



The Woman Who Danced First

— A Sam Calder Story —

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By Brian Minikin

This short story is the third one in the Sam Calder series.

A lesson in humility through Desire

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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Sam Calder was not unlucky in love.

That was the explanation he preferred when he was young, because it made his failures sound accidental, as if romance were a weather system that had simply passed him by. Later, with less vanity, more evidence and a good dose of self-reflection, he would admit the truth.

He was not unlucky at all in fact he had been blessed with luck with the quality of women who had been unlucky enough to cross his path. He was incompetent when it came to women and he was possessed with emotional issues that he had failed to recognise as a younger man.

This was not because he lacked feeling. If anything, Sam felt too much, too quickly, and often in the wrong direction. Nor was it because he lacked charm entirely. In the right circumstances, in front of a lecture theatre, with a whistle around his neck, a ball in his hands, or music in the room, he could become almost graceful and very charismatic. But put him near a woman he admired an emotional tsunami with the characteristics of a committee meeting. His default setting was to strive to help and be helpful but in a way that was procedural, confused, delayed by fear, and unlikely to reach a useful decision before the opportunity closed.

At school socials, he had been an excellent dancer who could not find the courage to ask anyone to dance. The lack of self esteem was clear but what was less obvious was his fear of failure when confronted by the need to pursue something that was good for him.

This remained one of the small absurdities of his life. He could move. He could hear rhythm. He could turn, step, slide, improvise, and make other people look better than they were. But the distance between the wall and the girl he wanted to ask might as well have been an ocean. He could cross countries more easily than he could cross a polished school hall. Over time this would evolve into a real problem. A man who pursued opportunities to meet other people's needs while completely neglecting his own.

By the time he reached the islands, he had improved in some areas and not at all in others.

He could stand before sixty players and make a training session out of two balls and a broken court. He could talk to presidents, argue with coaches, improvise equipment, referee matches, and explain footwork to people who shared no language with him. Yet a woman of intelligence, beauty, and purpose could still turn him into a boy with his hands in his pockets, pretending not to care.

This was the state in which he attended the President's garden party.

Navatu was celebrating its independence, and the town had dressed itself for the occasion. Flags moved in the heat. Children ran between adults in white shirts and bright island dresses. Officials stood in careful clusters. Church leaders spoke with diplomats. Foreign advisers tried to look useful. The President's residence sat above the lawn with the quiet confidence of a building designed to host both ceremony and gossip. It had once before been the Governor's Residence from the Colonial era and looked strangely out of place with its foreign architectural splendour.

The party had been modelled on European manners, or at least on the island memory of them. There were trays, speeches, polished shoes, floral dresses, clipped hedges, glasses raised at the proper angle, and just enough stiffness to make Sam aware that he should not spill anything on himself, at least not in front of others.

He had come because someone from the volleyball federation had told him he ought to be seen there. That was how such invitations worked. Attendance was not always about friendship, nor even pleasure. It was about being visible in the correct place, to the correct people, at the correct time, while pretending that none of this mattered.

Sam did his best.

He stood under a flame tree with a glass in his hand and spoke earnestly about volleyball to anyone who made the mistake of asking. He talked about movement, footwork, timing, national teams, coaching clinics, and the astonishing vertical jumps he had seen in the local players. Several people listened politely. A few were genuinely interested but most were more interested in the food and drink, and of course the very beautiful women that had assembled. One elderly official nodded for so long that Sam feared the man had fallen asleep standing up. It was moments like these that reminded him that he needed to 'get a life'.



Then he saw her.

She was across the garden, half in sunlight, half in the shade of a veranda post. She stood with a small group of people, though for several seconds Sam noticed no one else. She was not merely beautiful, though she was certainly that. Beauty alone would have frightened him, but he had survived beauty before by looking away.

This was different.

She carried herself as if she had not asked the room for permission to exist. Her presence had a force that was indescribable. Her dress caught the light when she shifted. Her hair moved against her shoulder. She was listening to someone but not surrendering herself to the conversation. There was intelligence in the way she held her face, and something else too, a kind of private amusement, as if all that was happening around her was for her entertainment.

Then she looked at him.

Sam should have looked away. That would have been consistent with his history, his habits, and every known method he had used to avoid humiliation.

Instead, before he could consult the committee inside his head, he smiled.

It was a broad, foolish, unguarded smile that came from somewhere younger and braver than the rest of him. Then, to his own astonishment, he raised his glass.

It was the most reckless thing he had ever done without moving his feet.

She held his gaze. For one perfect second, Sam believed something had crossed the lawn between them. She did not smile, she simply looked at him, unreadable, and turned away.

A moment later she was gone.

Sam stood beneath the flame tree holding his glass in the air like a man signalling a ship that had already sailed.

For the rest of the afternoon, he was useless.

People continued speaking to him and he continued answering, because that is who he was. He made a point of being interested in others and that made it possible for him to lack interest in himself. The President made a speech. Someone proposed a toast. A church choir sang with such beauty that several guests lowered their heads. Plates appeared. Glasses were refilled. The garden filled and emptied and filled again.

Sam remembered almost none of it. All he could remember was the gaze of a mystery woman who appeared to treat him with the contempt that he felt he deserved.

That annoyed him. He had recently damaged a relationship through a mixture of cowardice,

confusion, and the slow destructive force that built up as a result of not knowing himself. He was in no condition to begin another romantic disaster. He knew this and had told himself this firmly. He had intended to devote this trip to coaching, learning, and not making any further mess of his private life.

There was no denying it, that one 'look' across a garden had disturbed him more than any sensible man should allow.

That evening there was a ball, once again in the true colonial meaning of what a Ball is but infiltrated with the islands environment in which it was set. Everyone who was anyone in Lalo Bay seemed to be there, along with many people who were not anyone but had found a way in. The hall was hot, bright, crowded, and alive with polished shoes, bare shoulders, uniforms, island shirts, lots of beer, and music that could not decide whether it belonged to Europe, the Pacific, or somewhere in between.

Sam liked dances.

He liked them more than he admitted. Dancing allowed him to become the person he could not become in conversation. Music gave him the permission he needed to be himself. The rhythm and beat of the music removed the need to decide what to do with his uncertainty. On a dance floor, for reasons he never fully understood, he could stop apologising for having a body and express himself in the way that he needed to.

He had not come looking for her, well, that was a lie, of course, but one he maintained for nearly an hour.

He saw her midway through the evening. She was with friends near the far side of the hall. Laughing now as she enjoyed her wine, talking easily. More beautiful in motion than she had been in stillness. She glanced at him momentarily but it felt inconsequential.

Sam drank his beer and watched the spectacle with what he hoped was mature detachment.

He had no intention of approaching her. This decision brought him great comfort because it required no courage. He could admire her from a distance, turn her into a private story, and leave with his dignity intact.

Then she walked past him. She did not stop. She did not speak. She moved across the edge of the floor, stepped into the open space, turned, and looked directly at him with hands on hips.

The challenge was unmistakable. It was not an invitation in any language Sam had previously been brave enough to understand. It was a command disguised as a question.

Sam put down his beer.

Years later he would not remember the moment that he decided to move. He would remember only the sudden fact of being on the floor, the music already inside him, and the woman before him with one eyebrow lifted as if to say he had kept her waiting long enough.

They danced.

At first carefully, testing rhythm, distance, humour, and nerve. Then less carefully. Then with such absorption that the room seemed to loosen around them. Sam forgot who was watching. He forgot



the federation officials, the diplomats, the coaches, the President's garden, the island heat, his own anxious history, and every sensible warning he had ever ignored.

She danced with precision and mischief.

She did not give herself away easily. If Sam moved well, she moved better. If he tried to lead, she let him for half a phrase and then turned the pattern back on him. She laughed once, not because he was funny, but because he had surprised her. That laugh undid him more than any touch.

They spoke a little but not enough to matter. Just the usual small talk. Names. Where are you from? How long are you here? Do you always dance like this? Do you always look so frightened before you do something you enjoy?

Sam had no answer and for almost two hours, they danced without him needing one.

People appeared to make room for them. The music changed. The floor filled, emptied, and filled again. At times the dance became playful. At times it became dangerously serious. There were moments when their bodies moved with such easy understanding that Sam felt embarrassed by the intimacy of it, as if they had admitted something in public neither had said aloud.

Then she was gone as suddenly as she had appeared. No drama. No farewell. No explanation.

One song ended and another began. Someone clapped Sam on the shoulder. He turned, engaged in conversations with people he knew. Meanwhile, she had disappeared into the heat of the night, the country's independence, or whatever force had produced her in the first place.

He stood at the edge of the dance floor feeling newly foolish.

When the ball ended, Sam stepped outside into the road. The night air was softer than the hall, though not cooler. Lalo Bay hummed with voices, engines, insects, distant music, and the occasional burst of laughter from people reluctant to let the celebration end.

She was waiting beside a motorbike free from the group that she had come to the Ball with.

He was surprised at first, but by then, Sam had learned enough about the islands to know that the most important arrangements often appeared without warning. Still, the sight of her leaning against the bike, helmet in one hand, made him stop.

"You need a ride?" she asked.



Sam looked at the motorbike. He looked at her. A wiser man would have asked where they were going. A more cautious man would have considered the risks. A man with better knowledge of his own heart would have understood that some moments are complete as they are, and that trying to extend them can turn a gift into a something less pleasant.

Sam was none of these men. "Yes," he said.

She smiled then, albeit it a faint smile that disguised warmth and genuine interest.

He got on the bike behind her, and she rode into the warm dark as if the road belonged to her.

Her name was Eleni, at least that was how he remembered it. It was a much longer name than that but Eleni was good enough for him.

She had been raised in Navatu but educated overseas, first by family expectation, then by

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scholarship, then by her own appetite for a larger world. She lived in a cold European city where people did not smile at strangers, where winter entered the bones, and where nobody understood how loud the ocean could be inside a person who had grown up beside it.

She had come home for independence celebrations and family obligations. She spoke the language of the island with laughter in it, English with precision, and French when annoyed. She belonged everywhere and nowhere, which may have been why Sam mistook her for destiny.

The next three weeks were the most romantic of his young life. Things were not perfect, perfect things rarely happen in the tropics, the heat alone prevents it. They argued about small matters. She mocked his seriousness. He misunderstood her silences. She vanished for family duties and returned as if no time had passed. He tried to make plans. She treated plans like weather forecasts, sometimes useful, but often wrong.

The good times were the best of times. There were rides along roads where the jungle leaned close and the sea flashed between trees. There were evenings in places where the lights of Lalo Bay trembled on the water. There were conversations that began with sport and ended somewhere near loneliness. There were dances when no music was playing. There were mornings when Sam woke with the foolish happiness of a man who believed life had briefly explained itself.

Eleni was not gentle with him, which was part of her mercy. She saw his need to be useful and did not flatter it. She saw how easily he could become devoted to someone else's needs and asked him, more than once, whether he knew the difference between love and service.

Sam did not. Alas he thought he did know the difference, which was worse.

When she left, the airport was not the same one that had forgotten him many months earlier. This time he knew the waiting area, the heat, the green beyond the runway, the slow procedures, the way people delayed goodbye until delay itself became unbearable.

She was returning to Europe and he was staying long enough to finish his work.

They made promises, that would never be kept. They spoke of letters, visits, possibilities, timing, money, distance, and the unfairness of meeting at the wrong moment. None of it was false. None of it was enough.

Then she boarded the plane. Sam watched it lift above the island and turn toward a world he could not reach.

For years afterwards, he carried those three weeks as if they were evidence.

Evidence of what, he could never quite say. That he had been loved? That he could be brave? That somewhere in the world was a person who had seen him whole? That the best version of himself had once existed on a dance floor in Lalo Bay and might be recovered if only he could return to the right night, the right music, the right woman, and the right road?

He tried, more than once, to turn the memory into a future but this would be a mistake.

Years later, they met again.

By then life had done what life does. It had given and taken. It had educated them without asking permission. They were older, more defended, less innocent, and carrying other people's histories in their faces. The meeting was not the reunion Sam had rehearsed in private. It was painful, clumsy, and unkind in the particular way that wounded people can be unkind when confronted by the ghost of who they once were.

No one behaved well. For a long time afterwards, Sam called that final meeting a tragedy. It was

not.

The tragedy had happened much earlier. It had happened when he mistook intensity for instruction. When he believed that because a moment was beautiful, it must also be continued. When he failed to understand that some people arrive to awaken you, not to remain with you. When he spent too many years measuring other relationships against a dance that had lasted two hours and a romance that had lasted three weeks.

Eleni had given him something rare that was undisputable. However, she had not given him a life. That was his to make, though he was slow to understand it.

Only much later did Sam see the lesson clearly. He had spent too much of his heart trying to provide what others needed, believing this was love. He was drawn to women of force, women of substance, women who knew their own minds and could find their way through his uncertainty as easily as Eleni had crossed the dance floor. But being chosen by someone powerful was not the same as being known. Being useful was not the same as being loved. Being needed was not the same as being with someone who was willing to give him what he needed.

At the garden party, across the lawn, perhaps the whole lesson had already been offered.

A woman had looked at him. He had smiled. She had not.

That should have been enough to teach him caution.

At the ball, she had danced first.

That should have been enough to teach him courage.

On the motorbike, she had taken him into the dark.

That should have been enough to teach him that some roads are gifts precisely because they do not last forever.

But Sam Calder was special in the way many young men are special. He was a slow learner.

Years later, when music caught him unprepared, he would still sometimes find himself back in that hall, the heat, the polished floor, the smell of flowers and beer, the flash of her dress, the lift of her eyebrow, the moment when the boy who could never ask anyone to dance found himself chosen by the woman who danced first.

He no longer wished to return, for that was how he knew the lesson had finally arrived. But he remained grateful for that moment in life.

For the look.

For the dance.

For the ride.

For the three weeks when bliss and danger wore the same face.

Most of all he was grateful for the Pacific, which had once again taught him best by refusing to explain itself until years after the lesson had been delivered.

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.