

# Swimming in the FastWarm Current

by

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sfrevu.com:

"Russell is another first-time author and he shows quite a bit of talent here."

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"...[the story is] rather nice, if again fairly conventional. The revealed history is enjoyable."

Jupiter SF #27 blog, 21/1/10:

"... Lee Russell's first story, a wonderful piece which shows he's got a great future ahead of him."

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Look out for other stories from Lee Russell at [www.russellweb.org.uk](http://www.russellweb.org.uk).

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Spinner cried with delight as he reached the top of his powerful ascent and burst into the strange, dry world above.

QuickFlip poked her head out of the water just in time to see him spinning gracefully in the air. For a moment he seemed to be floating above the wavecaps with sunlight sparkling through the drops of water falling away from him. Then he crashed back down, covering her with his spray. Spinner quickly swam over and anxiously circled around her before apologising with a subdued series of soft clicks; "Sorry," he said.

QuickFlip butted his snout with her tail just hard enough to show that she was upset with him. "You're so immature," she replied. "When are you going to grow up?" She was eight years old now and her skin was taking on its adult, blue-grey, counter-shadow pattern. Who knew, maybe this year a mate would choose her when the pod reached the summer feeding grounds?

Spinner batted her playfully with his tail; "Have some fun QuickFlip!" He said. "You're always watching; why don't you join in?"

"I want more than that," she answered. Then, just as she was about to swim away, she stopped dead in the water, staring straight ahead.

"What is it? What did you see?" Spinner asked quietly.

"I don't know," she whispered. "Just for a moment," she hesitated, "I thought I saw somebody watching us. It quickly backed off when I noticed it."

"A shark?" Spinner asked in alarm.

"I don't think so," she answered uncertainly.

Spinner slowly checked all around them. "There's nothing there," he said. "Could it have been a trick of the light?"

"Maybe," she said. She didn't sound very convinced.

"Perhaps it was DreamSong," Spinner teased.

She thought that over for a moment; "Perhaps it was," she replied.

"Oh, come on!" Spinner laughed. "He's just made up by adults to scare pups into good behaviour. Everybody knows that!"

"Maybe *everybody* has got that wrong," QuickFlip said. "Something was there; not a shark or orca, definitely one of us, but nobody that I recognised."

"Keep this to yourself," Spinner advised. "The Council blame DreamSong for falling morality and belief in Tech-ism. You don't want them to think you're involved in that, do you?"

"No," she answered gloomily. Then she slowly swam away, her pectorals drooping, leaving him alone with his thoughts.

Spinner's inner voice gave a long, melancholy sigh. What would it take to get closer to her? He loved her but she never seemed to *notice* him, no matter how much he tried to impress her. She was the most fascinating young female in their pod, much more assertive and mature than the others. She was a good length and packed with nearly as much powerful muscle as TrimTail, the dominant female. She had a deliciously sleek shape and he always marvelled at how air bubbles hugged her flanks when she was putting on speed. He knew it would be fun to stay with her but he was only just nine this year and she was growing up so fast.

He descended into the twilight zone, where the sunlit surface waters gave way to the murkier depths of the deep ocean. Feeling a shadow pass over him, Spinner didn't have to look to know that it was ScarNose. But he did have to look in order to avoid giving offence. Their leader was quick to anger.

Spinner watched with some fear as ScarNose drifted towards him in broad, lazy turns. With a final, calm yet powerful flick of his tail, ScarNose was alongside and swimming with him. He was close, too close.

"We've got a long way to go, Spinner," ScarNose rumbled, his deep voice full of rumbling undertones. "Are you still annoying people? We must concentrate on the journey ahead."

Spinner thought fast. You never knew if ScarNose was starting a challenge. He wasn't big enough to fight the big male yet and tried to distract him instead. "Just having some fun," he answered. "What do you think? The currents are changing and the water feels warmer here, and there's less fish around. Are we going to head east?"

"Maybe," ScarNose grunted before fixing Spinner with a hard, unflinching glare; "Interested in the currents are you?" he demanded.

"No," Spinner quickly replied.

"That was a fast answer for someone with no interest," ScarNose said slyly. "Have you forgotten what it was like last year?"

Spinner's skin started to take on those embarrassing yellow blotches that children show when they're being told off. Damn, he thought he'd grown out of that!

"Do you have a problem, Spinner?" ScarNose continued to batter Spinner's ego, trying to see if he could break the youngster into submission.

"No, no problem," Spinner managed to say. He rose to the surface and inhaled deeply to calm down; "What do you mean about last year?" he asked.

ScarNose moved in front of Spinner and stared straight down his beak in the most domineering way possible. "I know you entered the FastWarm current last year," he stated.

Spinner started to mumble some excuses, trying to avoid this confrontation.

"Don't lie!" ScarNose bellowed. "I know you've seen a Block. I know you entered one; I can see the little holes in your skin where it stuck things into you!"

Now Spinner was confused *and* scared; “How do you know about this?” he asked meekly.

“The Council always knows what happens to the pods!” ScarNose boomed. He continued before Spinner could speak again, drowning out the youngster’s words; “The Council say that anyone supporting Tech-ism will be hunted down. We must all stay together, and work together, and remember the Stories about our world. If you stray again I will kill you. Do you understand me?”

Spinner backed off in alarm but managed to dip his body in submission and mutter a simple “Yes”.

“When we reach the Summer Grounds I will take QuickFlip as my mate,” ScarNose said, “Perhaps you think that is unfair?” he taunted.

“No,” Spinner meekly answered.

“Good. I don’t want to have to wait for you again. Make sure you’re ready to follow when we move on,” ScarNose commanded before turning with restrained power and diving into the dark zone.

While Spinner watched their leader swim away his skin cycled through angry reds and blues before finally settling into a brooding grey-green. With a sulky shake of his tail he turned around and dived towards his favourite zone in the water column, the Sound Channel. Down here he could hear sounds from far away, further than he could swim in the time from one bright Moon to another. He heard the strange weeping songs of the whales, the calls of other pods, clicks from the claws of nocturnal creatures rising from the depths, and other strange pulses that nobody had explained. The sounds carried stories from a world that was much larger than he had experienced.

After a while QuickFlip found him and they swam ahead quietly together. “He doesn’t like you” she said.

Spinner softly grunted an affirmation, puffing bubbles from his blow-hole that drifted slowly away in the current.

“He worries about your mother, I think.” QuickFlip continued, “And then he takes it out on you.”

“Why? She can’t mate with him, and he’s paired with TrimTail anyway.”

QuickFlip slowly rolled around Spinner, trying to soothe his nerves and calm him down. She was pleased to see his colours return to their more normal sea-blue hue. “I heard ScarNose and TrimTail arguing,” she answered. “He’s worried that SmoothFlank will try to steer us towards the FastWarm current!”

Spinner summoned up some false bravado and butted her playfully, “What’s so scary about a patch of warm water anyway?” he asked. “Who knows, there may be big schools of fish just beyond it.”

“But we don’t *know* that, do we?” she retorted. “Warm waters hold less fish. What if there isn’t any cool water beyond the FastWarm current and we get stuck in it, without any food? Did you think of that?”

Spinner looked at her whimsically. “We won’t get stuck,” he said. He started to swim away but she quickly flicked her tail and blocked his path; “What do you know?” she demanded.

Spinner slowly inclined his body towards her, seeming to make some kind of decision; “Sometimes there’s a tingly taste in the water that calls me towards the FastWarm current. Do you get that?”

“No,” she answered quickly.

Spinner didn’t seem to notice the peculiar earnestness in her reply. “Some of the others are changing,” he continued. “The Great Whites have got bolder and patrol closer to the boundary between the cold waters and the FastWarm current. Have you noticed how we have to work harder to keep away from them?”

She thought for a moment and then agreed with a slight impatient flick of her pectorals; “So?”

“It’s just stuff that’s happening,” he said. “I’m feeling different; more alive, more alert,” he continued. “I’m full of questions and thoughts of possibilities.” Then he let his last few words drift softly in the waters between them; “I swam into the FastWarm current last year,” he said.

“Oh, Spinner! You mustn’t talk like that!” she said, sounding scared. She scanned the area around them but they seemed to be alone. “What if ScarNose heard you? He’d make you leave us!”

Moving closer and speaking in a quick burst of low-power, high-frequency clicks to ensure nobody could overhear, Spinner continued; “It calls to me, QuickFlip. Something in there knows where we came from.”

“The Elders’ Stories tell us that,” she countered.

“Oh, sure,” he answered and then continued in a kind of chant, “Then the world was flooded with waters and only the animals of the seas prospered and grew. The most intelligent were the most blessed, being given the power to choose how and where they lived.”

“Don’t you believe the Stories, Spinner?”

“Yes, well, I don’t know,” he mumbled. “I must see it again” he continued firmly.

“No!” Her voice was so strident that he backed off a few body lengths. “You know the rules; nobody goes into the FastWarm current, ever! Everyone knows that!” She was upset, her voice crackling with stress.

“Maybe *everybody* has got that wrong,” Spinner said, throwing her own words back at her. Then he seemed to shrug before slowly swimming off.

###

The following morning ScarNose urgently called them all together. "Great Whites have moved closer during the night," he said. "They're trying to force us into the narrows between the islands and the FastWarm current."

The rest of the pod trilled in alarm.

"Don't worry," ScarNose reassured them. "We're going to swim fast along the boundary between the currents and then move north into the colder waters. Everyone, stick together and we'll be alright." He looked at them in turn, trying to impress his calmness onto them. Then he turned, aligning his body parallel to the boundary before asking one word; "Ready?"

The pod happily clicked that they were. ScarNose gave a sharp, powerful flick of his tail and in moments they were streaming away at high speed.

###

Later, as they approached the shoaling seabed near the islands, Spinner felt the FastWarm current calling him strongly. It pulled at his guts, stretching his sinews with an almost sexual desire to cross the boundary and make towards the coast.

He remembered this place from last year; he'd ignored ScarNose's warning to stay away and nearly died in the maelstrom between the islands. He'd barely made it through alive and it was while he rested in the little lagoon close to the shore that he'd found the Block.

Dawdling along, caught up in his memories, Spinner only slowly realised how far he'd dropped behind the others. He couldn't hear their song anymore. He was alone.

A shadow passed about twenty metres ahead of him. He could barely make it out in the gloom and wondered if it was someone from another pod? Maybe he'd been found! "Hello?" he called out.

The stranger didn't reply and continued to swim around him near the edge of his vision.

Slowly the stranger moved closer and Spinner tensed his muscles to flee. He could see that it was an old male. His flanks were covered in scars and gouges and he seemed to be blind in his left eye.

The stranger circled around him twice more, scrutinising him with its good eye, before abruptly turning tail and disappearing into the murk.

'Where did he go?' Spinner wondered. He rotated in the water and tried to echolocate the stranger. He couldn't pick up the stranger's signature but he suddenly sensed movement ahead. The movement faded and then came back strongly; one, two, no, three; three sharks!

One was about fifty metres ahead, lost in the scattered light layer.

The second was slightly ahead but fifty metres below him.

And the third was rushing him from behind!

In sheer reflex Spinner ducked towards shallows on his right. The shark was just metres behind him and matching his speed. He didn't dare look behind. Any slight change of posture would increase the drag of the water on his body, slow him down and throw him into the monster's jaws.

He felt a pressure change in the water as the beast gained on his tail. Where were the other two? He frantically sounded the way ahead, trying to locate them. One was rushing in from his left!

He twitched right and felt the shark behind gain on him. The other one passed in front of him but he knew it would turn quickly and be back on the hunt in seconds.

If he turned to seaward he'd never survive pursuit in the open ocean. There was only one thing to do. The tide was pouring in towards the maelstrom. He had about a minute left to try and escape between the two islands. Jinking right, Spinner accelerated hard and burst into the straits as fast as he could.

They were racing into the shallows after the tide had started to rise. Spinner imagined the head of water that was piling up at the entrance to the straits. So much water would be trying to flow through as the tide rose that it wouldn't all get through at once.

Spinner could feel the pressure of all that water forcing a terrible current to flow. It was swirling around in vicious eddies, scouring the bottom clear of any unsecured debris.

Spinner had always been terrified by tales of podders' bodies being stripped of their flesh by the monsters of the maelstrom. Working very hard to keep a straight course he looked across into the heart of the expanding whirlpool. He saw a log ripped into tiny shreds by the boulders being hurled around in those fierce waters and finally understood the truth behind those stories.

The sharks were tiring. So was he.

It was just a matter of fitness and time now. How long until he was through the straits? How long before one of them sunk their cruel teeth into his flesh?

His muscles were slowing. He didn't dare look back.

But there! Just ahead, the exit from the straits!

He put on a final burst of speed and tumbled through the exit into the lagoon beyond.

Nothing followed him out.

No sharks. There was just the faint taste of their blood in the water.

He'd made it.

###

Spinner cruised lazily in the warm lagoon, letting his cramped muscles recover from their exertions. The smooth rhythmic motions soothed his body while curious tastes

played across his tongue, leading him towards a narrow inlet where the surf broke gently on a beach of black sand.

Popping his head out of the water, Spinner saw trees, waves, birds, and a large silver block right down on the shoreline. He'd seen other blocks when he'd been exploring. Those had been tasteless and silent but this one was different; it exuded strange and exciting tastes that were inexorably pulling him closer.

Spinner's mind was drifting when something suddenly touched his tail! He cried out in pure panic, his body involuntarily convulsed and he leapt clear out of the water.

Spinner splashed back clumsily into the water and tensed his muscles to swim again.

"Calm down, my friend." A voice behind him said.

His heart beating wildly, Spinner turned around and found himself staring at the scarred old male.

###

"Who are you?" Spinner asked.

The stranger paused and returned the question unanswered, asking "Who are you?" in return.

"I'm Spinner, who are you?"

"What is a Spinner?"

"I'm from ScarNose's pod," Spinner replied.

"What is a ScarNose?"

"You must know that!" Spinner answered. "He's ScarNose of the Elder Council."

"What are you?"

"I don't understand, what do you mean? Who are you?" Spinner answered.

"Some call me a traitor," the stranger said. "Some call me a heretic." He locked Spinner in the gaze of his remaining eye; "But you can call me DreamSong, if you like."

DreamSong and Spinner moved close to the surface where they could see each more easily.

"I've heard stories about you," Spinner said. "They say you lure young pups away from their pods. They say you use Tech to hurt them and nobody ever sees them again. They say you are a killer."

"Only the young will listen to my stories," DreamSong sighed. "Their minds are still free enough to imagine other ways that our world could be."

“What do you do to them?” Spinner asked, frightened.

“Oh, ho!” DreamSong laughed, “You have nothing to be afraid of about me. I just show them the way to the Truth. You want to know the Truth, don’t you?”

“What do you mean? What truth?”

“I mean the real Truth about what we are.”

“We’re podders!” Spinner retorted. But inside he didn’t feel so sure.

“You need to understand the full Truth, Spinner.” DreamSong said soothingly.

“Well, what is it?”

“I know it calls to you,” DreamSong replied. “It told me to find you. It wants to talk to you again.”

“You mean the Block?”

“Of course,” DreamSong answered. “I first found that Block fifteen years ago and since then I have been introducing other free thinking podders to it. I’ve watched you for a long time, thinking you might go through the FastWarm current. And we were so pleased when you did!”

“We? Are there more like you?” Spinner asked.

“There are Guides like me all along the coast. We try to help people learn the Truth. But that isn’t what I meant.” DreamSong paused and could see the realisation dawning in Spinner’s eyes. “Yes, the Block was very pleased to meet you and hoped you would return.”

“What does it want?”

“To tell you some more stories about where our people came from. But you must go now. Summer is nearly over and when winter comes the Block will fall silent until next year.”

“Will you come with me?”

“No. Everyone makes this journey alone. Are you ready for it?”

“Yes, I am,” Spinner replied, feeling an urgent desire to see the Block again.

“Then go in peace and happiness, my good friend Spinner.”

###

Spinner looked at The Block from the tideline. It was exactly as he remembered from last season. He knew something had happened to him during that visit but he couldn’t remember much, except that he had felt safe and warm. Ever since he had felt different and it had been a terrible strain to conceal the changes from his pod.

Glistening in the bright sunlight, The Block seemed to ebb in and out of his vision, much like a jelly fish can seem to disappear as you swim around and the direction of sunlight shining through it changes.

He was next to the Block now and the taste was overpowering. He felt dizzy. Abstract images from his memories were flickering rapidly in his head: birth, eating mackerel, kelp rolling in a rising tide, his mother, the sound of a storm, lightning.

The part of Spinner that was still pure podder was shocked when his body convulsed powerfully and thrust him onto the beach in front of the Block. Its side seemed to melt away and with a great effort he heaved himself in.

The missing side closed behind him.

He started to panic but lovely, comfortable, warm water flowed over him. And then the Voice spoke.

He remembered the Voice from before. It had told him a wonderful story about strange animals that had lived out in the air a long time ago. It spoke clearly but with a strange rhythm, like it had to think hard about how to form each word. "Welcome," the Voice said. A smooth, calming feeling washed down Spinner's body.

"Don't be afraid," the Voice said. "I am very happy that you have returned. How are you feeling?"

That surprised Spinner. He was so curious about the Block he hadn't thought about himself for several minutes. He considered the question; "Happy," he replied.

"Good, my friend. I am glad," the voice said.

"What is happening?" Spinner asked.

"All along the coast, on the landward side of the FastWarm current, the first fifty of you are finishing the *Transition*. Do you remember what that is?"

Spinner thought for a moment, "No," he replied.

"Think harder," the Voice commanded. "I can see the thoughts you need are nearly at the front of your mind. Pushing them forward now will help you prepare for the final changes."

While Spinner thought hard he sensed a new taste in the water. It was sharp, a bit like the way some metals can taste. As soon as he sensed the new taste he felt pathways opening in his mind, and he remembered. "I know you," Spinner said. "Last time you told me that other animals, intelligent creatures but very different to podders, used to live out of the water. You said they had strange long fins that they used to move about with called 'legs'."

"Yes, that is right," the Voice reassured him. "You are remembering clearly now."

"You said they poisoned the land and all died," Spinner continued. "And you said if I returned next season you would tell me the rest of their story."

“Well done, my friend,” the Voice said. “My companions and I have waited thousand of years for people like you. In all that time the world above the water has slowly healed and it is now ready to support humans again.”

“But they are all dead,” Spinner pointed out.

“No,” the Voice replied. “When they realised their race was dying the last humans made a terrible choice. They knew it would be millennia before their world could be habitable again, but they were very intelligent and they were *survivors*. If the land couldn’t support them anymore maybe the sea would, they thought.”

“What did they do?” Spinner asked.

“They made a new type of marine animal, basing it on the dolphin which they knew was a most intelligent and adaptable mammal. They found a way to move their human minds into the new dolphin’s brains, making sure that these new animals would be able to pass on their human intelligence to future generations, across the thousands of years that the world needed to heal itself before people could live on the land again.”

Spinner’s brain was working rapidly now and the realisation hit him hard; “Podders are these Human-Dolphins?” he asked.

“Yes,” the Voice replied. It sounded slightly different now, more melodious and almost female.

“Why did you call me here?” Spinner asked.

“The land is ready for people,” the Voice answered, “and you are ready for the Transition.”

“I’m scared,” Spinner said.

“Don’t be,” the Voice soothed. “You will find many machines like me on the land. They will help you find all the things you need to build a new life out of the water.”

Spinner started to thrash in fear again, “I don’t want to be alone up there!” he shouted.

“You won’t be,” reassured the Voice. “The first people emerged onto the land this morning, and more will follow after you. And I will be there to help you.”

“What happens now?”

“This machine holds a human form that has been stored and carefully maintained for you. You will sleep for a while and when you awake you will be a Man.”

###

When Spinner awoke he felt sharp sand rasping against the smooth skin of his back. He slowly opened his eyes and saw stars twinkling in the dark sky above him. The Moon was just above the horizon casting a lovely, milky light across the water. He stood up and then spent long minutes examining his strange new body. Finally he looked out to sea with a wrenching longing for his family, for QuickFlip.

Out in the bay he saw some fins circling. Straining hard to identify them he suddenly recognised ScarNose. “Hey, ScarNose! TrimTail!” he called out.

The podders paid no attention to him. He realised that his voice must work differently on land and they couldn’t understand him.

Feeling desperately alone, he started to walk along the surf line.

“Spinner!”

He heard the sound of a voice but didn’t realise at first that it meant someone else was on the beach.

“Spinner!”

This time he realised that someone was calling his name. He looked around, trying to see who it was. To his right he saw a ‘person’ emerging from the trees at the top of the beach. His new memories told him it was a female. He turned and walked up the beach towards her.

They both stopped when they were a feet apart.

“Hello, Spinner,” she said.

“Do I know you?” he asked.

“Well, I couldn’t leave you all on your own, could I?” she countered.

“Is it possible? Are you QuickFlip?” he asked, not believing the possibility that she may have joined him.

“Yes.”

“What are you doing here?” he asked, his voice loaded with amazement.

She playfully slapped his arm; “What do you think? I was playing in the FastWarm current long before you. I saw you leave the pod and decided to follow. After all, if you were ready to leave the water then I needed to complete the Transition as well. I couldn’t leave you up here on your own.”

He looked into her deep sea-blue eyes. “I love you,” he said.

“I know,” she replied. And then, finally answering the longing in his eyes, she said “I love you too.” And for the first time in ten thousand years, two humans joined hands on a moonlit beach.

The End