

## Inunaki Mura 3

The cycle of cherry blossoms is well and truly over. The vibrant pink petals of beauty have long drifted, tragic and magnificent, in to the ground. Trodden on, now, discarded and forgotten by those who rushed from all around to snap pictures of them in their preening relevance.

Usually, when the world is not barred behind fragile biology, people would sit beneath them, drinking their themed beers, sharing picnics and basking in their fleeting transience. They'd rest, talking wistfully about memories, muse excitedly about hopes, and deliberate over current circumstances as around them, a flurry of bright brilliance fluttered like one of nature's more diluted maelstroms.

But now, the green leaves that take their place have claimed conquest on the branches, clinging tight and stubborn, yet, still emanating a more common and attainable visage of elegance.

I think, like those, the prime of my thoughts have somewhat fizzled and frittered over the past month or so. I can barely hold tight on to one solid thought for more than a few seconds before it jolts, contorts and bends in to something tainted, marred and rotten. Sleep, to me, is a memory. Of course, my body gets the re-energising it needs, but hardly is it ever restful.

In my apartment, every day- every hour, my peripherals paint a gloomy silhouette of a ragged vision. It stands, tall and hunched, lurching over predatorily like a harrowing entity, but, when I build up the bravery to steal a glance, it has gone – faded and melded in to the shadow of the cabinet, or melted in to the tatami mat floor.

When I'm cooking, my senses kick in, and I can feel something else standing a short distance behind me. Studying my every move. When I'm showering, and my eyes are squinting through the soak, I can see the figure blurred and outlined behind the screen door, or creeping just out of sight of the mirror's telling reflection. I've been trying to tell myself, over and over, that it's nothing- my mind- the trip- but, now, I don't know.

When the nightmares are in full force and I spark in to the darkness of my room, I can make it out for a few seconds, standing at the foot of my bed, leaning forward as if waiting for the time to pounce, and even in the darkest nights – where the moon tickles only a hint of silver in to the room – I can see a sheen glimmer on the wet, black hair, and just a flash of a pale, tortured face; anguished eyes dark as grief. Then I panic in to full lucidity, and, before me... nothing.

My host town is much quieter than it ever has been. The days are sometimes as quiet as the nights. Most shops are closed. It's as if the planet is working in a conspiracy to keep me trapped in with my fear manifested – slowly devolving and pruning this place to leave it as lonely and abandoned as *there*.

The hiking with Nishimoto has stopped for the time being. He claims it's because of the virus, but, I know that's an excuse. And, I tried to clear my own thoughts, take myself on walks to the nearby mountains which are junior in their difficulty, but behind every tree, I see those faces from the village. Amidst the rustling leaves, and contrastingly chirpy birdsong, I hear faint whines, hollow moans, gulping breaths. And in the distance. Always in the distance. The same figure from my apartment.

And, as I typed those words, I shivered. An army of goose pimples stormed across my body, ready for battle, because I know deep down that the only way I can fix this erratic disposition, to offer this madness some respite, is to return. It's the last thing I want to do, but the urge is starting to sear at such an extent that it feels like my insides are on fire. I know I need to. Maybe.

But first, I want to try telling it first. Perhaps I just need to put in to words the anxiety, and let it drift off on to the eyes of other, impartial people who can tell me I'm being crazy and

returning to a town that shocked and snapped my reality to such an extent is nothing short of sheer lunacy. Please.

For now, let me explain what I saw when trying to enter *Inunaki Mura*, the abandoned howling village of rural Japan.

Nishimoto and I sat for a while, taking in the blockage of the tunnel. It really was a mess, and clearly a common spot for people to want to mark their presence. The reaching wall of which the tunnel was bore through was clearly left to disrepair. Leaves and vines trickled down it, whilst roots burst through here and there in bunched verdant blooms. At one point in its history, it may have been grey, but now a fuzz of dark forest moss had clawed across the veneer, in large patches, whilst typhoons and storm had weathered the rest, bringing great weeping droops of discolouration.

The graffiti was so thick that near completely, each individual addition camouflaged another, so that just a messy scrawl of differing colours fought for precedence. Mostly, it was just a clear moment of random Japanese, and even a few English phrases. But, the weather was already working on eroding and effacing their presence, as if even the elements wished to mute this town's cursed history. It seemed Nishimoto could make little sense of most of it, and of course, I could make less.

He procured two little foiled sandwiches, and bade me eat one of them. I was ravenous at the sight of it, so almost inhaled it before we decided to go on ahead.

We deliberated, individually mostly but with a few muttered interactions, as we ate. To get through to the village path, we could either hike around the current course we were on, in where we would have to carry on until we found a cutting, and struggle to slip through there before we found ourselves on the other side of the tunnel... or we can go through it.

We excitedly, and foolishly decided to go through.

Washing the sandwiches down with some water – clear and crisp as crystal - we made toward the piles of stones blocking off the tunnel's entrance. They only piled so high, but it was easy to slip through at the top, where the pinnacle of the arch peeked above, shadowy and menacing.

I tried to peer through with the safety of an obstacle between, knowing that during its construction, this tunnel caved in and stole the life of the workers within. Just there. A meter away. Those very workers are fabled to roam within, clawing at any souls who wish to traipse through and steal their lives, too.

Or even in the more grim realms of reality, knowing that a group of teens murdered an innocent man here in the not-too-distant past. Brutally beat and stabbed him, before burning the body (they were caught and convicted for the heinous acts)... I started thinking that maybe this was enough. The sight, and the bragging rights of- but it was too late.

Nishimoto had cupped his hands together, interlacing the fingers and nodding for me to stand on them for a boost up. With a stifled groan, I threw my bag atop the blockage, reached my foot up to the aged man's hands and jumped to reach the top. He seemed to support my weight with ease; I was infinitely impressed. I scaled it easily enough as the uneven stacks presented more than enough nooks and ledges for me to claim purchase on, but once at the top, I *refused* to look at the tunnel side until he joined.

He passed me his bag which I placed to the side, then held my hand down for him to grip. He was light enough for me to be able to assist in the ascent, but he still had to use his spare hand to find purchase here and there, as well as a few choice phrases – most I didn't need to understand to get the gist of it - before he joined me. He was grinning as he crawled next to me, and then, together, we turned to look in to the darkness.

Some daylight seeped through, of course, and disclosed the secrets of yet more scrawled graffiti that seemed to steal every inch of the wall like some bizarre mural of thrill seekers, threats, signatures, and surprisingly, lovers. It was odd to think that two people sharing lives would want to visit such a place, let alone slip here and mark their time. But, it oddly comforted me. This wasn't some stupid idea, regardless of the uneasiness demanding my thought's attention. This was a common place for the unconventional tourist.

The floor was a massed tangle of rubbish, chairs, beer cans, and other, more uncouth leavings. There was no visible floor beneath the detritus, no visible wall behind the scratchings. It was almost as if the tunnel no longer existed.

I started, suddenly, as a beam of light speared ahead of us, offering a little more insight in to what was within. Nishimoto had procured a torch from one of his many pockets, and allowed it to sniff ahead of us like an excited puppy, or a pawn willing to pour forth recklessly. It shimmered on the reflective rappers, revealing more and more weeds that were somehow thriving here without sunlight. It scratched across the wall, giving attention to the omnipresent markings; different alphabets, different languages, all scribbled with only a smattering of sense.

It was bizarre to think, that within here- where we were looking right now- deaths, murder. With each end blocked off, it gave an odd feeling of a desecrated and dilapidated mausoleum, and I suddenly felt an overwhelming urge to retreat, clamber down and rush back to his car. But instead, I leant forward rooted and mesmerised by the charged energy within.

I assumed he was just looking about, but it seemed as if he was checking for something, because he gave me a quiet, "Okay, we go," before shuffling his body around so his stomach was on the flat of the mossy blocks, then shimmied beneath the small gap, letting his legs dangle in to the darkness, and then with a careful feeling in the void, dropped to the ground.

There was a muffled thud that scuttled up the blocks and scurried past me, wanting no business of the man who authored them.

Anxious, stressed, but trying to tell myself the feelings were unjustified, or just imagination running wild, I followed.

As soon as I stepped foot on the crunching and rustling floor, it felt as if the world changed. The sunlight that slipped through from the outside didn't seem to exist within. It was as if with us, twilight had broken in to the tunnel, and the only light we could rely on was that manufactured of Nishimoto's torch. The other end of the tunnel was clear in sight, perhaps about a thirty-to-forty second walk were it not for the traveller's obstacles beneath us – it too was blocked up, but for sure we could slip through it. It would just be a tighter fit.

I was shivering already, trying to think back about all the mountains we'd hiked in the past, and how those were technically more treacherous than this – the only difference was the place's background, and I was plying that to every thought.

I positioned myself slightly behind him, and then brought my phone out in order to light my own path. A fuzz of dust swirled and whooshed, dazzled by the light. Each step seemed to disturb its peppered cascade, causing it to whizz as a flurry of bright specks in protest. It was almost as thick with dust as the walls were with etchings and the floor was with rubbish, so I brought my arm to my mouth, ensuring I couldn't inhale much.

As Nishimoto waded through carefully, his light mostly caressing the floor as he bulled a path through, I took to trying to make sense of any of the scribbles. Most of them were names from what I could see, somewhat preserved due to lack of rainfall but still hardly clear. Others, random images of characters shouting, smiling, winking – standard. A few random phrases in English that I could read, which I assume were mistranslations, such as "IT IS SEEN", or "HATE IS MINE".

Each footstep we took was echoed, the thud itself as well as the crunch and rustle. For every step we took, it sounded as if a thousand phantoms were racing across every surface of the old, forgotten walls. The sights this tunnel must have seen. Murders, deaths, visitors, lovers – for what was recorded, a thousand unknown things will have happened here, and there we were, wading our way through the rubbish with no protection.

Then, as we reached about halfway through, I could make out a huge piece of contrived work that had been infected and invaded by myriad lesser drawings.

I paused for a moment, trying to make out the bigger image. Feeling like some lowly version of an archaeologist, trying to piece together the hieroglyphics in a sealed tomb. The entire image was framed by a waving, yet spiky orange outline – which I quickly discerned to be a static blaze. But I couldn't exactly see what was the original victim or object subjected to the sketched scorching was. It could have been a few of the works within; a leg there, a cartoon here, an angelic wing sprouting from some bizarre spider thing; twisted and elongated but with the face of a fanged woman.

And then, in the midst, I could see a face staring out from the mess of it all. Like a stalker, peering through a lattice of dusky leaves, completely hidden in one sense, but now I could decipher its shape, it seemed to be all I could see – everything else sunk in to the backdrops, and left just this one single image. Something about it seemed so visceral, real, soulful-

Then the eyes closed.

I screamed and fell back, feeling a jagged assault of garbage stab at me in the frantic opportunity. Nishimoto was gushing a stream of Japanese, sounding panicked, desperate, and anxious all in one. He hooked his hands beneath my armpits, similar to with the deer, and heaved me up to standing as I was trying to explain that the face- the face *right the-*

It was lost again.

What was just a moment ago, so near, so clear, so real as if someone was standing before me, now had retreated back in to the cloak of shadows that the tunnel and mess offered. "Sore! Sore, uh... atama!" I forced through in a panic, *There! There a head!* not knowing how to explain there was a face staring from the wall. But he just gazed from me to the wall puzzled.

All of a sudden, I could feel an icy chill within, permeating from the walls. It was stealing through, pervasive, emanating, ruthless. A mist began to swish, so thick that the beams of light were mere gestures, nothing more. Nothing more.

Suddenly, the overwhelming sense of another's presence began to thunder about the tunnel. It was silent, but for the sound of the forest without, but still, I could hear everything as if two separate worlds were co-existing in terrible disharmony. Whines, cries for help in Japanese – some in English- muffled screams, throaty, primal roars galloping over helpless sobs of despair.

My mind conjured the vision of the woman in the lake again; the pale face, the drenched hair... she looked frantic, angry and-

Nishimoto's hand clutched at my wrist, and he began to yank me backward. He was shouting, I was shouting, the very maw of hell we seemed to have stumbled in to was replying in kind, with countless voices and a furore of chaotic anguish. "Please!" could be heard, drowning helplessly amidst the other calls.

Then, I felt a rush of icy cold water stream in, as Nishimoto and I both were knocked back by it. I hit the ground hard again, feeling an armoury of jags like before take their bite at the victim, but Nishimoto's hand fumbled about and pulled me back up.

I noticed it was bone dry- as was I. But that wave came in from nowhere with such a force... We felt it.

I was crying. Sobbing. He was yelling, perhaps prayers, perhaps curses, perhaps orders, but I couldn't understand. I just followed where the hand pulled me. Hopeless and lacking direction or sense. Until, the mist seemed to loosen in catharsis of its outbreak- but I wished it hadn't. As behind us, a fire bloomed in to crackling, roaring fury – loud enough to sear and dwarf all the other noises that boomed a cacophony in to the damned tunnel. The sudden illumination devoured every inch of the darkened tunnel, blasting an overload of horrors that I couldn't focus on.

Because, from that white-hot blaze, a figure emerged – black as coal, with a nimbus of unfurling steam, curling and rising in a hypnotic fashion. Each one singed orange by the heat behind them. I watched in panicked awe as, from this figure, they hissed upward until hitting the vandalised ceiling and fizzled like a snuffed dream.

The figure took a painful, unsteady, shambling step forward, and I heard a chorus of cracking and scratching from the flaked skin peeling and falling to the floor. I was frozen, even with Nishimoto pulling me, I couldn't move. I wanted to. I needed to, but every ounce of me wanting to leave wasn't listening. I just stared back.

The veins of the burnt silhouette glowed with cinders, like a river network of lava, breaking off in jolts and re-joining, a new step caused them to glow as white-orange as the fire behind it, then settle back to a dim glow with a hiss. A horrid, hallowed, raspy voice broke from a mouth of embers, followed by a puff of blackened smoke – though, what it said, was beyond me.

Almost immediately, a rush of clattering began to approach at a rapid speed, as from the sprawling below, a huddle of crooked, mangled, and rotten hands sprung from beneath, gripping blindly at nothingness before slipping below the illuminated mass – which now I saw consisted wholly of bodies – and then spearing back up once more. Closer, and closer they got, which was the jolt of rushing reality I needed to finally find my feet. I moved, feeling the heat of the flames, hearing the hiss of the steam, the call of his hollow voice, the sudden, squelched thrust of reaching hands chasing my fear from behind me.

The tunnel seemed to stretch out, impossibly far, as if the walls zoomed in to a horizonless distance, but I couldn't hold back. I ran, and ran, and ran, ignoring the consistency of what I was trodding on. It felt as if I had been running for hours, refusing to turn back, refusing to see if Nishimoto was behind me since I started my flight, until, finally I ran full force in to the blockage we climbed to get in the tunnel.

I screamed from the pit of my stomach and terror as I felt hands grasp at my shoulder, but I heard Nishimoto's voice instantly after, trying to throw me up before him, and with panicked effort, I scrambled, through stinging tears, and a rapid, stabbing heart, up via whatever I could grab – not caring that the edges were cutting in to my flesh, and seeming to burn with a heart of rage.

I'm ashamed to admit I didn't even wait to see if he was coming, I didn't even offer a hand to pull him up. I rolled straight off, feeling a frigid chill in contrast to the furnace within, and slammed with a heavy impact on to the cold floor.

The wind was knocked out of me, and every fibre of my being – mental and physical – was begging for rest, for tenderness and nurturing. I heard his grunts above me, and with herculean effort, struggled up to standing.

He made it, too. Nishimoto. Looking panicked and confused, horrified and bewildered, bedraggled and exhausted. But, as I turned to bid him to run, return, I noticed he was staring ahead, mouth open in a face stricken with horror and awe.

I followed his line of sight, to see we hadn't retraced our steps.

We somehow made it to the other side.

The night was black as ink, though, it was early morning when we entered the tunnel.

Stars were but a memory of bright, speckled hope.

But, before us, a swarm of trees stood stolid and tall – almost impossibly thick and impenetrable... were it not for a clear cobbled path, littered on either side with the most ornate and beautiful guardian statues I have seen thus far. Each of them a Lion Dog, with magnificent manes, so beautifully and deftly crafted that it was a wonder they didn't dance in the persistent gusts. They sat, tall, proud, immense. A procession of them faced on another across the path, equidistant, winding off in to the darkness of the vast foliage.

In each of their mouths, dangled a paper lantern, all glowing their soothing, calming orange that seemed to soothe the anxiety and ordeal from our souls.

Without a word to one another, we started on the path, knowing that it would lead us, both of us, to *it*, the village, *Inunaki Mura*.