The Never-ending Island

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What once might have been Atlantis sank to the bottom of the ocean and came out on the other side of the world. What once was a flourishing and prosperous rock, a flowering, ever-evolving achievement, the pride of mankind, became a backward, degenerate lump of human mess and misery.

My father calls that second country Pazienza, a land alive only in memory, and better loved only by memory. Perhaps he means to live up to the name of his homeland, but he does patiently spend his life poring over ancient maps and setting up the most frightful calculations on his second-hand computer. Or maybe he does not, as he cannot be spoken to while he is in the heat of figuring out the where and when of a new island. He is sure that it will happen again one day; the island will resurface, bringing with it all the forward fortune that Atlantis once had.

It stands to reason, he argues, that what advancements there were in Atlantis, and what regressions there were in Pazienza, would then become a pendulum swing back to advancements.

Well then, I argue back, does it not stand to reason that the island will resurface where Atlantis once was, again at the other side of the world?

He waves me impatiently away. It isn't so simple, he tells me, there are at least three new possible locations for this new Atlantis.

And I think it isn't just complicated, it is also impossible. I can see by how much paper my father has printed and thrown away; I can look on all

the wrong calculations according to plate tectonics, continental drift, and the earth's increasingly displaced orbit around the sun.

Back to the kitchen I go, where my mother heats her rage with the stew. She is not Paziente, like him, but Patria—native to the Motherland that embraced the refugees, when finally the ocean reclaimed its island. This is mother's argument: there will be no resurfacing; the ocean had given the island a second chance, which it had thrown away in favor of self-advancement and glorification.

To tell you the truth, I do not care for their arguments, and I do not understand why they had to come together in the first place, and have me, when they cannot even agree to the where and when of dinnertime. My mother clings to illusions that we could still be a family that eats together, but by now we ought to accept the fact that my father will eat alone, at a time inconvenient to the rest of us, when the leftovers have turned moldy. He will be out of sorts, proclaiming himself the imbecile, not worthy of solving an important problem for his people.

What I really want to know is why my mother can't call him to dinner in the first place. Why does it have to be me? I usually don't mind keeping my mother company; after all, I like her cooking. But today she tries to send me back to my father after he has driven me away, and I am hungry. I rush out of the kitchen and cross the backyard to enter Old Reyes' hut.

Old Reyes has stayed in bed today, with a bowl of rice soup on a cushion beside him. "Has the world's most urgent mystery been solved?" Old Reyes calls by way of greeting. He waves me to his table, where there's a plate of olives and cheese, and bread in the bread bin. I try not to think of my mother's warm food, the strips of beef over steamed rice, brimming with her garlic and mushroom gravy.

Old Reyes does not approve of father's work. What's the use of finding Pazienza, if there are no Pazientes left, is his question. (And it's true, because more and more Pazientes have left to seek their fortune elsewhere, outside of Patria). Only Pazientes can bring back Pazienza, is his answer. And one can bring back Pazienza through story.

Nobody tells a story like Old Reyes does. I remember when I was a child, among other Paziente children, sitting at Old Reyes' feet. He could still move around in those days, and he was always much more fun than the Patria Catechists who came to the camp and made us sit on chairs in their

stuffy Municipio. My mind now thinks particularly about the tale of the bamboo, how the bamboo shot out of the earth, each bamboo bearing a man and a woman. "And when the tree split down the middle and opened, they woke to the surface of the world. They shared what they could gather and hunt. They worked together tilling the soil and catching fish in the ocean. They sat in a circle and had all their meals together."

It's the thought of sharing meals that troubles me. Perhaps it is my mother who is Paziente, and my father who is Patria. How I wish just once my father could join us at table.

I help myself to Old Reyes' meager meal, trying not to think about when Old Reyes might get a fresh loaf. It's when I'm choking on a dry morsel that Vito chooses to make his entrance. As I am grasping for the water jug, he is ceremoniously pouring wine into a cup. Even if his older brother Lalo is there, frowning at all of us, he kneels on the floor and holds the wine up to me.

Of course I push the cup away, though I can't help but laugh. Vito is Patria, like my mother, with long lashes and olive skin. His dark hair curls around his ears in the most endearing way. Old Reyes' warnings about particular presumptions ring in my ears like the dissonant bells of the church in our camp.

Lalo heaves a basket of food onto the table, with such unnecessary force. Vito stands up, dusting his knees. "We've got a few more drops to make through camp, Vito," Lalo says, and turns to me. "Mai, you help Old Reyes distribute these. And get everybody ready for the Don's visit tomorrow. I mean everybody, including your loony dad."

With perfect timing, Vito drops a warm loaf onto my hands before I can clench them into fists and drive them through his brother. He folds my fingers over the bread, as Lalo leaves the hut without another glance. "My love to Auntie," he whispers, before he follows his brother out. He means my mother. Their families are related somewhere, but Old Reyes says my mother has no noble blood now, so Don Eduardo, Vito's father, will never approve a half-and-half like me. Yet another warning against presumption.

I am sorry to see Vito go, and long to run after him, but there is now the fresh bread, the grapes and cheese, to distribute throughout our part of the camp.

Vito's family belongs to a line of noble land tillers, and they grew both olives and grapes, enough to feed all of Patria. So Old Reyes told me. But they had many enemies, and one day the inconstant, unstable Government decided to build the biggest Paziente refugee camp on top of their vineyards. The family was reduced to feeding and tending the refugees, with the supposed aid of the Government, except sometimes, for months, the government aides never showed up. By the time Old Reyes was born into the camp, the family had taken it solely upon themselves to take care of the refugees—it was a matter of honor—and some of the refugees in turn began to work for the family, the family's relations, their friends, and the ever-growing, ever-extending web of connections they have made through their lives.

The camp is actually some kind of halfway house now; most of the refugees have been on Patria for so long that fewer and fewer live at the camp at all, or recall such a land as Pazienza. Most have gone to work for Patria families, and some have gone outside of Patria altogether. All the camp has left are the old, the very young, the sick and hungry. Some of them are not even Pazientes, nor Patria, but stragglers, lost travelers who never found their way again, or orphans left on the doorstep by gypsies from the South. Then there's the occasional runaway, a smuggler or two, and my mother and father who belong nowhere.

In the early evening, as I empty the basket of food in the last house, Vito finds me. As I give him back his basket, he stays my hand. His hand covers mine very gently, so that we are both holding the basket. Even so, I feel the weave of the basket handle dig into my palm.

I avoid Vito's eyes.

I understand why Old Reyes keeps warning me about these things. I know that my mother was disowned for marrying a Paziente. I know that Old Reyes does not want me, or perhaps Vito, to get hurt.

"Will you not love me, Mai?" he says in the near-dark.

My heart crushes under the weight of such a question. And I do not know why he must continue to plague me with such questions. In their big house, outside of our camp, many Patria beauties have already paraded themselves. I have heard that one had already been chosen for Lalo. It would only be a matter of time before Vito is matched too. She would be the best and brightest, the most beautiful one, and he would forget me. It is

difficult to swallow such a thought. I struggle to let the basket go, and Vito grasps my hand all the harder so that I finally cry out.

"What is it?" he asks, inspecting my hand in the light of our one remaining moon. There's a red welt, which he tries to soothe with his fingers.

But it hurts too, the way Vito looks into my face searching for answers. He looks just like my father then, with eyes that anticipate, and eyes that are full of fear.

I pull away, hiding my hands behind me.

"Let me see, Mai, let me see," he urges.

"Let me be." I say back, and even if I really don't want to, I run away.

There used to be seven moons, according to one of Old Reyes' tales. But the Sarimanok, that greedy ball of fire in the sky, gobbled them up like grains of rice, one after the other. The Pazientes called to the Sky-God, begging him not to let the firebird eat up all their light at night. And the Sky-God, hearing, gave light to the dust of the old moons, turning them into stars. He lent the last moon wings every time the Sarimanok caught up. But one day, the Sky-God will not be ready. One day the Sarimanok will steal the wings and eat up the last moon. One day the Sarimanok will starve for lack of moons, and burn out. And we shall all be in darkness.

In the darkness of my room, I wonder: within the orbit of our camp, who is the moon, who the sun? Who is the one who takes, yet the one who can never have? And who is the one who would love to be caught, to be held, engulfed forever, but for the worry of what might happen to her parents, going nowhere, living in the middle of nowhere?

O Water-God, let my father have his island back.

My mother nearly smashes her pots and pans in the effort to rouse my father from his study. Don Eduardo is due to arrive soon, with a group of doctors for Inspection.

"Almost! Almost!" my father screams, adding his own noise by pounding on the computer keys. To hear my father speak, you'd think we could pack our bags and be back on the island tomorrow. To hear him refer to his homeland, you'd think he had seen it with his own eyes. To see my father work, you'd think the island would resurface in his lifetime.

It is unclear to me whether Pazienza came to be soon after Atlantis

was not. My father is not sure either, though he hypothesizes that as it sank, it went from slow to fast until it reached the earth's core, and then from fast to slow as it traveled to the other side. It also neatly explains why the fortunes went in reverse when the island became Pazienza.

Nothing is neat, my mother often argues. Not his desk, nor his life either. She says this in an undertone so that he'll never hear. Everyone else thinks he is mad to even believe in such mythology. They say our island never surfaced; it was simply discovered. Perhaps everyone is right, and my father is wrong, and my mother and I are just here to make sure he doesn't starve accidentally. Today, my mother points out to me that my father merely married her for her computer, her science books, her access to information.

"And then," she adds, "I married him to spite my father, my family and their turned-up noses." She sniffs with her own, very straight and aquiline one. "And so I am here, in the camp, instead of outside it. And the doctors will inspect even me, me!"

And me, I start to wonder, whom shall I marry? Whom shall I spite? Will I ever live outside this camp? And does Vito—cheerful, graceful, happy boy—have it in his heart to spite anybody? Why, he loves even his nasty brother Lalo.

Both of them are present at the Inspection. They stand slightly behind their father, Don Eduardo, who stands slightly behind the Head Doctor. The Head Doctor and his team have each been given a chair and a table. We all know what to do and are no longer asked to line up, and wait to be called, by family and by hut and camp area. But my father, after each season, remains at a loss. He bumps into people, and is greeted by them, but he recognizes no one. His eyes briefly light up when he sees us before the table in front of the Head Doctor, but then he also sees my mother's scowl. Swiftly, he takes his hat off and bows to the Don, then ruffles what's left of his fine, white hair.

Vito tries to catch my eye, but I would very much rather he disappeared. I am sure that by the time the Head Doctor is done with his inspection, Vito would have had enough of my eyes and nose and ears and throat, not to mention the angry beat of my humiliated heart. And then Lalo leans forward and whispers to the Don, and Don Eduardo clears his throat to address my mother.

"Beatriz, your daughter is grown." She nods, and I am one step away from a curtsy when he adds, "We can't have her picking olives all her life. You should think about sending her to your old convent school."

"But," my mother says, wringing her hands, "Don Eduardo, she is—"

"A mixture." He does not even acknowledge my father. "The world is changing. They might take her in as a chambermaid. Perhaps there she might pick up better habits than yours."

My mother's face reddens. Idly, I wonder if behind her collar, her neck is red too. But she lifts her chin, and says for all to hear, "I thank you, Don Eduardo, for your thoughts." Her lips tighten into a straight line. Whatever she sees in the far distance, that is where I want to run. But here, inside the camp, there is nowhere to run.

After such a scene, I have to escort the Head Doctor to Old Reyes' hut. Today, Old Reyes could not get out of bed. Both his legs are swollen from the knees down. I busy myself with helping him sit up, plumping his pillows, straightening his collar, and fetching a glass of water for him. Even then, I can hear Vito arguing with his father outside.

"But I want to observe. I have set my heart on being a Doctor."

"Maybe you have set your heart on her," Lalo sneers.

"Don't be long, then," says Don Eduardo. "We have guests coming."

Vito enters the hut with a frown. Old Reyes looks at me as the Head Doctor listens to his heart. He reaches his hand out, and I take it. "The Sky-God and the Land-God were brothers," he said.

"It's just a story," I say quickly, but I do not let go his hand nor his eyes. Vito stands right beside me, talking to the Head Doctor.

"They were both in love with a litao," Old Reyes continues. "She was a woman with a tail, a creature of the sea."

A lump grows in my throat as I tell him, "I have never seen the sea."

"Neither of them could catch her."

"Neither of them really loved her. They wanted her as a prize." And I think, but even just the one brother for me, is not for me. I grit my teeth to keep the tears in.

The Head Doctor and Vito converse about Old Reyes' rheum. Less salt, one says. More exercise, says the other. But Vito is trying to draw me into their conversation. "Tell her," he tells the Head Doctor. "She takes

good care of the old man."

When the Head Doctor leaves, I follow him to the doorway, but Vito pulls me back. "Old Reyes has not ended his tale. What happens next?" He places a chair beside his, where I am supposed to sit.

"The Water-God gave them a challenge," Old Reyes says, now happy to be telling a story. "Whoever could make the litao surface from the bottom of the ocean would win her as his prize."

"Well, if she lived at the bottom of the ocean, I wonder how they knew about her in the first place." If I ever saw the sea, I think I would drown myself.

"Oh Mai," Vito says, "hush and listen!"

"I already know this story," I say. "The Sky-God makes it rain, and the Land-God makes the earth quake. She neither floats up to the surface to bathe in the rain, nor goes near land to see what all the shaking is about. In truth, she is betrothed to the Water-God. He is a very nasty fellow for playing a trick on his brothers like that."

"But that is not all of the story. The floods rise in the islands, and the land cracks and destroys everything. The Pazientes call to both the Sky-God and the Land-God for help, but they are too busy with their contest. In the end, Pazienza sinks into the sea, and becomes a new home for the Water-God's bride."

Vito says, "That's not how you said Pazienza was lost," and in spite of all the stories I have known and heard, I find myself wishing I could just sit and listen to Old Reyes tell all his tales again. When I was a child, time would stand still for me while Old Reyes spoke, and now time just marches onward, waiting for no one. Someday soon, I know, Old Reyes will fall silent, and the only private space for Vito and me will be gone.

"But it's still about the Sky-God and the Land-God," I say, inspite of myself, surprised at the connection I've made. "They were arguing about who would rule over the Pazientes."

The Land-God insisted that the Pazientes were karibangs, creatures who lived underground, in the second-layer of the earth. When the bamboo shot from the earth, some of the karibangs sprouted along to be the first men and women of Pazienza. Therefore, the Land-God felt he owned them. But the Sky-God believed it was the Sun, the Moon, and the Rain

that made the bamboo grow, and the people blossom. And so the Sky-God declared his dominion over Pazienza. Again the Water-God stepped in to arbitrate. Again, the Water-God embraced all of Pazienza to himself, claiming the land and its people.

"But of course, some of us lived, right?"

Vito sighs. "There are no such gods in our history books. Just a description of how Pazienza broke into a million pieces and the sea sucked up the shards. Some people floated on tiny bits of island until they were picked up by the galleons of Patria."

"Except that you say it much better than your history books, which are never so poetic," I point out. I've read a few battered books from my father's shelf. More stuff than anyone ever wants to know about longitude and latitude and galleon reports. I look away when he smiles, and pretend to brush dust from Old Reyes' shoulder.

"I am fine, girl," the old man says irritably. I think that perhaps he is saddened by the fact that we know his stories almost as much as he does. It's another sign that time marches on, waiting for no one. And then suddenly he grabs my hand. "Mai, very good! If you can remember all I've said, and if your father ever finds the island again, then maybe…". But then, just as suddenly, he flings my hand away and weeps. "It's no use, time never goes back to the way it was before. We might as well accept that. But even so, Mai, try to remember, for the sake of this old fool."

Again it is evening, again Vito walks me home, and again he holds my hand. If time marches onward, it also seems to run around in circles.

"I'd rather your father never found Pazienza," Vito begins. "I'd rather you stayed here with me. I wish you'd stay here forever with me."

It is I who am filled with fear. "You would much rather I stayed in this camp forever. Maybe I am going away."

"But where would you go?"

"To the convent. I am going to be a chambermaid."

Vito draws me to him. "Nonsense. You take Lalo and my father to heart."

"And you? You take nothing seriously?"

He is silent. I try to break away from his grasp, but he pulls me closer. "It is you, Mai, who makes a joke of everything I say. What must I do so

that you will trust me?"

And if time ran around in circles, it also makes for that sudden break and leap forward. I cannot stand a perfect circle. I would much rather break my heart and get it over with.

"Get my father to sup with us. Just once," I say, and then I run.

On my return home, there is another circle to follow, round and round my father in this never-ending dinner charade. My mother sits in her place at table, and she says, "Wash your hands, we will now have our meal. Can you call your father to table, please?"

But since I am still riding the wind on my leap forward, I say, "When will you admit that he will never say yes?"

"Let me call him, Señora," Vito says behind me.

My mother and I cannot utter a sound. Vito has never set foot in our hut before. He walks unhurriedly to my father's study, and knocks politely on the door.

"Almost!" my father cries, but he cannot say the word again when Vito opens his door.

And just like that, we are all at table, and I do not know where to look or what to think. My father keeps looking at me as I pass him the rice, the strips of beef, the bowl of gravy. He also keeps looking down at his plate, as if he has never seen food before. I know this is the same untouched meal from lunch. My mother is flushed with pleasure; she tries to draw my father and Vito into conversation by describing how she cooked the beef, what garnishings she used, the cabbage and red peppers that give it more flavor. And Vito speaks to her graciously, complementing her on her expertise in cooking. They are all at their best behavior, and I feel as if I have disappeared.

None of us really know how to eat with company. My mother keeps elbowing me to join in the conversation, and my father bangs his cup on the table, indicating to my mother that she has forgotten his drink, which is usually a mixture of crushed fruit we can grow in our own backyard. Vito tells everyone to be at their ease, and to let him be of some service. He opens my mother's cupboard, and as he has suspected, my mother has a little stock of wine with his family's crest rupturing the surface of the bottle. I already know what is on his mind, and rise quickly. A chair topples down,

and a disapproving sound escapes my mother's lips before she can stop it.

"What are you doing?" I demand, barring his way to our cups.

"We had a deal, Mai," he says, his eyes twinkling.

"It was a joke," I say.

"So you take nothing seriously?" He advances toward me and I have to step aside or risk contact with his arm. He reaches for the goblet. It is clear now, even to my parents, why he is here.

My mother, still a Patria at heart, wavers between pride and uncertainty. "That is not your family cup," she says.

My father, still struggling with all his thoughts, reacts with horror. "But Señor, she is not Patria. Your father…"

"My father is not here, sir. He has made his choice for Lalo, and I will make my own choices." He pours wine into the goblet, and kneels at my feet, proffering the cup. "Won't you agree with me, Mai? Couldn't you trust me? Shouldn't we be starting our own traditions from this moment on?"

I am trying to get him to stand up. "Please, Vito, please. Stop making jokes."

We are at this awkward impasse when Lalo barges in. "I'm afraid you've stayed out too long," he tells his brother. "Father will be here shortly."

It was not a pleasant moment for our family, and I would have wanted to quickly forget it. Vito took a swing at his brother, and was in disgrace when Don Eduardo arrived with the news: the guests at their manor had waited too long. Señora Maria Faustino de Gracia might have been the perfect match for Vito, but he had given in to baser tastes and instincts. This was unfortunately too much for my mother, who instantly threw our evening meal along with the crockery in the Don's direction. He was also, unfortunately, accompanied by a retinue of foremen, who restrained Vito, my mother, and anyone else who wanted to attack the Don.

"Beatriz," Don Eduardo said, "I took you in when none of your own family wanted you, and this is how you repay me, by stealing my son. You are to leave this camp tonight, and God bless you on your way."

And this is how I finally leave the camp behind. We are escorted to his carriage, with just the clothes on our back and a bit of the bread that

Vito and Lalo brought to camp the other day. Time runs out too, it disappears, when you need it most. We cannot even say goodbye to Old Reyes, I cannot even have my last look at the man I love.

We are deposited at a hut in the first town just outside Don Eduardo's lands. The landlord, Señor Joaquin, is yet another of my mother's relations, but he chooses to ignore her, and pretend she is another stranger he must attend to, while she has the money. I eye the pouch that one of Don Eduardo's men had given my mother. How long before it all runs out?

When we move in, I realize I have to sleep on the floor. My parents speak no word of blame, and my eyes are dry. My mother refuses to speak at all. Surprisingly, it is my father who breaks the silence. He realizes at last what he has lost: access to his computer and his files. We fall asleep to the thrum of his regrets.

By the next day he has talked himself into a fever, and by nightfall he is delirious. He struggles to get up and finds himself defeated by the bedclothes. He writes his equations on them, with the use of a pen that he has found somehow. "Almost, almost," he murmurs, "please don't distract me, the island is here. It's here. Get me a map, a map, I'll tell you where."

My mother looks at him askance and says nothing. She leaves the hut the next morning, and I am left with my father and our dwindling pieces of bread. I try to coax him to eat.

He holds my hands, my face. "You cannot stay here. You have to return. This is not your land. They are not your people."

I look at my father because he had finally granted my wish to sup with us, but he has lost his way. He is lost to mass, velocity, and gravity. He is lost in his equations.

I try to take the pen away from him. "Even the Water-God got his heart broken. It seems no one in our cosmogony is spared. This was during the time of his long engagement with the litao, whom we shall call Maria. Have you noticed, father, that everyone beautiful and kind and marriageable is called Maria in our stories? But you have never listened to Old Reyes. Well, then, let me tell you this tale."

A young Paziente fisherman came upon the litao while they bathed in the river one day. They were Maria and her sisters. He found where they had hid their tails under some river fronds, and on a whim, took one home.

The tail turned out to be Maria's. While her sisters found theirs to wear, for their return to the sea, Maria had to stay and search for her tail. She could not return without it.

The fisherman found her weeping by the riverbank the very next day. Though he knew what ailed her, he kept silent about it, and took her home. Soon, she agreed to be his wife.

The Water-God could do nothing about it. His brothers were too busy fighting to listen to his troubles. He learned from Maria's sisters that his betrothed had lost her tail and would soon wed the fisherman.

He could do nothing but bide his time, and watch Maria from afar. She would come to the shore to bid her husband goodbye on his fishing expeditions. The fisherman, he protected, because he stood between Maria and their neighbors, who were suspicious of Maria because she was so different. And then, one day, the Water-God met Maria's children swimming in the sea…

"A boy and a girl, Father," I say, but he barely lifts his head. So busy is he writing yet more equations. And I am near tears at last, for I remember a boy and a girl hiding behind a thousand year-old olive tree, pretending to be the first bamboo man and bamboo woman. Vito had also loved Old Reyes' stories. In his spare time away from school, he would go to the old man's hut and listen. And I have lost them all, Vito, Old Reyes, and one day soon, my father.

"Give me a map, girl," he croaks, then pushes my empty hand away. "Never mind, I will make my own."

Above us, the sky thunders and quakes. There is so much rain in the next few days. My father strains to the last against the bedclothes. He begs me to pack my bags and reclaim the island. We will have to bury him soon, in the second layer of the earth. He will be swallowed up by land that is not his. Will there be karibangs to meet him? Have they too been lost when Pazienza went under?

My mother, who is Patria, somehow sends word to Don Eduardo. She bears my father's body back to the camp, where he can be buried. I am not allowed the journey. Perhaps Don Eduardo fears that Vito still loves me. It is then that I make for the city and the harbor. My mother is Patria, she can make her way back to her people. I am neither Patria nor Paziente, I have to make my own way.

The Water-God told the children to look in their father's hiding places. They thought it was a game. One day they told him they had seen something funny and strange under their hut, a fishtail as long as their father's boat. And then the Water-god told them to tell their mother about the tail, and about him. Obviously Maria had a choice to make, and she made it. Perhaps it was because the neighbors had never truly accepted her. Perhaps her husband the fisherman had never truly loved her. Perhaps it was just because she was a creature of the sea, and therefore had to return to the sea.

I have looked at my father's hiding place, it is full of calculations, and they are correct. The blanket that I bundle up in at night has a map that is fading, like Pazienza; still, it does not completely wash out. Somewhere past Éire, where he indicated, there is a new island re-forming, on an ancient ocean that yields but also takes away.

Everywhere the reports are the same: Somewhere past Éire, silver modules shoot down from the sky, each bearing a man and a woman. They are tiny, stout creatures, with a head full of hair. Their modules connect and become a floating island. Elsewhere there is doubt and hesitation, but I have found one captain, one galleon, who must rush, and race, to be the first to get there and greet them. I have the exact coordinates, thus have I found my place in the ship. And thus must I go back to the sea, if it will have me.

[with thanks to Dad, who created Pazienza]