

Chapter 1: Life is Good

From my perch in the crown of our coconut palm, I look out over the entire world I know. With each swing of the machete, a ripe coconut hits the ground with a satisfying thud. I smile. Beneath my feet lies our vegetable patch, where taro and kumara are ripe for the harvest. Further down the mountain, the thatched roofs of our village are surrounded by the jungle, alive with birds and bats and myriads of creatures. And beyond the forest, out in the ocean, Uncle Toa and other fishermen are bobbing on the waves in their canoes, catching fish for our dinner.

The rainy season has started, as it always does, at the end of November, bringing with it regular downpours and higher temperatures. Right now, though, a light breeze dries the sweat on my neck. I would stay up here all day if Bumbu Joshua weren't waiting for me down in our vegetable patch.

Up here, so close to heaven, all my worries seem far away. Just this morning, my brother Dura snatched the last wing of the roasted fruit bat out of my hand and ate it. If he walked by right now, I might drop a coconut on him and pretend it was an accident.

Dura also keeps talking about the strangers on the island, the ones the adults speak about in hushed tones. Bumbu Joshua says we need to call on our ancestors to keep them away, and that they may destroy our island culture. I don't understand it; how can they change our people and our way of life? But I've seen them too... an unknown boat here, an unknown person there. Nothing good can come of it, they say.

I hardly even think about the end-of-year exams, while my legs are clamped around the trunk halfway up to the sky. I hold on tight to my machete, the bush knife Bumbu Joshua gave me, which I keep sharp at all times. I whack at one of the heavy pods and listen to it hit the ground; then another, and another. Leaving the smaller ones for later, I let my eyes roam over the panorama again. They come to rest on the island of Maevo, and further out, on Tutuba and Malo. *Where is the big island of Pentecost?*

This thought tears through my stomach like a lightning bolt. My hands turn sweaty and weak, and I feel the bush knife sliding from my grasp. Instinctively, my hand catches hold of the falling object.

What a fast reaction, I congratulate myself, breathing a sigh of relief. Anyone who might have walked below me might have gotten sliced in half, had I not had such presence of mind. My

right hand still clasps the blade firmly when big drops of blood turn the sharpened metal and my hand crimson.

An ear-splitting scream emerges from my chest. I drop the blade. Blood spurts out of my hand, and I fold my fingers to close the cut. *Did I see bone through the open gash?*

The island starts to spin, and soon, the whole jungle is in a wild dance. My stomach cramps. I feel faint, but twenty feet is too far to fall. So I hold on, strangling the tree with my uninjured limbs. I take a deep breath and pay no attention to scrapes and splinters as my legs slide down the rough bark.

“Hold on, Abel, you can make it. You’re almost down. Hold on!” Bumbu Joshua coaxes, suddenly below the tree.

Bumbu Joshua’s hands pull me the last few inches, helping me drop to the ground. There I lie, heart racing, wondering if I’m going to die from losing so much blood. I try not to move a muscle. Just then, my stomach constricts as if a coconut had landed on it, and I vomit.

“Sit up, Abel,” Bumbu Joshua commands. “Show me your hand.” I obey but avert my eyes, swallowing hard to stop my stomach from repeating its violent heaving.

While I feebly extend my arm, I try not to look at the wound. Instead, I gaze into the canopy of the trees that surround us: coconut palms, paw-paw trees, breadfruit and mango trees swinging and swaying wildly. I can feel the spurting blood, and I feel weaker with each gush. Bumbu Joshua breaks a branch from a dondakaya bush, chews some of the leaves and adds the rest of the shoot to our harvest. Then he opens my right hand. Even though I don’t want to look, my eyes steal a glimpse. The white bone that connects the thumb to the wrist shines back at me. The blood, a lighter red now, pulses out of my hand with every heartbeat. Then panic hits me like a flying arrow.

This is dreadful, awful, terrible! I need this hand for everything. How can I climb, use my knife, dress myself, even hold a pencil? That’s when a more pleasant thought comes to my mind: Surely, this will prevent me from having to leave our tribe at the end of the school year.

Bumbu Joshua gently closes the gash and spreads the green paste across my palm. He tears off his tattered t-shirt and wraps it around my injury. Miraculously the blood stops flowing. He hugs me tightly, giving me back some of my strength and courage as his slow, steady heartbeat

quietens mine. He seems as ancient as the forest around us. Even though I am already twelve, I am grateful to be wrapped in Bumbu Joshua's wisdom and care.

I had been looking forward to this trip to the mountain garden. We come here every few days to harvest coconut, taro and papaya for dinner. This Saturday was special, because I had already shot a bird with my slingshot and received lavish praise from my grandfather. The thought of pulling the rubber on a slingshot with my injured hand now makes me cringe.

"Thank you, Bumbu. You really do know everything." I stare at the green paste that sticks to his fingers.

"Ah, my boy, the forest supplies our every need. In time you will learn all about it," Bumbu Joshua's full lips curl into a smile as he stretches out his sinewy brown arm to help me back onto my feet. His bare chest is covered with little curls of white hair.

The lines on his tight belly seem like waves that refuse to be tucked into the elastic waist of his worn shorts. Bumbu Joshua proudly wears a long gnarly scar on his right upper thigh, the trophy of a pig-killing ceremony during his initiation into manhood. I may end up with a scar not unlike his, unless I lose my hand entirely.

"What if I'm never able to use my hand again?" I ask Bumbu Joshua, fearing life as I know it is over. "What will I do?" Tears cut off my voice. *I guess I can still be a teacher, even if I'm a left-handed one.* It calms me down a bit as I imagine myself, one-armed, surrounded by students.

"You will not lose your hand, my boy. And even if you did, know that you would be no less of a man. You can learn to do everything with your other limbs. But you are young yet. It will heal." I focus my attention on his sinewy arms as he ties up our harvest of various fruits and roots into two parcels. He slides a pole through these bundles for carrying the produce home. He pauses, and then he lays it across my shoulders.

"Let's go," he says, as he bends down to pick up my bush knife off the ground.

"This knife will need some work." Bumbu Joshua spits on the blade to better inspect it. Then he beckons me to lead the way home. As I walk to the rhythm of the two pendulums, I rest both hands on the pole for balance. Gradually, the pain in my right hand diminishes. Bumbu Joshua keeps a steady pace behind me with our dog, Lokin, panting alongside us.

As soon as we arrive back in the village with our harvest, my brother Dura and cousin Toa come running. They yell a greeting and check what we have brought back. When we enter the

grass hut that is our kitchen, Bumbu Janet is sitting in the far corner, grating green bananas. She doesn't pay much attention to our arrival.

She's already sorted out cabbage leaves to prepare simboro for dinner. Usually, I love to help her mix the starches with coconut cream and wrap a spoonful of the mix in banana leaves. She then boils these parcels in water until they float back to the top. My mouth waters.

"What's that flapping around your hand?" Toa asks with surprise.

Bumbu Janet's eyes fasten onto the green t-shirt, and before she even opens her mouth, I know the words she is going to hurl at us.

She is small and wiry with a head of short-cropped hair. Her mouth usually flashes a lovely smile, but it can also be the source of very sharp words. "Joshua, you were supposed to take care of the boy," she hisses.

When I was only two years old, I was given to the family of my father's father, as is the custom when families get too big. I often wonder why they chose to have me live with my grandparents. Was I weaker, slower, or smaller than their other children? Did I require more attention than they could give? So far, I have not been brave enough to ask.

I consider Bumbu Joshua and Bumbu Janet my parents, and I love them more deeply than Viralongo and Lovatu, my actual father and mother.

Bumbu Janet unwraps the makeshift bandage, moistens a rag and wipes my palm with it. I wince. With each swipe through crusted blood and green leaf paste, the red rim of the cut becomes more visible. It crosses my whole palm and goes deep. She reapplies more of the green paste and wraps my hand in a new bandage.

It stings. I bite my lip. For the hundredth time, my thoughts revolve around the fact that I may never be able to use my right hand again; it's going to be useless for grabbing on to anything, especially my machete. I can't climb a tree; I can't pull up a taro root; I can't even hold a fishing rod. What good would I be to my family in this state?

For that matter, if I can't use my hand, I won't be able to complete my final exams. I can't even hold a pencil. If I fail the exams, I won't need to worry about having to leave my family and all I hold dear. The decision would be taken away from me, I realize. A smile spreads across my face. But then again, what a disappointment I would be to Bumbu Joshua and my family. My smile falters.

After Bumbu Janet is done with her surgery, I slump into a corner and hug my throbbing arm. Tears burn in my eyes as I suck in the air with a ragged breath.

“How can you let this boy use a bush knife?” Bumbu Janet scolds. She has reprimanded Bumbu Joshua often for it, and this accident, of course, is fresh ammunition.

Bumbu Joshua is undisturbed. He answers with his usual half smile, gesturing with his arms. “Abel was doing a great job picking papaya and coconuts. These things happen. Calm down. Sometimes this boy just needs to concentrate better.” He and I know these comments go in one ear and out the other. They won’t change her mind.

Bumbu Janet continues to tell him off with words neither Bumbu Joshua nor I ever want to hear again. He tries to resolve this quarrel as fast as possible and holds up the bird I shot this morning, interrupting her complaints.

“Look, Abel shot a nalaklak bird with his slingshot. Pretty soon he’ll be able to shoot a kangwae pigeon, and you know how skittish they are. I love to watch this boy take aim and shoot. Toa will roast the fowl for dinner.”

I wish I had not put Bumbu Joshua in such an adverse situation. I glare at Bumbu Janet. No one else would ever address Bumbu Joshua in this way. After all, he is the chief of the Lolotitimba tribe and the head of the Hivoliliu clan on Ambae Island in Vanuatu. *What an opposite pair she and Bumbu Joshua make.* I am sure if it were up to her, she would not let me use a knife until I have a beard.

Bumbu Joshua is sitting in his carved-out timber trunk that leans against the navele tree, resting his legs, his bush knife at his side. I am leaning against the tree, too, not daring to leave.

“Your mountain garden seems to be more important than anything here in the village,” she continues to nag from inside the smoke-filled cooking hut, where she is boiling pandanus leaves for weaving. Smoke oozes through the thatch roof and billows through the door. Bumbu Janet cannot see us, nor can we see her.

“If Abel leaves the village, you know that you must give up the mountain garden to Viralongo. You’re too old to go there without the boy.” She pauses to catch a breath. “I will certainly not go back up there at my age, and you shouldn’t either.” She has to control her breathing because of the smoke, so her words are barked rather than spoken.

“Do you really think that when he comes back from boarding school, he’ll still be interested in our way of life? Today’s children forget their bush skills when they go to school overseas. They become lazy, sit in comfortable offices and forget about the rest of the world around them, including us.”

She can’t be serious. “I will always want to live this way!” I almost shout at Bumbu Janet in anger. “I love the mountain garden as much as Bumbu Joshua does. And he’s my very best teacher.”

It looks as though Bumbu Joshua is contemplating the words that come from the hut. He is looking at me in a curious way, maybe considering whether he should take the bush knife from me. I try to cradle the knife’s shaft in my palm, but I can’t open my hand. It hurts too much. I drop the machete beside me.

I think back to when Bumbu Joshua taught me how to use this knife to peel tree-bark, clear paths and cut firewood. He taught me to scale the trunk of a coconut palm and tease a green fruit from the bunch with my bush knife. He showed me how to chop it with a few whacks to get to the refreshing juice inside. Without my machete, I would often be thirsty, since our village has neither a river nor a well. The rainwater we collect in cement tanks is only suitable for washing, and for watering our animals and plants.

Bumbu Joshua made a slingshot for me when I was only five. “Hit the tree trunk, Abel,” he used to say, and later, “Hit the branch.” Eventually, he’d command, “Now aim at that fat wood pigeon.”

It didn’t take me long before I succeeded in killing such a fowl or one of the flying foxes that criss-cross high in the trees above. When I did, Bumbu Joshua would wring its neck and slit open its underside to clean out the bowels before bringing our spoils back to the village to feed our family.

“Keep practicing, my boy, to become a good hunter,” he says out of the blue, bringing me back to the present. “After all, all the meat we need is either running on the ground, swimming in the sea below, or flying in the sky above. You need to outsmart the prey. This way, you never go hungry.”

“And all our fruits and vegetables are either buried in the ground or growing on a tree around us,” I add with a smile.

“He’ll learn to be more careful,” Bumbu Joshua almost shouts for Bumbu Janet’s benefit. “All of us have had some accident or another. It’s part of growing up.”

Turning to me, he says more quietly, “You are not going to catch another machete with your bare hand, will you, my boy?” He winks at me with a smile, and I feel in my chest how much I love him.

“Of course not! I’ll never do that again, ever. I don’t want to leave you, Bumbu Joshua!” I declare loudly, hoping Bumbu Janet would hear me too. Yet, deep down, I know I may not have a choice in the matter.

Out of our Hivoliliu clan, this big family where I have many brothers, sisters, cousins and friends, only I was offered the opportunity to pursue higher education. When my teacher suggested the idea, Uncle Toka accepted it with honor in the name of the whole family. He is my mother’s brother and in charge of my future, as uncles are. How much say does Bumbu Joshua have, and how much do I? Bumbu Joshua is looking at me thoughtfully. My whole future depends on the result of the end-of-year exam.

From afar, I hear Papa Viralongo yelling in his house, which is swarming with eight children and twelve grandchildren. I think they loathe the fact that he commands immediate and absolute obedience to his wishes. Mama Lovatu thinks I am being overprotected and spoiled by my grandparents, so I am often glad not to be part of that bunch.

==//==

The sun is about to set, and several of my brothers, sisters and cousins have joined Bumbu Joshua and me under the navele tree outside our cooking hut. The evening breeze brings welcome relief from the heat of the day. Bumbu Janet and my mother are working on dinner. One by one, other siblings and cousins arrive to share the evening meal, and everyone helps with the preparations.

“Abel almost died up in the mountain garden,” Dura is the first to comment on my hand. Some of my younger siblings come over to examine the involuntary surgery. “Lucky he had

Bumbu Joshua there to rescue him.” He turns to me and asks conspiratorially, “Did he have to climb up the tree to get you down?” The image prompts smirks and giggles all around.

“Here, I just sharpened my machete. Do you want to catch it with your left hand?” jokes Alain. “Lokin wouldn’t mind a few roasted fingers.” I grimace. If my hand weren’t so sore, I would sock him in the face.

Bumbu Janet and Bumbu Joshua have quieted down. Presently, they are avoiding each other. Bumbu Janet is upset. I feel bad for being the one who caused the strife, and it weighs on me while we sit around the fire after the meal.

Bumbu Joshua, in his usual carefree manner, is telling us stories of the creation of our people. He knows how certain ancestral spirits influence our actions and lives, and he also seems to know everything about everyone in our village of Vatuhangele. When he’s done with his story, he asks us about school and life, our hopes and worries. This is my favorite part of the evening.

Viralongo approaches our group with long and hasty steps. “There are some men waiting for you at the nakamal,” he says to Bumbu Joshua.

“Must be the business people from Tanna,” Tari says, running a hand through his blond hair and looking as if he knew.

My ears perk up. “Let me go to the meeting house with you. I want to meet these foreign people,” I ask. When I am near Bumbu Joshua, I feel like a flourishing ndandakwora tree swaying proudly in the breeze beside a majestic banyan tree. I love to listen in on the various conflicts that arise among the several dozen people in our village: it may be a land dispute or parents objecting to two teenagers who want to be together.

I imagine going with him to the nakamal, where men share the customary drink of kava. They say that half a coconut shell of this fermented brew calms men down. Bumbu Joshua manages to stay serene and undisturbed, even in the most challenging situations. Most of the time, he is able to restore peace by finding a solution both parties can accept.

“I heard these people have boatloads of money,” Vira adds. I wonder if he’s picturing that in his mind. “And they wear expensive sunglasses and golden bracelets.” I can see he wants those things, too.

“We should throw them out sooner rather than later. They may be dangerous.” Dura is repeating snippets of conversations he’s picked up here and there. “They’ve come to change our culture.”

“How old are they?” I wonder out loud. Are they approaching the age of wisdom Bumbu Joshua has reached, or are they brash young men, maybe fresh out of school? My curiosity tempts me to sneak to the nakamal and hear what’s going on with my own ears. In fact, I want to talk with the men and learn about their business and their intentions. I want to know what powers they have that might change our way of life.

I don’t want Bumbu Joshua to leave the fireside. He has asked us important questions, and we have things to say. But he starts the process of getting up from his dugout log, grimacing and leaning heavily on my shoulder. Bumbu Joshua's knees tremble, and they refuse to straighten completely. His frame unfolds into a vague Z shape, making him scarcely taller than I am. For the first few staggering steps, he relies on the support of his cane. Then he regains his balance.

“Can I come?” I’m begging now.

“Stay with Bumbu Janet,” he mumbles softly. Then he embarks on the footpath that snakes towards the nakamal. His figure is soon swallowed up by the tree ferns and shrubs as he labors up the slope to the men’s clubhouse. Lokin, tail wagging, accompanies Bumbu Joshua instead of me. I’m disappointed and slouch against the navele tree with sagging shoulders.

Bumbu Janet doesn’t pay me any heed as long as she knows where I am and what I’m doing. But I swear she has eyes in the back of her head. If I try to sneak out of her sight to pick ripe cocoa pods or to scale a tree, or if I decide to play with my cousin next door without telling her, she’s right on my tail. When she calls my name, she expects me to answer instantly. Failing to respond in two standard calls can result in serious trouble.

That’s when she uses her coconut broom for “educational purposes,” as she calls it, and I end up with a sound thrashing at mid-buttock range. Her left hand tightly holds me by the arm, foiling any attempt at escape. Her right hand, empowered by its woody extension, sends me jumping and yelling.

Today I am not going to take that course. Bumbu Janet asks me to feed the pigs, and I obey. Then I go and sit in my perch in the guava tree and feast on some of the sweet fruits that have ripened behind the bush hut kitchen. I don't need my bush knife to open them.

Bumbu Joshua returns after dark. Most of the fires have burnt themselves out, and the birds have quieted down. He surprises us with a plucked rooster that someone offered him at the nakamal to thank him for his advice. He ties it to the rafters inside the kitchen hut.

It is time for the boys and men to retire to the men's sleeping house and the girls to the women's. I am so tired that I could fall asleep leaning against a tree. It's been a long day, and my hand aches. I know Bumbu Joshua's knees ache, too. He says it helps when I massage them. What if I skipped it just this once? Would he say anything? He would not, I'm sure. But I'd feel bad for not doing what I can to make him walk better.

I patiently support his fragile body on the way to the sleeping house, where he drops onto his cot without a word. He must be tired, too. As my left hand finds the knots in his swollen knee, he hums a tune, tapping his fingers on the bamboo wall. Tonight it's the rhythm of a Kastom dance that the Lolotitimba tribe performs at a funeral. I prefer to imagine that parts of these melodies are Ambae love songs.

Usually, Bumbu Joshua dozes off before me, but tonight I'm worried I'll fall asleep first. Soon, though, his almost toothless mouth whistles gently as he draws in his breath, and his tapping fingers slide to his side. He's moved on to dreamland. His snuffles mingle with the sounds of cicadas and the cries of nocturnal birds for my nightly lullaby.

Even though I'm exhausted, sleep won't come, and I lie with my eyes wide open. The more I think about going away and leaving all this behind, the more it feels like a rope is tightening around my chest. I can barely breathe. How many more times will I have the opportunity to fall asleep with Bumbu Joshua? What if my right hand doesn't heal? Will I learn to hunt with my left or will I have to depend on others to feed me?

I think of old Bumbu Celeste, who's been lying in her cot for several months with heart troubles from eating a poisonous barracuda. Her relatives take turns feeding and washing her. It's not easy to while away the time when you can't do anything.

"Catching a machete with your hand... how dumb must you be?" I heard the words Tari pitched to his cousin Paul, and they hurt.

“If he loses the hand, Joshua’s plans of making him his successor will come to naught,” Paul responded.

Losing a hand is still better than decapitating someone who’s under the tree, I justify to myself over and over. Still, it was thoughtless, maybe even dumb. How one moment of inattention can change a whole life. Perhaps I’m not cut out to follow in Bumbu Joshua’s footsteps after all.

Chapter 2: Village Education

“When you sit at home listening to your exam results on the radio, remember that the sun will go on rising and setting, no matter what your score.” The words of our teacher’s farewell speech are valid, even if they are not very reassuring. One day I want to be able to say these words to a class full of my own pupils. It seems to me that being a teacher is the noblest of all professions.

In ten days, all the parents of Vanuatu will be glued to their radios to hear their children’s test results. Until then, I won’t know how my life will turn out: I will either stay here or go to the island of Pentecost to study things I need to survive in a city, maybe even to teach future students in our village. Either I will earn my livelihood by working the fields and fishing in the ocean, or I’ll come back as a teacher. Ten more days. A nauseating chill settles in my stomach.

It is the middle of December and the end of our last year of school. We just wrote our final exams, during which my right hand hurt me so much I couldn’t properly hold a pen. So I used the left to clumsily scribble an x here and there and jot a few words down where I had to. Even I struggled to decipher some of my responses. Cheeks burning, I focused on making my answers legible right up to the last seconds before we had to hand in our papers.

“I can’t believe we have to wait a full ten days! I can’t stand it.” I lament, as my schoolmates Tari, Vira and Kwevira and I are walking along the beach for the hour’s trek to get home. Here the waves lick the fine sand, and in other places, they smack against giant black volcanic rocks. We have often joked that we wished a boat would take us to school. Now my wish may come true, except that the boat will take me to a strange land.

“Hey, let’s take the inland path and pick some coconuts and breadfruit to bring home. Maybe the mangoes are already ripe,” Vira suggests.

“You know we are not supposed to pick those. What if the owner catches us?” I ask. Tari rolls his eyes.

Just then, the daily rainclouds roll in from the ocean. I can hardly distinguish the black cloud of dread that hangs over me from the one that darkens the jungle. Quickly, we each pick one of the gigantic, waxy leaves of the elephant plant and fold it over our heads and satchels to protect us from the squall. As we continue on our path, our talk reflects the excitement of the last six hours.

“I’m sure I aced all the math questions, except for the last one. How did you do, Vira?” Tari asks as the first big drops roll off his leaf. When it comes to mathematics, Vira is usually the first to understand a new formula our teacher proposes. He is the one with the darkest skin among us, and he has the most adventurous spirit.

“I couldn’t remember the arrival date of the first European explorers,” laments Vira, not even heeding Tari’s question.

“In 1606 a Spanish expedition came,” boasts Tari before I can say anything. He pulls out a piece of paper from his pocket and points to the date on it. Did he look at it during the test?

Tari likes to show off. He is mighty proud of his hair, which is a golden color. A soft yellow fuzz covers his chin and his arms. He is the tallest of us and a good runner, and he looks down on others as if he was superior.

“And in 1774 Captain Cook arrived,” adds Kwevira, the daughter of our pastor. She is a quiet and serious girl who loves to read and study. Her beautiful dark hair is often twirled into two thick braids that her mother fastens on top of her head. She is almost as tall as I am; that is why I sometimes ask my brother Dura to pull on my legs, hoping to make them longer.

“It does seem as if it is the end of everything, doesn’t it?” I say to Tari, thinking he feels the same. The completion of our tests closes a chapter of our lives, but he looks at me in astonishment. I often end up feeling like he knows something I don’t, and he won’t tell me.

For four years, we were rivals. Tari was the teacher’s favorite, which made me sick at times, but it also made me study harder. I’d say that Bumbu Janet needed me and decline an invitation

to go on a hunting trip or join a soccer game. Instead, I'd study and answer questions I imagined might be asked in a test. How I savored every time I tipped the balance and beat him in an exam.

"I can't wait to leave and see other islands!" Tari says. He's still looking down at me, but he continues, "My cousin Paul told me there are towns with hundreds of people, shops full of stuff from other countries, and movie theaters. Paul loved living in Vila, but he's come back now that his work contract has come to an end."

"I can't see the value of working just to be able to buy goods from other countries," I reply.

"That's not the point at all. Don't you see? With money, you can buy anything. Fancy shoes, sunglasses, a motorboat to catch even more fish..." his voice trails off. I can see him imagining hauling out an enormous catch and selling the surplus to get even richer.

"Life on our island is perfect. What is the point of being in a crowd of hundreds of people I don't know?" My curiosity gets the better of me, and it annoys me, but I have to ask. "What's a movie theater, anyway?"

"That's where they show how other people live, and what they have, and what they do. Paul told me it's fantastic." Tari is obviously impatient to experience this new kind of life, to make money and use it to buy things we can't get in our village. "You don't understand anything, Abel," he sneers.

I walk away towards our hut, my head spinning with questions.

====//====

"I can't go on living in suspense like this!" I declare to Bumbu Joshua a few days later. We are in our mountain garden again, picking taro and papaya for dinner. I try to keep my hand high to lessen the throbbing. "And even if I did pass all the tests, which I'm starting to doubt more and more, there is this black cloud of having to leave you over my head. I wish I could stop thinking about it, but I can't."

"You can," says Bumbu Joshua. "The future is not yours yet. Look how you're fretting and not enjoying our last days together. Be here, not in the future. Be here, and nowhere else, with nobody else, and with nothing to do but this, my boy. That's how you escape from the gloom."

“But you need me, don’t you?” I start again, trying to reason with him. “Besides, I have already learned plenty.”

“Sure, if you want to be a farmer or a fisherman,” Bumbu Joshua says. “But one day you will step in the shoes of your ancestors and be a leader of our clan. You say you want to become a teacher, which means you need to learn what goes on in the world beyond our island.”

Uncle Toka has scraped together enough money for tuition, boarding and transportation for one in the family. Many times, he had told me that I am the one with the best grades and that they’re counting on me. He’d said that only someone with education could write letters to the Australian church missionaries to help them understand our island culture better. But I wonder what would happen if I failed. I shudder.

Bumbu Joshua is a firm believer in education. However, he knows very little of what we learn in the classroom. I don’t want to be unfair to him, but there are some things he will never understand.

I smile, remembering the day when I tried to explain to him how to use an isosceles right-angled triangle to measure the height of a tree: “You know the two short sides are equal,” I said. “Keeping a short side on the ground, you can walk away from the trunk until, when you look at the tip of the tree at a 45-degree angle, the hypotenuse exactly connects the ground with the tip of that tree. Then you can measure your distance to the trunk, and this will be the height of the tree.” Bumbu Joshua looked at me as if I was speaking an alien language; as if a pig was trying to communicate with a rooster. Since then, I secretly decided not to share certain school knowledge with him.

On the other hand, he knows what plants to eat or use as medicine, how to bring about peace in a discordant situation, and how to stay happy and content. These are not things that find their way onto a school exam.

He stops in mid-pull, releases the leaves of the taro plant, straightens up laboriously, and fastens his pale eyes on me. His broad smile and his calmness make me hopeful that he knows a way out of my situation. Surely he has a solution for my woes, as he does for those who consult his wisdom in a tribal meeting. He probably has special powers. A rush of love and admiration for Bumbu Joshua washes over me. How honored I consider myself for all the attention he showers on me.

“You are fortunate to have schools, my boy. There were no schools on our island when I was young. I only learned to read and write from missionaries when I was an adult. I never had the chance to learn things like English, or math, or science. You know a lot more about these than I do. And now it’s too late to learn them.”

He squats down again and tightly grabs the base of the taro leaves. Pursing his lips in full concentration, he shakes it and pulls until the uprooted taro root slams onto the grassy patch near my feet. He sighs contentedly. He loves to teach me what he knows, and I am eager to listen, even if he tends to ramble. He’s definitely in the mood to talk, and I want to get my mind off my worries. I can’t stop myself. I think this question will be a challenge for him.

“Why then are there cyclones, Bumbu?”

“Ah, little man,” he pauses to recover his breath. One last tooth remains as an outcrop on his bottom jaw. It is close to the front, quite nicely displayed. He relies on it for steering his speech. “The cyclone is for regeneration and strength. Consider the moon cycle. It brings the seasons for everything: planting, fishing, hunting, breeding; you name it. Anything that grows is tested for strength by the cyclone. Such a fierce wind requires deep and large root systems and strong branches.”

Ah hell, there he goes, I think, while I refocus my attention on his hands.

“Look at the giant nakatabol tree and its enormous root system. The tree grows fast during many moons. It seems it can sense from experience that a testing time will come.” He takes a deep breath while he thinks of another example. “Look at our thatched kitchen hut. We need to make it strong enough to withstand that next cyclone.”

All the while we’ve been bundling our harvest together into two parcels that Bumbu Joshua tied to both ends of our four-foot pole. He pauses a moment before he lays the pole across my shoulders. It’s up to me to carry it home. *How good it feels to be useful.* But I understand that Bumbu Joshua has bigger plans for me than continuing this lifestyle.

==//==

Finally, the dreaded day arrives, and the whole village sits around various AM radios to listen to the exam results. I've had ten days to let the doubt grow in my thoughts, and I am pretty sure now that my dream of becoming a teacher may stay just that: a dream.

"Kwevira Benadeth passed the tests with a result of 96%," the newsreader's voice crackled on the old radio. "Tari Johnston passed with a result of 98%. Abel Nako passed with a result of 97%."

My heart almost stops.

"These three promising students will be leaving the village to continue their studies on the island of Pentecost," the announcer states without a hint of emotion. And then it hits me: what about Vira? I did not hear Vira Edmon's results announced among the best.

There must be a mistake. Vira had looked forward to leaving the island and seeing the world 90 nautical miles away. He must be so disappointed. I, on the other hand, want to stay with Bumbu and my tribe. Bumbu Joshua is so old that he might not be waiting for me when I return. How can I leave him and Bumbu Janet behind after all they have done for me?

But my fate is sealed. Now it is final: I am leaving on February 7. I look into the faces of those around me. Vira is shaking his head. His eyebrows are squeezed together.

"Hemi gat hed... I've always said it, this boy has a good head," Bumbu Janet sings out in her excited way. I look across to where she is standing, retrieving clothes from the line. Do I see a tear in her eye? I can't tell if it's one of joy or sadness, but I know she will miss me. The fact that she won't have me to yell at will surely be the most painful part for her.

She drops a t-shirt into the basket and comes towards me with a big smile, arms outstretched. Then she folds me into a hug. I feel the affection in her embrace as well as her sorrow, and I know this hug is one of dignity and respect. Both she and I know that the situation cannot be changed. We will part from each other, and that is real; we will have to learn to live with it. Her hug is sending me off to start a new life.

No more waking up with the jubilant songs of the morning birds. No more boastful crows of the cockerels calling us into action. No more morning prayers with Bumbu Joshua, who's usually up by the time I crawl out of the sleeping hut. These prayers are quite lengthy, by my standards, as he reveals his inner secrets and wishes.

A dark cloud obscures the sun, and even the cicadas fall silent. I swallow hard. *No tears, no tears, no tears now. Just like Bumbu Joshua.* He is nestled into his wooden carved seat, observing Bumbu Janet approvingly. I have never seen him cry a single tear, so I am not surprised that he does not show any signs of emotion now.

I shuffle in the direction of Lokin, who wags his tail at me, unbothered by any of my worries. After all, he does not need to go far away and over the ocean into a foreign land.

No more hunting trips with Bumbu Joshua for birds or bats. No more eavesdropping on his conversations with quarreling landowners. No more harvesting trips to the mountain garden. A sigh straggles from my chest.

“I don’t want to go. I don’t want anything to change. I am so nervous, my stomach is doing flips,” I whine. “Do I really need to know anything else?” I ask Bumbu Joshua for the tenth time.

“You must be brave,” Bumbu Joshua tells me. “Remember, you’re going away for a four-year adventure. It wouldn’t be an adventure if you weren’t nervous. There’s no progress without struggle.” He pauses for impact. “It’s easy to walk on the well-trodden path. Make your own path, my boy.”

I almost buckle under the weight of expectations that our tribe is thrusting upon my shoulders. I don’t like it one bit.

Then he adds, “You have a good head. Learn everything you can, and when you come back with all your new knowledge, you’ll be a good teacher and leader for our village.

“I think you are an eagle chick ready to hatch and fly, even though you feel snug in your eggshell.

“Look at the clouds, Abel. Beyond them, there is blue sky. But before we see the blue sky, there will be rain. The rain and clouds might be an expression of sadness or fear, but things always become bright afterward. Now don’t get me wrong,” Bumbu Joshua tilts his head slightly as if he was listening to the Great Creator. “You might not like clouds and rain. Yet without the clouds, there is no rain, and without the rain, there is no taro, no coconut, no life. And here we are, you and I, enjoying these plants all around us. It pays to look at the balance of things.” Bumbu Joshua’s words make sense. I nod, and a smile forms on his lips.

“I never want to leave you, Bumbu Joshua.” I look into his eyes, but he looks away. “I always want to live by what you teach me.” In the care of my grandfather, I’ve always felt like a chick protected by a territorial rooster. Who will look out for me when I’m so far away?

“Abel, we are mighty proud of you.” My eldest brother Molrongo nudges me in the ribs. He owns a goat and a couple of pigs that he keeps tethered to a post beside his hut. His wealth in goods and friends makes me question the wisdom of going away.

“Remember, it’s been nine years since I felt like Vira does today. I had also been pining for adventure. I know what it feels like. But you know, life is good here.” He looks around. “I might even get married soon,” he says with a twinkle in his eyes.

Since he keeps his love affairs very secret, I can’t help but wonder whether he really has a girlfriend. He doesn’t seem like he is ready. *A bit like me... not at all ready for what’s coming.*

“You’ll be ready when the time comes,” he says, reading my mind.

“How can I know that?” I question, looking off into the distance. I’ve never been far from our village, and always with a family member. Molrongo smiles. He must have noticed my panicked face, because he adds jokingly, “Now that my house is built, you’re leaving. Unless you reckon you can’t. We’d understand that, too.” He looks around. “Sometimes, a path is just too hard for us to take. You might feel too young, too weak, or too scared to go away. Besides, I need you to look after my kava plants when I’m off fishing. I could pay you in chickens,” he laughs out loud.

How can Tari be so confident, even eager to go away? How could I prove my readiness? I shudder, but a daring plan starts to form in my mind.

What if I visited my mother’s sister, Aunty Anna, down the coast in the far South of Ambae? Last time I saw her was at her wedding to John Tariyuke. They had both brought five children into the new family after John’s first wife had died from a fever, and Anna’s first husband drowned in a storm at sea. What a wedding feast it was! She has often told me I am her favorite and invited me to come to visit her sometime when I am older. I must be old enough now; if I wasn’t, why would they send me away?

It can’t be that difficult to find this village if I stay near the water’s edge and keep walking in a southerly direction. Our ancestors were good long-distance walkers who knew the island like the palm of their hands. Bumbu Joshua, too, knows all the villages on the island by heart. He

has traveled on all the tracks that connect them and knows their distances from each other. I've heard him give directions to people who have stopped in our village while traversing the island to see relatives, or to search for water and food supplies.

Braving such a daring endeavor would prove to everyone that I am ready to face the big world out there like a grown-up. Bumbu Joshua will certainly admire my boldness. He will be so proud of me for visiting a valued family member.

The more I think about it, the better the idea seems. Step by step, I map out my plan. *I will show you, Tari! Not even you have achieved such a daring feat of bravery.* This will be a story everyone will talk about for many years to come.

The next day I roll my machete into a pandanus mat. I scoop the slingshot into my pocket, which is already weighed down with carefully selected pebbles. Right after lunch, I slip into my flip-flops and take off. To avoid any unnecessary questions, I look as relaxed as possible as I stroll past the huts as if one of them was my destination.

When I reach the forest unobserved, I let out a sigh of relief. Here, where our village ends, I look back. *Off into the adventure!* Fresh energy and enthusiasm put a spring in my step. Suddenly, a movement catches my eyes, and I find myself in front of Molrongo. My shoulders drop. He's with a lady I have not seen before. She's not from our tribe. I try to hide, but he has already spotted me.

"Little brother, where are you going?" he laughs, letting go of the lady's hand.

Don't look as if he caught you, I tell myself and stand upright. As if Bumbu Joshua had sent me on this errand, I mention that I'm on my way to visit Aunty Anna and Uncle John in Lolovatali.

"Are you serious? Do you know the trekking path? You sure you want to go by yourself?" He points to my bandaged hand, some concern in his voice. "That's a three-day walk."

"Of course," I say matter-of-factly and shift my weight from one foot to the other. "I'll be okay," I say and turn to leave. He shrugs and directs his attention back to his lady friend. I breathe out and walk steadfastly towards the ocean. My step is light; the sun is shining brightly. *I did it. That was not so bad.* I congratulate myself on my brilliant idea. *I will show them!*

I reach the water's edge in record time. Now to turn south and see what comes. The walk on the white beach does not last long, and soon I have to climb over what seems to be an old lava

flow thick with trees and impenetrable vegetation. The sun is burning down on me, and I am so thirsty my tongue is stuck in my mouth. The pandanus mat is getting heavier and heavier. My hand aches. *I need to find food and drink soon*, I think, veering off my path in search of a coconut palm.

No such luck. I make myself go back to the beach and hope to hunt for fish. Of course, my weapons are not adapted to that, but I do catch a few prawns with my bare hands and eat them raw after smashing their heads with a rock.

Upwards and onwards, as Bumbu Joshua likes to say. I climb the dense forest again and have to use my machete to cut a path. It is slow going, and for the first time, I start to question the wisdom of my decision.

I keep on going, taking advantage of a few more hours of daylight. All the while, I keep the ocean, no matter how far, to my right. The undergrowth lightens somewhat, and I manage to make some headway. The birdsong all around me does not help my stomach feel fuller, and loneliness starts to weigh on me. As I forge onwards, I have plenty of time to think of dangers lurking in this jungle, where to stay for the night, and how to get food. *I could eat a wild pig*, I boast to myself, imagining how I'd kill one and roast it over a fire.

A breadfruit tree offers me its pod – big, round, green and spiky. I manage to dislodge it by throwing a big stone into the tree, and then it splats before me, seeds spilling out. A bundle of black bugs in its center tells me the fruit is ripe. *Good, no need to make a fire, I can eat it raw*. I lay the pandanus mat and my machete beside me on the ground and start pulling the fibrous plant apart. Each seed is wrapped in sticky yellow strings, and I am thankful for their sweet flavor. *If only I had a coconut to drink*.

The sun is about to set, and a slight evening breeze brings some welcome cooler air. My muscles ache, and now that my stomach is somewhat satisfied, I look for a place to lie down. That's when I notice tufts of coarse hair clinging to the bark on the tree before me. *An old boar probably scratched its haunches here*.

What was that? A distant snort. My hands get clammy. A low grunt makes the hairs on the nape of my neck stand to attention. I know that wild pigs fight rather than flee, and I am not in any shape to fight a wild boar. My heart hammers. My hands shake as I grab my parcel and tip-

toe into a thicket. *Hide me, crown bush.* Every muscle in my body is tense, ready to act. Bats are noiselessly looking for their dinner of flies. My heart is ready to explode. I wait.

Another snort, nearer now, a movement. A female with a young one is engrossed in foraging for food. *I should kill the young one - wait, what am I thinking? But the bravery of it! My famous ancestor, Bumbu Lazarus, would have done it. Bumbu Joshua, you'd approve, wouldn't you? "Brave Abel killed a wild boar!" you could say.*

I flinch at a drawn-out, low grunt. The sow has come so near that I can almost touch her. My hands shake as I grab for the liana lying at my feet. *Be quiet, heart. Calm down, hands.* Though my fingers fumble, I manage to make a lasso. Then I bide my time. The sow scours the roots of a tree for grubs. She's in my range.

With a sudden lurch, I throw the lasso over her head and tie the vine to the base of the thicket that hides me. Grunting wildly, she thrashes, jerks, and strains, but my lasso holds. She squeals pitifully as she struggles to be with her piglet. Then my victim goes wild, snorts, digs her hooves and tries to get away. Still, the liana holds.

My nerves are raw. *What next,* I ask the darkness. Every one of the sow's moves makes me jump. It takes about an hour before she calms and begins to suckle her young. *This is my chance. Should I approach them in this vulnerable state and cut off the piglet's head with my machete?* It seems cruel, but it would provide me with food for the coming days. Thinking of my brave ancestor, Bumbu Lazarus, I unwrap my blade without making a sound.

Voices shatter my thoughts. Three men appear and make straight for the tethered animal. One of them spies the pandanus mat and comes towards the bush I'm hiding in. My heart stops. I bite my hand to stifle a scream.

The one who discovered me is big and burly. He grabs me by the arm and pulls me out of my hiding place, alerting the two others with his booming voice. His friend is about my height, and rather stout, with arms as thick as my legs. The third one is rather skinny and by far the youngest of the three. He cuts the liana, setting my quarry free. The three surround me. *Now I am their prey.*

"What are you doing here?" I think my hunter says, but I can't understand a word.

“I am Abel Nako from the Lolotitimba tribe up in Vatuhangele village,” I say by way of introduction in vague Bislama. They look at each other and seem to discuss what to do with me. More unintelligible words follow and obvious questions, but none that I know how to answer.

“Hemi Tabu. Tabu mo yu brekem law.” I know what this means in our language, as well as in Bislama: “Absolutely forbidden. You broke the law.” But what did I do? I can only send a short request to my ancestors to protect me from these men.

The leader of the three wraps his large hand around my arm and drags me off. Pandanus mat and machete stay behind, under a bush I will never find again. Soon we arrive at a cluster of thatched huts, not unlike ours. A fire is burning, giving off uneven flickers. Men, women and children emerge, and intense discussions follow. In the dark, fingers point at me, and some 23 faces address me directly. I press my elbows into my sides to make my body as small as possible.

“I didn’t do anything!” I shout again in our language, then in the best Bislama I can manage, and try to wriggle free. But to no avail. My chin trembles. I have run out of things to say. Either they do not understand my words or choose to ignore them.

Finally, the strong one who had yanked me into this place drags me off to the men’s sleeping hut and allows me to crumble onto a cot. But he makes sure I will still be there in the morning by tying my legs to a bedpost. *What did I do to arouse such anger? What is going to happen to me?* I am confused, but more than that, I am scared. *What is the worst thing they can do to me?* One by one, the men come in and lie down. Some more words are exchanged, but gradually they are replaced by snores.

In the middle of a vivid dream of a violent pig hunt, I get a nudge in my ribs. I’ve slept lying on my injured hand, and it hurts. I rub my eyes with my left. Fire ants are crawling all over my cot. I jump, but my shackled leg stops me from making the move I had intended, and I fall flat on my face.

The hunter tells me with words and gestures to get up. “Lolotitimba tribe?” he asks, and I nod vigorously, happy they understood this one word from last night. After they untie me, I shake off the last of the fire ants, and we step into the morning light. Tree ferns provide shade, and flowering poinsettias nestle among giant banyan trees. But the people have not become any friendlier. Feeling the eyes of everyone upon me, I eat some bananas and drink the juice of a coconut while I scratch the burning bumps on my legs.

Sturdy's big hand around my biceps leaves me with no doubt that I am to follow where my three captors tread. His tight grip discourages any thought of escape. *Where are they taking me? What will they do to me?* I have a hard time keeping up. Half running, half stumbling, I stare ahead without seeing. My heart beats so hard I can only take little breaths. One of my flip-flops comes off.

Are they dragging me back home? Hope mingles with relief. I sigh when I realize why these unfamiliar people want to make the arduous trek to my village: They want to wrangle some restitution from our clan for whatever I've done wrong. But I'm not sure they know the way.

"Wait," I shout, but the only effect is that the grip around my arm gets tighter, dragging me on. "We need to go down to the beach," I try to tell the men, but I can't, so they don't. We hike through the woods, across ridges, into ravines, and I'm not even sure anymore if they are going to bring me back home or not. Tears rise in my throat, and I gulp down air to keep them at bay.

At last, we arrive at our village, entering by the southern entry. I still dangle from my trapper's firm grip as the men stride purposefully to the center. It's not only Tari, but also Kwevira and every other kid in our tribe who witnesses my sad return. I look like a criminal, and I can't bear it. I want to disappear into a wild boar's den and never come out again.

Bumbu Joshua gets up from his dugout tree and comes over. The men talk, gesticulating wildly, and Bumbu answers in Bislama. I understand only bits and pieces of it. A circle of nosy people is forming around our little congregation. "Tabu" I hear again and again, before the men retreat to the nakamal to discuss the matter over shells of kava. I hide in our hut with Bumbu Janet. It doesn't take long for my brothers and cousins to join us.

"Everyone was worried about you," Dura reproaches me, his arms crossed in front of his chest. "How can you take off like that? That was a super stupid idea."

Even Tari has come to rub in my failure. "Everyone knows there are wild boars in the south of the country. You can't go there without a rifle." *Ah, the wise one has spoken again.*

After what seems like hours of negotiations, the men re-emerge from the nakamal and get ready to leave. Suddenly, Bumbu Janet's mood swings from disbelief to understanding. In an abrupt outburst of anger, she looks at the assembled group of visitors and family members and asks me directly, "Did you know you had a domesticated pig in front of you?"

"No," is all I can contribute.

“There is no way of telling if a pig, or a chicken for that matter, is wild or domesticated, as it roams freely in the jungle!” Her voice rises as she formulates my defense. “It doesn’t make sense to accuse our boy of stealing. These animals may have been on John Tariyuke’s land, for all we know!”

The men look at each other. Bumbu Joshua, the chief mediator, looks uncomfortable at having to agree with Bumbu Janet, but he picks it up from there.

“It’s true that you should have kept the pig on your land. Once it trespasses into another man’s property, it is considered wild.” He nods to underline what should be evident. The men are calm from the kava and stand there, listening. Before the assembled crowd of curious people, Bumbu Joshua explains again that the men thought I was stealing their pig. That’s taboo!

Of course, I can see their point, as the sow was tied down and I was holding a machete. Intending to kill a mother-pig when she is still suckling a young one is another one of the taboos I violated.

Bumbu Janet, now bolder, goes on, “If you continue to hold this boy accountable for any wrong-doing, you will have to confront my brother-in-law, John Tariyuke. He will want to have a say in this matter.” She goes into her kitchen hut, then comes back out holding a pandanus mat she has made.

“Use your common sense next time,” Bumbu Janet says, offering the mat as a parting gift to them. Are her words directed to them or to me? “And travel safely,” she adds. I’m secretly wishing that all the creeks may overflow on their way back to their village.

Bumbu Joshua offers up a goat to pay for the trouble I caused. I am struck by the different approaches these two have to balancing justice and fairness.

I also realize that if I had learned Bislama better, or if I had known the language those people speak, we could have explained the situation to each other. That way, none of this humiliation would have happened. *I must study and learn, even if that takes me away to Pentecost. Bumbu Janet and Bumbu Joshua, I’m sorry for leaving you behind after all you have done for me.*