their arms, and I am pulled to the base of the shrine, my face pressed into the wooden floor. I do not struggle. What would be the point?

Footsteps come from behind me and I am released, though fear keeps my face down. After a long moment of silence that not even the cicadas are willing to break, I hear soft words from a calm voice. I am not of the proper rank to be addressed by the Shogun directly. His servant speaks for him.

“This is not, I imagine, how you expected this night to proceed.”

I am too scared to respond.

“I do not like foreigners. What country should I blame for your disrespectful intrusion tonight?”

“I am an American.”

“I am not surprised. What did you hope to accomplish here tonight?”

“I came here to kill the gods enshrined here.”

“Why should you want to do that?”

“They are killers, rapists, unworthy of divinity.”

“And who are you to make such judgements? What gives you the authority? My first impression would be that you are motivated by vengeance. Did you lose someone to the deities here when they lived and breathed?”

“No. I had no relatives in any war with Japan.”

“Then if not vengeance, what brought you here? What set you on this path, god-slayer?”

“A friend’s words.”

“Who is this friend you speak of?”

“A kami . . . like yourself.”

“Ah, I see. You seek to curry favor with one divinity by slaying another.”

“Please, I can see this was a mistake. Spare me. I beg of you.”

I will remember the Shogun’s laughter for eternity. It says to me that the ways of gods will forever be hidden from men. I am pulled to my feet, and as I face the shrine, I smell again the fumes of the gasoline. I stand with my toes against the offering box and wait for my end, but to my surprise, the guards release me and back away.

“Turn around,” says the servant, and as I do, I realize the extent of my folly. Across from me, all of the Shogun’s countenance shimmers and fades but for his mask. Is it cast iron or a black wabi sabi ceramic? I stare not into the face of a man, but into the vulpine features of my friend, the Prince, locked into a wicked sneer. Mist falls from the nostrils of the mask, and the ghost-flame behind his eyes shows only scorn. The servant holds forth my bottle of gas.

“Drink up, mortal. Tonight, you will understand how presumptuous men are punished.”

How I am consuming this, I do not know. It tastes like nothing I have ever known as it flows down my throat, and I can sense the spark of ignition once it enters my belly.

The Shogun gestures for me to move deeper into the shrine, and as I move inside, I see him: Tojo. He stands defeated, head hanging low, with the remaining divinities trapped in this prison for errant gods watching from the shadows. I can see the rope marks on his neck. I can hear his sobbing. I can smell his stained trousers. Even the dead can piss themselves in fear.

When I approach, he looks at me with eyes that say this night is no different from any he has endured since being enshrined; first they are vacant, then focused, then disturbingly human. The heat travels up my throat as his own lips part, and while my tongue dances with tongues of flame, I see his, blackened, cracked, struggling to move.

“Do not hesitate now,” I hear the Shogun’s servant say mockingly. “Do what you came here to do.”

Is this too cruel for us? No, the gods know best how to treat wayward men.

As I take my final step toward Tojo, ready to press my lips to his and belch forth the flaming sin, as the hidden priests of Yasukuni have done for decades, I understand my punishment, and I am enlightened.

Tojo's scream is my own.