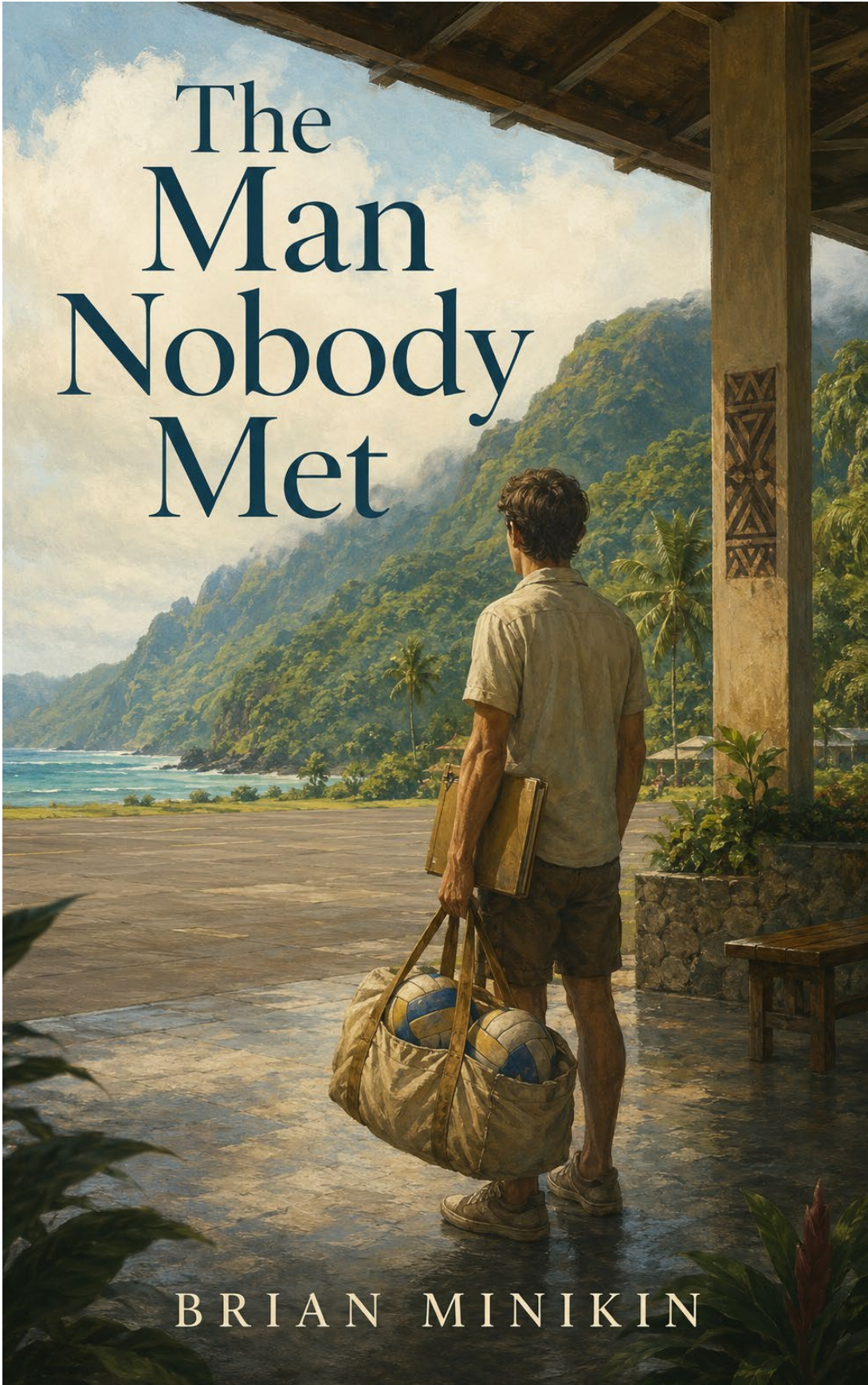


A man with dark hair, wearing a light-colored short-sleeved shirt and dark shorts, stands on a wet, reflective stone or concrete surface. He is seen from the back, looking out towards a tropical landscape. He holds a wooden clipboard under his left arm and a large, light-colored canvas bag filled with blue and white beach balls in his right hand. To his right is a wooden structure, possibly a porch or part of a building, with a decorative wooden pillar featuring a geometric pattern. The background shows a lush green mountain range, a blue ocean with white waves, and a clear sky with some clouds. The overall scene is peaceful and scenic.

The Man Nobody Met

BRIAN MINIKIN

The Man Nobody Met

Brian Minikin

This short story is the first one in the Sam Calder series. They are fictional stories based on the life and times of Sam Calder, a rather goofy and naïve Australian who was lucky enough to spend time working in sport development throughout the countries of Oceania. Any reference to a specific person or their story is purely coincidental.

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No one met him at the airport.

Years later, Sam Calder would decide that this was the finest welcome the Pacific could have given him. At the time, standing in the open-sided arrivals hall with a canvas bag full of volleyballs, a folder full of coaching plans, and the fragile confidence of a young man on his first adult journey beyond Australia, he did not see it that way.



He saw only the emptying terminal, the slow customs queue, and the impossible green pressing in from beyond the airfield. The vegetation seemed to lean toward the runway, bright and wet and alive, as if the island itself had come to inspect the stranger.

He had imagined a greeting. Not a grand one, but something official enough to confirm that he mattered. A federation shirt. A handwritten sign. A man with a clipboard. Someone who knew his name.

Instead, passengers disappeared one by one into the arms of relatives, drivers, hotel vans, church friends, and men who seemed to know where everyone else was going.

Then there was only Sam.

The country was newly independent and still learning the choreography of borders, stamps, uniforms, customs desks, and airport security. Everything had taken longer than he expected, though he had not yet learned that his expectations were among the least useful things he had brought with him.

Outside, he sat beneath an enormous banyan tree and tried to look like a man waiting calmly for arrangements to catch up with him.

This was not true.

He was young, internationally certified, overprepared, under travelled, and secretly terrified. In his bag were volleyballs, coaching notes, whistles, music, and movement drills he had choreographed with the seriousness of a man who believed that footwork could change lives. He had dance sequences designed to teach players how to move before they touched a ball. He had session plans that kept everyone busy. He had games, progressions, teaching points, and confidence polished bright enough to hide his nerves.

He had also created a problem for himself back home. The trip had taken him away

only one week after starting a new public service posting. He told himself it would be fine. He had approval. He had a letter. He had funding. He had a purpose. Only later would he understand that leaving a new office job after one week created its own politics. Back home, ambition and resentment often shared the same desk.

At the airport, none of that helped.

A taxi driver watched him for a while. "You waiting for someone?"

"Yes," Sam said. "The volleyball federation."

The driver smiled in a way Sam would come to recognise across the islands: kind, amused, and already aware that the foreigner was several pages behind the real story.

"Ah," he said. "Volleyball."

"You know them?"

The driver picked up one of Sam's bags. "I know everyone. First, we find you a hotel."

The hotel was one of the oldest in Lalo Bay, built in the fading confidence of another empire. It had wide verandas, ceiling fans that turned with ceremonial slowness, and wooden floors that seemed to remember officials, traders, missionaries, drunks, sailors, and government men who had passed through before Sam was born.

It was too hot to stay inside. The air sat heavily on his chest. So he waited on the foreshore, watching the clear water move against the seawall. Huge fish drifted past as if they had no fear of people at all. He stared at them for long stretches, embarrassed by his own amazement.

Back home, water was something you swam in, trained beside, drove past, or saw fenced off behind signs. Here it seemed alive in a different way. Transparent, generous, close enough to touch.

The hotel staff adopted him without announcement. Someone made sure he ate. Someone else helped send messages through the mission office. A woman at reception listened patiently to his explanation for the third time and nodded as if misplaced coaches were a common inconvenience, like rain or late freight.

"Island time," she told him.

Sam smiled politely. He did not yet understand that this was not an explanation. It was a warning.

For two days he waited. Patience had never been one of his gifts. He liked clocks, schedules, progress, and people who arrived when they said they would. He liked

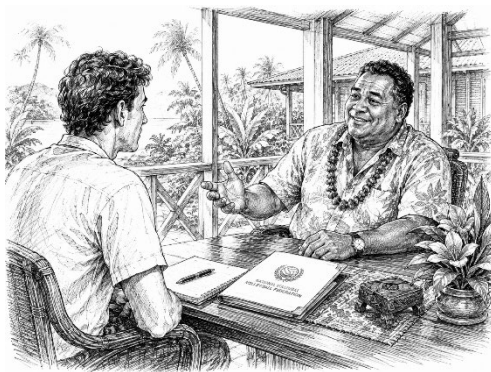
training sessions that began with a whistle and ended with a review. He believed that being busy was close to being useful.

Lalo Bay disagreed.

On the third morning, two men came to the hotel.

The first was President Soro, head of the Navatu Volleyball Federation. He arrived with a wide smile, an open shirt, polished shoes, and the relaxed authority of a man who could apologise without giving anything away.

“My friend,” he said, taking both of Sam’s hands. “We thought you were coming next week.”



Sam did not know whether to be relieved or offended.

President Soro was generous, charming, and apparently delighted that Sam had finally arrived. He explained the misunderstanding. He praised the programme. He admired the equipment. He spoke of youth, development, national pride, and the importance of

volleyball to the future of Navatu. He made Sam feel welcome, useful, and faintly foolish for having doubted anyone.

Only much later would Sam recognise the calculation behind the smile. President Soro was not dishonest in any simple way. He was a man of obligations, loyalties, ambitions, relatives, villages, rivalries, and opportunities. He could make people feel chosen while moving them exactly where he wanted them to go.

Sam, at that time of his life, was very easy to move.

The second man was Luc Moreau, the national coach. Luc Moreau, the national coach, was sunburnt, precise, suspicious, and visibly displeased. He looked at Sam as if someone had delivered an extra bag of cement to a building site where the foundation was already cracking.

“You are here to coach?” Luc asked a little defensively.

“To help,” Sam said, which sounded weaker than he intended.

Luc gave a small shrug. “We will see.”

They did see. Over the next few days Sam ran sessions with the national men and women. He refereed matches. He passed balls. He demonstrated drills. He tried not to interfere too much with Luc, who eventually thawed just enough to admit that some

of the dance footwork was “not completely stupid,” and that his insights on developing good timing and rhythm were quite helpful.

The players unsettled Sam’s certainties.

Some of the men were barely up to his chin, but when they jumped, they seemed to leave normal physics behind. They hung in the air long enough for Sam to doubt his own eyes. In a reach test, one short outside hitter outjumped him by so much that Sam measured again, convinced there had been a mistake.

There was no mistake.

They learned quickly. Too quickly for some of his progressions. Their movement was natural, elastic, almost musical. They spoke little during play but somehow knew where each other would be. A glance, a flick of an eyebrow, a shoulder, a shift of weight, and the ball moved. Sam had come from a coaching world that prized talk: call the ball, name the play, demand communication. Here the players communicated with their bodies and their eyes.

It would take him years to understand that silence was not the absence of communication.

Then, out of the blue, President Soro sent him to Amani Island. Sam was not sure if this was just a way to get him out of his hair, or a genuinely thought-out attempt to spread volleyball to a remote part of the country.

“You will go to Talaha,” he said. “Beautiful village. Volleyball people. They will be very happy.”

Only later did Sam learn that Talaha was President Soro’s village.

The journey to Amani felt like leaving one world and entering an older one. There was little electricity, no running water in the way Sam understood it, and few of the conveniences he had mistaken for normal life. He was lodged in a mission house on a hill. By some miracle, he had it to himself.

From the veranda he could see the ocean spread below in impossible blues. Each evening the sun lowered itself into the water with such extravagance that Sam felt embarrassed to be the only witness. At night the island grew dark in a way cities never did. The darkness had depth. It had sound. Insects, wind, distant voices, something moving in the trees.

Food appeared on his doorstep, but he never saw who brought it. Tropical fruit in abundance, beautifully cooked meals wrapped in banana leaves that looked like nothing he had ever eaten before.

The first time, he thought someone would knock. No one did. He opened the door and found fruit, cooked yam, fish wrapped in leaves, and a tin cup of something hot. The next meal came the same way. Then the next.

People watched him from a distance. Children came close and ran away. Women smiled but did not speak. Men lifted their hands in greeting and continued walking. Sam, who had come to teach, found himself unable even to begin a conversation.

The headman eventually arrived. He spoke excellent English and welcomed him warmly.

"We are grateful you have come," he said.

Sam relaxed.

"But no one told us you were coming."

Sam stopped relaxing.

The headman smiled. "It is all right. We will tell the people. Tomorrow, maybe they come."

Tomorrow, maybe they come.

Not at nine o'clock, when Sam was ready. Not at ten, when he had reorganised the drills twice. Not even at eleven, when he had begun to feel ridiculous standing beside the field with his whistle and his carefully folded notes.

They came when they came.

By midday there were sixty of them.

Men, women, teenagers, children, serious players, laughing beginners, barefoot boys, girls in skirts, older men who claimed only to be watching, and three small children who chased every loose ball as if retrieval were an Olympic event.

The playing area was an open field used for everything. There were two volleyball courts scratched into the ground, but only one had a net. The surface was uneven, dusty in some places, damp in others, and interrupted by stones, roots, and patches of grass that seemed determined to reclaim the field by afternoon.

Sam had brought a new net and several balls. These were accepted with great gratitude and then disappeared, possibly into safekeeping, possibly into village politics. For the actual session, he had one court, one tired net, and two usable balls.

His coaching plan died quietly in his folder.

For a few minutes, Sam felt the old panic rise. Too many people. Too little equipment. No clear groups. No schedule. No interpreter beside him. No chance of delivering

what he had planned. He was sitting well outside of his comfort zone now.

Then something loosened.

He put the folder away. "All right," he said, mostly to himself. "We dance."

He clapped a rhythm and began with footwork. Forward, back, side, side. Low stance. Quick feet. Hands ready. The first line copied him uncertainly. The second line laughed. The children joined without invitation. Someone added a clap. Someone else added a hip movement that was not in any coaching manual Sam had ever read.

Within minutes, the field was moving.

He broke them into small stations: four here, four there, ball control at one end, passing at another, movement patterns without balls, jumping mechanics near the tree, recovery steps in the dust. Every thirty minutes they played a game modified so that everyone, somehow, was involved. Then they returned to stations. Then they played again.

It should not have worked. Fortunately, It worked beautifully.

It didn't work in a way that would have satisfied a coaching assessor with a clipboard. But it worked. They moved, laughed, sweated, shouted, failed, tried again, teased each other, competed fiercely, and kept going long after Sam expected them to fade.

By late afternoon he was exhausted. They were not.

At the end of the day, as suddenly as they had arrived, everyone disappeared.

Sam stood on the field holding one of the old balls, wondering if there would be another formal session the next day. There was not. A few children came to play. A teenage boy asked about serving. An older man wanted to know how to jump without hurting his knees. But the great crowd did not return.

At first Sam felt disappointed. Then he realised he had been given one day. One good day. Perhaps that was enough.

The next afternoon, two men took him to the beach because he was hot, tired, and beginning to smell like the mission house, the field, and his own confusion.

The beach was beautiful and empty.

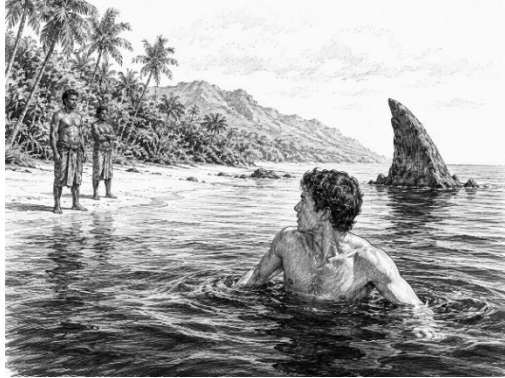
This surprised him. Everywhere else, people gathered near water. Here there was no one. No children. No fishing. No washing. No laughter.

Sam was too hot to think about it. He stripped down and walked into the sea.

The bottom vanished almost immediately. One step, then nothing.

The water went dark beneath him. The cold rose from below. A feeling came over him so sudden and complete that he could not explain it then and did not like explaining it later. It was not fear exactly. It was a warning without words, a pressure in the chest, a sense that he had entered a place where he had not been invited.

He turned and scrambled back to shore.



The two men were laughing. "You don't want to swim?" one asked.

Sam tried to recover his dignity. "Water's very deep and its very black out there."

They laughed harder.

Sam recovered his composure and asked "Do you swim here?"

"No," the other said.

"Why not?" surprised that they would bring him to a place that they would not normally come to.

The laughter softened. The men looked at each other. Then one pointed toward the water. "This place is not for swimming, not for us anyway, but you are a white man, so it is O.K."

They told him about the old ones, about spirits that remained, about places that belonged to ancestors, about forces that watched, warned, punished, protected. They spoke calmly, not as performers telling stories to entertain a visitor, but as men explaining the practical arrangements of the world. A World War 2 legend of two American Destroyers that used the area for target practice that went separate ways only to disappear without a trace was just one of the many stories associated with this magical place.

Sam listened.

He had arrived in Navatu with a young coach's faith in visible causes. Ankles rolled because landings were poor or players encroached on the defensive blockers space. Players mistimed jumps because their approach angles were wrong. Teams lost because preparation failed. Problems had reasons. Reasons had solutions. Solutions had drills.

On that beach, wrapped in the fading heat of the afternoon, Sam began to understand that his coaching manuals described only a very small part of the world. The men did not ask him to believe, nor did they did not need his agreement. The

sea was there. The taboo was there. Their ancestors were there. Sam's opinion was not required.

He looked back at the dark water. "Thank you," he said. "But I think this place might be taboo for me too."

They laughed again, but kindly this time and then they simply sat and told stories long into the evening.

When Sam left Amani, the headman shook his hand and thanked him for coming. The children followed him part of the way. Someone placed food in his bag. He never learned who, but it felt as though the Island and its spirits had accepted him and would welcome him back.

Back in Lalo Bay, President Soro smiled broadly and asked if the village had enjoyed the coaching.

"Yes," Sam said.

"What about you?"

Sam looked for the simple answer and could not find it. "Yes," he said again, but this time it meant something else "I hope I come back one day," Sam said.

President Soro smiled. "Then maybe next time we will know you are coming."

On the flight out, he watched the islands fall away beneath the wing. The stunning reef, the incredibly green jungle, and then the large expanse of water that is the Pacific Ocean. His folder of coaching plans sat unopened on his lap. They were still good plans but not relevant to the environment he had just experienced. He still believed in drills, preparation, footwork, movement, and the usefulness of a well-run session. But something had shifted in him as his insignificance in this world had been shown to him, even in the smallest of places.



He had been forgotten at an airport, rescued by a taxi driver, adopted by hotel staff, managed by a smiling president, tolerated by a Frenchman, humbled by silent athletes, housed by shy villagers, fed by invisible hands, defeated by island time, rescued by dance, and warned away from a beach by ancestors he did not know how to believe in.

He had come to the islands thinking he had something to teach and that was not entirely wrong.

But as the plane turned south, Sam Calder understood that usefulness was smaller than he had imagined, and the world was larger.

He had not arrived in the Pacific as an expert.

He had arrived as a student.

About the Author

Brian Minikin graduated with Honours in Physical Education from the University of Western Australia at a time when there was little work in the field of sport or sports science outside of the school system or Universities. Consequently he chased a career that saw him at the University of Adelaide, The Federal Department of Finance in Canberra, the Department of Sport and Recreation, The Australian Institute of Sport, The Tasmanian Institute of Sport, The Australian Sports Commission, the Tonga National Olympic Committee, the Oceania National Olympic Committees before moving onto to academic positions at the University of Kent, the University of Stirling and Chengdu University.

He spent many years coaching and training athletes across a number of different sports including a period spanning 30 years working or volunteering in sport across all of its aspects throughout the Pacific Region.

