



Is God Green?

Continuing from last year, this is another story from the 'Summer Suite' - a collection of stories written during the summer of 1994, when our family spent a month staying at the home of my late father-in-law, in a small village in Mie Prefecture.

It was mostly to get away from the Tokyo mugginess that we came down here to the country this August, but we're finding that this is one of those long, very hot summers that seem to come by every few years, and there's just no escaping the oppressive heat, even here.

Yesterday I rather unwisely stepped out for a stroll around the village during the mid-afternoon, and within a few minutes was gasping for breath and looking around for somewhere to shelter from the glare. A narrow footpath leading off to one side seemed to offer some relief, and I followed it as it led between a couple of old stone walls, and then up the hillside. A few steps up, and then ... a pair of small stone lions, one each side, guarding the entrance. Of course, the village shrine.

I step into the compound, and the heat is turned off as though with a switch. Trees tower up on each side of the pathway. Tall 'sugi', even their lowest of their branches far, far above my head. The sky is invisible, the outside world shut out, the air cool and still. I walk forward through the dim light towards the little shrine building, old grey, and ramshackle. The rope hanging down is knotted and frayed.

I don't ring the bell. I never do when visiting these places. I'm not a religious person, in any religion, and to play with things like this, seems to me to be a bit of an insult to those people for whom this has meaning. I'm simply content to enjoy the feeling of calm peacefulness that pervades this place. And then, I notice it, standing off to one side. A tree.

But how useless are those two words - a tree - to describe to you what I see there. A massive, massive presence. What name of tree I have no idea. Not like the surrounding sugi, with shafts tall and straight shooting directly skyward from below the surface of the earth, this tree boils aloft from a gigantic tangle of earth, stones, and writhing roots. An old stone fence enclosing it is pushed aside, and leans this way and that. Arching my head back to follow the vast trunk upwards, my vision is lost in a tangle of huge twisted limbs, and shrouding greenery, and I stand stupidly with mouth agape, trying to take in what I see.

A tree. Ridiculous little words. This is not a tree. I know trees. They are nothing but bigger versions of the little plants in our garden, just another creation of life on earth, like the frog hopping there in the pond, the cat sleeping on the porch, just like you and me standing here. This ... is something else. This is not a 'tree', not a 'plant', not a 'creature'. It is ... an entity ... something above and beyond all these things.

Yes I suppose, at one time hundreds of years ago, it was a little plant. Then it became a tree. But then somehow, during the passage of all those years and years and years, it transcended those concepts. It transformed itself into ...

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And then I understand something of the significance of this place. Of that dirty little building standing there. A long time ago, some men knocked a few boards together into a little building shape and said, "This structure shall be our 'shrine'. It shall represent 'godness', and we will stand here to worship." And to protect it, they planted trees nearby. Trees that, while they were day-by-day growing ever so slowly larger and taller, watched all the visitors, heard all the prayers offered, and listened ... and listened ... and listened.

Among those who now come here to ring the bell and commune with their god, how many do you think realize that there he stands, silently watching them?

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