Quicksands

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Abstract

"‘I I *HE SAILS are in sight, they’re coming!’ shouted the lookJL out. He tied a battered piece of red cloth onto a bamboo pole and practically slid down the rough ladder. By this time, the children who had already been playing on the beach had made their way up to the point..."
"The sails are in sight, they're coming!" shouted the lookout. He tied a battered piece of red cloth onto a bamboo pole and practically slid down the rough ladder. By this time, the children who had already been playing on the beach had made their way up to the point. The men came running and pushed the children out of the way. Wood was already stacked so that the fire could be set as soon as Arn came with the torch.

By the time the rest of the villagers had made it to the point, a huge fire was sending a column of smoke into the otherwise completely blue sky. Occasionally a mother would slap a child's bare buttocks and warn him to stay far enough away from the flames. It was dangerously crowded, but everyone wanted to be first to spot the ship as it sailed into the cove.

The arrival or even rumor of the ship created a noticeable effect upon the island people. Their common pattern of existence centered around irregular attempts to lure fish into their hand-made nets; and this they would do only if some celebration wasn't demanding their attention. Seldom did anyone show concern about finishing a task, unless it was in preparation for the ship's return.

A mound of white sand was kicked over as the villagers ran from the point further down the beach. The little boy who had been playing in the sand scooped up a handful of it and, almost in a damning gesture, threw it after the mob.
The ship had now anchored, and was sending a few boats out to meet the frenzied waiters on the shore.

Arn walked through the crowd to greet the first sailors. He had taken time after the fire-lighting to return to his hut and get the book and his polished stone. This was Arn's first year to be in charge of the transaction, since his father had only died since the ship had last been there. He thought that he would have to explain to the one they called "Skipper" about why his father was not there; but none of the sailors seemed surprised—they seemed to have expected it.

"How old was the chief, anyway?" one of the new crew members asked.

Neither Arn nor any of the other villagers knew how to respond.

"Is everything ready?" the captain simultaneously asked and ordered as both his crew and the natives nodded.

Arn motioned and his men carried the bags out from the shelter and stacked them at the captain's feet. The captain took the knife from his belt and slit the top bag. Pure, white, fine-grained sand flowed down over the remaining bags, sacrificially spilling onto both the captain's boots and Arn's bare feet. Seeing that it was good, the captain ordered the trunks to be opened. Arn, along with the other men, picked up a few bolts of cloth, passed them around, then nodded in agreement.

With both parties thus satisfied, only the legalities remained to be handled. A crewman took the leather-bound book and wrote something in it, then it was signed by the captain. Arn had watched his father sign and had practiced drawing his sign on the wet beach, but his hand still shook as he took the pen and made his mark. Why the captain wanted his people to keep the book wasn't clear to Arn. As long as both he and the captain passed the polished stone between their hands, though, he would be assured that both the man and his trade were honorable.

Everyone knew that a feast would follow this solemn occasion, and so one began. Most of the island's celebrations lasted for at least a full day and usually on for two or three more. The sand trading feast was always cut short, though, because the sailors had to leave for a place called the "Port" and meet its deadline.

The captain's answers to Arn about deadlines and the
Port just added to his curiosity. All Arn could figure out was that someone called Time controlled the actions of the captain and his men. Arn wandered off by himself and before even the lowest crew member came back, had found his way on board ship. He squeezed into a corner hidden by sandbags and waited for his discovery.

The red flag appeared on the look-out's pole and everyone came running. The men fired puzzled questions and accusations back and forth among themselves. "Why do you think it's coming back so soon? We just began to refill the shelter with sand. Do you think there could have been something wrong with the last load?"

The women and children were already preparing for another feast.

A more anxious groups than usual was waiting for the ship's passengers. The crowd's curiosity turned into amazement when they saw Arn climb into one of the small boats along with the captain. The men ran out into the water to meet them and returned pulling the boat up onto the beach.

The captain repeatedly assured the men that nothing had been wrong with the sand. Arn didn't say a word—no questions were asked of him. The captain finally quieted everyone and asked some questions for himself. "Didn't you miss Arn while he was away? Or did you know all along that he was going to stow away on board? What did you think he was doing for over a month?"

The islanders took no offense. One of the oldest poked his son to ask him what a month was.

"We thought that he had gone up to the cliff for a while; lots of us go there to get away from the village. You can just lie back and watch the sky a little closer. Whenever someone comes back, though, we never forget to have a celebration. . . . Why aren't the rest of the sailors coming ashore with the trunks?"

The captain didn't answer, but just handed something to Arn and then climbed back into the boat to head for the ship.

Arn started to walk toward his hut. He was not allowed to escape to solitude, though. The villagers, by then, had regained their voices along with a million questions. They sat down all together on the beach and demanded to hear about everything Arn had seen and done since he had disappeared.
Realizing that he was in for a lot of talking, Arn sat down on the beach and made himself comfortable. Before he started to speak, he took the object given to him by the captain and buried it in the sand next to him.

Since most of the adults had seen the interior of the ship at one time or another, they hurried Arn through his description of the actual voyage.

"Did you go all the way to Port? Come on and tell us what it's like."

Arn described his view of the coast as they approached, with the wooden piers crowding most of the rocky beach.

"Is that why they want our sand, then, to cover the beaches?"

Arn ignored the question about the sand and instead went into a full account of the city's streets and wooden buildings. The size of the town, alone, was enough to stir up the villagers' interest, if not disbelief, since its population included more people than had inhabited their entire island for any of their lifetimes.

The captain had forewarned Arn about what he could expect to see, but there was no way he could prepare him for actually experiencing life in the city.

It was getting dark and Arn began to look around to see if anyone was getting restless. "Won't you want to be going home to eat soon?" Arn asked the group. The people exchanged glances and then a few women got up and left. Arn enjoyed the moment or two of silence, but could tell that his captive audience was intent on keeping him captive.

Arn had only started speaking again when the women returned with torches and some big baskets filled with fish and fruit. Hands reached out for the food but the people, themselves, remained sitting. No one was going to leave until they had heard all that Arn could tell them.

Taking an orange that was offered to him, Arn continued. "After eating with them, I can see why the sailors cut our feasts so short. On the ship they rush through meals like they expect a squall to come and blow away everything left on the plates. In Port people seldom even get together in the middle of the day to eat, let alone try to catch some sleep before rushing back and forth again for the entire afternoon. Once I asked the captain why he had to eat so fast, and he said he had no time to waste on mere food."
I guess I should have figured that out for myself.

"The main reason I decided to go with the ship, anyway, was to find out who this Time was that always made the sailors leave our feasts so early. I heard people everywhere constantly talking about Time, but whenever I asked any questions they would only laugh. Some of the friendlier people would try to explain, but all I got out of them were a lot of words like "hours," "minutes," "days," and on and on.

"After a while I could see how Time was to blame for a lot of things. Who else could make people ride on running animals? Occasionally I could convince the captain to walk someplace with me, but even then we would end up nearly running. Once we went to a place called The Eight Bells. When we walked inside there were a lot of people who seemed to be having a fairly good celebration, but no one ever seemed to sit down. People walked in and out all night, staying only long enough to gulp down enough brew to last one of us through a whole feast."

By this time not a single villager could take his eyes away from Arn. It was obvious that there was much more to be said, but he suddenly seemed to be having trouble finding the right words to use. Except for a few children who had fallen asleep on the sand, everyone remained sitting in silence.

Arn began to shift the sand around the mound that covered the captain's gift. "I looked for the beaches covered with our sand, but there were none to be found. I finally had to ask the captain what they did with the sand after bringing it so far. That was when he gave me this." At that time, Arn dug into the mound and pulled out a small glass case, with a miniature waterfall of sand trapped inside.

"What is it? Let me see. What does it do?" Arn was bombarded with questions and requests to see this curiosity more closely.

"This is what the captain called an hour-glass and it, of all things, is what Time is all about." The villagers' eyes focused on the glass case, becoming almost hypnotized as they watched the grains flow through the tiny opening.

"There is at least one of these in every home at the Port. The people are always walking up to it, staring, and then walking away—usually with a strange look on their faces or muttering something. When they're not going up
to it themselves, they are asking someone else to look for them. It's very strange, they do all this for the hour-glass and it does nothing for them. Then, when all the sand runs through, someone has to immediately turn the hour-glass over, like this. If anyone forgets, you've never seen such a scared look, unless you saw someone standing face to face with a tidal wave!"

The villagers were pretty confused by this time. One of the men grabbed the hour-glass and passed it around the adults. At least for awhile they had run out of questions. Arn lay down on his stomach and started to draw figure eights in the sand. He rolled over on his back, picked up a handful of sand and let it pour slowly down upon his chest. Suddenly he stood up, spilling most of the sand onto his own feet. "Give me the hour-glass," he said, and walked through the crowd to grab it.

"This Time business, I think I'm beginning to figure it out. The sand must be magic! It's our sand, not Time, that is making all the Port people live the way they do! When the sand is put into cases like this, some sort of spirit must be captured. All this time we've been sending these powerful spirits away on the ship without even knowing they existed."

The villagers shifted around but nobody stood up. It seemed almost as if they were afraid to walk on the newly considered sand. "What should we do, Arn? We can't just ignore those spirits now or something terrible will happen."

"Don't you see, the sailors have already taught us how to handle the spirits. The shelter that they built for the bags must be more important than we thought. That shelter, with its bags of sand, must be full of spirits. Let's fill the shelter to the roof tonight and put the hour-glass right inside the door."

"Maybe we should put the polished stone and the leather book in too," said one of the older men.

Nobody slept that night, but by morning the shelter had been filled and the three additional items were lined up together on a large stone slab. The inside of the shelter was off limits for the villagers, but everyone was afraid not to go at least to the door and look in at least once a day. Arn went about choosing special men to be responsible for turning the glass every hour and adding a mark each time on the new page of the leather-bound book.