1

My country is shaped like a Y floating in the ocean. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say it looks like a dotted line in the shape of a Y, because on a map you can see nearly a hundred small islands scattered in a chain. My country is called **Vanuatu**, which means “the eternal land.”

I am **Ni-Vanuatu**, which means I was born a native of Vanuatu. My home is in the village of Fanla on Ambrym Island, a small village set some distance inland from the coast, high up on the slope of a mountain. Not many people live here, especially when compared with the capital city, Port Vila, which is full of white foreign tourists who like sunbathing on the beach, diving to see coral reefs, hiking,

playing golf, and enjoying the traditional culture of the Ni-Vanuatu.

Another group of hardier tourists enjoys climbing up to explore volcanoes on other islands. I suppose they are fascinated by the thrill of standing on the rim of a volcanic crater, peering down into a river of blazing red heat, waiting to see when the boiling liquid below will erupt and shoot up into the sky.

But for people who are born and live with volcanoes, like the Ni-Vanuatu, volcanoes are not exciting at all. They are a source of worry, because they can change our lives in an instant. When a volcano erupts violently, villagers must evacuate the area. If the eruption is milder, it may only scatter ash and injure several people. Ambrym, the island where I live, has two active volcanoes. The elders say that the last major eruption happened more than four years ago. After that, lava and ash were released, followed by acid rain. The water sources around the area turned blue and could not be used for drinking for many years.

Only once in a long while do tourists come to explore the volcanoes on my island. Perhaps it is because Ambrym still lives the way it did many decades ago. There is no modern

technology or convenient infrastructure, no luxurious hotels for tourists, only small bungalows. Most of the beaches on the island are black sand beaches, not fine white sand. But more importantly, there are rumors that Ambrym still preserves traditional customs and rituals so strongly that it has become a center of magic, spells, curses, and old powers, words that carry a depth and dread beyond ordinary understanding.

Bubu was one of the people said to possess that kind of magical power. The villagers often said that Bubu might even be the most powerful person on the island. Those who have power or know how to use magic and spells hold the status of village chiefs. They are called **custom chiefs**. Their duties are to uphold the rules and act as judges, mediating conflicts within the village and collecting fines from those who do wrong.

Each village may have several custom chiefs, but every one of them must be descended from former chiefs and must have passed through the proper grade taking ceremonies according to tradition. Bubu was the chief of Fanla village, and he held the rank of **Malmow**, the highest level.

I once dreamed that Bubu turned a lizard into a horse with a wave of a branch. When I told him about it, Bubu smiled and said he could only conjure smoke. Then he threw a coconut husk into the fire. In an instant, thick black smoke billowed up everywhere. That was the first time I learned how to make a smoky fire to drive away mosquitoes.

Bubu was not very tall compared with chiefs from other places. Even so, he was strong, though he was already well past sixty. Bubu's tight curls had turned almost entirely gray, just like the thick curly beard beneath his chin. Bubu was a man of few words. I rarely saw him laugh, only smile. Yet whether it was a small smile or a broad one, to me his smile always felt warm.

That was because Bubu had fierce eyes. There was also a small scar at the outer corner of his left eye, shaped like a Y. Whenever he stared at someone, that person always had to look away. Even the skin around Bubu's eyes looked like a shark's, still and frightening at the same time. Only Father dared to meet his eyes, and only Father dared to ask for Bubu's daughter's hand with as many as twelve pigs.

In our country, wealth is not measured by "how much you have," but by "how much you can give." The more one can

give to others, the wealthier one is considered. We also use pigs as a measure of wealth. When someone wants respect from the village, he must negotiate and give pigs to the chiefs and to others. When someone commits an offense, he must pay his fine in pigs. If someone wants to learn knowledge passed down through generations, he must pay for it with pigs. In the same way, Father had to give pigs to the bride's father to show that he had enough patience and diligence to care for many women.

It was not easy, but it was an old way of life.

Ambrym is famous for woodcarving. Father paid pigs as tuition and as permission to become a carver. Before he could begin learning how to carve wood into human faces or animal figures, such as pigs, fish, or parrots, he had to pay. Once he became skilled, he had to pay more pigs, along with several strings of shell money, in order to learn how to carve **tam-tams**, one of the best selling items for tourists.

A tam-tam is a long vertical drum made from breadfruit wood or another kind of wood. The trunk is hollowed out and a long slit is cut down the middle. When struck in rhythm for dancing, it produces a deep, resonant sound. People believe

that the finest tam-tams can call schools of fish to swim close to shore and move in time with the beat.

The top of a tam-tam is carved into human faces. It may have one face or many faces stacked one above another. Each carver is allowed to carve only the number of faces he has received permission for. Only high ranking chiefs can carve tam-tams with as many as six faces. Father is a chief too, but his rank is not yet high enough, so he is allowed to carve only three faces.

Every piece Father carves is delicate and sells well when sent to Port Vila. Before long, Father had saved enough money to buy a breeding sow. When it produced another litter of piglets, he gave some to Bubu as payment for various obligations.

Bubu could carve as well, though he did not do it seriously as a profession the way Father did. Most of the time, Father carved masks or pig shaped ornaments. Bubu's carvings, however, looked strange in a way I found fascinating, because some of Bubu's patterns had small tube like holes for eyes, almost like a person's.

Although the position of village chief is inherited through bloodlines, women have no right to become chiefs. Everyone therefore expects that one day I will become a chief. Whether I will become the highest chief like Bubu Chamalor is something only time will tell. First, I must raise pigs of my own to use as payment for the ceremonial rites. I must also prove to everyone that I have enough ability to take on the position. If by then I still cannot prove myself, the highest chiefship will pass to the next person, who might be Jo Michael.

Jo Michael was not Aunt Irene's biological child, but if we trace the family line, Jo Michael and I share the same great grandparent. That means he has the same right as I do to inherit the highest chiefship. Jo Michael's father was hit by a car and died before Jo Michael was born. The impact was so severe that his father never had the chance to see his son's face. His mother died not long after giving birth because she lost too much blood. Aunt Irene had been married for many years but had no children, so she took Jo Michael in and raised him.

According to Ni-Vanuatu custom, if a child's parents die, the child is not abandoned. We have no such thing as orphanages. The relatives of the child's parents immediately become the

child's guardians. In our language, we call this **wantok**, meaning family.

Jo Michael had trouble speaking from the time he was little. His words were unclear, as if a swarm of bees were stuck to his tongue. But I never felt that Jo Michael's speech was different from that of other children. Perhaps it was because we had grown up and played together for as long as I could remember. When he was small, the children in the village teased him, so he liked to follow me everywhere, as if using me as a shield. But now no one dares tease him anymore. Even though he is younger than me, he is tall, muscular, and built like an older boy.

Jo Michael also has an unbelievable talent. He can imitate the sounds of animals, all kinds of them. The cry of a boar in mating season, the call of an owl hunting at night, even the low growl of a mother cat guarding her kittens.

Aunt Irene often makes noise at him too, though hers is a loud scolding voice, especially when she lifts the lid of a pot and finds him picking at the sweet pieces inside or scraping up the tasty crust from the food. But once he has eaten, he always grins, as if nothing in the world could taste better than Aunt Irene's cooking.

Laplap is a local dish you can find almost anywhere in Vanuatu, but Mother says she makes the best laplap in the whole village. When she begins grating coconut into a large basin, I help prepare the earth oven and cut banana leaves for her. The pit is a large one, lined with banana leaves especially for cooking laplap. At the bottom, glowing hot volcanic stones wait in a layer of heat.

Mother pounds the sweet potatoes until they are smooth, then spreads them over the banana leaves. After that, she lays vegetables on top, followed by another layer of pork, fish, or chicken. She pours coconut milk over everything, wraps it tightly in several layers of banana leaves, then lowers it onto the hot stones in the pit. More banana leaves are placed over the opening.

By the time the outer leaves have turned brown, the meat inside is perfectly cooked and gives off a wonderful smell.

One New Year celebration, we competed to see who could eat the most of Mother's laplap. I managed four pieces. Jo Michael ate seven. The next day, he lay clutching his stomach, barely able to breathe, and had to ask for herbal medicine from Father's elder brother, an old man who held

the title of **kever**, a medicine man who knew how to prepare remedies and perform healing rituals for the sick.

After that day, Jo Michael and I followed Uncle Achin to learn about digging up the inner parts of roots, grinding certain seeds into powder, and extracting oil from various kinds of leaves. Uncle Achin liked how Jo Michael listened carefully and followed instructions perfectly. As for me, I often got tapped on the head with his crooked black walking stick made from vine, because I could never remember which wood was which. Uncle Achin would scold me and my mind would go blank, filled with only one thought: nothing will grow.

Jo Michael and I walked to school together every morning. I was a fifth grade student at the primary school in Wanan village, about twenty minutes away. It was the only French system school on Ambrym Island. There were more than a hundred students, and some of them walked in from nearby villages. The school taught grades one through six. After that, anyone who wanted to continue to secondary school had to go to another island.

Most students did not continue their studies, because just one term of secondary school cost several thousand vatu, which

was a great deal compared with the cost of living and the income of the islanders.

There are two kinds of schools in Vanuatu: English schools and French schools. Besides Bislama, which we use in everyday life and which is also an official language, English and French are also official languages. That does not even include the more than one hundred local languages spoken by the people of different islands.

My school taught English, which I thought was easy because it was close to the Bislama we used at home. Or, to be more accurate, Bislama was the language adapted from English. When you break down the English words, you can see it clearly. For example, **“Me wantem wota”** in Bislama corresponds to **“Me want water.”** And when we want to say we are very happy, in Bislama we say **“Mi glad tumas,”** which corresponds to **“Me glad too much,”** or **“I am very happy.”**

Mother always said it was a shame she had not continued studying through secondary school. She loved reading and learned quickly from books, but Bubu had not supported her education. Bubu did not understand why girls needed to study so much. A woman’s duties, according to him, were to plant

sweet potatoes, care for the pigs, weave baskets, and make laplap.

Whenever the subject of education came up, Bubu and Mother argued. In just over a year, I would finish primary school. Mother said she would make sure I continued to secondary school, while Bubu said he would teach me to fish better than anyone in the village. Mother said she would do everything she could to get me into university. Bubu said that if I stayed to help raise pigs, he would teach me how to cut a boar's tusks into a curve more beautiful than any pig's tusks on the island.

Bubu asked where Mother would find the money to pay the school fees. Mother had no answer for him then. We all knew that Father's income from selling tam-tams and woodcarvings would not be enough to send me to live on another island.

The person who openly supported me going to Port Vila was Father Pierre. Before this, Pierre had always said that people who read too much, like Mother, tended to become restless and distracted. But now he went around telling everyone that I should be sent to study in Port Vila, perhaps even all the way to university.

“Once he finishes his studies, he can find a good job there. If he has any money left, he can send some home.”

Aunt Irene probably meant well, but that sentence made everyone think I might never return to Ambrym. After that, Father Pierre always ended his praise of me by mentioning Jo Michael too, or by comparing the two of us.

For example, he would say, “Jo Michael is like a gift from God. Even if he has been farming since he was little, and even if he speaks differently from other people, he is more gifted than many of his brothers and sisters.”

Aunt Irene would take every chance to remind Bubu that Jo Michael was quick and clever, especially when he helped Uncle Achin prepare medicine. She believed Jo Michael was ready to learn higher rituals and magic. Bubu would only answer briefly, never truly arguing with her about the matter. He let Aunt Irene go on talking, while Mother paid little attention to it.

The next morning, Aunt Irene went around telling everyone about a frightening dream. She said that a demon with the head of a bird had appeared in it. After that, the subject of

spells and magic became something she brought up again and again, though Mother never raised the matter herself.