



The Adventurer

Joseph M. Lipner

EXCEPT FOR THIS CONVERSATION, WHICH I HAD traveled across the planet to avoid, the morning was perfect: eerily quiet, with a wet-towel sort of humidity that soaked your shirt before you walked three steps, and an ocean the temperature of bath water. I sat in a lawn chair in the shallows of the Philippine Sea. A few feet from me the water turned a lurid green that made it look like a tropical postcard or a cesspool, take your pick. I held today's issue of the Pacific Daily News, with its front page stories of traffic accidents and petty crime in Guam, and a thermos of orange juice spiked with just enough gin to lubricate the beginning of my day. Really, a tiny amount.

The man came sloshing towards me through the tepid water. He wore a soiled white shirt and a jockey cap that threatened to fall apart. He had a long beard, matted, impressive. His long loose pants soaked up the ocean. I knew before he said a word that he was crazy.

He cupped his hands in the universal sign for, Hey, I'm begging. "Hungry," he said.

"I'm wearing a bathing suit," I said. "I have no money."

I didn't tell him that I wouldn't give him a penny even if I had it but that was the bitter truth. He stood there patiently. He pointed towards my thermos and licked his scary, cracked lips.

"Look, you don't want this," I said.

But he grabbed it from me with a starving man's strength. He drank it down, the orange liquid spilling onto his beard. There was no way he could miss the tang of the alcohol, but he drained it. Dirt streaked his face and an unpleasant odor emanated from him, sweat and urine, that took me back to the Brooklyn street corners of my childhood, and not in a good way.

He handed the thermos back to me. "Tzedakah," he said.

"Excuse me?" A seed of panic started to blossom in my gut.

"Rabba," he said, making me wonder if he could talk at all. "Hanna."

The fact that he was talking gibberish calmed me. I thought for a second that he had spoken the Hebrew word for charity, but he was just babbling.

"I have to go to work," I said. I wondered where he came from. I knew everyone on the island, more or less, and I had never seen him before. Beyond him I saw the dock with its pleasure and fishing boats and the harbor, where wrecks of World War II battleships and kamikaze airplanes were visible from the surface of the still-clear water. Farther beyond that, close to the horizon but still plainly visible, floated two enormous modern battleships, each longer than twenty city blocks, keeping a safe but companionable distance from one another.

"Work," I said again, loudly and slowly, as I folded up my lawn chair. "Goodbye."

I looked back once as I trudged towards shore. He stood still, a statue in the ocean, staring at me without emotion or anger.

After work I stopped by the Island Beach and Country Club for the sunset. I stopped there most nights to mingle with Saipan's beautiful people who are, to speak bluntly, not all that beautiful. The club is the island's most civilized place. It has tennis courts and a swimming pool and a water course for local kids, not to mention an expatriate air, with a crowd that's part local Chomorro but more Anglo, Japanese, Filipino. Anyone with a little bit of money goes there to convince themselves that the world has not forgotten them, and to forget that, though the island is part of the U.S. in some ill-recognized way, most Americans cannot find it on a map. After eight years, I can't decide whether Saipan is beautiful or butt-ugly. It's both, I guess, with squalid towns without proper sewage, and a single rutted road that runs around the island, and wild dogs that scavenge for food, and overbuilt hotels for Japanese golfers. But the cliffs from which the Japanese civilians threw themselves when the Allied troops approached are lovely and for pure drama you cannot beat those stretches of shoreline where waves annihilate themselves against boulders and rock outcroppings. From the lawn of the Island Beach and Country Club, as you watch the sun setting over the neighboring island of Tinian where the Enola Gay took flight for its mission

to eradicate Hiroshima, and the water and sky start turning pink and azure, the place is nothing less than paradise.

I sat alone with my vodka and cranberry juice and a plate of shrimp-filled spring rolls and watched the colors change. I waved to a man who made or lost a fortune importing computer parts, who was drinking with a Midwestern businessman or investor, all blonde hair and sunburn. I nodded at the islands' federal judge who lived down the street from me on a curving road that butted up against the jungle.

Bill Johnston appeared and shook my hand. Uninvited, he sat down. "Counselor," he said. "Planning any trips? Thailand? Australia?"

"I'm traveling to India next week," I said. I gave Daniel the headwaiter the signal for another plate of spring rolls and another drink. "Business."

"You'd think that someone who loved to travel so much would live closer to somewhere."

"We're close to everywhere," I said.

"We're not near New York." I sensed anti-Semitism lurking behind Johnston's comment but I could not care less.

"Ready for tomorrow?" I asked.

"We should settle," he said for the thousandth time.

I held out my hand like a traffic cop. "Not going to happen. Mr. Sangmoro wants his trial." Johnston and I were on opposite sides of a lawsuit, set for trial at 1:30 the following afternoon, about the ownership of a condominium development on the rustic island of Rota. Johnston's client had defrauded mine to steal title to the land just before development started. As Bill launched into a speech about the benefits of settlement (the same speech he used in every case, because the man was scared to death of going to trial) I caught the eye of Andra Trujillo, married to a man who owned a huge sugar cane plantation in Guam. She had two stunningly beautiful children, a boy and a girl, both almond-eyed, dark skinned, thin-featured, black haired. They were skipping rocks into the ocean but when their mother came up to me they ran over too and stole the rest of my spring rolls. The little girl gave me a kiss before running back to the water.

"Allen," said Andra, kissing me on the cheek. "Do you know that man?"

The beggar from this morning stood right near Andra's children in sharp outline against the water that was turning silvery in the fading daylight. He was arguing with Daniel and just when I could start to hear his raised

voice he turned around and pointed at me.

They walked over to my table. "He says he knows you," said Daniel, who liked his club to run smoothly and made this sound like an accusation.

"I don't know him," I said.

The man looked stricken. "You do." He spoke with an accent, Persian or Israeli, something unpleasant. "You do know me."

"I'm sorry," I said in a whisper. People were starting to stare.

"Rabba. Bar. Bar. Hanna," he said, each word louder than the last.

"Please —"

"Rabba Bar Bar Hanna!" he shouted.

"Mr. Bernstein, I can have him removed." Daniel said. Andra and Bill could both hardly keep themselves from laughing.

"Can I give you a lift somewhere?" I asked very quietly.

The beggar started to cry. He grabbed my sleeve. "Thank you."

I could not get out of there quickly enough, leaving my second drink gathering tantalizing beads of moisture on the tabletop. In the parking lot, I noticed my new friend was wearing different clothes than this morning: a T-shirt and khaki pants two sizes too big for him. He smelled better. Like salt water and sun.

I opened the mud-splattered door of my pickup truck for him. "Where can I drop you off?"

"Your house. Soon it will be dark."

"Who are you?"

Now he looked at me like I was the crazy one. "Rabba Bar Bar Hanna."

We were driving through the clatter of buildings of Garapan, past the storefronts whose electric red sign flashed with admirable clarity, "Porn Shop," and I continued traveling home along the only road on the island, past palm trees and blood red water. I wasn't afraid of him but did want to make sure that he was not who he said he was. Which was a little crazy — a man does not live nearly two thousand years and then show up in the Northern Mariana Islands begging for money. I had seen enough scams to recognize them flashing in the same bright letters as that sign at the porn shop. Still, I needed to check that the fairytales I once believed were not true.

I live at the end of a dirt road and the back of my house faces a jungle. I can literally feel myself at the far end of the planet here, lost, unfindable. I am so far away from rabbis and synagogues, from bustling Jewish thoroughfares

with their kosher butchers and book stores, from brilliant and neurotic friends and family, from community politics and constant anxiety for the state of the State of Israel, from all the chatter about Jews and Judaism that used to occupy my brain. I'm far from God, in whom I don't believe, but who chased me fifteen thousand miles before I could escape Him.

I have two Labradors and the house smells of dog and mildew — the moisture never leaves the air here in the tropics. There are snakes and wild dogs out in the jungle, and bullets and unexploded grenades that are the remnants of hand-to-hand World War II battles, and my back porch faces the vine-covered trees and the narrow trail to the ocean. I sat my guest at my back porch table and made myself look at him instead of practicing the studied indifference you usually use to ignore beggars.

I'm far from God,
in whom I don't believe,
but who chased me
fifteen thousand miles
before I could escape Him.

He was a good-looking man under that unkempt beard. His eyes were green and they observed everything. And he sniffed, like my dogs sniffed, moving his head around to catch the different fragrances, dust, blossom, mildew.

"Can I get you something to eat?" I asked. "I don't keep kosher."

"Bread," he said.

I brought him half a loaf of bread with butter, fruits, vegetables, and a glass of milk, all of which was kosher, more or less. His manners weren't bad, but I could see him restraining himself from inhaling the food and drink. When the plate was empty, he started popping betel nuts in his mouth, chewing that disgusting, compelling narcotic fruit and spitting the large smooth pits onto his plate.

"Who are you really?" I asked after he spit out his third pit.

"Rabba Bar Bar Hanna. I still travel."

"You are not Rabba Bar Bar Hanna," I said.

Somewhere in my attic I actually had a box of Talmud tractates stored away, moldering in the too-wet air, but I did not need them. My near photographic memory, a kind of mental illness, pulled up the column of Aramaic words even though I had spent years trying to unlearn them and the rest of my early Jewish studies. Tractate Baba Batra page 74: the amazing

travels of Rabba Bar Bar Hanna, Sinbad of the Jewish people, telling seafaring stories to the ancient Babylonian rabbis, bringing the scent of cardamom and salt air with him into the study halls of Jewish law. He reported on all sorts of wonders: a frog larger than a fort, the point of contact between heaven and earth where one could observe the rotation of the heavenly spheres, the fissure that had swallowed Korah and his band of rebels after the Exodus from Egypt, a fissure from which their voices rose in eternal confession: "Moses is true and his teachings are true and we are the liars." Once Rabba Bar Bar Hanna's ship docked on an island covered with grass and trees. When he and his companions lit a fire, the island started to move and sank beneath the sea. It turned out to be, not an island at all, but a fish so enormous and unmoving that it appeared to be dry land. Had a ship not been nearby, Rabba Bar Bar Hanna would have drowned.

"All Rabbas are asses," I said in Aramaic. The Talmud recorded this comment by some of his colleagues at the end of its recitation of his fabulous stories.

"...and all Bar Bar Hannas are fools," he said, also in Aramaic, finishing the quote.

I was surprised. A swindler or a madman, maybe, but a learned one.

"Rabba Bar Bar Hanna died nearly two thousand years ago."

"Why do you say that?"

"Everyone dies," I said.

"Not me." He leaned back from the empty table. "I once saved the life of an Ethiopian prince, a descendant of Solomon and Sheba, and he rewarded me with the nectar of a flower that grew on top of a hillside where he was protecting and hiding the ark of the covenant. The nectar granted me eternal life."

"Where is he now, the Ethiopian prince?" I asked, moving softly into my most innocuous cross-examination style. "Why didn't he live forever?"

"Such a potion could be used once," he said. "And he was a very loyal friend."

"Your English is good," I observed.

"I pick up languages quickly," he said. "People speak English all over the world. Do you speak Chomorro?"

"A little."

"I have started to learn. And I speak French and Spanish."

"Hebrew?" I asked. "Aramaic?"

"Of course."

"How did you find me?"

"I can smell a Jew anywhere in the world," he said. "I need money to get me off this island."

"Well, you smelled the wrong Jew," I said. I looked for a saltine cracker, a Saipan non-perishable delicacy, to pop into my mouth, but he had wiped the table clean of food. "I don't give charity."

"You also do not ordinarily let strangers sleep in your house," he said. "Yet here I am."

"I never said you could sleep over."

"You have more milk?" he asked "Goat's milk, maybe?"

"No, I don't have goat milk." I went inside to the refrigerator and brought back another bottle of milk. Cow's milk.

"You have a boat." He was slapping at mosquitoes. We were both slapping at mosquitoes — it was that part of the evening.

"Yes." Most of the Anglos on the island have a boat or access to one.

"Docked on the west side of this island?"

"Yes."

"Tomorrow," he said with the voice of a carnival hypnotist, "the tides will be right, and an island that reveals itself once a year will rise — very briefly — above the level of the sea. North of Saipan but south of Farallon de Medinilla. There refugees from the tribe of Benjamin, exiled after the destruction of the first Temple, built a village, which they called the World's Fourth Corner, and they built a Temple on the model of the one in Jerusalem. They are long gone, and the sea swallowed up their island a century after they arrived but the ruins of their Temple remain."

"That's nice. You can have the couch tonight."

"Tomorrow, you and I should travel to this island."

"A very tempting offer. I need to be in court tomorrow afternoon for a trial. You know what a trial is?"

"We will leave early. We have a once-every-year opportunity."

"And I'm not getting in a boat with you. No offense but I don't know you."

"You do," he said.

That night I could not sleep. I squirmed uncomfortably on top of my

thin sheets. I could not get the image out of my mind of me and my mysterious guest traveling silently across blue water in search of the vanishing island. I had loved those stories as a kid: Sinbad, and Jason and the Argonauts, and the tales of Jules Verne and Herman Melville. And the tales of Rabba Bar Bar Hanna too. These were all the stories that had probably sent me sliding across the blue Pacific to find a refuge on the forgotten island of Saipan.

I fell asleep for a couple of hours before dawn. When I woke it was still dark and I heard him dragging my Styrofoam cooler around my kitchen. He had already packed every item of kosher or quasi-kosher food that was in my refrigerator and filled up a large jug with water. He had made coffee and had also bathed, it seemed, and taken a pair of my baggy shorts and a large T-shirt. He looked good, less like a crazed Talmudic traveler with everlasting life, more like a well-kempt beach bum.

I should have been angry at him for ignoring my answer of the night before. Instead, I hoisted the food and water onto the back of my truck. "I have to be back by 11:00," I said. I did not need to prepare any more for this trial, but I did need time to change into my court clothes and compose myself. He nodded, and I let the dogs out into the jungle, and we set out.

The island was weird this early in the morning, eerie-silent, nothing but wind and waves. No one else was around as we transferred the provisions to my boat. It was a modest once-white boat, the cheapest I could find with both a motor and sails. Big enough for four people. I used it for fishing or to travel to the neighboring islands when my business called for it. Without hesitation, Rabba Bar Bar Hanna unfurled the

sail and grabbed the rudder. There was a good wind blowing north northwest, and before long Saipan had disappeared behind us, and the water turned a crazy blue, the sort of blue you might see in the celestial palace if you were having one of those visions. I saw a dolphin jump out of the water and then disappear. A million whitecaps played on the surface of the otherwise quiet sea. Very quiet. We did not say a word to each other.

A million whitecaps
played on the surface
of the otherwise quiet sea.

Very quiet.

We did not say a word
to each other.

After an hour, the heat had baked the air, the wood of the boat, the deep water, so that the spray was welcome when it came lightly over the railing and doused my skin and clothing. I slathered sun block on the exposed areas of my skin and my guest did the same, but I still felt defenseless against the warming sun. I fell asleep, lulled into the calm that eluded me at night. When I woke my visitor was still intent at the sails, still heading north. I looked at my watch.

"It's past 11:00," I said. "We're supposed to be back in Saipan."

"We are almost there," he said. "We cannot turn back."

Logic told me that if we did not turn back now there was little chance of my making the court date. Here were my choices: fulfilling my professional duties and avoiding a claim of malpractice, on the one hand, or continuing to search for a non-existent island. I lied to myself and said, another minute, another minute, I will be able to return in time. So another hour passed, and we were still sailing on the empty sea. My world had retreated to this tiny boat and to this one man about whom I knew nothing except the not-very-comforting information that he considered himself a long-dead Talmudic traveler.

At one thirty, when far to the south across the water Bill Johnston was sitting in court tapping his pen, when my client, Mr. Sangmoro, was pacing the hall, when the judge was fuming at my disappearance and considering sanctions, when the court clerk was calling my number but getting an endless series of rings, when the dogs were deep in the jungle making mischief, I asked, "Do you know where you're going?"

"We are close," Rabba Bar Bar Hanna said. "We will find it soon."

I was not anxious. Water calmed me. I had left the world behind for Saipan, and now I had left Saipan behind for this boat, and I felt nothing but affection for this charlatan or madman with his schizophrenic charm and unlikely story. The crisis of my own creation in that courtroom was far away and I would deal with it when and if we returned to Saipan. Although Rabba Bar Bar Hanna sat silent now searching the horizon, his previous, brazen, near-whining demands for money hung in the space between us and I played with the idea of handing him a stack of bills totaling five thousand dollars and sending him off for more adventures, all assuming we made it back to Saipan alive. Jews should keep wandering the globe doing astonishing things. I wanted no part of it, but I'm happy they're out there, you know, making trouble.

He barely moved his head but he might well have shouted through a megaphone. The contrast between his lack of motion for the past hour and the slight inclination of his head was remarkable. To the west, near the horizon, something stood out above the water. It could have been a whale, or a small fishing boat, but I think it was an island, an atoll, at least a group of rocks breaking through the surface of the water, maybe more. Rabba Bar Bar Hanna made the slightest adjustment in the rudder and the wind filled the sails and we headed west. Soon, I started to think or started to hope, we could land on that impossible island.



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