

❧ CHAPTER ONE

The birds keep singing

*“My world stopped
in earth-shattering suddenness,
yet not one bird
stopped singing.”²*

A white-collared kingfisher swooped down, landing on a branch of the pine tree just outside my office window. Its azure blue feathers contrasted with the brilliant purplish-red color of the bougainvillea. That thorny vine draped itself around the pine branches like strings of Christmas tree lights. “Is there really a pine tree under there?” a friend had once asked.

Many unusual creatures like kangaroos, leatherback turtles and flashlight fish live on this island of Papua New Guinea connecting the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

I favored the exotic birds. I called them “feathered friends,” mainly because they kept the insect population down, though they did more than minimize my chances of contracting malaria. There was something reassuring about their throaty notes and the way they glided through the air. They inserted an element of pleasure and peace into my high-energy schedule by their glorious songs and brilliant plumage.

² Jones, Doris Moreland. *And Not One Bird Stopped Singing*. Nashville: Upper Room, 1997: 27.

I gave myself a little pat on the shoulder, proud that I could name so many of the birds of our adopted country—the mannekin, lorikeet, honeyeater and lovely snow-white cockatoo. When my husband, Edmund, our children and I traveled back to America for what we missionaries call “furlough,” I enjoyed telling people that Papua New Guinea has the largest pigeon in the world, the largest and tiniest parrots in the world, with at least eight hundred species of birds, more than the U.S. and Canada combined.

The kingfisher was a frequent visitor to this spot and my family laughed when they heard me greet him with a cheery, “Good afternoon, friend.”

I kept my eyes on the kingfisher. This afternoon he seemed to be looking straight at me, like he knew something I didn’t.

I felt a soft afternoon breeze through the open louver windows and reminded myself that at sunset, when vandals roam freely, we should remember to shut and lock all the windows. But now with the tropical sun’s rays all around us, and friends beside us, we were safe, weren’t we?

After a series of high-pitched nasal notes, as if in gentle warning, the kingfisher flew off. All I saw was a flash of blue wings. *I need to tend to the job at hand and stop the bird watching.* I smelled the coffee perking in the kitchen and glanced at the clock. We believed in coffee breaks almost as strongly as we believed in the work we had come to do on this fascinating island. We were missionary-translators, determined to learn the Nabak language, devise an alphabet, and eventually translate the Bible for this group numbering 25,000.

It was three o’clock in the afternoon. The steaming cups of coffee and plate of crackers and peanut butter I planned for my husband, the two Nabak translation helpers and myself, would give each

of us a much needed boost of caffeine, sugar and protein for our translation work.

But then the older of the men ran past my window and out the driveway.

“Geŋ zigok?” I shouted.³

No answer.

“Where’s Miliŋnâŋe going?” I called out, turning to my husband’s office.

No answer.

Strange. I swiveled in my chair and walked through the tiny room adjoining our offices and peered into his office. If no one was around I’d wait with the coffee until they came back.

Instead of two men engaged in energetic discussion of Nabak words and phrases, my husband, Edmund, was alone at his computer, slumped back in his chair. An axe hung from the back of his head.

An axe? I stared. Am I going mad? Surely I’m hallucinating. Cold fear crept through my entire body.

“No, no, please, this can’t be happening,” I sobbed.

One minute my mind spun out of control, the next, I stood stupefied, refusing to believe the dreadful reality before me.

I rubbed my eyes, patted Edmund’s shoulders and sensed the truth instantly. This was no dream. My teeth chattered. My stomach lurched.

Someone had murdered Edmund.

³ The n with a tail is our way of writing the sound ng as in the English word ‘sing’. The problem with writing it ng in Nabak is that this sound comes at the beginning and middle of words. It is a very frequent phoneme so it makes words twice as long. It is really one sound, a velar nasal, and needs one symbol. The other problem with using ng is that there are many words in Nabak where g follows the n sound, two sounds. For example ‘nin-gat’.



Edmund and Grace Fabian. The last picture taken of Edmund before he died.

Photo by Pat Brien