

UPRIVER

By Gerard Sarnat

WHY WE LIKE IT: *This is a writer who always hits the mark and his creative nonfiction is the kind of exemplary 'gonzo' journalism Hunter S. Thompson could get jealous about. Sophistication 101. Read it and weep. Then read it and learn. Quote: From nowhere, a gibberish of Wounded Knee, Slippery Rock, and Captain Ahab jangle my head. Good job, Sarnat, no point fooling around if there's any possibility he didn't understand or wouldn't be deterred by the international ramifications, the big hurt that would descend if he ate an American. (Spacing is author's own.)*

Upriver

Last night's festivities behind, it's last-chance-for-adventure time before we head back home.

Wolfing down blood oranges and poached eggs with the family, I head out alone east along the northern shore. Kadavu musk-parrots shriek "KANDAVU!" -- probably the reason natives add an "n" when pronouncing the island's name. Marveling over exquisitely spiraled yellow, pink and white scallops, conches, whelks and starfish; the world is my oyster.

I follow the creek inland. About a hundred yards upstream, zany Dr. Seuss-ish skipper fish, heads up like alert water skiers, surf the surface on their flipperlike tails. Another fifty Darwinian yards inland, they've increased from small guppies to medium trout. An owlish turtle's head bobs up from its shell like Captain Nemo's periscope. *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* was one of my favorite kids' movies. Exquisite slithery slivery fluorescent geckos and red smushy newts slide underfoot.

Sand gives way to rock as I ascend southeast. The lush green canopy shelters the cut-glass crystal-clear blue lagoon from the rain. Black and white millipedes inch along the ground. Monarchs surge overhead, reflexively triggering my humming, “Zippity do dah, Zippity eah. My oh my what a wonderful day. Plenty of sunshine heading my way. Zippity do dah, zippity eah.” I flashback to childhood Ur-memories of the amazing butterflies in the animated feature film *Uncle Remus*.

Leaving the rainforest’s cover, it’s drizzling pleasantly. Slipping on the sharp boulders, I break off a sturdy tree branch to better support cartilage-less knees. My internal soundtrack flips to Doc in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, “Hi ho, hi ho, it’s off to work we go.”

It’s a regular Disney moment out here.

Thud! My glasses and I fall. Although body parts seem no worse off than before, a palm and elbow sting and drip blood. Feeling a bit like Piggy in *Lord of the Flies*, I fumble around for my glasses. Luckily, my searching fingers find them unbroken. Reaching over, I’m startled by two bare brown feet a foot in front of me. Looking up, I gradually see raggedy filthy shorts, a broad tattooed chest, a tangle of disheveled hair on a young man with nose bones holding a wood pitchfork with three sharp metals blades. This guy looks just like the hundred-plus year-old cannibal photos in the museum. What’s going on? Who is this dude?

Be real, Ger, no time to panic, learn from past mistakes when you’ve overreacted. Within a millisecond, my spinning mind retreats into a flood of loony-in-retrospect family jokes I’m the butt of, stories I’m constantly kidded about.

On safari in Kenya, a horde of tall thin red-robed spear-bearing blue-black Masai tribesmen wade across a river toward us: I yell for my wife and two small kids to get behind me, I’ll protect you; the warriors cross over... smiling, sheepishly offering to sell trinkets, trade a spear for Eli’s camera.

Stripping to undies, jumping into the Pacific to rescue a capsized middle-aged lady...who turned out to be a most ungrateful master kayaker.

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In Belize, the brute jumping out from nowhere toward my younger daughter, three hours into what felt like a forced-march through torrential mud looking for Indian ruins...to give her an umbrella.

Alone with my older daughter deep in northwest Thailand's rice paddies, hours after leaving the Lanu Red's village, a man runs at her wielding what looked like a club...a generous, if blottoed, Lanu White extending us his opium pipe, inviting us -- *Come Over to My House, Come Over to Play* -- to stare at a receptionless blank TV screen.

So, cool it, man. I gather myself, rise to stand tall (all five feet five inches of me), and summon a hearty *Bula! Bula!* Unlike every other Fijian, who's out-smiled and out-*Bula Naka'd* me back, this fellow just stares, suspicious, clearly not happy to see me, arms on spear, holding his ground, not moving on. I hold my walking stick firmly in front of me.

Although last night I'd dismissed Susan's news as so much gossip, I reconsider. The owner of the adjacent resort recently fell to his death from a cliff. He catered to the high-end \$3000 a night likes of Madonna, offering cement bunker security and isolation instead of our up-close-and-personal bourgeois experience. Rumors have it that he abused the Fijian staff, which may have had something to do with his accident.

Now I'm totally focused, no yucks or campy drama-king inner giggles about what a cool story this will make. I pause to look briefly into his ghostly eyes. Then, careful not to touch, I slowly walk around him as calmly and confidently as I can muster. Not looking back, I proceed up toward the suddenly threatening misty peaks. From nowhere, a gibberish of Wounded Knee, Slippery Rock, and Captain Ahab jangle my head. Good job, Sarnat, no point fooling around if there's any possibility he didn't understand or wouldn't be deterred by the international ramifications, the big hurt that would descend if he ate an American.

Not hearing rustling or steps behind me, the self-recriminations and second-guessing start. My god, what if you've violated his tribe's territorial boundary? You idiot, he was just as shocked as you, he's probably hightailing it back to the village where you attended church yesterday. You ridiculous wimp! 4

Nevertheless, relieved to be safe, my adrenalized fight-or-flight rush turns romantic, into a Wordsworthian *Intimations of Immortality* natural high. A half-eaten honeycomb and an intact tiny blue egg generate sublime epiphanies. I go forward. The ecstasy proves short-lived.

Way too full of myself, not concentrating on my next step, I collapse into a mud hole. Skittish crookedly black crabs scoot from their holes under my feet. Delusions of grandeur instantly shift back to dread. Pulling myself up, tubers become snakes entwining my ankles. Twigs become giant walking stick insects snatch at me. Low-slung gnarly black-hooped mangrove trellises, strangely rooted in the sand at both ends, come alive to entangle me in the nasties. My sweat and blood attract every kind of bug. Sheets of rain bite into my skin. I retreat under a tree -- until I see smell lightening char. The rocks are impossibly slick. The path is sometimes underwater, sometimes washed out.

With that, I'm done. No trouble convincing myself that I've got a good excuse for the family, that after two hours in the elements, they're all worrying about my whereabouts. We've got a plane to catch. Time to turn around, retrace my steps down.

He's nowhere in sight as I return to the point of our brief encounter. The storm rat-a-tats the now black lagoon like a machine gun. A black and tan water snake -- the tan camouflaged by the sandy bottom making it look like a string of undulating black diamonds -- swims toward my open sandal. Making it back to the open-spaced beach, I stumble on sharp shells, cutting my big toe...

Now showered and comfy, I wonder what the hell actually happened.

I'll bet if the kids had been in my shoes, they'd have made friends and invited him back for tea right now.

Although sympathetic, my family obviously doesn't know what to make of my story. In any case, enough is enough for me at sixty. Back in time for a quick nap and snack.

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Before lunch, I pull *Papagena's* Canadian manager aside. "Don, I have no idea what really occurred, but you should know about it. I'd appreciate your being discrete if you make inquiries..."

Don said he'd never heard another like this before, that all tourist-Fijian meetings have been friendly. "Every once in a while, the villagers chase off a hunter spotted poaching game on Naikorokoro land, but it's never happened on the resort side."

After lunch, Mele comes over, formally but sheepishly. "I apologize to you and your family." That was all. He left without further explanation.

Then Samson sidles over, putting his arm around me. A huge affable brown New Zealand Maori who's been the divemaster here for six years, he often serves an intermediary role between the Fijians and the Westerners. He's the only person who eats at both the staff and the guest tables. "My little white man, I heard you had a scare today. You encountered Mele's brother. He's the village idiot, an idler, no good. Never works, a longhaired hippy. He was sneaking off to spearfish in the ocean when you came upon him. At times he gets stoned into oblivion, so bad he can barely talk or walk. But you needn't worry, he's meek and mild and wouldn't hurt a fly."

With all remnants of a Kurtzian mystery dispelled, I join the family on the *Nunu Moi* to motorboat to the local airport, then puddle jump to Nadi before jetting home into our routine California lives. But before we hop on, our hosts, the sweetest people in the world, place *leis* around our necks and hold us around our waists as we sing our last four-part harmonies together. After kisses and hugs, we jump on board, wave, and toss our flowers back toward shore, leaving our hearts in Kadavu, our intention to return.

Au sa liu mada, see you later, not goodbye.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *I thrive on adventure travel, and have indulged such with each of my three kids when young, both individually and as a family. Upriver was conceived when visiting our son, an entomologist “ant man” doing fieldwork in Fiji.* 6

BIO: *Gerard Sarnat is a physician who's built and staffed current homeless and ex-prisoner clinics as well as a Stanford professor and healthcare CEO. Currently Gerry is devoting energy/ resources to deal with global warming. Sarnat won the Poetry in the Arts First Place Award plus the Dorfman Prize, and has been nominated for a handful of recent Pushcarts plus Best of the Net Awards. Gerry is widely published in academic-related journals (University Chicago, Stanford, Oberlin, Brown, Columbia, Harvard, Pomona, Johns Hopkins, Wesleyan, University of San Francisco) plus national (Gargoyle, Main Street Rag, New Delta Review, MiPOesias, American Journal Of Poetry, Poetry Quarterly, Free State Review, Poetry Circle, Poets And War, Cliterature, Qommunicate, Texas Review, Brooklyn Review, San Francisco Magazine, The Los Angeles Review and The New York Times) and international publications including Review Berlin. He's authored the collections Homeless Chronicles (2010), Disputes (2012), 17s (2014), Melting the Ice King (2016). Gerry's been married since 1969 with three kids, five grandsons with a sixth incubating.*