

A Call to Come Home

Skimming precariously down the gravel track, mask dangling from its strap in one hand and a pair of sun-bleached fins in the other, she hoists her shoulders back to avoid being launched into a rough tumble into the heath. The sharp tips of triangular wattle leaves scratch at her calves, and the rubble under her bare feet is strangely numbing. And she embraces it, pressing a tear out of the corner of her eye with the knuckle of her thumb. Bloody Dad. Always telling her what to do with her life. Always shutting down her ideas.

She's not going to the city, not to study how to treat the world like a resource rather than a system. Not to learn how put one species' wants above over a million species' needs. She belongs here, living amongst it all. Learning. Feeling.

The coast and this ocean have never betrayed her. Beyond the gnarly crowns of stunted moorts and whispery peppermints, the wind ripples across its expansive blue skin, stretching out to meet the streaky purple clouds drifting across the base of the vast periwinkle dome of sky. The granite monoliths, polished over the millennia by the caress of the Southern Ocean, slump into the gentle surf like sleepy seals, the sun glistening off their backs.

As the track steepens, she slows, forced to focus through sticky eyelashes on slotting her feet into the right ledges and pits in the eroded limestone. The afternoon sea breeze tosses her shoulder-length blonde hair about her face like a playful dog trying to cheer its human. Her eyes burn red and angry outside blazing green irises, but hurt is caught in her chest, too deep now to dislodge with a shaky exhale. She needs the ocean, its ears to listen wordlessly, its surges of cleansing, silent assurance.

Eventually the limestone crumbles to familiar squeaky white sand, and she follows the grassy banks of the dunes south to the rocky peninsula where the swell gurgles and crunches over the shallow reef. A Pacific gull patrolling the wet granite eyes her warily under a defined brow, shuffling elegant grey-black wings in apparent dither of whether to relocate further south or claim this patch of rock. She peels off her shirt, her skin prickling as it is kissed coolly by the breeze, and tucks it with her towel into a split in the granite. A clump of succulent pigface dangles over the side, its silvery-green chunky leaves twinkling under a fine beading of sea spray. She turns, surveying the secluded bay, inhaling the salty air though a slightly snuffy nose. The gull, raising one knobby yellow leg, rests on its haunches and returns his attention to the whitewash swirling around the lip of granite.

Having not bothered to scour the house for her wetsuit, she wades into the crystalline water in a saggy-bummed blue one-piece and boardshorts. Her muscly legs glow white and her hairs prickle as the iciness of the southern waters rise up her thighs. It's the end of the summer, or more correctly *Bunuru* – the second summer in the local Minang six seasons – but the water remains relentlessly cold. Rinsing her mask and rubbing spit into the lenses, she secures the seal around her face, careful to remove from its grip all hairs of her rambunctious bronze mane. With fins secured to her feet, she descends beneath the crisp surface and savours the touch of the ocean's cool fingers as they push across her sweaty scalp. The sun dances flirtatiously on the sandy bottom, rippled and ridged like it had been traversed by a gang of pythons. Slender schools of speckled beige whiting scatter into the endless blue as she glides deeper, bubbles trailing behind her like giant pearls.

For a while, she roams the open bay like a mud-larking dolphin, spurting out water and duck-diving to forage in the kelp under the shoulders of the rocks. And gradually, with every algae-encrusted shell she inspects, with every wide-eyed fish that drifts curiously closer, her mind quietens, then enters a new frame. One where her body is awake, her senses sharp and yet somehow calmer. Responsive. With the roar of the dumpers crashing beyond the granite islands further out to sea and the slurp of waves on reef, her heart finds its rhythm again.

As her fingers begin to resemble pale, puckered prunes, she decides to venture behind the reef for a quick look. The pink sprigs of algae shelter little brown kelpfish and shy blue-striped wrasse. A crested morwong sailing its way down to a shadowed cavity under a ledge pauses to eye her. She admires its black stripes; one stretching down its back and caudal like a hockey stick, and the forked band splitting over its restless eyes. A graceful clique of old wives give her a sideways glance over upturned noses and retreat behind the swaying flames of kelp.

She makes a turn for shore when a shadow sharpens in the wavering depths. Keeping her back to the fortress of reef, she sinks just under the surface to stare into the hazy blue. It's large, an ancient blue groper maybe? But as it comes swaying closer, her heart rises into her mouth. The steady pectoral fins steering her way, powered by the slow, gentle swing of a sharp-tipped tail. The dark dapples on the grey skin and white rim around deep black eyes disclose the creature's identity.

A young tiger shark, sauntering over to suss out the foreigner in her domain.

The girl freezes, her eyes locked with the shark's. Her hands don't know where to place themselves, so she treads water with them slowly, trying to prevent the tiger's attention fine-tuning on her. But she knows they're both aware of each other, both aware of another mindful soul in the water. And a strange calm descends over her shoulders. Inhaling slowly, she sinks deeper to the shark's level, her hair billowing about her face like the ambient kelp. Five metres away, then three. Her breath stales in her chest, tightening, urging her to surface. She resists, unwilling to move. The tiger passes, and she briefly rises for another lungful. As she does, the shark swings in a tight arc, gliding towards her undefended torso. She crouches in the water, her back protected by the rocky reef, the seabed a metre below the blades of her fins. Upon meeting her gaze, the tiger swiftly deviates from her beeline, cruising casually past.

Her arms are stinging with cold now, and she's starting to shiver. But she can't move. The flat top of the rocky reef is just too far down from the surface to be a safe haven, and the granite monolith behind it is as smooth and unclimbable as a frozen waterfall. To reach the beach would require her to swim nearly a hundred metres, exposed on all sides by open water. Tigers sometimes come in shallow. And this young creature, perfectly adapted after 450 million years to this underwater world, seems to have an inquisitive soul. But even a gentle mouthy nip might not be the most ideal situation along this desolate coast. Not when nobody, not even her family, knows where she is.

The tiger comes close, mouth agape and gills beating slowly. This shark has no intention of hurting her, of that she is confident. Its eyes, always locked on her, seem too sentient, too aware of their mutual peaceful regard for each other. And as it comes within reaching distance, her hand, almost unconsciously, drifts out towards its blue-white shovel-shaped snout. This animal is beautiful, the way webs of light squiggle on its leathery skin, the perfect hydrodynamics and musculature of its streamlined body. But what entrances her are the eyes. Serene and insightful, like a master yogi, with the curious twinkle of a child's.

Her fingertips lightly graze the shark's snout, just for a moment. And somehow, she knows the shark is getting a feel for her too. And then with a flourish, the shark arcs into the blue. She

watches her go, savouring the last glimpse of the powerful contracting caudal muscles sweeping the tail. Shivering, she backs down the reef to the shallows, before emerging into the golden late-afternoon light.

Several weeks later, her old school friends ask her to come out rock fishing – the last group gathering before dispersing across the state for the year. As they lug their rods and tackle boxes across the salt-encrusted gneiss, they bemoan having to leave this tranquil little town. Nat and Chloe are heading up for their first year of university, having spent the year since graduation working at the local bar to earn their Centrelink independence allowance. George is heading into the Goldfields for a sparky apprenticeship. Luke has been offered a FIFO job up in the Pilbara, but is in two minds about accepting it after not being quite sure of his stance on economics and environmentalism. And her? An unaccepted university offer still waits on the computer.

She belongs here, on this wild coastline where the karri blends into marri, and the salmon run in March.

She'd not shared her encounter with the tiger shark with anyone. But every night, she is visited by those soulful eyes, the dance of sunlight on dappled skin. The graceful carving of dorsal fin through turquoise water.

But as they walk, George muses about someone falling down the steep rockface and being mauled by a white-pointer. In their laughter, she smiles, but her lips are weak. Her stomach churns. Why are these creatures so vilified? Sure, they're opportunistic and carnivorous, but blood-thirsty? She'd seen no such desire in that young tiger's eye.

Later in the evening, Nat's line bends and bounces. Excitedly, they gang around her, biceps pumping at the reel. Straining against her harness, Nat hoists in a chunky dark figure. A blue groper, the jig hooked through its rubbery blood-dribbled lips, writhes and flaps its inky fins on the wet rock. Luke scuttles down the face to grasp the fish, slipping the hook out of its lips as the groper's gills flare. She watches on, wondering whether that groper might've crossed paths with the tiger. Whether the tiger, and all its cousins, have enough fish in the sea.

Her questions trouble her, because she doesn't have a way of finding the answer. Not here, anyway. Hugging her knees, staring out at the sun sinking behind the limestone cliffs, she sighs. There's a place she could find out all these things, learn how to protect this wild and restless place and all the lives within it. At university, she could learn about overfishing. She could learn about why some people think the way they do, why some people get caught on this western treadmill of making profit out of destroying a perfectly capable natural ecological economy. And with that knowledge, she could be part of the change.

The next morning, she accepts the offer, enrolling in conservation and marine science. She'll miss this place. But she'll miss it even more if it is ruined. Her parents caution her about her financial future, about being unemployed or ending up scrubbing fish tanks for the rest of her life. But she lifts her chin. The future is in healing the earth, not the destruction or so-called 'management' of it. And are core part of that transformation will involve people no longer seeing themselves as above nature, but as part of it. To see themselves as fellows to the diversity

of other creatures going about their lives in ecosystems so finely tuned and intricate that they offer perpetual wonder.

On the bus to the city, she reads an online article from the ABC. A tiger shark had been found on a beach near Walpole this morning with its head sliced clean off. Apparently, it had been caught in a commercial net and had to be cut away. But as she studies the neatly guillotined torso on the screen, tears stinging her eyes, she can't imagine a crewmate desperately hacking to free the shark. More than likely, they'd just wanted the jaws to prop up on their living room cabinet. Why are some people so cruel? Over 100 million of these animals are killed each year, but yet they're still the murderous villains? The real predators crawl over the waves, not beneath them.

She thinks of that curious young tiger. Imagines her sauntering up to investigate some distressed fish caught in a haul net or long-line and becoming snagged itself as she simply takes advantage of an easy meal. Pictures her mottled torpedo being dragged in with the catch, and instead of being released gently back home, has her head sickled off just so someone can gawk at her jaws, at her teeth. Or worse, having her fins sliced off for some trendy soup and dumped back in the water like a legless lizard to suffocate as she sinks into the darkness. Eyes wide and frightened as she helplessly watches fish come to pick at the exposed flesh where her fins once soared.

Reading the comments on the post, her heart lifts a little. So many people are sorrowed by the slaughter of this prince of the ocean. A few recount of their own peaceful encounters with these animals – predator respecting a fellow predator. She realises she's not alone. There are people who think like her, too. If all these people can continue to rally together, push for not only political change but societal and spiritual change, perhaps the strength of humanity might enable us to return to being connected with this earth for a fulfilling life, rather than an indulgent one. A world that both home and wild, and here to stay.