TO DIE ON AMBAE: ON THE POSSIBILITY OF DOING FIELDWORK FOREVER*

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Abstract: "To Die on Ambae . . ." is ethnography cast in the form of a narrative, a "true fiction" about illness in the context of fieldwork on a remote Pacific Island. We reflect on the way in which our direct involvement in the politics of curing shed new light on our relationships with people in our host community. We also deal with some of the hidden costs of fieldwork, both for anthropologists and for the people they study. Implicitly, we seek to contribute to discussion of three current issues in interpretive anthropology: the points of interface between fiction and ethnography, the representation of reflexivity in ethnographic writing, and the uses of dialogue and multiple voices in ethnographic narrative.

Résumé: « To Die on Ambae . . . » [« Mourir à Ambae »] est de l'ethnographie exprimée en forme narrative, « un véritable ouvrage fictif » dont le sujet est la maladie. Le contexte est celui du travail sur le terrain sur une île lointaine de l'océan pacifique. Nous cherchons à comprendre comment notre engagement dans la « politique de la guérison » remet à jour nos relations avec nos hôtes. Nous examinons aussi les coûtes invisibles du travail sur le terrain, tant pour les anthropologues que pour la population que nous étudions. Nous cherchons tacitement à contribuer aux études de trois des problèmes courants de l'anthropologie interpretive: premièrement, les points où la fiction et l'ethnographie s'entrecroisent; deuxièmement, la représentation de la reflexivité dans les écrits ethnographiques; et troisièmement, l'emploie du dialogue et de la multiplicité des voix dans la narration ethnographique.

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December 7, 1985: Late Saturday Night, Our House, Ambae—Bedside

Bill

And then I said: An Anthropologist gets sick and dies while conducting fieldwork on the small South Pacific island of Ambae. Suddenly, there she is, standing in front of these big gates beside a man with a long beard and a scroll. "Hello," says the man, "I'm St. Peter and these are the Pearly Gates. I have some good news and some bad news for you. Which do you want first?" "The good news," says the anthropologist. "O.K.," says St. Peter, "the good news is that you have been admitted to Heaven." "That's just great," she says. "If I've been admitted to Heaven, then what could possibly be the bad news?" "Well," says St. Peter, "Heaven consists of little worlds. People spend eternity in the same place where they drop. You planned a few months fieldwork on Ambae, but now it looks like you'll be doing fieldwork there forever."

It was a bad joke and I knew it. Still, Margy managed a weak smile: "That's not very funny," she said. She thought for a moment and her expression became more serious: "You don't suppose. . . ." "No," I told her, "Of course not. Dumb joke. Sorry." For two days, she had run a fever and endured severe chills and worse sweats. She hadn't been able to keep down a thing, not medicine, not food, not even water. We kept thinking the fever would break, but it didn't, and she was getting weaker. She had been a trooper but now I could see in her eyes she was getting scared. "Bill." she said, "you've got to get me out of here." I wanted to, God knows, but there was no way, at least not for another few days.

Friday, December 6, 1985: The War Museum in the Rainforest

Margaret

On our first fieldtrip to Ambae in 1969 we discovered that the island is, for us, a place where the days last longer and time slows down. Back in Canada, we yearned to re-set our mental clocks to Ambae time, and indeed we've returned to the island for three more fieldtrips over the years. Our most recent trip, in 1985, provided both a respite from a demanding period of fieldwork elsewhere in Vanuatu and a chance to fill in some gaps in our material.

By early December, we were ready to leave the field. My last scheduled interview was with an old man named Charlie Siu, a collector and connoisseur of World War II memorabilia. Charlie lives in an isolated hamlet near the coast with his wife, Betty, a healer with a twinkle in her eye and an aura of mystery. For years, I paid more attention to her than to him. I recorded her songs, photographed the medicinal plants she uses, learned from her the sexual facts of life that she thought every Ambae woman should know. For years, Charlie had wanted to tell me of his wartime experiences working for

the Americans on Espiritu Santo, a huge medical and supply base for the Battle of the Coral Sea. It was a topic that interested our son Sean, then 13, so he decided to come along with me and help by taking pictures.

We set off early on Friday morning, exactly a week before we were due to bring the fieldtrip to an end. I had a headache and hiking to Charlie's hamlet seemed an immense effort, but perhaps the weather was to blame. It had rained in the night and then again at dawn, a windless rain that left the air so damp I could see my breath. The rainforest steamed as we followed the path down the hill, our flipflops slipping and slapping a gritty spray of dark volcanic mud up the backs of our legs. We crossed a pile of mossy stones, once a garden wall, into Charlie and Betty's plantation, a raggedy stand of old coconut palms from which they earned a little money making copra, smoke-dried coconut meat, the "palm" part of Palmolive soap and an ingredient in coffee whitener. Copra is the main cash crop in Vanuatu and it provides the only source of income for most people on Ambae.

Their hamlet occupies a clearing in the plantation. Sean and I stood in the plaza at the centre of the settlement, looking down at the bare earth, shuffling our feet and clearing our throats, politely signalling our hosts that we had arrived. Sean picked up a piece of paper in the mud. "Mom, it's a pay slip from the US Navy!" It was a blank, undated, unsigned, but the navy hasn't been in the area since 1944. We knew we were in for a treat.

Charlie led us into a bamboo house where we sat on new copra sacks that smelled like freshly mown hay. He sang, his soft, whining old man's voice recalling the war as the islanders experienced it. The traditional melodic forms of Ambae warriors' songs contrasted with the sounds of a white man's war—boom, ratatat, whirr—and with songs he learned from soldiers: "God Save America Wan Gudfala Ples." Betty joined us and took charge of presenting Charlie's World War II collection for our inspection: 47 American dimes with dates ranging from 1928 to 1944, shell casings, bullets, blankets, dinner plates from Los Angeles and forks marked USN. "And see that big cooking pot in the corner? That's from the wartime, too." I nodded, and suddenly I felt my enthusiasm run out of me like water. I wasn't feeling well; my head still hurt and my bones ached, perhaps from the damp, hard earth beneath the copra sack.

Before we left, Charlie posed solemnly in front of a red hibiscus bush. Sean snapped a picture of him wearing a US navy cap, long sleeved shirt, and fatigues with cuffs rolled several times to keep them above his bare feet and the muddy ground.

Sean and I climbed slowly through a soft rain to the hill village of Waileni, our fieldsite during our three visits to the island since 1978. We walked past a fallen banyan that lay on the edge of the village like a great wooden whale beached in the last hurricane. Then we continued on to our

compound, which consists of a bamboo house, a separate kitchen, and a privy concealed in the bush. Our compound is part of a satellite hamlet just out of sight of the village plaza. It's the chief's hamlet: Chief Mathias Tariundu, a leader of the highest rank in the *hungwe*, an association in which men kill tusked boars in order to gain prestige. I am Chief Mathias' "daughter-in-law" because, in 1978, he adopted Bill as his "son." Since then, we have spent about twenty months living in his village.

Channing, our 5-year-old daughter, hurtled down the path to greet us, village playmates in her wake. Sean ducked into the cool, dark kitchen in search of something for lunch and Channing followed, chattering, her eyes on the small ripe bananas hanging from the rafters. I wasn't hungry. I thought I'd lie down for a while. It was a week before I got up again.

Bill

I, too, conducted my last scheduled interview that Friday morning. When I returned to our compound, I asked Sean where his mother was. "Mom isn't feeling well" he said. "She went inside to lie down." "No big deal," I thought, and I left her alone to take what I thought was a nap.

I had mixed feelings about leaving the island. I was pleased that our field-trip was almost over and sad for the same reason. Pleased that it had all gone so well—Margy and I had gathered good data, and we'd renewed old friendships, some of sixteen years' duration. The kids had readjusted to village life and the family had remained in good health. I was sad mostly because I was leaving Mathias, my second father, almost certainly for the last time.

Once, Mathias told me he was as old as the century; I think he believed the birth-date he assigned himself and thought of himself as not doing badly for an "olfala" of eighty-five. He'd slowed down a bit, but not much: he mediated fewer disputes in the village but he still attended just about every rank-taking in the area, the art of killing tusked boars being his particular passion. He'd raised me to my first rank in 1978; on this fieldtrip, I'd taken a second rank. Most days, we spent hours together in the shade of the canarium almond tree near his clubhouse. I'd heard most of his stories before but just being with him gave me pleasure. Most nights, we drank kava together, he and I, and felt the sweet communion of the slightly stoned.

Toward nightfall, Mathias came by our house. He leaned through an open window and I stopped typing the morning's interview. We talked for a moment about the man I had visited, then he asked: "Where's Margaret?" "Lying down. She's not feeling well." I said. "Fever?" What he meant was: "Does she have malaria?" "I think so." "Too bad." He paused, and then, with a trace of a smile: "Some men are coming over. Do you want to drink

kava with us?" "No, not tonight. I have to make dinner for the kids." "Too bad," he said, and wandered off.

Saturday, December 7: At Home at the End of the Line

Bill

Margy and I have always thought of malaria as a kind of dues. Everybody who works in northern Vanuatu gets it: it's part of the price you pay to conduct fieldwork there. We take anti-malaria pills whenever we are in the field, chloroquine in the '70s, newer and more sophisticated drugs in the '80s, but still we've both contracted the disease twice. On one occasion, my fever went high enough—and stayed high long enough—that I heard two little village dogs talking to each other across the plaza from where I sat propped against a tree. That they were holding a conversation didn't surprise me at the time; however, I remember being impressed that dogs on the island speak English.

Most often, in my experience, what happens when you develop a bad case of malaria is this: you get a splitting headache, followed by a high fever, and then you become very cold, even though the weather is warm. Your teeth begin to chatter uncontrollably and you cover yourself in blankets. You have a miserable time out there on the ice-floe, and then your personal thermostat swings into turnaround and you throw the blankets off because the room you are in has become a sauna and your sheets are soaked with sweat. By this point, you should have taken a "curative" dose of anti-malaria pills, roughly three times the weekly suppressive dose, and after a while your temperature begins to fall as rapidly as it rose only hours earlier. You feel enormous relief, then you sleep, and then you feel wrecked for about four days.

That's malaria as we knew it, awful, but not lethal. In the late 1970s, new strains of the disease appeared in northern Vanuatu. The most recent types of malaria don't respond to chloroquine or any other medication an anthropologist might have in his pack. Left untreated, the disease can be deadly.

We worried about our children contracting malaria, so we took all the precautions we could. We chose a fieldsite high in the hills of the island. There are no mosquitoes at night in Waileni: it's too cold for them. Sunday was Pillday. Every Sunday, without fail, our whole family took the bitter-tasting pills that suppress the most common strains of malaria. One of the smells I associate most vividly with fieldwork is the smokey scent of mosquito coils made from pyrethrum, the dried flower heads of chrysanthemums; we burned a coil any time we were in the house during the day. "Deep-Woods Off" was as much a part of our interviewing kit as a tape-recorder and spare batteries. For all our precautions, Margy had every symptom of malaria with which we were familiar from experience, plus a few more.

Her illness didn't respond to the initial dose of chloroquine; her fever remained constant. Starting late Friday night, she began to vomit and could hold nothing down. Medicine came up immediately; so did as much as a mouthful of water. My main concern was that she might have contracted cerebral malaria, an especially dangerous form of the disease, but I was almost equally concerned about the possibility that she might become severely dehydrated. How long can a person with a fever last without water? Three days? Less? A bit more, perhaps? I wasn't sure, but I knew that it wasn't very long.

On Saturday, the seriousness of our situation struck me with full force. Not only was Margy a very sick woman: we were isolated, temporarily unable to leave our fieldsite. Margy was in no shape to walk anywhere and the single motor vehicle in the village, an old, battered Toyota truck, belonged to a leader of the area's small population of Seventh Day Adventists. Saturday is the Adventist day of worship: they maintain a strict prohibition against work of any sort on Saturday, their Sabbath, and they count driving a truck as "work." Even if we had transport, our options were limited. A truck could drive us to the cowpasture that serves as a landing strip on that part of the island, but no plane was due until Monday or, possibly, Tuesday. A truck also could take us an hour over rough road to a small hospital located on the southeastern tip of the island. The hospital is staffed by two "doctors" whose titles are honorific: one holds a degree in hospital administration while the other, "Dr." David, has received training roughly equivalent to a North American paramedic. Regardless of their qualifications, we perceived the hospital as our best hope for obtaining medical aid. But we had no way to get there.

So all day Saturday I stayed in our compound. I transcribed interviews and, every so often, checked on Margy, remaining with her for as long as she wanted company, which was never very long. She was pale and her eyes had become dull and sunken. Her skin was hot, as if she had a furnace casting off heat inside her body. She couldn't read (a side-effect of the malarial headache) and she couldn't sleep either. So she spent most of her time staring at four photographs of horses I'd torn from a Minolta calendar and taped to the bamboo wall of the room.

The village was quiet: all the kids, including our own, were off in the bush, hunting for crayfish or pigeons, gathering nuts, playing games. Around noon, Mathias came in to check on Margy's condition. He leaned through the big open window in the bamboo wall of the house and rested his forearms on the sill. He looked very old and his eyes were troubled. "How is she?" he asked. "Not so good. About the same. She still has the fever." He slowly and audibly exhaled, eyes fixed on the floor. Then he looked up, directly at me. "What do you think she has?" I told him I still thought she had malaria.

"Did you give her the medicine?" "Yes. But it won't stay down." He thought about this for a moment and then shook his head. "You say it's malaria but if it is, then your medicine should help her." His statement didn't surprise me. I'd heard many times his view that Western medicine was made for white people; "hospital medicine" (as opposed to "bush medicine") always helped restore white people to good health. Modern medicine sometimes worked with islanders; other times, bush medicine worked better. "Well," I said, "I think it's a *different* kind of malaria."

He quickly raised and lowered his eyebrows. It was an ambiguous gesture that could signify agreement or a witholding of judgement or even disagreement, but with a desire to avoid confrontation. He left abruptly, without saying another word, and retreated to the cool semi-darkness of his men's house. I didn't see him again for the rest of the day.

Sunday, December 8: The Farewell Feast

Bill

In the January before our August arrival in Vanuatu, Hurricane Nigel devastated most of the northern islands of the archipelago. On Ambae, only one person lost his life in the hurricane but damage to property was immense: according to the government newspaper, over 90 percent of the houses on the island were flattened. When we heard the news in Canada, we wanted to do something to help the relief effort on Ambae, especially that part of the island with which we had longstanding ties. We conduct our fieldwork in the Anglican sector of Ambae and, at that time, Margy attended the Anglican church in our neighbourhood in Canada. She received permission from the minister of the church to give a Sunday sermon concerning the plight of the people in Vanuatu. Part of the collection was set aside for hurricane relief. A few weeks later, she showed slides and gave a talk to a church woman's group. They too made a generous contribution to the small relief fund we were accumulating.

Margy had planned to present part of the money she had collected to Waileni in church on our final Sunday in the village. She was too sick to attend the service, so I acted in her stead. I explained the origin of the funds she had collected. Mathias stood up and made a short, graceful speech thanking us on behalf of the community. After church, I went immediately to find the man with the truck to take my wife to hospital.

Margaret

The very complexity of a passage that I had always performed simply and without thought brought home to me, and to our neighbours, how quickly I had become as weak as the oldest, feeblest widow in the village. To walk from our house to the waiting Toyota Landcruiser, pull open its heavy, squeaky door, clamber into the passenger seat, and close the door behind me

was much more than I could accomplish on my own. I leaned heavily on Bill's arm as he led me across the few yards that separated our house from the truck. I tried to smile but the eyes that gazed back solemnly reflected my own discovery that, try as I might, I could not even create the illusion of being less sick than everyone feared. This scared me. And I could see that it scared Sean and Channing. Bill helped me into the passenger seat, closed the door, boosted himself into the truckbed and signalled the driver that we were ready. The children waved as we drove off, Channing almost, but not quite, in tears and our teenage son beside her, dry-eyed and tall. "Two brave kids," I thought.

I rode with my eyes closed as the Landcruiser lurched through potholes and ruts. The driver was proud that he had maintained this truck for nine years; he eased it carefully through washouts and down hills. Time slowed to walking speed, and I remember the journey mostly as a sequence of scents—the fecund smell of gardens, the damp earth of the forest, wood smoke from cooking fires, the rancid bacon odor of drying copra. When at last the driver shifted into third gear, I could smell cattle manure mixed with sea-salt and I knew we had reached the flat, coastal plantations. The hospital was nearby, just over the lip of an extinct volcanic crater that had blown open to the sea.

A local nurse in a crisp blue uniform and bare feet greeted us, seated me on the veranda which serves as the waiting room of the colonial-style hospital, and took my temperature. She was young and shy; long thick lashes protected her downcast eyes from the intrusive gaze of outsiders. Her sympathetic bedside manner depended entirely on softly sibilant intakes of breath combined with clicks of the tongue. Nurses in Vanuatu all seem to be experts at producing this consoling sound, somewhere between that of a purring cat and a sitting hen.

Lulled by the nurse's care, I began to think everything would be all right. Then "Dr." David appeared, dressed in Sunday shorts and a Foster's Lager T-shirt. He was proprietary about my illness. I remembered his Australian predecessor haranguing us in 1970 when we complained of loose teeth: "No one on my island gets scurvy," he bellowed as he treated our vitamin deficiency. I don't know if the old doctor was really David's role model, but it was quite clear that no sick person would be evacuated from his island if he could help it. Go back to the village, take more anti-malarial drugs and rest, he prescribed. He had seen more serious cases. Why, one man from a remote settlement came down with resistant malaria and had been unconscious for two days by the time his friends carted him to hospital. He survived and so will you, David assured me. Turning to Bill, he signalled the end of our consultation with a cheerful: "No worries, mate!"

Bill

In fieldwork, as in show business, there are times when the show must go on: our farewell feast was one such occasion. The village had planned the feast for weeks. By Sunday, the event had a momentum of its own, an inevitability quite independent of the mood and wishes of its guests or even its planners. Some invited guests lived in the deep bush of a neighbouring district. There was no way to contact them quickly in their own communities: in any case, by Sunday morning, they were on their way to our village. During the past few days, our neighbours and friends in Waileni had brought taro and yams from their gardens. They had grated and processed the tubers into the principal feast food in Vanuatu, *lap-lap*, a starchy pudding. In small compounds all around Waileni, *lap-lap* had been cooking in earth ovens since early Sunday morning.

Upon our return from the hospital, I was told to remain in our compound until preparations for the feast were complete in the main village. Sean posted himself at the window of our house overlooking the dirt track connecting our compound with the village. Around 4 pm, he saw a small group of men leave the main village and walk down the road toward our house. He turned to me. "Better lighten up, Dad," he said. "It's party time!"

My mother's brother gave me a head of kava to take with me to the feast. He gave Sean and Channing each a small bundle of *lap-lap*. Then he led us into the meeting house, located on a small rise overlooking the plaza and fallen banyan in the village. When we arrived, the meeting house was filled with the people. It had been decorated for the occasion with flowers and ornamental shrubs, gardenias shaped like ivory pinwheels, hibiscus as red as heartsblood, crotons with corkscrew leaves that look like a thermal map, splashes of sea-green on a base of vivid canary-yellow. The three of us were seated on a plain wooden bench: facing us were ten heads of kava and twenty-six bundles of *lap-lap* wrapped in banana leaves, each weighing from ten to fifteen pounds—a lifetime supply unless you know the rules for disposing of it. Channing's friend, Ndiu, ten years old, placed an artificial lei around her neck. This was an honour indeed: in Waileni, real flowers are commonplace but plastic flowers (which bridesmaids carry in all church weddings) cost money and last indefinitely. Sean and I received wreaths of real frangipani. In fact, Ndiu placed two leis around my neck, one for the absent Margy.

There were speeches of welcome and thanksgiving, of friendship and the sorrows of distance, and then ten half coconut-shells of kava were set out in front of the bench where I was sitting, and I drank the gray-coloured, bitter liquid with all the chiefs, a kind of kastom communion. According to one local myth, kava first grew from the decomposing genitalia of a murdered woman and everyone agrees it tastes terrible. It is acceptable, even polite, to

make loud phlegm-summoning noises and then spit after drinking kava. So the chiefs and I all rushed outside the meeting house as soon as we had drained our shells. There we all stood, lined up on the grass in front of the meeting house, spitting over the edge of the small rise, and at that precise moment the sun broke through the clouds, bathing the fallen banyan across the plaza in golden light.

It was the last light of late afternoon. Night fell quickly and I distributed the bundles of taro and yam pudding with the help of my adoptive kinsmen. Women and children began to leave the area of the meeting house for their own compounds. Most of the men stayed behind to drink more kava. The wife of my mother's brother sent one of her children to tell me that I was to remain with the men, that she would look after Margy and would summon me if I was needed. I trusted her and, gratefully, I accepted her offer. As I waited for my second shell of kava, some of the men asked me about Margy's condition. I told them she had malaria and they said "ahhhh" or "sori" or else they drew in their breath sharply through their teeth in an expression of sympathy. I had no idea at the time how thoroughly the villagers rejected my diagnosis in favour of their own judgement.

I returned home after my second shell of kava. As soon as I stepped through the door of our house, I wondered if I was hallucinating. Margy was sitting up in bed. By the light of a single kerosene lantern at her bedside, I could see that she was grinning. That struck me as odd but odder still was the way she smelled. She smelled smoky, funky, as if she had spent the last few hours putting out a brush fire in a coconut plantation. "You'll never guess what happened while you were away," she said.

Margaret

As I lay in my bed, drifting with the fever, I became aware that not everyone was at the feast. The corrugated iron roof creaked as it expanded to absorb the heat of the day; but the bamboo floor also creaked, and for no apparent reason. From time to time, I saw worried brown faces peeking through the open window above my bed or watching me from the darkness of a doorway as I staggered to the privy. By evening, the worried faces had settled down at the foot of my bed to stay.

Woibani, the local kindergarten teacher who lived next door, acted as the spokesperson for the other women. I should realize, she explained, that while I might be ill with malaria, I was clearly suffering from something more serious. "Like what?" I asked. "Well, like spirits," she said, her dark eyes shining with excitement and concern. "Oh," I said. "The women—my mother and the others—want to do something to help you."

It soon became evident to me that I was being made an offer I couldn't refuse. "No" was not an acceptable response: what I didn't have was a choice. Looking back, I realize that the village women had no choice either. To fail to give me the appropriate customary treatment would have been like a doctor witholding a tetanus shot from someone who had rolled through a barnyard full of rusty barbed wire.

Woibani's mother inched forward from where she had been standing at the foot of the bed. She held a tiny green coconut husk. I felt the round smoothness of the coconut move down my right side from my cheeks to my thighs, while the coarse, scratchy fibers followed the same course on my left side. Then she took the coconut and the husk away and faded into the outer dark. Woibani explained to me that she was taking the implements to Eva, a local healer. Eva would say a spell over the coconut and the husk and that would begin my cure.

Eva must have been nearby. In a few minutes I heard voices outside the house: "Woibani, pssst!" Woibani slid off my bed and conversed softly with her mother through the slats in the thin wall. As she listened to her mother, Woibani looked down at the dry, woven bamboo floor of the bedroom, shook her head and said: "No, Mother, I think I'd better do it in the kitchen." I began to be apprehensive about what was going to happen next.

Soon I found myself, unsteady but upright, standing in our kitchen, surrounded by Woibani's younger sisters. They drew back as Woibani carefully put a match to the crusts of coconut husks. First, she held the burning husks and solemnly wafted the smoke around my body like a priest with a censor. The sisters cringed away from the smoke which was meant for me alone. Then she placed the little fire right between my feet. I was relieved that Woibani had had the good sense to suggest the coral floor of the kitchen for this event.

Someone handed me the small green coconut and said: "Here! Drink this in one swallow!" I did, and promptly threw up. That didn't seem to matter. Woibani helped me back to bed, and I lay there, reeking of smoke, feeling that—in a small way—I had given my body for science.

Monday, December 9, 1985: Denying the River Spirits

Bill

The night passed. Margy seemed to sleep well enough—sheer exhaustion will do that—but when we took her temperature first thing on Monday morning, I became alarmed. During the last few days, she had a relatively low fever in the morning, and then her temperature had risen gradually during the day, reaching a peak at night. Today, she was starting out close to 103. I tried again to give her some food and medicine: none of it stayed down. I decided that I had to get her out—today.

Mathias came to the house at about 6 am, as soon as he saw we were awake. He looked grim. His eyes were serious and his mouth was set in a deep frown. I assumed that he agreed with my diagnosis that Margy had malaria, even if he didn't understand the technicalities of chloroquine-resistant strains. I further assumed that he would be relieved if I put her on the plane to Espiritu Santo, where Western doctors could treat her. He listened to me in silence as I tried to reassure him that proper medical care could cure her and told him my plan to get her to Santo. I expected agreement, sympathy and relief. Instead, he wore a curious expression on his face, one I had never seen before. There was something about the set of his eyes and a certain tightness around the edges of his mouth. Then I knew: I recognized with a shock that he disbelieved and discounted what I was saying. But there was something else, too, in his expression, something more than mere disbelief, an emotion closer to contempt. What was the matter? Why was he looking at me like that? Then he told me, his voice cold and harsh:

"You white men think you know everything," he said. "You may *think* this illness is malaria, but that's just not right. If you take Margaret to Santo right now, you will kill her. She must stay here in the village." "What are you talking about?" I asked him angrily. I felt confused and defensive and not fully awake. "I'm talking about *wande*, river spirits, the ones that killed Elsie a few years ago. When your medicine had no effect on Margaret's illness, we knew it couldn't be malaria. We began to consider other possibilities, other ways of explaining why she is so sick. I thought it might be *wande* because I know she went swimming at Waisala last week. That's their place, you know; that's where they live. Last night, Eva took the young coconut that the women rubbed over Margaret's body and she dreamed on it. Early this morning—before dawn—she came to see me. She told me her dream. She said she saw rows of little houses on the banks of the Waisala, dwellings just like our own but much smaller. As Margaret swam with her friends, the *wande* watched her from the other side of the river. They liked her and they decided she must come live with them. They lined the river bank and waved at her, but she couldn't see them. She couldn't hear them either, but they were calling to her: "Come live with us. Come live with us."

Mathias's voice became soft, melodic, almost pleading as he imitated the *wande*. "Come live with us" was a bush-siren's call, entrancing, irresistible. I felt a chill run down my spine.

He continued: "Eva spoke to them in her dream. She told them that Margaret couldn't come to live with them, that they must release her. The *wande* agreed, but now Margaret must take the medicine that will cure her." "What medicine?" I asked. "It's *our* medicine," he said, "special leaves. Eva prepared some to give to Margaret. She must take it." "No," I said sharply, and knew immediately that our relationship had been altered forever.

With one word, I had shown him the limits of my trust in him and the boundary of my belief in his world. Damn it, life has its bottom lines: mosquitoes, not bush spirits, had made Margy sick; proper medical care would cure her, not concoctions made to guard against invisible enemies. I had known Mathias for sixteen years. I had spent almost two of the last eight years living with him, much more time than I had spent with my own kinsmen during the same period. During all the time we had known each other, we played our roles well: he was my teacher and I was his eager student, he was a warm father and I tried to be his loving son, he was the chief and I was his follower, bound to respect his word. Suddenly, it all seemed like play-acting. If the stakes were high enough, and I thought they were, then I was willing to take off my mask called "anthropologist" and kiss cultural relativism goodbye. What I didn't consider at the time was that he thought the stakes were high too, and he, too, was willing to take off his mask. "She *must* take the medicine," he said.

Margaret

Bill didn't know that Mathias' will had already been done. While the old leader confronted Bill in the front yard, Woibani slipped through the bushes and came silently in the side door. She stood by my bed, breathless for a moment, holding another little coconut and a green leaf, folded as if something was wrapped inside of it. "You have to drink this. Drink it all at once," she said handing me the coconut. "And here, you must eat this medicine. Eva made it for you." She opened the leaf wrapper, revealing a paste made of chopped greens. Mixed with the greens were dark brown chunky bits, like dry cat food in puréed spinach. "It's useless, Woibani. I'll just throw up." "That doesn't matter," she said reassuringly. "Just eat it and see what happens!"

"See what happens, eh? What if I take a bite of that stuff and grow so big I fill this entire house. Or would I find myself as tiny as a mouse, swimming in a pool of tears?" I really didn't say that, except in my mind. In fact, I said nothing at all as I reached out for the medicine. I heard Mathias' and Bill's voices outside, in front of the house, and I wondered what they were arguing about. I envied them their strength to argue and knew I was too tired to do likewise. The simplest thing was just to do as I was told. How could a few leaves make much difference to my poor body?

Later, Bill asked me what the leaves tasted like. They tasted green, that's all I remember. What did strike me as remarkable at the time was that they were the first thing I'd eaten since Friday that stayed down. Woibani smiled the smile of the vindicated. She *knew* the leaves would help me. Before she left, she told me with something like pride in her voice that she would bring me another round of medicine in only a few hours.

I didn't want to be around for that. Not that I felt that the medicine was harmful; I simply had no faith that herbal cures could prove effective against a new strain of malaria. The women meant well; they really cared about me; but I'd had enough.

And so I left the village. It was a visit cut short and not properly ended. The women stood at the edge of the clearing in front of our house; they did not approach the truck that came to take me to the airport. I wanted to assure them that I would be all right, but for them to really believe me, I would have had to stay in Waileni. Anyway, I was having difficulty putting words together coherently. My head had begun to buzz. I felt as if I was underwater listening to people speak on the surface. As the truck pulled out of the village and headed for the airfield, what had been ordinary daylight began to pulse and flare.

Bill

Semi-conscious and still smelling strongly of smoke, Margy must have been quite a sight to the young French pilot of the Britten-Norman "Islander" that landed on the airstrip on Ambae. He helped me carry her to the plane and settle her in the co-pilot's seat. I kissed her on the cheek and whispered to her that I love her. Then, when the pilot made ready to close the door of the aircraft, I let go of her hand and walked back to the bush shelter at the end of the runway. A few minutes later, the plane raced down the cowpasture that served as an airstrip, gathered speed, lifted, and then headed out over the coconut plantations, toward the sea. Santo was only thirty miles away but it might as well have been on another planet. My separation from Margy was complete, as complete as if she had been in Voyager passing the dark side of the moon.

That afternoon, I packed our bags. Getting ready to leave Waileni was lonely work. Except for Mathias, the compound was empty of people: no kids played under the almond tree, no women clustered around our kitchen, no men squatted on the bare packed earth in front of the clubhouse. It was an ordinary Monday in an average week. Children were in school and, for their parents, there was work to be done in the gardens, copra to be made, pigs to be tended. Mathias often remained behind when others set off to work; he was an old man, entitled to an old man's rest. Every so often, he would come to my house and sit in the place where he always sat, just inside the door, on the bamboo floor. Neither of us felt like talking. Silently, he watched me pack, and then, as silently, he would leave, only to return a little while later. His anger at me was gone but I could still feel his concern and his sadness. He *knew* I'd made a terrible mistake in sending Margy to Santo before her cure was complete. He'd done what he could but in the end I had acted just like the white man I was. There was nothing much else to say.

Tuesday, December 10, 1985: Final Acts

Bill

Getting out of the field is simple in concept (pack only two suitcases; everything else stays) but difficult in practice (you must dispose of the rest of the stuff). I arose at 3 am and went to the kitchen, my storeroom and staging area. I lit the kerosene lamp and looked around me: there on tables and on the coral floor, was the detritus of our stay in Waileni—plastic buckets, gray trade-store blankets, a machete, bright blue calico curtains, spare flip-flops, a half-empty sack of rice, a can of shaving cream, a case of corned beef, an unopened bottle of French champagne Margy and I had planned to open on our last night in the village, and more, much more. My problem was how to distribute our belongings fairly—that is, how to give everyone in the village *something*, with special gifts for special friends. I made myself a cup of coffee and sat down at a table with two pads of Scotch Post-its.

By dawn, every item in the kitchen bore a little yellow sticker with someone's name on it. I woke up the children.

Outside the house, people were gathering—under the almond tree, in the clubhouse, on the road. I could hear men's quiet laughter and women shushing noisy children. I carried the first bundles outside. It was like Christmas morning, two weeks early. Mathias received the lion's share, as was his due. He sat apart from the rest of the men and received my gifts without comment. To Eva, I gave our very best lengths of calico; to my mother's brother's wife, a silver-plated necklace I had brought from Canada for just this occasion; to Woibani, many small gifts, including Margy's favorite brush and comb. And so it continued, the final act, with everybody on stage except Margy.

Then the stage emptied: I'd given my last gift, shaken everyone's hand, said my goodbyes. For the people of Waileni, it was the beginning of another ordinary day and there was work to do. Only Mathias stayed behind, waiting for the truck that would take us to the airfield. When it arrived, I slung our suitcases up to Sean, who had clambered into the back of the truck. I lifted Channing into the Toyota's cabin, beside the driver, and shut the door. It was time to go. I stood beside the truck on the road with Mathias, not knowing how to end it, what to do or say.

"I don't know when I'll see you again," I said awkwardly, "maybe soon, though. You never know." He just stood there. "Goodbye," I said, and stuck out my hand. He just looked at it. Slowly, his gaze returned to my face, and he said loudly "Awwww, buggerit!", which is not a local word at all. He smiled and put his arms around me in a short, strong embrace and then let go of me forever.

* * * * *

The Australian doctor's wife in Santo is the only woman in town with freckles and long red hair. As we landed, before we disembarked, I saw her standing behind the wire fence bordering the airstrip. We had become close friends, and with dreadful certainty, I knew that she had come to the airfield to meet me. "My God," I thought as the plane rolled to a standstill, "what's happened to Margy?" I raced across the tarmac toward her, my mind a broth of nightmares: Margy flown out to a larger hospital, Margy in coma, even Margy dead. "She's going to be all right," I heard the red-haired woman say, "I thought you'd want to know immediately."

Recovery Time

Margaret

"You ate those leaves!" The young, bearded Australian doctor at the Santo hospital looked appalled. He was my friend and one reason we had become friends is that we seemed to share so much in common. He had visited us in the village, drunk kava with the men, and gone swimming (without ill effects) in the Waisala. I had assumed that his attitude toward customary medicine would be rather like my own: it can't do any harm and it might do some good . . . *they* take leaf potions themselves when they are sick . . . and anyway, who knows, maybe the cure for cancer grows wild in the rainforests of Ambae.

There's a certain expression that humans reserve for friends who have acted foolishly. The doctor wore that expression—benignly incredulous, bemused, embarrassed *for* me—as he stood by my bedside. He didn't want to tell me he thought my views on customary medicine were naive and romantic, but that's what he let me know. As he took my temperature, he said he had seen many patients arrive at the hospital unconscious and half-dead from the effects of "bush cures." Indigestible leaves sometimes caused intestinal blockages. In any case, he said gently, when he had finished taking my pulse, "the medicine probably *did* have an active agent. From your symptoms, I imagine they were trying to ward off the spirits with leaves that contain atropine."

My recollections of the first few days in Santo are vague. I lay in bed in the doctor's house, my jaws and every muscle in my body clenched tight, a side-effect of the massive doses of quinine the doctor gave me. He also gave me medicine to inhibit the vomiting, which had resumed some hours after Eva's treatment.

We left Santo on Thursday, four days after I'd arrived, but before I was really well enough to travel. According to the hospital scales, I had lost 15 lbs: I weighed less than when I was fourteen years old. I still couldn't walk

steadily. Both my vision and hearing were impaired from the malaria or the quinine or the leaf medicine, or all three.

In Port Vila, the capital, we stayed on the outskirts of the town in a house more suited to the plantations of Mississippi than those of Vanuatu. It was a mansion in a state of genteel decay, redolent of rotting flowers and the sea breezes and mildew. We were houseguests of a British public servant who spent early evenings and weekends whacking away at decorative shrubbery gone wild. Hibiscus flowers, purple bougainvillea vines, avocado trees, all fell to his machete and left a swath like a firebreak between the house and the jungle. I lay in bed looking out the window, listening to the hum of tropical fields and to the slap of the knife, growing stronger, and gaining distance from what had happened on Ambae.

"That Which Does Not Kill Me (Gets No Second Chance)": Conclusions from Experience

Margaret

Would I go back to Ambae? Certainly. In part, I want to return so that I can make a proper leavetaking. I want Woibani and the others to see that I have regained good health. I've written letters but I'm sure some people in the village wonder if I'm telling the whole truth. Maybe I'm shaving the edges of the truth to save them worry or maybe I'm unaware of some lasting effects of my brush with the spirits: maybe the *wande* are not so easily denied. Peoples' residual doubts will be stilled only when they see me. That's the way things are on Ambae. Seeing is believing.

When I return to Ambae, there's one thing I *won't* do: I won't swim in the Waisala. *Wande* may exist only in people's minds, but I am not brave enough to mock them or fool enough to risk another invitation to come live with them. Fieldwork is the most tempting of fates for an anthropologist, but in doing fieldwork, you don't tempt fate, not unless you're willing to do fieldwork forever.

Bill

Nietzsche said "That which does not kill me makes me stronger" and Hemingway believed him. Me, I'm not so sure. I think experience makes us wiser, wilier, sometimes sadder, but seldom stronger. If anything, a crisis such as the one we experienced is more apt to introduce new hesitancies to the human soul than to build character. To do fieldwork in a remote area, an anthropologist needs self-confidence, a sense of being able to cope with the islandness of islands, the secret ways of jungles or the emptiness of deserts. This can lead—easily—to a soldierly illusion of invulnerability, a fiction that the slithergadee (which comes out of the sea) "will get all the others, but won't

get me." Make no mistake: we are all vulnerable. It is not the mere fact of isolation that makes us vulnerable, nor is it a lack of caution or preparation that is most apt to get us into trouble. What renders us helpless most often is circumstance. Even where there are planes, there is always a last flight out. If you need to be on it, and you are not, then—for you—there might as well not be any flights at all.

Another thing I learned from the events surrounding Margy's illness concerns a hidden element in the economics of fieldwork. Anthropologists never view themselves as being a burden on their hosts: we all try to repay the many kindnesses of the people we study in whatever ways we can. It's true that there is a sense in which our exchange with our host communities always is imbalanced: without fieldwork, we would have no careers as anthropologists. We never repay the people we study for the benefits we receive in our own societies from our fieldwork. But it's also true that reciprocity always underlies a good relationship between a fieldworker and a host community—we exchange goods for glimpses into lives, the rewards of learning for the pleasures of teaching, big gifts for oceans of story and a host of intangibles. Everyday exchange and mutual generosity come to feel natural, balanced, value given for value received, a relationship between equals who like each other. What I learned during our last fieldwork was that some people had been giving us gifts that we hadn't even recognized, let alone repaid. Margy's illness cast into bold relief the degree to which our presence in the village was a burden to Mathias. We chose to live with him because we respected his knowledge and liked his personality. It was easy for us to choose him; it was an added burden for him to accept us. He likes us, of that I'm sure, but he also felt very, very responsible for our well-being. We were babes in the woods and, as such, a source of worry for him. He knew about hazards to our well-being (river spirits, bush spirits, God knows what else) of which we were either unaware or else did not take seriously as threats. He loved us, I think, and I also think he must have counted the days until our departure. When we left him, we were sad; he may have been sad too, but he also was relieved. It couldn't have been otherwise. Looking back, I am a bit mystified that he managed to tolerate us for so long with such apparent ease and good humour.

The final lesson I learned was the hardest of all, and it has to do with the *real* politics of fieldwork. In most places, at most times, anthropologists conduct fieldwork in an atmosphere of political relativism—we observe but do not interfere; the people we study tolerate our observation and do not attempt to exercise authority over us. A crisis can change all that. During our final days in Waileni, Margy and I became key participants in a small-scale drama involving the politics of curing and, by so doing, we became less innocent about the political realities of fieldwork. I had always thought that my rela-

tionship with Mathias was based on rough and ready equality and bonds of mutual goodwill. After all, he adopted me: I interpreted that as having to do with kinship and amity, not politics. But Mathias understood something I did not: ordinary sentiments of friendship and affection are inappropriate to extraordinary times. He is the chief of a territory—we were in his territory at the point at which Margy became ill. I assumed (incorrectly) that he would never try to impose his will on us. He assumed (incorrectly) that I would not challenge his decision in a time of crisis. Being in conflict with each other was a learning experience for us both. We both learned something about ourselves, about each other and about each other's culture. Those lessons are important, and there are other lessons I learned that are less cautionary and more personal; they are implicit in the story we have told and need no underlining. The lessons we learn breed lessons we go on learning. Even when anthropologists return from the field, they continue to do fieldwork as they remember and interpret their experiences and learn from them. In that sense, for as long as we care, we do fieldwork forever.

Note

* "To Die on Ambae: On The Possibility of Doing Fieldwork Forever" will be published as a chapter in Philip DeVita, ed., *The Humbled Anthropologist: Tales from the Pacific* (Wadsworth Publishing Co.).