

Call It Courage

Mafatu always feared the sea. Until one day ...

Adapted by Bryon Cahill
from the novel *Call It Courage*
by Armstrong Sperry, winner of the
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by Eili-Kaija Kuusniemi

CHARACTERS

(main characters in **boldface**)

Narrators 1, 2, 3, 4

Mafatu's fear

Mafatu

Mafatu's mother

Moana, *the sea god*

Kana, *a village boy*

Mafatu's courage

Village boys 1, 2, 3

Tavana Nui, *Mafatu's father*

SCENE 1

Narrator 1: In the heart of the South Pacific Ocean, just about halfway between South America and Australia, lies a very small island called Hikueru. Today it is part of French Polynesia.

Narrator 2: This story happened many years ago, before the traders and missionaries first came to the South Seas, when the Polynesians were still great in numbers and fierce of heart.

Narrator 3: Even today the people of Hikueru sing this story in their chants and tell it over the evening fires. It is the story of Mafatu, the boy who was afraid.

Narrator 4: They worshipped courage, those early Polynesians. The spirit that had urged them across the Pacific in their sailing canoes, before the dawn of recorded history, still sang its song of danger in their blood.

Narr 1: But the boy Mafatu, son of Tavana Nui, the great chief of Hikueru, had always been afraid. In his blood sang the song of fear.

Mafatu's fear: It was the sea that I dreaded. I had been surrounded by it since birth. The thunder of it in my ears. The crash of it upon the reef. The threat and fury of its storms!

Mafatu: When I was 3, my mother took me out to the barrier reef pools to search for sea urchins. It was late afternoon, and the fishermen in other canoes were turning back. They shouted warnings to my mother as they went. It was hurricane season, and they were certain one was on the horizon.

Mafatu's mother: Do not listen to them, Mafatu. It is a beautiful day. Not a cloud in the sky. Here, let me help you with your net.

Mafatu's fear: I looked up, past the surrounding cliffs. The sky was darkening.

Mafatu: Look, Mother.

Narr 2: Mafatu points to the quickening darkness. His mother is shocked by what she sees. The storm is coming fast.

Mother: We must hurry, Mafatu.

Narr 3: Mafatu's mother grabs the oars and paddles hard. But the tide turns suddenly, and their little canoe is thrashed by waves.

Mafatu: Mother!

Mother: Hold tight, Mafatu!

Narr 4: The storm reaches them at breakneck speed. The waves are too great. Their little canoe **capsizes**.

Narr 1: Mafatu's mother grabs hold of her son as they are both plunged into the raging sea.

Mother: Mafatu! Hold on to me!

Narr 2: The storm violently

crashes against them. Young Mafatu is terrified.

Narr 3: The raging current pushes them toward shore. Mafatu's mother is beaten and dying. With her last ounce of energy, she carries her son to shore. She picks up a cracked coconut and manages to press the cool, sustaining meat to her child's lips. And then she dies.

Mafatu's fear: Moana, the sea god, took her. But I was spared.

Narr 4: For years after his mother's death, Mafatu awakes screaming many nights. He avoids the sea at all costs.

Narr 1: On the rare occasion he does get close to the water's edge, he imagines hearing the sea god call to him.

Moana: You cheated me once,

Mafatu, but someday, someday I will claim you!

Narr 2: The fishermen pass Mafatu on the beach. Their sons accompany them. Mafatu watches, as he always does, as the men and boys of the village get in their canoes and paddle out to do their day's work.

Narr 3: Fishing is the village's main source of food. It is the people's **livelihood**. And courage, above all, is respected and honored. Mafatu knows that, but there is nothing he can do. He is terrified of the sea.

* vocab

CAPSIZES: overturns

LIVELIHOOD: a means of supporting one's existence

SCENE 2

Narr 4: Everyone sees Mafatu as the scared little boy who contributes nothing.

Narr 1: Mafatu wants desperately to help his village in any way that he can. He spends his time weaving nets for the fishermen and avoiding other boys.

Narr 2: The one boy who is friendly to Mafatu is Kana. Sometimes, Kana stays behind with Mafatu when the other boys go fishing with their fathers.

Kana: The **bonitos** have begun to run, Mafatu.

Mafatu: Yes.

Kana: My father brought back word from the reef today. Already there are bonitos out there. Tomorrow we boys will go after them. That's our job. It will be fun, eh?

Narr 3: Mafatu's knuckles whiten. His ears pound with the swift fury of the sea. Kana, seeing that he is scared, starts to walk away.

Mafatu's courage: I wanted to cry out to him, "Wait, Kana! I'll go! I'll try!"

Mafatu's fear: But the words did not come.

Narr 4: Later in the evening, the boys' fathers all boast about their sons. Mafatu's father, Tavana Nui, is silent. He is ashamed of his boy.

Village boy 1: Hikueru is too poor. There are only fish from the sea. A man must be fearless to provide food. We will all go—every one of us!

Village boy 2: Not all of us will go. Not Mafatu!

Village boy 3: Ha! He is afraid!

Kana: He makes good spears.

Village boy 1: Ho! That is woman's work.

Village boy 2: Mafatu is afraid of the sea.

Village boy 3: He will never be a warrior.

Kana: I have tried to be friendly to him. But he is good only for making spears. Mafatu is a coward.

Narr 1: The boys disappear down the moonlit beach. Their laughter floats back on the night air. Mafatu stands still.

Mafatu's fear: Kana had spoken. He had voiced, once and for all, the feeling of the tribe. I, Mafatu, whom my father had once called Stout Heart, was a coward.

Mafatu's courage: That's when I made up my mind. A fierce **resentment** flowed through me. I knew in an instant what I had to do: prove my courage to myself, and to others, or I could no longer live in their midst.

Narr 2: Mafatu walks with purpose to his hut. There, he finds his dog, Uri.

Mafatu: We're going away, Uri. Off to the south there are other islands.

Narr 3: Together, Mafatu and Uri head off to the shore's edge. Mafatu flings half a dozen green drinking nuts and his fish spear into a canoe. Then boy and dog board the tiny vessel.

Narr 4: He picks up a paddle,

and, without giving another thought to fear, pushes off.

Mafatu's courage: The lagoon was as untroubled as a mirror. Noiselessly, I propelled the canoe forward, sending it half a length ahead with every thrust of my paddle.

Mafatu's fear: As I drew nearer to the barrier reef, the thunder of the surf increased. The old, familiar dread of it sunk in my stomach's pit.

Narr 1: Mafatu's hands tighten on the paddle. For a second, he almost turns back. But then he sees his albatross, Kivi, flying high above him, guiding him.

Mafatu: Kivi! You have come along on this adventure with us! My heart is lifted!

Narr 2: The bird circles slowly in the moonlight, then heads out to the open ocean. Mafatu grips the steering paddle and follows.

SCENE 3

Narr 3: Day breaks over a gray and dismal world. Mafatu looks back over his shoulder, searching for the last glimpse of Hikueru, his home. But the island has vanished.

Mafatu's courage: I was out there. I was doing it. Me. The boy who was afraid.

Narr 4: The sea is calm for Mafatu at first. As he paddles, he meets all sorts of sea creatures.

Mafatu's courage: Flying fish broke the water, skimming away in a silver shimmer of flight. A dolphin sped after us, smooth-rolling in its pursuit, so close



that I could hear the sound of its breathing.

Narr 1: Mafatu opens one of the green drinking nuts and tilts his head back to let the cool liquid trickle down his parched throat.

Mafatu: Would you like some food, Uri?

Narr 2: Mafatu scoops out some **gelatinous** meat for his pup, who eats it gratefully.

Narr 3: The boy looks to the sky, searching for Kivi.

Mafatu: There are hundreds of birds in the sky, Uri! Perhaps thousands! Kivi could be any one of them or none at all!

Narr 4: Uri just looks at Mafatu with curious dog eyes.

Narr 1: Suddenly, the wind picks up.

Mafatu's fear: Storms in the South Pacific frequently come out of nowhere. I was very young when the sea god took my mother, but I remember how fast the weather turned.

Narr 2: A light drizzle quickly turns to hard rain and blasts Mafatu's sail.

Mafatu's fear: A heavy squall came upon us, and the waves got higher. All around us was tumbling water, gray in the hol-

lows, greenish in the slopes. Like advance scouts of an oncoming army, wind gusts moved down upon our canoe, striking at it savagely.

Mafatu: Spare us, Moana!

Mafatu's courage: Somehow, the sound of my own voice reassured me. I guided our small canoe well and with a skill I did not know I possessed.

* vocab

BONITOS: mackerel-like fish

RESENTMENT: a feeling of displeasure toward something

GELATINOUS: resembling jelly



Narr 3: The sky darkens. A burst of lightning lights up the sea with supernatural brilliance. An instantaneous crack of thunder shatters the world.

Narr 4: The storm rages on for hours, but Mafatu manages to keep his canoe afloat. The storm very slowly weakens in the night. When it finally **subsides**, the boy is exhausted from struggling against the currents. He believes he hears an old, familiar voice ringing in his ears.

Moana: Someday, Mafatu, I will claim you.

Narr 1: In the morning, the sun is warm on Mafatu's sleeping face. He wakes and sees Uri looking out at something in the far distance.

Mafatu's courage: It was land!

Mafatu: Uri! Uri! It's land. *Land!*

Narr 2: Mafatu scans the sky and sees Kivi flying in front of them, leading them to some strange shore. Mafatu can hardly believe it.

Narr 3: All through the day, Mafatu paddles toward the great mountainous shapes in the distance. He never takes his eyes off his destination.

Mafatu's fear: We had traveled southwest for two days. I knew that much. But as to what island was before me, I did not know.

Mafatu: Is it Tahiti, Uri, the golden island? Or could it be one of the terrible dark islands of the eaters of men?

Mafatu's fear: Of course I had heard the stories of the dark islands. On Hikuera, all the boys would tease one another

with terrifying accounts of such places, where the **inhabitants** were savage and would kill you without a second thought.

Mafatu's courage: I didn't know whether the stories were true. All I knew was that I was heading toward land. I would deal with whatever lay ahead when I arrived.

Moana: Someday, Mafatu. Someday.

Narr 4: Mafatu pushes the sea god's voice out of his head and quickens his paddle.

Narr 1: Night falls once again. As Mafatu gets closer to the island, a wave lifts his canoe and flings it forward. The boat crashes into splinters, and Mafatu and Uri are hurled headlong into the surf.

Mafatu's fear: The shock of the cold water kept me from falling into unconsciousness. But as I swam weakly toward shore, Uri was nowhere to be found!

Mafatu: Uri! Uri! Where are you?

Mafatu's courage: The beach was still out of reach. I pushed onward with what little energy I had left.

Narr 2: At last, Mafatu feels his feet touch sand. All the world seems to hold its breath as the boy climbs out of the sea. He stumbles slowly out of the water and crashes on the land.

Narr 3: Through half-closed eyes, the boy sees his dog running toward him.

SCENE 4

Narr 4: In the morning, Mafatu wakes. He sees Kivi drinking

from a pool of clear water just up the beach. The boy shuffles over to it and drinks cautiously.

Narr 1: Uri is with him, drinking at the pool.

Mafatu: There is so much to do, Uri! We need fire and food.

Narr 2: His thoughts of survival are broken by one of sheer happiness.

Mafatu's courage: We were alive.

Mafatu: Uri! We're alive! It wasn't all a bad dream. It really happened!

Mafatu's fear: And then another thought rushed in on me: the eaters of men. What if it was their island? What if they were watching me from their secret places in the jungle? Biding their time?

Narr 3: Mafatu scans the trees and sees no one. He looks down and sees no sign of footprints.

Narr 4: A flash of green and purple parakeets flash across the sky and vanish. Mafatu sees coconuts and other fruits in the trees.

Mafatu's courage: Because I was **famished**, I climbed a tree and knocked down some fruit.

Mafatu's fear: I carefully scaled down the coconut tree to my prize. Greedily I sank my teeth into the rosy pulp. As I was eating, a wild boar rushed right past me.

Mafatu: Uri! Did you see that?

Narr 1: Uri barks after the boar as it runs away.

Mafatu: I will hunt down that boar and kill him, Uri! I will make such a necklace for myself from

his tusks. And when I return to Hikuera, men will look up to me with respect and say: "There goes Mafatu. He killed the wild boar single-handed!" And Tavana Nui, my father, will be filled with pride.

Mafatu's courage: The prospect of returning home set another train of thought in motion.

Mafatu: I must find a tree for my canoe.

Narr 2: Mafatu walks through the woods. He notices that some of the banana trees have recently been stripped of their fruit.

Mafatu's fear: This was evidence enough that someone else was on the island. Again, the terrible thought of the eaters of men crossed my mind.

Mafatu's courage: But still, I walked on.

Mafatu: Maui, god of fishermen, hear me! I shall return one day, I swear it. My father, Tavana Nui, will be filled with pride at my homecoming. It is a vow that I take now, oh Maui. I have spoken.

Narr 3: With Uri at his side, Mafatu comes to a clearing in the woods. There, he is confronted by a grotesquely ugly **idol**.

Mafatu's fear: At the idol's feet

* vocab

SUBSIDES: becomes quiet, lessens

INHABITANTS: permanent residents of a place

FAMISHED: extremely hungry

IDOL: an object that represents a subject of worship

were ... bones. A lot of bones. Piles of bones. Bones too large for dogs. Bones too large for pigs. It was then I understood.

Mafatu: This is *motu tabu*, Uri. A forbidden island. It is here that the eaters of men make their terrible sacrifices to their god.

Narr 4: Though he is scared, Mafatu tries to remain calm. It is evident that the savages have been here recently. Piles of ashes rest at his feet, undisturbed by wind.

Mafatu's courage: And then I saw it. At the base of the giant statue was a platform. And on that platform rested a spearhead.

Mafatu: Dare I take it, Uri? We could use it as a hunting tool or a weapon against attack!

Mafatu's fear: But what if the eaters of men are watching?

Mafatu's courage: Then let them watch. Grab it!

Narr 1: Mafatu's heart is pounding. His fear and his courage are arguing for control over him. For a second, he is powerless to move.

Narr 2: Mafatu takes a deep breath, grabs the spearhead, and makes a run for it.

Mafatu's courage: I ran all the way to the beach without looking back.

Narr 3: Now that Mafatu has a spearhead, he is feeling more confident.

Mafatu's courage: That took courage, *ai*, courage! That night, I made fire and danced around the flames.

Mafatu: Tomorrow we shall start

work on our canoe, Uri. And what a canoe we will build! Deep and strong, but light—as swift and powerful as a shark's tail. But first ... shelter.

Narr 4: Mafatu tears down some giant **fronds** from a nearby tree and sets them up to serve as a roof over his head.

Mafatu's courage: I had fire. I had shelter. I had food. I had faced Moana, the sea god. I had dared the eaters of men to win my spear. There was a newfound confidence in my heart. I had found a new belief in myself. I went to sleep that night at peace with myself and my world.

SCENE 5

Narr 1: In the morning, Mafatu begins building his canoe. He spends the entire day carving trees and bamboo.

Mafatu's fear: As I worked, my mind returned again and again to the wild pig I was determined to kill. My entire being seemed to have changed from frightened to ... something else.

Mafatu's courage: How could I go back to Hikueru without a boar's tooth necklace? Why, that necklace was as important as a canoe! For by that token men would know my strength and courage.

Narr 2: Mafatu spends many days building his canoe and keeping his eyes open for the wild boar.

Narr 3: One morning, Mafatu wanders far down the beach and comes across a sheltered cove. Gleaming there in the sun is all

that remains of the skeleton of a whale.

Mafatu: Uri! We are rich! Look at all the bones! We can make knives and fishhooks and darts and spears. Come help me drag these bones home.

Narr 4: When the **arduous** task of dragging the whale bones back to his shelter is finished, Mafatu sets about sharpening them into tools and weapons.

Mafatu: Let the eaters of men come to me now, Uri. I will be ready!

Mafatu's fear: True, I was feeling **invincible**, but part of me was still scared. Had I really outgrown being the boy who is afraid? Or was I just acting out a story in which I was a hero? If the eaters of men had attacked me then, would I have fought bravely or merely cowered before them?

Mafatu's courage: I like to think I would have killed them all.

Narr 1: As Mafatu's two sides are vying for position within him, his thoughts are suddenly interrupted by a beast of another nature.

Mafatu: The boar!

Narr 2: The wild boar comes charging at the boy. Mafatu jumps out of the way, and the boar crashes through his shelter, knocking it down.

Narr 3: Mafatu wastes no time. He clutches his spear and chases after the pig. Halfway down the beach, the pig turns and stares Mafatu down. The boy stops in his tracks and prepares to meet his foe.



Mafatu: Wild pig! I, Mafatu, have come to kill you!

Narr 4: The boar charges. Foam flies from its tusks. Mafatu braces himself. He meets the charge with a perfectly timed thrust of his spear.

Narr 1: The spearhead goes deep into the boar's shoulder. Mafatu is thrown off balance and sent spinning. Over and over he rolls.

Narr 2: Mafatu leaps to his feet in a panic, defenseless. But the boar topples, gives a shudder, and lies still.

Mafatu's fear: I was struck dumb. I had killed a wild pig!

Mafatu: Ai! I have killed him! Do you hear me, Tavana Nui? I, your son, have killed a boar! Ho! Ha!

Narr 3: Uri comes trotting over from the far end of the beach.

Mafatu: A fine one you are! Where were you when I needed you? Off chasing butterflies?

Narr 4: Mafatu teases his dog, but he is in too good a mood to be cruel.

Narr 1: Mafatu gathers some bamboo, quickly makes a crude sled, and loads the boar's carcass onto it. He then drags the pig back to his campsite and cooks it.

Mafatu's courage: I sang at the top of my lungs that night. I was all Polynesian now, charged with the ancient fierceness of my race. Victory coursed through my veins. There was nothing I would not have dared.

Narr 2: Using his sharpest whale-bone knife, Mafatu skillfully removes one of the boar's tusks and makes a necklace of it.

* vocab

FRONDS: large leaves

ARDUOUS: difficult

INVINCIBLE: incapable of being defeated



Mafatu: Now, Uri, we can go home.

SCENE 6

Narr 3: The next morning, Mafatu works steadily at his canoe. By noon, it is finished. He drags it down the beach and places it in the water.

Narr 4: Uri jumps in the boat, and the boy follows. High above, Kivi sails with widespread wings.

Mafatu's courage: As I paddled away from that island, I felt as if I were a new person. I was proud. And I looked forward to greeting my father.

Narr 1: As day turns to night, Mafatu hears something that sounds like drums from behind him.

Mafatu: Do you hear that, Uri?

Mafatu's fear: At first I thought it was just my imagination playing

tricks on me. But the drumming got steadily louder and louder until it could not be ignored.

Mafatu: The eaters of men!

Narr 2: Mafatu's heart is pounding in his chest. Uri is barking at the wind. Their canoe speeds across the sea.

Mafatu's fear: I flung a desperate look over my shoulder. Four dark figures were gaining on me. And that was just in the lead canoe! Behind that one were several others!

Mafatu: Maui! Do not desert me! This last time—lend me your help!

Moana: The time has come, Mafatu. I will claim you.

Narr 3: Mafatu pushes the sea god's voice out of his head and paddles to save his life.

Mafatu: Not yet, Moana! You haven't won. Not yet.

Mafatu's fear: The canoes got closer and closer. There were six of them behind the first, each filled with 10 warriors. They were a sight to quake the stoutest heart.

Narr 4: The chase goes on all night long. Mafatu never tires. He fights bravely to keep going, and, by morning, he comes to notice that his pursuers have slowly begun to fall back from him.

Narr 1: The drums fade into the distance behind him. Mafatu can hardly believe it. He has outraced the eaters of men! He is free!

Mafatu: We did it, Uri! We did it!

Mafatu's fear: Looking back, I wonder whether the eaters of men were really pursuing me. Or was it just my irrational fear taking hold of me one last time?

Mafatu's courage: Whatever the case, foe or fear, I outran it. And as that last day dragged on,

I soon began to see a hint of Hikueru in the distance.

Mafatu: Do you see, Uri? Here we come, at last, to our home.

Narr 2: Mafatu chokes back a tear. Uri barks with glee.

Mafatu: Moana, you sea god! *You!* You destroyed my mother. Always you have tried to destroy me. Fear of you has haunted my sleep. Fear of you has turned my people against me. But now ... now I no longer fear you!

Mafatu's fear: Here I take my bow.

Narr 3: The small canoe makes its way slowly to Hikueru's shore.

Mafatu: Do you hear me, Moana? I am not afraid of you! I laugh at you! Do you hear? *I laugh!*

Mafatu's courage: Uri, whimpering softly, crept to my side. Kivi, above, soared. As Hikueru got

closer and closer, I saw a crowd had assembled on the shore. They were cheering and waving me in.

Narr 4: A strangled cry breaks from the boy. He shuts his eyes tight, and there is a taste of salt, wet on his lips.

Narr 1: When the canoe reaches shallow waters, all the island boys jump in and help escort Mafatu in.

Kana: Mafatu! You are alive! You have conquered your fear!

Mafatu's courage: My father, Tavana Nui, was smiling at me.

Mafatu: My father, I have come home.

Mafatu's courage: And then my father beamed at me.

Tavana Nui: Could this brave figure, so thin and straight, with the fine boar's tusk necklace and the flashing spear and courage blazing from his eyes be my son?

Narr 2: Far overhead, Kivi catches a light of gold on its wings, and Tavana Nui turns to his people and says ...

Tavana Nui: Here is my son come home from the sea. Mafatu, Stout Heart. A brave name for a brave boy!

Narr 3: The entire village now cheers for the boy who was once afraid.

Mafatu's courage: Overwhelmed with joy, I swayed where I stood.

Mafatu: My father, I ...

Narr 4: Tavana Nui catches his son as he falls.

Narr 1: It happened many years ago, before the traders and mis-

sionaries first came to the South Seas, when the Polynesians were still great in numbers and fierce of heart. But even today the people of Hikueru sing this story in their chants and tell it over evening fires. ■

Write About It

Do you have any fears? Mafatu conquered his fear of the sea by sailing off into it. Imagine your piece of paper as your ship to courage, and write away your fears! What exactly do we mean by that? Well, that's up to you! One of the great things about writing is that it can be extremely personal. You don't have to share your work with anyone if you don't want to. However, if you wish, you can send your piece to word@weeklyreader.com. Who knows? We might publish your piece on our blog, WORD, at www.readandwriting.com. We're here to inspire you—to help you find your careful words of expression. Whether or not you send us something, we hope you will give this exercise a shot.

*Also, when you get a chance, look up the word *catharsis* in the dictionary if you don't already know what it means.

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