

Beyond the Faded Shrine Gates

by Brandon Barrows

When I was a little boy, I was very angry. The world seemed wide and terrifyingly huge and I wanted to take in every centimeter of it that I could grasp and make it mine. Not out of any malice or desire to rule or anything like that, but because I was filled with wonder and curiosity, and it was there for the taking, so why not? As someone living on this big blue ball, it belonged to me as much as it did to anyone. But when we're young, our ambitions often outpace our reach and stymied wonder becomes frustration. That frustration, in turn, becomes anger more easily than most of us would like to admit. Standing before the paint-cracked, weather-faded *torii* of *Ankokuishi* shrine, it's easy to remember that. No, more like it's hard to forget.

I grew up in a town at the foot of a mountain in Nagano. The name doesn't matter. What does is that, while the world at large seemed immense, my personal world was very small. The town was small, my school was small, my few friends content. No one was interested in the things I was, the places and people outside of our little home. Talk among my peers mostly ran to whatever comics or TV shows were popular, and while those things are fine, it just wasn't enough for me.

Adult interaction wasn't much better. My parents were distant. My mother loved me, as much as she dared, but she always treated me as if I was somehow something that didn't quite belong to her. I was of her body, and she wanted me in her heart, but something was in the way. I realized that thing was my father, though it took me a long time to understand why.

My father was... distant, is the best way to put it. I never felt that I was unwanted but nor did I feel from him love or warmth of any of the things a parent supposedly feels by default. We were more like cohabitants of a too-large house than family. He didn't ignore me, we just didn't speak often. When we did, it was usually in the form of one-sided admonishments: don't do this, don't do that; this isn't proper, that isn't fit for someone of our status. I had no idea what that even meant. What was our "status?" I asked him more than once. He never explained. I suppose that was beneath him, too.

I grew up in that small, lonely town, craving more, but I wasn't born there; we moved when I was very small – young enough that I didn't really remember anywhere else. That was part of my frustration: I thought maybe if I'd been born into that place, I'd have fit better. Talking about it was useless; my mother was mute on such subjects and I assume my father had made the decision in the first place, so I never even tried with him. And it must have suited his purposes quite well, because once we'd moved into our new home, he hardly left it – though he did have a lot of visitors. They would arrive in the evenings mostly, enter my father's private den, stay for minutes or hours or anywhere in between and then disappear. I wasn't allowed to speak or even look at them if I could avoid it. My mother never greeted them or served refreshments. They were like passing ghosts we did our best to ignore. On the rare occasions that my father did leave the house—always, it seemed, prompted by a visit—he would be gone for days, or even weeks. My mother was happiest during those times and that made me very sad, though I only understood why in the vaguest terms. I just knew it wasn't normal...

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