

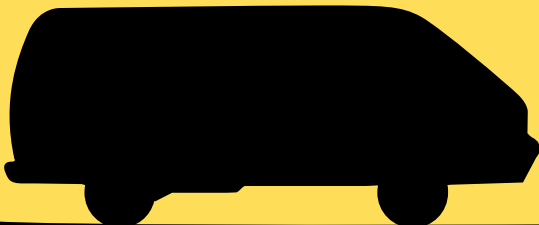


Write
Regina Glej

the Ghosts

of

Tinian



テナン島の幽霊

The Ghosts of Tinian

by Regina Glej

One day the airfields will be gone. Nature claims them back piece-by-piece. Grass has long conquered the cracks between the concrete plates. Bushes and trees close in from the sides. Bees have infested the old command center of which only a skeleton still stands.

In the never-ending oppressive heat, things rot away so quickly. Next to the merciless sun, rain and wind wash over the airstrips, quite a number of typhoons per year, too. I wonder how long it will take until everything will be gone.

The two pits where the bombs had been stored are covered with glass. From afar, they look like innocent greenhouses. Close up, they reveal the bombs' concrete pits and a few black and white photos, on long tripods, that fade more and more every day under the beating sun. They show the bombs and the soldiers who have mounted them onto the B-29s. Most of the soldiers are bare-chested because of the unbearable heat. I am convinced they didn't know they were dealing with atom bombs or even if they had, they had no idea that something called radiation could kill them.

Looking at these half-naked men always gave me a weird feeling in my stomach. Of course, a layer of cloth couldn't have protected them from radiation, but the sight of their naked chests made them look even more vulnerable.

One of the locals, who put the photos onto the tripods, didn't know what he was seeing there: one photo is upside down. The glass house is locked, I don't have the key or know who has it and thus cannot correct the mistake.

More than 2000 times I have told busloads of tourists the story of the two B-29s called "Enola Gay" and "Bockscar". How they left from the tiny Pacific island of Tinian, five miles south of Saipan, 1500 miles south of Japan, to drop Little Boy and Fat Man onto Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

#

Sometimes I think I see something in the foliage next to the airstrips, ghosts of the past, maybe, and every time that happens I scold myself for

my foolishness. There are no ghosts--it's the heat. It puts you in a weird kind of trance, makes you slow and dull and tired, always tired.

The air-conditioning of my old minibus cannot cope with the heat anymore. It manages, if one stays on board and drives for a while, but I have to load and unload the tourists all the time. The bus stands idle in the sun, while I show them around the glass houses. When we get back on board, the minibus has become an oven of more than forty degrees Celsius.

Even if I have no tourists, I feel drawn to the airfields. The solitude there: the air heavy with the scent of jungle and history, wobbling over the concrete in flaring heat, the spooky atmosphere. All this radiates a strange allure that I do not fully understand.

The airfields in the rain: how the water rushes over the ground and down the glass houses' windowpanes. The sound of the heavy rain drops on the concrete and glass, the trees whipping in the wind. The whole place so sad and desolate and lost, that I need no horror films to entertain me.

Around May, the region is dead calm with not even a tiny bit of moving air. The heat stands solid like a rock; you hit walls whenever you move. The sun beats down on you like a hammer; you never stop to sweat. The concrete slabs of the airfields reflect the heat; it's like walking inside purgatory.

It was on a day like this, when no tourists had come, and yet I had mounted my minibus and driven to the airfields. I parked the bus right in the middle of them and sat under a tree on a patch of more or less maintained green, between the two glass houses for Fat Man and Little Boy.

I munched a sandwich and drank a mango juice, thinned down with water to the level of sweetness I prefer.

I have often been tempted to try chewing betel nut, like many of the locals do, but I dread the effect. Probably I would really see ghosts under the drug's influence; besides, it makes your gums orange and heightens the threat of tongue cancer significantly. Sometimes I wonder, though, what it would feel like to be on the drug; whether it would make the heat bearable or worse.

“So hot today, isn’t it?”

I shrieked, whirled around and stared in shock at the man who had spoken. I had absolutely not expected to encounter anyone here. I had seen no car, far and wide, except for my own and I hadn’t heard him approach.

The man stood behind me, smiled at me, sat down in the grass a meter and a half away from me and looked in the direction of my minibus. He was Caucasian, blond, brown eyes, good-looking, early thirties and tanned by the sun. He had to live out here; he wasn’t pale enough to be a tourist. He wore khaki pants and an olive green shirt, vaguely military looking, but with no insignia on it.

“Whew, you scared the hell out of me,” I said.

I wasn’t really afraid though. The islanders were usually nice to each other. They had to be; there were too few of us to be otherwise. You have to behave in a small community where everyone knows everybody.

“Sorry, didn’t mean to. John Parker,” he said and stretched his hand out.

“Nice to meet you. Nanae Takahashi. Call me Nana.”

We shook hands.

“You live here? I don’t think I ever saw you before,” I said.

“Yeah, sort of...”

His answer didn’t worry me either. There were many drop-outs around; I was one of them.

“How long have you lived here?” he asked.

“Seven years.”

“Wow.”

“Yeah.”

“Tourist bus?” he asked and pointed at my vehicle.

“Yes.”

“Where are they?”

“None today.”

“And yet you come out here?”

“Yeah, I guess everyone who lives here by choice is a bit crazy.”

He chuckled at that and nodded.

“Why do you come out here?” he asked.

“I don’t know...This is a weird place. Sixty years ago it buzzed with activity--a Japanese colony planting sugar cane, soldiers, war, US troops taking the island and now they’re all gone...for such a long time already. Most of the world gets more and more crowded--here, it’s the other way round. I...when I sit here by myself, I can feel the presence of the people who are gone...sort of. You probably think I’m pretty weird now,” I chuckled, embarrassed.

“No, not at all,” he said and smiled. He had a very nice smile.

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

“I’m a pilot.”

Strange, I had thought I knew all the pilots on the island.

“What airline?”

“Military.”

“Oh...” I still didn’t understand, but then drew a conclusion.

“Stationed in Guam?”

He looked a bit irritated, but soon said, “yes.”

“Why are you taking holidays here? Don’t tell me, you can’t get enough of tropical islands,” I said and laughed.

He smiled shyly. “I wanted something nice and quiet.”

“Well, that’s what you get on Tinian,” I said, with a cynical grin.

“Staying at the ‘Royal’?”

“Excuse me?”

“The hotel.”

“Oh, oh yes...”

The Royal is the only big hotel on the island. Built by Chinese investors, a palace in the middle of nowhere, with a giant pool, a black marble entrance hall and a casino where mostly Asians lose their money. One or the other of them has jumped off the Suicide Cliff back on Saipan, convinced death was better than bankruptcy.

I took a measure of him; maybe he was on betel nut. He gave that absentminded impression. His clothes looked pretty old, out of fashion and shabby. Strange, if he was a military pilot, he couldn’t be poor.

“You come here every day?” he asked.

“More or less.”

“Why did you leave Japan?”

“I wanted something nice and quiet,” I answered with a grin.

He chuckled. “You want to go back one day?”

“I don’t know yet, maybe, but not yet.”

“You don’t get bored?”

“No, not really. There are new tourists almost every day. People on the island are nice. I still like it here. If you don’t, you cannot stay. There is no reason to...It’s an easy, simple life--in Japan things are much more complicated.”

“I bet they are.”

I had long finished my lunch and it was getting too hot, even in the shade.

“Well. I think I’ll head back, it’s just too hot,” I said and got up.

“Where’s your car?”

“Oh, over there.”

He pointed behind him.

“Can’t be, there’s only jungle there.”

“Um, I meant there.”

He pointed to his left.

I looked skeptically at him. “Are you alright? Shall I take you into town?”

“No, no, I’m perfectly fine, no need to worry, thank you.” He smiled winningly at me.

I shrugged, assuming the guy was just high.

“Well, it’s been nice meeting you, John, enjoy your vacation.”

“I will, thank you...one second, let me give you something, Nana,” he said, got up and fumbled in his pants’ pocket.

I waited and looked expectantly at him. Now what? He took out an incredibly old looking small bast fiber pouch and offered it to me.

“What’s that?”

“You have to try.”

“Oh, thanks, but I don’t do betel nut.”

“It’s not betel nut...I’ve had this long enough, it should go to someone else.”

“What is it?”

I didn’t take the thing; a long time ago my mother had taught me not to

accept anything from strangers. He smiled secretively and reached out to take my hand. He put the pouch into it and closed my fingers gently around it. He had nice hands, long fingers, like my last boy friend, an American pilot at “Freedom Air”. He had left me for a Chinese girl on Saipan and for a while I had seriously considered sabotaging his Cessna: let him plunge into the straight between Saipan and Tinian and drown.

“I found it here on the island. It’s sort of a lucky charm.”

“Well, thanks, but...”

“Take care, Nana,” he said and smiled at me.

Now that I had it, I wanted to open the pouch.

“Look at it later, when you’re at home. It’s nothing bad, don’t worry.”

I shouldn’t have taken anything from him at all, or at least looked into the pouch, but I didn’t. His smile was too winning and it was too hot to argue. I had seen quite a bunch of people in my life, met new ones in form of tourists almost every day and was confident that I had acquired quite an amount of knowledge about human nature. Though my last boy friend had made me doubt that talent. But John was not a bad person. I could feel that, or at least thought I could. He looked so lost and sad. Maybe he was a little nuts, but so were many of the islanders and I liked them that way.

I shrugged my shoulders again, thanked him and we parted. I stepped out of the tree’s shadow into the glaring heat and walked to my minibus, which would have reached sauna temperature now and the seat cover would be so hot that I almost wouldn’t be able to sit on it.

I got into the bus that faced the tree under which I had eaten lunch, and froze. John Parker was gone. As if the very earth had swallowed him.

Irritated, I looked around. No sign of him.

I noticed how terribly hot it was inside the bus. I put the bast fiber pouch he had given me onto the passenger’s seat and started the engine.

Didn’t he know how dangerous it was to walk in the jungle? There are duds literally everywhere and go a few meters in and you need a machete to get through the foliage.

I made a 180-degree turn with my bus, studying the edge of the jungle. No sign of him.

I drove to the neighboring airfield strip and looked for his car but there

was none. I drove around the entire premises, but found no other car.

Finally, the bus's air conditioning started to work a tiny bit and cooled the sweat on my forehead. I got an extra portion of chill from the spooky feeling that John Parker was gone.

I looked at the pouch on the seat next to me, but I couldn't open it while driving. The road was too bad; I needed both hands on the wheel. There was no car anywhere for miles. Not a living soul.

I giggled to myself. Maybe he had been a ghost. But, usually you don't shake hands with ghosts and receive pouches from them, do you?

The jungle suddenly looked menacing and eerie. I drove by the bee infested command center and stared into it, no one there--of course not, there were thousands of bees inside.

His clothes, they had looked so old-fashioned. No, no, no, I couldn't start believing in ghosts now. I just couldn't!

Unsettled, I drove back home along the lonely road that enthusiastic US troops had named "Broadway" sixty years ago, past a rusty WW II tank.

#

At home, oddly excited, I finally opened the bast fiber pouch, which clearly was ages old. The curiosity for the contents of the pouch had gradually fired up, fueled by having been unable to open it, though it had been so close on my passenger's seat, and also by John's mysterious disappearance.

In wonder, I took out a necklace made of shark's teeth, lined up neatly on an ancient cord whose material I couldn't identify. I stared at the thing and was sure that the necklace had seen at least a hundred years. The shark's teeth were all yellowed. The necklace looked shabby, ugly even, but its apparent age gave it a precious and special touch. It wasn't tourist junk, but made the impression as if it might have belonged to a shaman or medicine man of some Pacific tribe. The thing deeply impressed me. Where had John got it?

Without trying it on, I stored it in its pouch again--I couldn't keep it. This thing was precious. I couldn't accept such a gift from a total stranger who, on top of everything, had looked

pretty poor.

I went straight to the Royal. Mike, the concierge on the afternoon shift, was a friend of mine.

“Why are you looking for this guy, Nana-chan? Haven’t you had enough of unfaithful Americans?” Mike teased me.

I grinned at him. “It’s not what you think, Mike, I just need to find him.”

Chuckling, and not believing one word, Mike checked his computer. “Sorry, but we don’t have a John Parker staying with us.”

I wasn’t even surprised.

Mike grinned mischievously. “And another American who will one day drown in the straight between Saipan and Tinian...”

I laughed and boxed his arm. “We’ll see. Thanks, Mike and see you later.”

#

Of course, I couldn’t get John out of my head now. Mysteries cry to be solved. I had to find this guy and return the necklace to him.

I took it out of its pouch again in the evening and stared at it; spread it on my kitchen table. I couldn’t explain why, but the thing had a presence, as if it emitted strange vibes.

I shook my head. That was ridiculous; I neither believed in ghosts nor in magic, did I? But so many things had been strange about John Parker: the way he had reacted to certain questions. Whether he stayed at the Royal, where he was stationed. How he had appeared and disappeared, no other car around. His clothes that looked like fashions from sixty years ago.

Damn, I had to stop believing in supernatural stuff. I didn’t put on the necklace but returned it to its pouch and hid it in a drawer of my nightstand.

To be able to sleep, I persuaded myself that he was a soldier stationed in Guam, who had been high on betel nut.

I had a very disturbing nightmare that night, of an army of zombies out at the airfields, who loaded Fat Man and Little Boy onto planes from hell.

John was among them. He was the only one still alive and beautiful, and he directed the creatures from hell.

#

The next day I had tourists again. Anxiously, I drove them out to the airfields and did the tour. I caught myself staring restlessly at the grass below the tree where I had eaten my lunch the day before. I hoped to see him again but, of course, there was no sign of John Parker.

As usual, my bus was the only vehicle around. As usual, there wasn't a living soul anywhere, except for the tourists and myself. I caught myself studying the men in the photos in the two glass houses. None of them looked like him but it was hard to tell, the photo quality being so poor.

I knew that as soon as I told one of the locals about John Parker and the necklace they would go crazy with speculations--they were a superstitious folk. I considered asking Mike to help me find John without mentioning the necklace, but discarded the idea. I knew him, he was too talkative. If I told him anything more than I already had, the whole island would know half a day later. And people would draw the same conclusion as Mike: "Oh, another white dude who has dumped Nana..."

#

A week later, my tour was canceled due to bad weather. The dead calm period had finally come to an end and it rained, highly welcomed rain. I felt an incredible urge to drive out to the airfields, nevertheless, drawn by the cooling rain and the spooky atmosphere. I also couldn't forget John Parker and had the vague hope of meeting him there again if I was alone. Because of that, I took the necklace with me.

It was wonderfully cool compared to the oven-like temperatures before and finally wind blew the wall of air away that had been hanging over the island like a heavy veil.

I left the bus, with the necklace in my pants' pocket, and walked to the

tree where I had met John Parker. The memory of our encounter was incredibly intense and vivid. He had to be here somewhere. Well, if he was a ghost, maybe he was.

Could I call the ghost with the necklace? Was that why he had given it to me? Again, I scolded myself for my superstition. Nevertheless, standing under the tree in the cooling rain, I took out the pouch, got out the necklace and put it over my head and around my neck for the first time.

I gasped, almost screamed.

The world changed, the rain stopped, it suddenly got dark and bright again within a few moments. The trees around me wobbled in the wind, like in the fast forward motion of a movie.

Hastily I tore the necklace from my neck and the wobbling stopped.

Frightened, I whirled around. The sun was shining, the jungle steamed with evaporating moisture. My bus still stood there on the airfield. The weather was completely different, only a few clouds in the sky. The weather on Tinian could change quickly, but not that quickly. And it had been dark in between, for a moment.

Shivering, I stared at the necklace in my hand.

The thing had clearly done something and it felt like it had sped up time, which I found impossible to believe. It also implied John had come from the past. I couldn't accept that.

Hastily, I returned to my bus and rode back home, just in time to pick up tourists. I had missed a whole day!

My neighbors had been very worried and had almost called the police when I hadn't come home the night before. I told them I had been stuck in the mud with my bus out at the airfields and hurried to do the tour for the tourists. It took a lot of self-discipline to give them an adequate tour in my bedazzled state.

In the evening, I sat at my kitchen table and stared at the necklace I had spread out on it.

I tried to be logical about it. If this thing sped up time, then John Parker had come from the past. If this crazy idea was true, then he still had to be around. He would have no money, no valid papers, no means to leave the island.

I had to find him.

With the urge to find him so strong I soon did, the island was small after all. He was working as a gardener at the Royal now.

I didn't want to confront him at his workplace with my outrageous assumption of when he had been born, so I spied on him for the time being. He stayed by himself, avoided people, took his lunch alone. I found out that he had rented a room at a dismal and cheap inn where globetrotters and locals sometimes stayed.

The inn had a tiny restaurant with homemade food. He ate there every evening. One evening I gathered courage, entered and sat down in front of him, while he ate his dinner of fried rice and a beer. I had the impression that he was very surprised to see me.

"Hi, John."

"Oh, hi Nana, it's Sam now."

"What?"

"Sam Baker, to be safe."

I eyed him skeptically. "We need to talk, Sam."

"I'm surprised you're still here," he said.

"Well..."

I didn't know what to say to that. Had he thought that I would take the necklace and go into the future for a few hundred years? I almost had to chuckle.

"Let's take a walk after dinner," he suggested.

I nodded and watched him eat.

"Working at the Royal now?"

"Yes, I was lucky."

He finished eating quickly and we walked down the lonely road, away from the inn to the beach.

"Did you try it?" he asked.

"Yes, I think I lost a day."

"You think?"

"I'm not sure."

"You did lose a day, or better to say you skipped it."

I stared at him sideways. "Are you telling me this necklace thing is a time machine?"

“I don’t know what it is, but I don’t think the term time machine applies. It speeds up time. You cannot go back, the one thing it does is to make time pass faster when you put it on.”

“When were you born?”

“What do you think?”

“Around 1910?”

“Pretty close, 19th of February 1912.”

I swallowed hard.

“How did you get the necklace?”

“There was a local guy who was pretty crazy, we thought. He didn’t speak a word of English but he always hung around the airfields. We tried to scare him away but he came back every day, as if he wasn’t afraid of machine guns. After a while we let him stay. He didn’t hinder our work and he was sort of nuts, or so we thought. Probably he had never seen airplanes or white people before, I don’t know. We made fun of him for a while, but then stopped even that and got used to his presence. I gave him a Coke and he was hilarious. Well, I guess for a guy from the fifteenth century or whatever, a Coke must have been an even bigger miracle than machines that can fly. To pay me back, I suppose, he gave me the pouch with the necklace. I put it on to do him a favor and time sped up. Like you, I tore it off my neck when I realized what it did. But, I reappeared in the middle of frantic bomb loading activity and startled a bunch of people. In their panic, they looked like they were about to shoot me, so I put the necklace back on.” He paused and took a deep breath.

“After a while the flow becomes steady and you can discern things. For years, there was nothing but jungle, absolutely nothing. I thought humanity had managed to kill itself. Then they turned the place into the memorial, but I didn’t dare to appear and frighten them to death. Finally, I saw your bus flashing by, so often, always the same bus and decided to stop...65 years...I...I still cannot believe it myself. I literally put on the necklace a few days ago in 1945. But I have to believe...the cars now, the color TVs, how people dress and behave, this computer thing, I don’t really understand what that is yet, all the facilities in the Royal, amazing...But...I lost everything, my past, my

family, my life, everything. I don't know what to do..."

Depressed, he looked at his shoes. He was wearing sneakers, jeans and a t-shirt now.

"That's an incredible story," I said. "And I bet a lot of historians would like to talk to you and you would become famous and scientists would like to analyze that necklace."

"I don't want that. If you want that, you can put it on and go a hundred years into the future. But I don't want any of this, at least not yet. I'm too confused and overwhelmed. I'm only happy that the war is over and that I can talk to a Japanese woman as if that was the most normal thing in the world. Heard Japan and the US are allies nowadays and we are friends with the Germans too and now the bad guys are something called terrorists...we didn't have that when I grew up. And I have no papers, nothing, I'm lucky I can earn a few dollars without them at the hotel. At first I thought they were paying me a fortune until I saw the prices in the stores. But I don't even know most of the products they have there. I have a hell of a lot to learn."

I nodded. For him the 21st century had to be a very strange place and time.

"Well, I could explain a few things to you."

"If you did that...I'd be very grateful."

"Sure, but only if you tell me about life in the 30s and 40s." I smiled encouragingly at him and he relaxed a little.

"I'll be happy to. Thank you, Nana."

"Don't mention it."

"I'd like to ask you one more thing."

"Sure."

"Please, let's keep it secret for now where, or better to say, when I come from."

"You have my word."

"Thank you."

He smiled a bit sheepishly.

#

We met every day. He was different from the men I had known so far. He was polite, had something knightly about him, which, needless to say, made him incredibly attractive. They were both Americans, but my last boy friend and John were like night and day. My former boy friend had been an adventurer, a good-for-nothing whose main goal was to enjoy himself. John had joined the army because he had honestly wanted to fight against evil. And he didn't look for fun but for love.

In the beginning, I had difficulty taking his talk about honor and love and all that seriously. It seemed so cheesy and kitschy. We modern people have lost something along the way, I believe, and John was just too good to be true for our world and time.

Finally, we made love at a lonely beach.

Afterwards, we lay in the warm sand and stared at the stars, arm in arm. "You are in pretty good shape for a ninety-six-year-old," I said.

He laughed out loud. "Thanks!"

I sighed comfortably.

"Will you stay with me now?" he asked.

"What do you mean, now?"

"As you might have noticed, I take things about love and honor pretty seriously." He teased back. "You have to marry me now and I won't let you use the necklace."

I sat up and stared at him. He grinned broadly but I could see in his eyes that he feared my response.

"You're proposing?"

"Yes."

"You're amazing."

"Thanks."

"The necklace...it's damn tempting to find out what the world will be like in fifty or a hundred years..."

"Nana, please...I..."

I put a finger over his mouth. "But I won't do it. I'd be stupid if I did...my answer is yes."

He smiled so happily that it hurt and he kissed me passionately.

"But...I can't have that thing around my house," I said.

"Then let's destroy it, throw it into the ocean at a deep spot, something

like that.”

“No, I think I have a better idea...There is so little magic left in our world, but this thing is magic, it’s sacred, holy. If we destroy it, we might draw the wrath of the gods that made it upon us.”

I paused and he didn’t laugh. I loved him for that.

“Let’s keep it in circulation,” I said.

“But to whom do we give it? And how do we avoid having someone trace the thing back to us?” he asked.

We thought about it for a while, decided on a wedding date and then the following concerning the necklace: I invented some story for why I didn’t want to mail the package with the necklace from Saipan and asked a friend of mine to mail it from Hawaii, where my friend had to go for business.

She did as she was told and sent the necklace from Hawaii, without a return address, to a museum in Tokyo with an anonymous note inside that I had printed: “It’s important that you put the necklace on for a minute”.

Greetings from the author:

It was a great experience for me to participate in the translation process of one of my short stories into Japanese. The more specific a writer is, the easier it is to translate what he/she wants to say into another language. However, even being precise bears pitfalls. What is precise in one language may not be precise in another due to cultural differences. The example that struck me most during the translation of “The Ghosts of Tinian” was the “purgatory”. There is none in non-Christian believes ? so how does one translate something that does not exist in the target language? It became “a hell” in Japanese, a hot one ? we got as close to “purgatory” as possible. This shows how difficult it can be to bridge the gap between languages and cultures. Compromises are unavoidable. They are one of the central aspects of the translation adventure.

I hope you’ll enjoy this little story about the “Ghosts of Tinian” in either the Japanese, or the English version, or both.

Comments about the translation etc. are always welcome. You can email me at iguanal4@hotmail.com

You can find more information about my publications under:

<http://www.juka-productions.com>

And last but not least, I am excited to announce that Dark Quest Books has just recently accepted my novella “Lord of Water” for publication.

Sincerely

Regina Gleil

The Ghosts of Tinian

テニアン島の幽霊

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