



Fudō Myōō, Utigawa Kunisada, 1852

Into the Fire

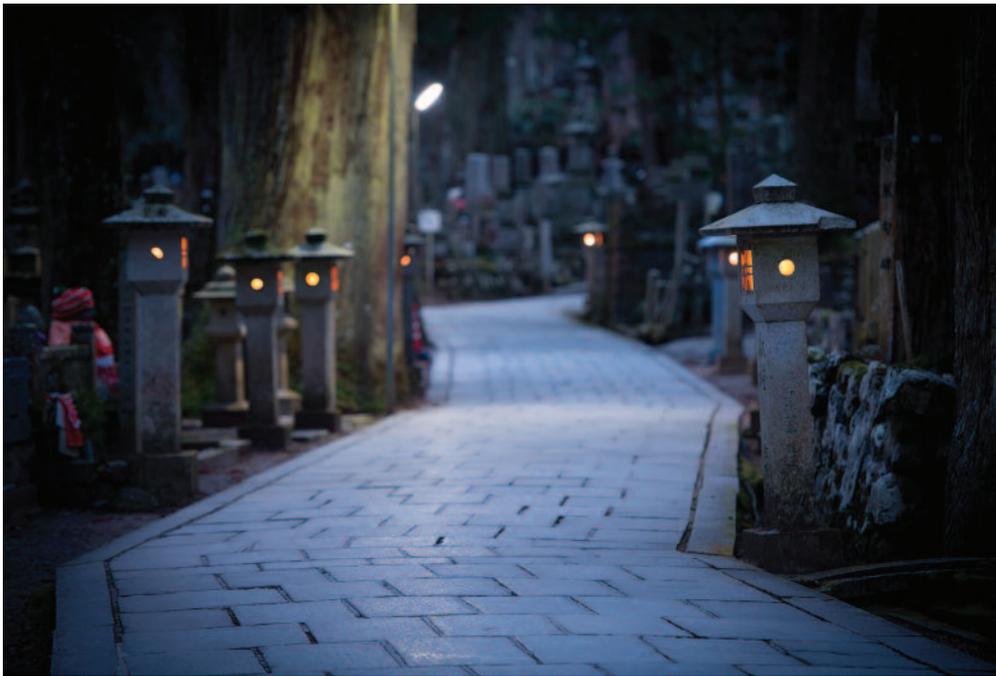
Barbara Straus Lodge

Seeking to heal her son and herself, she encounters the angry god of Fire

I’VE FINALLY ARRIVED AT MY DESTINATION—sacred Mount Koya, rich with possibility and shrouded in thousands of years of mystery. Nestled within the eight peaks of Japan’s Kii Mountain Range, Koyasan is said to resemble, from above, the blessed center of a lotus flower. While I didn’t journey here on foot with a walking stick and conical hat like many traditional pilgrims do, I did make each of my seven connections from Kyoto and got here in time for dinner.

I’ve come from California hoping to learn something or feel something or hear something that will heal him. Me. Him.

My twenty-year-old son is a drug addict. He’s lost many friends to overdose. He’s overdosed himself. While I’ve been told by one too many professionals that I’m powerless over his choices and need to let go, maternal instinct demands that I hold on as tightly as possible. I’ve tried everything on the spectrum between punishment and indulgence. I’ve stood at attention, arms outstretched ready to catch him. I’ve stayed one step ahead by studying his tone and facial expression, deciphering what he’s thinking or taking or thinking about taking—yet still, he uses drugs.



Mount Koya, Okunion cemetery, 2013

And my muscles are failing. And I'm losing my grip. And I don't have a life. And I'm scared all the time.

So here I am; either running away from, or towards, some kind of truth.

Not coincidentally, the type of Buddhism practiced here is called Shingon, which literally means "true word." According to Shingon doctrine Buddha nature exists in everything and gaining enlightenment in this lifetime is inherently possible. The good news is I'm not even after Enlightenment with a capital "E," I just want to be able to relax my shoulders, unclench my teeth, and figure out how I can help my son. My-self. My son. I'm not entirely sure who needs the help right now.

Within seconds of entering the temple lodging, something thick and hard, like a low hanging branch of a tree, *slams* into my forehead. The room starts spinning, I see black spots on the beige walls, and streaks of neon

blues and greens shoot by from all directions.

Could this be enlightenment? Already??

Beware of low ceiling beams, the travel book had warned.

I check in, eat a light vegetarian dinner, and go to bed before 9:00 p.m. as tomorrow is the 6:00 a.m. mandatory prayer service.

At 5:56 a.m. a crashing cymbal jolts me from a deep sleep; I must have forgotten to set my alarm. Frantic that I'll be late (but grateful I woke up at all after last night's concussion), I hurriedly dress in the clothing provided by our hosts. As I'm nearly six feet tall, my "long" pants flood at mid-calf and the wrap shirt doesn't completely wrap. I put on a tank top lest these celibate holy men catch a glimpse of my bra, and stuff my size-12 feet into the size-5 slippers. I'm not feeling completely confident as I slide the *shōji* open with a crash, assuming it's fifty pounds heavier than its actual featherweight.

*The air becomes so thick with molten tar
and unanswerable questions
that I think I might suffocate.*

I'm worried about being an obnoxious, clumsy American. I'm worried about missing mandatory Morning Prayer. I'm worried about my son. I'm worried about everything.

I smile self-consciously at the silent monks who direct me down a tangle of halls, past gardens, libraries, and ornate mini-shrines leading into the main temple.

These young men look to be in their early twenties, like my son. Their years-long journey to priesthood involves grueling training, extreme asceticism, daily prostrations, sleep deprivation, and sixteen-hour days of uninterrupted concentration.

Meditations under icy waterfalls, isolation, severe rules and regulations mark their difficult lives. Do their mothers struggle with letting *them* go? These men will spend decades learning complex rituals which summon rain, improve harvests, exorcise demons, avert natural disasters, heal the sick, and even protect the state.

I just want my son to get sober.

I take a wrong turn into a business office where a hefty monk, the actual shape of a Buddha statue, sits on the floor behind a cluttered desk speaking to a group of saffron-robed monks. They look at me and stop talking. This sect of Buddhism is the most secretive in the world, with its doctrines passed down orally and never recorded on paper. I fear I might've walked in on something I shouldn't have and quickly back out,

bowing *sorrysorrysorry*, and shuffle to the temple.

The ceremony is starting and I take an end seat on a flimsy plastic chair pressing my extra-large prayer beads into the palm of my hand, like everyone else. I bought them for the trip and don't know how to use them but take comfort in their representing the "shoulds" of this place. My Jewish ancestors won't mind.

I've no idea what to expect when a half-dozen monks start chanting in a slow steady hum. Drumming and cymbals join the syncopation, all intensifying in volume, awakening my sleepy cells. The breadth of such sounds can't be born from a human's voice, only a human's depths. If I'd not seen the source, I'd have thought the chanting was that of five-thousand men.

The crashing, the humming, the vibrations all become the pulse of this place—beating into me, pressing my body onto the seat and pulling my spine straight up towards the sky. I've practiced Vipassana meditation for years, although lately I've been too busy to get quiet and look inside. But today, in this sacred space, I remember to calm my mind, focus on my breath, and watch my thoughts float by as if they're puffy white clouds. The clouds I see, however, are dark and mysterious and bash me and thrash me and yank me into their thunderous centers where fear is all there is. *Will he overdose again? What can I do differently? What did I miss? Was it the divorce? The move?* The air

*Layers upon layers of truth, of presence,
of what is, wrap around me.
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The chanting subdues and my skin is still buzzing as I open my eyes to another monk, presumably a head priest, stepping before the congregation. He speaks Japanese for a solid ten minutes in what could be a sermon, or the funny story of the American woman who smashed her head on a ceiling beam last night. I'm in a foreign film without subtitles.

We are motioned to stand and walk single file towards a small altar. I watch other guests watch each other and I do what they do and kneel without knowing why. I pray to God or Buddha or whoever's listening that he or she help me help my son see the truth—that he's going to die if he doesn't stop using. I officially refuse to let go so please teach me what I can do instead. I sprinkle a pinch of sand onto the incense embers and watch the thread of prayer rise and disappear into thin air.

Next we walk in line past a fire pit where a monk dressed in robes of gold places kindling onto glowing embers. Within seconds, hissing and crackling flames extend over five feet high—and the chanting and clanging and molten-heart-beating begins anew and engulfs the room, my body, my mind.

I later learn that we are participating in Goma, the Shingon daily fire ritual, practiced for over 3,600 years. It's

performed in reverence to the angry Buddhist God of fire, Fudō Myōō, and is said to have a powerful cleansing effect on both mind and body, incinerating negative energies, destroying false perceptions, and opening the eyes and heart to the truth of *what is*.

An older monk with a stern face beckons the line forward. The chanting intensifies, injecting itself into my veins.

I watch the congregant in front of me step onto a pedestal and bow to a monk holding a large *Vajra*—a golden object that resembles a wrench with curved dagger-like prongs on either end. It symbolizes both a thunderbolt and a diamond; destructive and indestructible. The man turns his back and the monk emits a high-pitched, ear-piercing yelp while lashing the *Vajra* towards the crown of the congregant's head. The monk halts the weapon a millimeter away from the man's skull and whips it back in slow motion with a scorching shriek, as if he's drawing white hot threads of negativity out of the man's head and burning his hands in the process.

It's my turn. I'm scared. I force a friendly smile at the monk holding the *Vajra*. He doesn't smile back. When I turn around, I'm inches away from an enormous statue of Fudō Myōō, whose mouth is grimacing and giant round face is contorting with hot rage. He looks straight at and into me with such intensity that I must look away. Brass flames shoot out from behind and around him and he's encircled by an

altar of candles. Millions of golden embers float slow motion in the air between us. Everything I think I know about my son and my self, about power and powerlessness, contracts into this pinpoint of time when I hear the crack of the monk's invisible whip, his shrill cry, and the gust of the *Vajra* rushing towards the back of my head. I fear my skull will split open from the hurtling energy.

I look up at Fudō Myōō, timidly at first, frightened to meet his bulging eyes and angry grimace. But this time, as if he's grabbed me by the shoulders, I'm unable to look away. And then I swear to God, lightning tears through my head and I can't see but I know the monk is drawing out delusions like strands of flaming yarn—*His addiction is my fault, I've done something terribly wrong, my life depends upon saving his*—up and then out into rarified air.

And then, before I can regain my balance, it's over.

The monk taps my back, turns me around, and gestures me towards the exit. I can't feel my legs as I bow a deep reverential bow and walk past shelves upon shelves of urns containing the ashes of monks who've lived, and died, on this mountain.

Instead of heading towards the scents of breakfast, I walk outside into the morning towards a grove of ancient cedar trees. Wind cools my skin and I sit on a weathered bench. The wood is hard beneath me. Closing my eyes, I breathe in, breathe out. Waves rise and fall. Breathe in. Breathe out. My mind quiets. As if a switch flips and turns on the sound, currents of birdsongs, whispering leaves, faraway chanting flow into my ears. Layers upon layers of truth, of presence, of what is, wrap around me. This is my son's fight, not mine.

I feel loss, tinged with hope, falling back into greater arms. The music of Mount Koya lifts me up like a prayer. |

