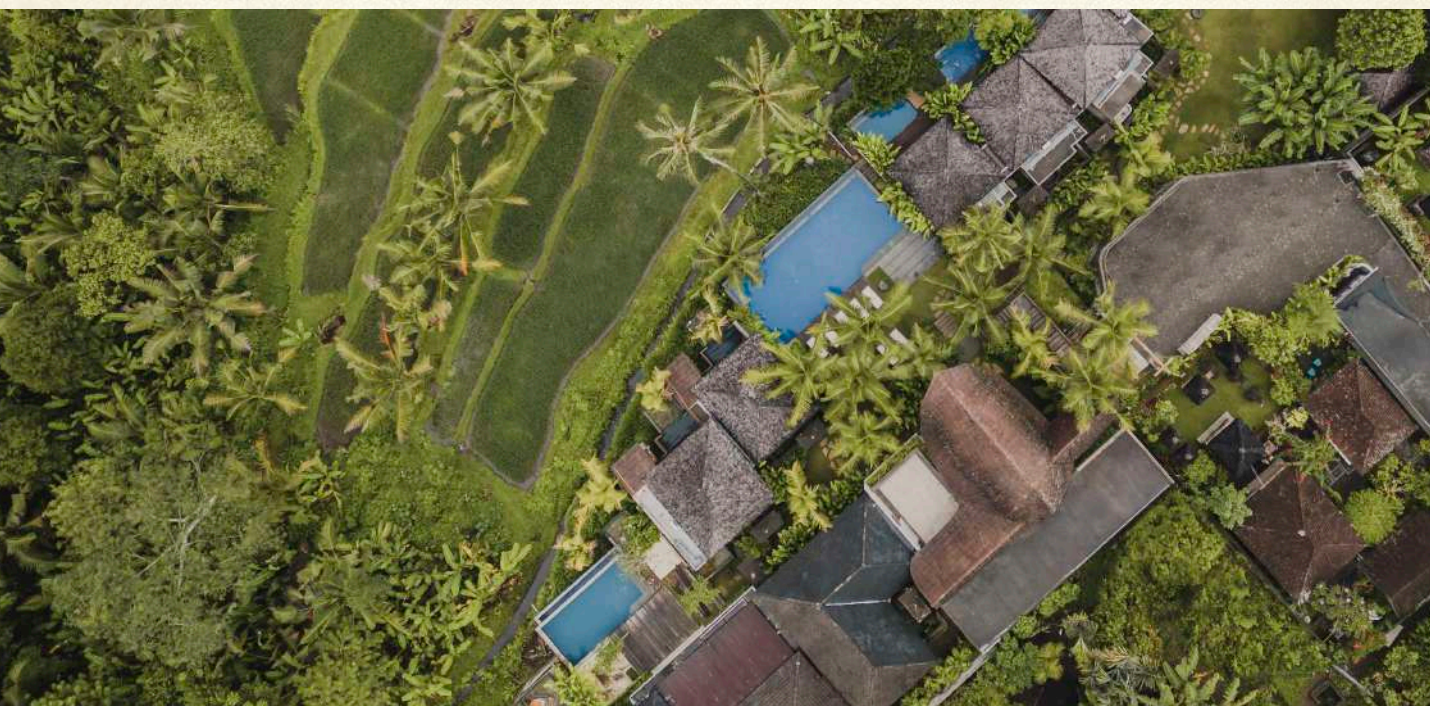




Niang's Storybook

Original Stories from Ubud, as curated by Niang Maar

*An in-room storybook for **Maar Resort, Ubud***



Come in, come in. Sit wherever is comfortable.

I have been telling stories in this valley for a very long time - some I heard from my own grandmother, some I have simply lived long enough to witness myself. They are not all cheerful, and they are not all certain. Bali holds many versions of the same old tale, and I will not pretend to know which one is truest. I only know the ones that were passed to me, with love, and I am passing them now to you.

Take your time with these pages. There is no test at the end, no map to follow. Just ten small stories, and ten small reasons to love this place a little more than you already do.

Sleep well, and dream kindly of Ubud.

- Niang



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Chapter 1: The Origins of Ubud

Rsi Markandeya and the Origins of Ubud

Have you ever stood where two rivers meet, and felt the air itself grow quiet?

There is such a place at the edge of Ubud, in Campuhan, where the water seems to hold its breath. Niang has walked there since she was a girl, and every time, she remembers a story her own grandmother told her, a story that is older than anyone now living, older even than Ubud's name. Long ago, so old stories say, a holy man came walking from far across the sea. His name was Rsi Markandeya, and he came from India by way of Java, carrying with him the teachings of a faith that would take root across this island.

The first time he tried to settle in Bali, misfortune found him. Sickness spread among his followers, and he was forced to lead the survivors back home to gather their strength. But something about this island had already taken hold of him, and before long, he returned; this time with a clearer sense of where he was meant to go. It is said that on his travels, Rsi Markandeya received a vision: that he should bury five precious metals in the earth at the foot of a great mountain, and that this place would become the spiritual heart of Bali. That mountain is Gunung Agung, and today it is home to Pura Besakih, Bali's largest and most revered temple.

Afterward, drawn by a feeling he could not quite explain, Rsi Markandeya and his followers found their way to the confluence of two rivers in the hills of Ubud, a place called Campuhan. There, he felt a stillness and a strength he had felt nowhere else. He built a small temple, Pura Gunung Lebah, to mark the spot. Around that river junction, the earth was rich with wild plants; herbs and roots long used for healing. In the old Balinese language, the word for medicine is ubad. Over time, this is the name many elieve gave rise to "Ubud". Pura Gunung Lebah still stands today, quiet and unhurried, at the start of the Campuhan Ridge Walk. Balinese families still come to bathe in the river and collect holy water for ceremonies, just as they have for longer than anyone can count.

Niang likes to remind her grandchildren that Rsi Markandeya did not find this place on his first try. He had to leave, and grieve, and begin again before he found where he belonged. Perhaps that is why Balinese people say a place of healing is rarely found quickly, it is found by those who are willing to return.

Chapter 2: The Forest That Remembers an Old Story

The Monkey Army of Ubud's Sacred Monkey Forest

Niang's grandchildren always want to know why the monkeys of Ubud are treated differently from monkeys anywhere else. Why are there shrines among the trees? Why do people bow their heads as they pass? To answer that, Niang has to tell you a much older story, one that comes not from Bali at all, but travelled here from India, long, long ago.

In the great epic called the Ramayana, still performed in dance and shadow puppet theatre across Bali today, a prince named Rama loses his wife, Sita, to a demon king. To win her back, Rama is helped by an army of monkeys, clever, loyal, and fiercely brave. Their greatest general is Hanuman, a monkey blessed with extraordinary strength and unshakable devotion.

Hanuman leaps across oceans, carries mountains, and never once abandons his friends. In Balinese belief, he has come to represent loyalty, courage, and the quiet power of putting others before yourself.

Because of this story, monkeys hold a special place in Balinese Hinduism. They are seen as creatures who can be both mischievous and sacred; protectors of temples, but also reminders that even the most respected among us can be a little unruly.

Now, Niang must be honest with you, the way a good grandmother should: the monkeys living in Ubud's forest today are not literally descendants of Hanuman's army. That is not what the old story means. It means something gentler, that this forest, and its temple, Pura Dalem Agung Padangtegal, are watched over, and that the monkeys who live there are treated as part of something sacred, not simply as wild animals to be tolerated.

You can visit that forest today, right in the heart of Ubud. It is still an active place of worship, with offerings laid daily, and the temple within it is still used for ceremonies.

Loyalty does not always look noble or grand. Sometimes it looks like a small, curious creature swinging through the trees, keeping watch over a place it was never asked to protect.





Chapter 3: The Story Niang Tells Carefully

The Monkey Army of Ubud's Sacred Monkey Forest

Not every story Niang tells is soft and easy to fall asleep to. Some stories are meant to sit with you a while, the way a hard truth does.

This is one of them, the story of Calonarang, told for centuries in Bali through sacred dance and temple performance. Niang wants you to hear it the way it was meant to be heard: not as a simple tale of a villain defeated, but as something far more complicated, and far more human.

Long ago, in a version of the story set in old Java, there lived a widow named Calonarang. She had a daughter, Ratna Manggali, whom no man dared marry, for people feared and mistrusted her mother, believing Calonarang held dangerous, magical power.

Grief and humiliation are heavy things to carry, and in her sorrow and anger, Calonarang turned to a fearsome goddess for strength, and unleashed chaos and sickness upon the land.

A wise priest was sent to face her. In the versions performed in Bali today, this confrontation becomes something larger than a battle between one woman and one man, it becomes the eternal dance between Rangda, the fierce widow-witch, and Barong, the great protective spirit, part lion, part guardian,

beloved by the Balinese people. Their meeting is neither a clean victory nor a clean defeat.

In the performance, men fall into trance, turning blades upon themselves, protected only by Barong's presence. It is fierce, and loud, and unsettling and it is meant to be. It is not simply "good defeating evil." It is a reminder that both forces exist within the world, and within us, and that neither one ever fully disappears.

You may still see this performance today, especially at Pura Dalem Ubud and other Pura Dalem temples during their anniversary ceremonies. The masks of Rangda and Barong are treated with such respect that they are kept, side by side, inside the temple itself between performances.

There are many versions of this story across Bali, and Niang does not claim to tell you the only true one. Ask a dozen Balinese elders, and you may hear a dozen retellings.

Niang's own grandmother used to say that light needs darkness to be seen at all, and that a story which frightens us a little is often the one that teaches us the most about balance

Chapter 4: The Goddess Who Walks Through Green Fields

Dewi Sri and the Rice Terraces of Tegallalang

Have you noticed, on your way into Ubud, how the rice fields seem to glow - even on a cloudy day?

Niang has worked those fields herself, as a girl, and she still remembers her mother pausing before each planting to lay a small offering at the edge of the paddy. "For Dewi Sri," her mother would say. "So that we remember rice is not only food. It is a gift."

Dewi Sri is the goddess of rice, fertility, and abundance, and in Bali her presence is felt everywhere rice is grown. Farmers believe her spirit moves through the fields as the rice ripens, and every stage of growing - planting, tending, harvesting - is accompanied by small rituals of gratitude.

None of this would be possible without one of Bali's true wonders: the Subak system. For over a thousand years, Balinese farmers have shared water fairly across the island's terraced hillsides through a network of canals, tunnels, and water temples - all coordinated

not by a single ruler, but by the farming communities themselves, guided by shared belief and cooperation. This way of farming reflects a larger Balinese idea called Tri Hita Karana - the belief that wellbeing depends on harmony between people, nature, and the spiritual world. You will see small shrines tucked at the corners of paddies, offerings of flowers and rice laid quietly each morning, giving thanks before anything is asked for.

The terraces around Tegallalang and Ceking, just north of Ubud, are some of the most beautiful examples of this living tradition - recognised for their cultural and agricultural importance. Walk among them, and you may still see farmers tending the fields exactly as their grandparents did.

Niang often says that the Balinese do not thank Dewi Sri only when the harvest is good - they thank her all along the way. Perhaps that is the real lesson: gratitude given only at the end is not gratitude at all.





Chapter 5: The Palace That Opened Its Doors

The Story of Puri Saren Agung

In the evening, if you walk toward the centre of Ubud, you may hear gamelan music drifting from an open courtyard. That sound has echoed from the same palace grounds for generations.

Niang remembers being a young girl, sitting cross-legged with the other village children at the edge of that courtyard, watching dancers move in the torchlight. "This place," her father told her, "is why Ubud is what it is today". Puri Saren Agung, known to most simply as Ubud Palace has been home to Ubud's royal family for generations, its buildings rebuilt and expanded many times over the centuries, including after a major earthquake in 1917. For much of its history, the palace was not only a home, but the center of Ubud's governance, ceremony, and community life.

What makes this palace's story unusual is what happened in the early twentieth century. Rather than closing its doors to outsiders, Ubud's royal family most notably Tjokorda Gede Agung

Sukawati - chose to open them. They welcomed foreign artists, scholars, and travelers, and encouraged a spirit of exchange between Balinese tradition and the wider world.

This patronage helped support Balinese dancers, musicians, carvers, and painters at a time when that support mattered greatly, allowing Ubud's artistic community not just to survive, but to flourish and become known far beyond Bali's shores.

Today, Ubud Palace still holds nightly dance performances in its courtyard; Legong, Barong, and other traditional forms open to anyone who wishes to watch. The royal family still resides in part of the compound, so a visit here is not a walk through a museum, but a step into a living tradition.

Niang believes true leadership is not about how tightly you hold onto tradition, but how generously you share it. A door left open, she says, can carry a culture farther than a door kept locked.



Chapter 6: The Water That Remembers a Battle

Indra and the Sacred Waters of Tirta Empul

Have you ever let cool water run over your open palms and felt, just for a moment, lighter than before?

Balinese people have believed in the power of water to cleanse far more than the body for a very long time. Niang wants to tell you why, through a story of a god, a wicked king, and the birth of one of Bali's holiest springs. Long ago, so the old manuscripts tell, a powerful and arrogant king named Mayadenawa ruled with cruelty. He forbade his people from worshipping the gods and used his own considerable powers carelessly and unjustly. Balinese priests, seeing the suffering this caused, prayed for help and the god Indra descended to confront him.

A long struggle followed. One night, while Indra's army slept, Mayadenawa crept into their camp walking on the sides of his feet to leave a strange, misleading trail and poisoned their water source. In the morning, Indra found his soldiers gravely ill. Rather than despair, he struck the earth with his staff, and from the ground burst a spring of pure, healing water. His soldiers drank, and were restored. It is said that this act of creation is where the sacred spring of Tirta Empul began, and that the very village nearby, Tampaksiring, takes its name from Mayadenawa's telltale sideways footprints.

Tirta Empul temple, not far from Ubud, dates back roughly a thousand years to the Warmadewa dynasty this part is documented history, distinct from the legend of its founding. Balinese Hindus still come to its pools today to perform melukat, a ritual purification, and visitors are welcome to observe, and in many cases join, with the proper respect and guidance.

Niang says that every one of us carries a little poison from time to time; old hurts, old mistakes. What matters, she says, is whether we let ourselves find the spring that washes it clean, and begin again.

Chapter 7: The Gentle Giant of Old Bali

Kebo Iwa, the Giant Protector of Bali

Some of Niang's favorite stories are about people who are far more than they first appear. This one is about a boy so large, so hungry, and so strong, that an entire kingdom feared what might happen if he was ever their enemy.

Long ago, a couple who had prayed for years for a child were finally blessed with a son. But this was no ordinary child; he grew and grew, eating more than any ten grown men, until the village could barely afford to feed him. They called him Kebo Iwa, meaning something like "Uncle Buffalo," for his enormous size. Rather than resent him, the village made a choice: they would care for him, and in return, he would use his strength for them. When drought struck, Kebo Iwa dug deep wells with his bare hands so the village would not go thirsty. When danger came, he stood as their protector.

In time, his legend grew larger still. Some say he carved the extraordinary stone shrines of Gunung Kawi with nothing but his fingernails, in a single night, as an act of devotion. Bali's archaeologists, studying the same shrines, believe they were carved by skilled human hands around the eleventh century; a reminder that a legend and a historical record can hold the same place with different kinds of truth.

Kebo Iwa's strength made Bali difficult for outside kingdoms to conquer until, in one version of the story, envoys from the powerful Majapahit Empire offered to help him dig a great well for his people, as a gesture of friendship. As he dug, trusting their intentions, they filled the pit around him, and he could not escape. Whether you find Kebo Iwa in the shape of the stone shrines at Gunung Kawi, or simply in the way Balinese elders tell his story to their grandchildren, his legend endures as one of Bali's most beloved; a giant remembered not for his size, but for how he chose to use it.

It is not strength itself that makes someone remarkable. It is what a person chooses to protect with it.





Chapter 8: When Painters Came to Ubud

Rudolf Bonnet and the Artistic Spirit of Ubud

Niang wants to be honest with you about something: long before any visitor from far away ever set foot in Ubud, this town was already full of art.

Painters, carvers, dancers, and musicians had been shaping Balinese beauty for centuries, tied closely to temple life and royal courts.

But there is a particular chapter in that story worth telling, a chapter about what can happen when people from very different worlds meet with real curiosity. In the late 1920s and 1930s, a Dutch painter named Rudolf Bonnet arrived in Bali and settled in Ubud. He was not the first foreign artist drawn to the island; the German painter Walter Spies had already made his home here but Bonnet, in particular, formed close, lasting relationships with Balinese artists, learning from them as much as he shared with them.

Together with Walter Spies, the Ubud royal family, Tjokorda Gde Agung Sukawati and his brother celebrated Balinese artist I Gusti Nyoman Lempad, they founded an association called Pita Maha in 1936. Its purpose was to support Balinese artists, encourage

high standards of craftsmanship, and help their work reach audiences beyond Bali, at a time when tourism was just beginning to change the island.

This was never a story of foreign artists arriving to "save" Balinese art. Balinese art did not need saving. It is, instead, a story of genuine exchange: Balinese artists sharing techniques passed through generations, and outside visitors bringing new materials, new eyes, and new opportunities for that work to be seen.

After the disruption of the Second World War, Bonnet and the royal family worked together to establish what became the Museum Puri Lukisan "Palace of Paintings" which opened its doors in the 1950s and remains, today, one of Ubud's most treasured places to see this era of Balinese art firsthand.

Niang believes the best things happen not when one culture teaches another, but when both sit down together, genuinely curious, and leave a little changed by what they've shared.

Chapter 9: The House on the Hill

Antonio Blanco and His Love Story in Ubud

There is a hilltop above the Campuhan river where, even now, a house full of color and imagination looks out over the valley. Niang has always found something tender in its story, even the parts she cannot fully vouch for.

Antonio Blanco, a flamboyant, well-travelled painter of Spanish descent born in Manila, arrived in Bali in 1952 already restless from years abroad. Something about the island stopped him in his tracks. The King of Ubud offered him a piece of land overlooking the river at Campuhan, and there he built his home and studio. It was here that he met Ni Ronji, a celebrated Balinese dancer. They married, and she became his lifelong muse, her image appearing again and again across his paintings for decades to come. Together they raised four children, and Bali, once a stop on his travels, became the center of his world.

Blanco was a romantic and a showman, known for his elaborate frames and vivid,

often theatrical style and many stories are told about his life and his marriage, some more documented than others. Niang tells you plainly: the details of his art and his arrival in Bali are well recorded, but some of the more romantic tales about his private life have been retold and embellished so many times over the years that it is hard to know exactly where history ends and legend begins.

Blanco's hilltop home became the Blanco Renaissance Museum, which he dreamed of opening to the public though he did not live to see it completed himself. Today, visitors can walk through his studio and see, among his many vivid works, the many faces of Ni Ronji looking back at them.

Niang believes love does not need to be perfectly documented to be real. Sometimes the truest thing a love story leaves behind is simply how much was created because of it.





Chapter 10: The Cave With a Giant's Face

Goa Gajah, the Elephant Cave Near Ubud

Just a short way outside Ubud, past rice fields and quiet village lanes, there is a cave with a doorway carved to look like an enormous, watchful face. As a child, Niang was both a little afraid of it and unable to stop staring.

This place is Goa Gajah - the Elephant Cave - though no elephants are found within it, and no one is entirely certain how it earned its name. Some believe it comes from a nearby river once shaped like an elephant; others point to old carvings nearby. Niang will not pretend to know for certain, and neither does anyone else.

What is better understood is its age: the cave and its surrounding shrines date back roughly a thousand years, to a time when Hindu and Buddhist traditions were both taking root and blending on the island. It is believed the cave itself was carved by hand, likely as a quiet hermitage for priests and monks seeking a place to meditate.

The entrance is carved into the shape of a great guardian face, its wide mouth forming the doorway itself, meant to ward off harmful spirits from whoever passes beneath it. Inside, the cave is small and dim, holding a statue of Ganesha and ancient stone symbols still used in worship. Outside, bathing pools - uncovered only in the 1950s - remind visitors that water and purification are never far from any sacred place in Bali.

Goa Gajah sits just outside Ubud, in the village of Bedulu, and remains an active place of prayer today, not simply a historical curiosity.

Balinese Hindus continue to visit for ceremonies tied to the lunar calendar.

Niang likes to remind her grandchildren that no one fully knows why this cave earned its name, or exactly who first carved that great watchful face. Some places, she says, remind us that not everything needs to be fully understood to be respected.

Closing Note from Niang

So - you have sat with me a while, and heard the stories that have followed my family, my village, and this valley for longer than I have been alive.

Some of these tales are legend, some are history, and some sit somewhere between the two - the way most good stories do. That is alright. Bali does not ask you to choose between what is remembered and what is proven. It asks you only to listen with an open heart. Wherever you go from here, I hope a little of Ubud walks with you. And if you ever find yourself back beneath these trees, you know where to find me.

Until then - sleep well, and thank you for sitting with Niang.

