

THE SHARK CALLER



My name is Blue Wing and I live in my waspapi's house. My waspapi is Siringen – the shark caller. Close to seventy-five ages old. From the clan of Tarangun. Son of the maker of paddles and the calmer of seas.

But I am not a shark caller.

“Why not?” It is a question I have asked Siringen a hundred thousand taim.

“You know why,” Siringen replies for the hundred thousandth taim.

“But I want to be able to call the sharks. You know this. I have told you for so long now that my jaw aches whenever I say it. I want to call the sharks. Teach me the magic and show me the ways. I may be a girl but I can do as well as – no, I can do even mobeta than – a boy.” I stick my chin out to show him I am tough and fierce.

But Siringen knows all this anyway and just shakes his head for the hundred thousandth taim.



Every second is of infinite value.

Goethe

TO MY BROTHERS

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THE SHARK CALLER



ZILLAH BETHELL



THE SEA

←
TO TOWN

COPPER MINE

CHIMERA'S
CAVE

BURIAL GROUND

LAWATBULUT
TREE

PAPAYA
GROVE

MAPLE HAMELIN'S
HUT

MR JEFFREY'S
SHOP

THE SEA

SIRINGEN'S
HUT

BIGMAN'S
COMPOUND

MAP OF
BLUE WING'S
VILLAGE

BLUE WING'S VILLAGE IS IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA.
PAPUA NEW GUINEA IS AN ISLAND COUNTRY
BETWEEN THE PACIFIC OCEAN AND THE
CORAL SEA, AND LIES 150 KILOMETRES
FROM AUSTRALIA.



GLOSSARY OF PAPUAN PIDGIN ENGLISH TERMS

bikpela = big
hambak = annoying
hat = hot
kapiak = breadfruit
kapul = small marsupial
kasaman = rope and wood device used in shark calling
kaukau = sweet potato
kol = cold
larung = coconut rattle used in shark calling
liklik = little
longlong = crazy
lukim = look
mobeta = better
Moroa = Papuan god
namba wan / tu = first / second
nogut = bad
oltaim = always / all the time
orait = all right
raskol = criminal
saksak = milk and honey pudding

snek = snake
soldia = soldier
taim = time
tambu = traditions
tarangau = eagle
taur = conch shell
telefon = telephone
tru = true / very

NUMBERS (NAMBAS):

wanpela = one
tupela = two
tripela = three
fopela = four
faipela = five
sikispela = six
sevenpela = seven
etpela = eight
nainpela = nine
tenpela = ten
wanpela ten wan = eleven
wanpela ten tu = twelve
tupela ten = twenty
tripela ten = thirty
wan-handet = one hundred



BLUE WING

I stand on the edge of the moonflower coral and take a cormorant dive into the blue. My ears fill, my nose bubbles and my eyes sting; but I can see *tru* clear in this underwater kingdom and I can hold my breath for a very long *taim*.

I somersault over an angelfish, then float for a while – sway, sway, sway – like a ribbon of seaweed in the beautiful cool. How many secrets live down here? How many tight-shut oyster shells? Nobody knows. Not even me.

I climb back onto the reef, careful not to cut my feet on the coral that looks like chewing gum. The sun hits me with a slap. It is going to be a rude and uncivil person today, the sun.

Soon the motorboat will come, bringing the tourists. “Blue Wing,” Siringen will say if I am close, or if I am far

he will blow the *taur* shell to announce “*It is time.*” And I will dive off the coral, swim hard to the shore, take my place in the canoe.

I look across the *bikpela* blue, beyond the leaping place, beyond the shark roads. There is a *liklik* black dot growing bigger and bigger, like a pupil in the darkness. *Sea Ballerina* is coming! I smile at the name, because this boat is no dancer on the waves.

I turn to the shore. Siringen is waving at me. I wave back. Standing at the edge of the sunflower coral, I dive into the sea and start swimming fast...

It is time to call the sharks.



PAT NAMBA WAN

THE SAND



WANPELA

The Man-From-England sits in the outrigger canoe with Siringen and me. Sometimes the man smiles and sometimes he frowns, his hands covering his eyes as he looks out over the dazzling water.

Siringen doesn't smile.

He doesn't smile much anyway, but today he doesn't smile at all. The Man-From-England does not make him happy. I know Siringen feels it is all wrong. The man is dressed too well. His face too clean. His hands too soft. He has more money than anyone in the village could ever dream about. More money than the god Moroa could ever imagine. And because he can pay, he can do what he wants. That's what the Bigman tells Siringen, and that is why Siringen has to take him out onto the shark roads.

Because the Man-From-England wants to kill a shark.

The man sweats. Even in his rich clothes made for the heat, he still sweats. His forehead shines with it and he has made his shirt wet. Sometimes he reaches over his round shoulders and pulls the shirt away from his skin, shaking it all off. It doesn't work because he keeps doing it. And he makes *hambak* blowing noises – I think he thinks it keeps him cool.

“Is it always this hot?” the Man-From-England asks Siringen.

“*Hat*, yes.” Siringen nods. “*Hat oltaim*.” He pushes the paddle into the sea and turns us to face the land.

I can sense the smile in the man's eyes. He hides it as well as he can, but I can sense it around him like a cloud. He finds Siringen funny. He is laughing at him, within himself.

I suddenly feel angry and hate the Man-From-England, who has swooped in like a *tarangau* spotting *kapul* in the forest. He has come to take what he likes and wants, before leaving behind what he doesn't like and doesn't want. I feel my fingernails digging into the palms of my hands.

Siringen stops paddling.

“What're you doing now?” the man says, watching Siringen taking up the coconut rattle.

“*Larung*.”

Siringen puts the rattle into the water and shakes it hard. The seawater gurgles and froths, and the coconut shells knock against each other. He stops for a short *taim* before doing it again. And again. Then again.

“Makes sharks come,” Siringen explains to the man. “They think fish are in trouble, so sharks come.”

“Cool,” the man says, before drinking the ends of his cola can and throwing it into the sea. Siringen shakes his head at the man's action but the man doesn't see. Or pretends not to see. “I hope we get a big one.”

Siringen shivers the rattle one more *taim* before starting his chant. The chant is part of his magic to make the sharks come. His uncle taught him the magic chants many years ago, when Siringen became a man. Siringen's eyes half close, and the magic words start coming out of his mouth, up and down like a song played on the *taur* shell.

The man laughs out loud. He doesn't even try to hide it. He laughs out hard at the noises Siringen is making.

But none of it stops Siringen. With his half-closed eyes, the magic streams from his mouth and down into the depths of the sea below. I have seen him do this a *handet taim*. And every *taim* the words bring sharks to the surface.

After a while, the man stops laughing, and all that can be heard are Siringen and the soft slaps of the waves against the side of the canoe. I crouch in the corner, my legs tucked into my arms, my mouth against my knees.

I keep myself silent.

There is no wind. Out here, sometimes, when shark magic is happening, the wind blows itself away, so that the sharks can hear the words the old shark caller speaks. It is like Moroa understands, and allows the natural things to flow around the ancient tradition like a river around a rock.

“Ah.” The man breathes in like a knife and points. “There! Over there.”

Far off, the sea is cut with the tip of a fin.

“Here it comes!” says the man. His hand reaches down into the bottom of the outrigger and pulls up the spear.

Siringen, opening his eyes a little, waves at him to put it down and, without asking any questions, the man does so.

Slowly the shark nears us. It is not a *bikpela* shark, as the man had hoped, and his face tells me he is disappointed. The shark dives under the outrigger and comes out the other side before turning back on itself, drawn towards us by Siringen’s magic. Softly, Siringen

takes up the spear and puts the day-old bait fish onto the end of it.

“What happens now?” asks the Man-From-England. “Are we going to kill it with the spear? Or should I bash it to death?” He grabs the wooden club and sweeps it about in the air like it is a paper windmill. Suddenly I feel sorry for the people who know this man well.

“No!” Siringen almost spits by speaking so quickly. “Not yet. First, we must tempt the shark into the *kasaman*.”

I can see that Siringen is hating all of this.

“What’s the...*kasaman*?”

“This.” Siringen shows the man. It is a loop of cane rope passing through a small hole, in what looks like the wooden propeller of a plane. I think of the propeller on the plane which brought this man to the islands – and which I hope will take him away again *tru* soon.

“What’s that do?” The man taps the wood with his finger.

“Watch,” says Siringen.

He lowers the loop into the water and pushes the bait fish at the end of the spear in behind it. The shark circles, the fish tempting it near.

The man says nothing. He doesn’t even move. His eyes watch the shark as it swims beneath the canoe,

twisting back and around. Slowly getting nearer the bait. Waiting to take it.

Suddenly the shark strikes, but Siringen is too quick for it. All his years out on the seas calling sharks have made him quick, even if he is an old man staring into the window of death. As the shark bites at the bait, Siringen lets it swim through the loop before pulling hard on top. The loop tightens and the wooden propeller is tied to the shark's back.

The shark panics and swims away, fighting with the float, kicking up the surface of the water and making it foam.

"What do we do?" shouts the Man-From-England. "Do we kill it now? Why are you letting it get away?"

Siringen puts his fingers to his lips and sits as calm as the breeze, watching as the shark struggles with the *kasaman*.

"Shouldn't we kill it now?" the man asks again, pointing and frowning.

Siringen shakes his head. "The shark is powerful," he says. "*Much* more powerful than any man. If you want to kill a shark, you must make it weaker. You must make the battle..." He searches the sky for the right words. "You must make the battle more fair."

The man watches as the shark shakes and fights with

the piece of *kapiak* wood.

"But...isn't that cruel?" the man asks. "Isn't it better to kill it straight away? Not to let it suffer?"

Siringen smiles to himself, and I know why he is smiling. The man wants the kill to be easy. But the problem is he does not understand what it takes to make the kill easy. He wants the honour without doing anything honourable. He wants to be a warrior without knowing what is needed to be a warrior. He wants to take away the life of something, but he does not want the blood on his hands.

It is like he is not real.

"The shark does not eat man," Siringen says, his fingers cleaning off the end of the spear. "It is not...in their nature. They eat fish. But..." He puts the spear in the bottom of the boat and picks up the paddle. "They will defend themselves against man. Too many men and women and children I have known have been bitten or killed because a shark has felt..." His eyes look at me. "Has felt...risked."

"Threatened." The man puts the word right. "I think you mean 'threatened'."

Siringen nods. "*Kasaman* stops the shark from diving. It makes the shark tired. But only a willing shark would ever come. A shark not ready to be caught...it would

not come. There is respect between the shark callers and the sharks. A shark caller knows the shark, and the shark knows the caller. Respect.”

We all sit there quietly as the splashing starts to stop. The shark is tiring.

At that moment, Siringen puts his eyes upon me again and speaks to me without saying anything.

I know what it is I have to do.

Softly I lower myself over the side of the boat and into the water. The man doesn't notice me go. I dive beneath the surface, the blueness and silence of the world below the waves like another home to me. I kick hard and keep as far down as I can.

Soon I am directly under the shark that is giving up its life. With the light of the day above it, it looks like a bird in the sky. A bird caught in a snare. The outrigger canoe, like an aeroplane.

I swim up towards the shark. It is not fighting any more. It has accepted that today it will die.

But it will not.

It is my job to make sure it will not.

As I get nearer, it sees me and thrashes its tail. But it cannot get away because of the *kasaman*, and it knows that. Its eyes are glossy like milk and its teeth – shown to me as a useless warning – sharp and flat and uneven.

She is a young shark. I can tell. No one knows how long the sharks live, but this is a young shark. I can feel it. The size. The shape. The way she moves. She is young.

I come up alongside and stroke her. She struggles no longer and lets me. Her skin is rough. Like every shark's skin.

I want to talk to her, tell her that it will all be good soon. But this is a place of silence and no words are ever spoken. So I stroke her some more, and then I begin.

I reach down to my ankle and rip the knife out of its sheath. With my other hand I hold the top of the *kasaman*. The cane rope is tough, but I know that if I keep cutting away at it, it will eventually split. The shark pulls a little but, accepting it is about to die, quickly stops and lets me continue. I drag my little knife over the rope, up and down, and as I do it, the canoe comes always nearer.

I need to be fast.

Up and down. Up and down...

And then—

It splits. The threads of the cane come away in my hand and I pull the rope back through the hole in the *kasaman*, letting go the hold on the shark.

Feeling the loop about her loosen, the shark comes

back to life and shakes herself free before swimming away scared into the dark distance of water. I wave towards her and slide my knife back into its sheath.

I wish I could shout to her and tell her to take care and not to come back until this man has left. But I cannot. Because this is a place of silence and no words are ever spoken.

I dive deeper and swim to the place beneath Siringen's canoe. The sun flickers above and, as I surface just behind the boat, its warmth bursts onto my face.

"Sometimes it happens," I hear Siringen saying. "The shark can be very strong. So sometimes it happens."

I pull myself gently into the back of the boat and tuck myself in once again. The Man-From-England never saw me leave and now he doesn't see me return.

Siringen is picking the broken *kasaman* out of the water, inspecting the cane rope like he is surprised even though he isn't surprised.

"What about another?" the man asks. "Do your coconut shake and try to get another one. A bigger one this time."

"No. It is too late." Siringen pulls the *kasaman* into the canoe. "The magic has gone."

* * *

Back in the village, the Bigman is standing on the beach with his arms crossed. As the canoe comes in closer to the shore, I can see he is frowning.

"No shark again, eh, Siringen?" he says as Siringen climbs out and drags the outrigger onto the sand. "How many trips is it now? Seven? Or eight?"

"I cannot remember."

"No."

The Man-From-England helps pull the boat out of the shallow water.

"We had one," he says. "But it got away. Broke the float."

"Did it? Well, well." The Bigman still stands frowning with his arms crossed like they are knotted together and holding back his anger. "Your *kasaman* are not so strong these days. It is strange how many of them break. You must be losing your magic, Siringen."

"Yes." I notice that Siringen doesn't look the Bigman in the eyes.

The Bigman doesn't look at me at all.

"It's a pity," says the Man-From-England. "I've shot elephants and giraffes in Africa. I've shot bears and wolves in Canada. I would have loved to have caught a shark. Had it stuffed and flown back home. Shown my friends and told them all about this place." He gives the Bigman

a jokeless stare. “They’d all be coming over and paying good money to catch one themselves. Such a shame.”

A *nogut* word comes to my lips, so I press them together before it escapes.



TUPELA

My name is Blue Wing and I live in my *waspapi*'s house. A *waspapi* is someone who looks after you if your parents are dead. My *waspapi* is Siringen – the shark caller. Close to seventy-five ages old. From the clan of Tarangun. Son of the maker of paddles and the calmer of seas.

I cried when I first came to my *waspapi*'s house, saw the sharp coral fence, the tree fork for a door and the shark carvings, dirty with smoke and hanging from the ceiling.

Now I smile when I lie on my sago mat while Siringen chews betel nut and tells tales of *tumbuna* time, when the god Moroa hung the sun in the sky and – when the sun was asleep – hung the moon in its place. I smile because I am glad. I smile because it is my home.

* * *