

Swimmers
by MJ Politis
mjpolitis@yahoo.com

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CHAPTER 1

Once upon a distant time on a distant shore beyond the Western Horizon there was an island which was called by its inhabitants, "Conclada". Conclada was surrounded by water on all sides, few sailors knowing of such a place or existence. No one recorded how Conclada burst up from the wide, deep and warm ocean waters around it, or where the Concladans came from. But they were there, as was the island, the warm breezes, the lush forest and the many fish around the island that made it a tropical Paradise. Indeed, the islanders had no words for 'misery', 'sorrow' and 'enemy'. Pain and pleasure were the same thing to them, enjoyed equally with no judgement as to which was which. They worshipped a Great Spirit, who they called "Holkin", whose name meant 'Great and Wondrous Friend.'

Holkin provided Conclada with everything it needed, and the Concladans provided everything else for each other. They wore few clothes, and spent many hours in the water, in the activity which was both work and play. Everybody swam, to get from one place on the island to another, and to catch fish. Everyone caught fish in different ways, some with nets, some with spears, and some with calls they sang underwater. And at the end of the day, everyone shared all the fish, the hungriest getting the most, those who needed less food taking the least. And the waters never ran out of fish. Everyone always had enough of fish, and every part of the fish was used. It was said on Conclada that the only thing more valued than other Concladans was the fish, and, of course, laughing and singing for, and with Holkin. The Great Spirit who had the greatest sense of humor of all because, after all, he created laughter and people who could create more laughter

The Concladan men were a magnificent species, each one different. Tong had a grey beard and white hair, and his muscles were not as strong as they were when he was a younger man, but his mind was bright and spirit strong. Once the strongest and fastest swimmer on Conclada, he taught others how to swim and catch fish. Tong never had children of his own, but everyone on Conclada considered him their father, uncle and, of course, friend.

Blok had muscles and bones that made swim faster than any fish. His eyes were bright, and could see as well underwater as in the air above it. Tong spent much time with Blok, and Blok's family. It was important for Conclada to have a wise young man as well as a wise old one, and Blok was as eager to develop his mind as he was to keep his muscles big, firm and strong.

Vlek and Klek were brothers who looked alike when they were born. They looked alike when they were older too. They also walked, talked and swam alike, and learned to work together. Vlek and Klek could swim just as well as each other, but Klek was a little faster, so Vlek learned to talk to the fish while Klek kept silent, and swam around them. Together, they didn't catch a lot of fish, but it was enough to keep them fed, and their families very healthy. Their wives were very happy with them, and bore them many happy children, who all looked different than each other.

Ewek was a big boy who became a big man, particularly around his waist. He wasn't very tall, and sank in the water more than swam in it, but he learned how to float a lot, and spoke to the fish through a mouth that no one else used. He spoke particularly loudly after eating beans that grew on the island, the waters around him turning slightly brown in color. Some fish liked the songs he burped out of that hole, most chose to go away, into the nets set up by everyone else. It was a very good way to catch fish that didn't want to be caught, and on those days when there were few fish to be caught, Ewek's singing from his 'other mouth' underwater made the other Concladan's laugh, though mostly the men laughed. Many of the women didn't, but they did smile when the men weren't looking.

Dorak was born with one arm, an affliction some say was a curse. But he said it was a gift from Holkin. How else would he have become a one-armed swimmer, who learned to use his legs to move the nets. Dorak wasn't very fast at catching fish, and when he spoke, his lisp made him hard to understand, but no one minded that Dorak caught less fish than everyone else. He made them think about themselves in ways that even Holkan didn't, or couldn't.

Mump was born with a strong body and muscles that were well developed for swimming and fishing. But the muscle between his ears didn't work as well as the ones on his bones. Mump swam very

well, but most of the time he caught rocks instead of fish. Sometimes he didn't know they were rocks, and one often cooked the rocks, thinking they were fish. But the women of the village, and even Tong himself, would often take the rocks out of his frying pan and put fish in them. Tong admitted to everyone, even Blok, that Mump wasn't a very good fisherman, but that he caught more rocks than anyone else, and that catching rocks could be as valuable as catching fish. Blok didn't quite understand what Tong meant, but accepted his wisdom and, on some days, did see that he was right.

CHAPTER 2

All seemed perfect on Conclada. Like it was for as long as anyone could remember, till one day, a ship came upon the horizon. It was a strange ship, with sails and thundersticks on its sides that only Tong could see at first. Tong's mind had the 'open disease', as he was starting to forget the way things were supposed to be, so he could see how they really were. The grey haired man described the ship to others as it approached, and gradually, everyone saw the ship as it was. The strangest thing was that the only people on board the ship were men, and that they all had frowns on their faces and an emotion that Concladan's knew little of. "Anger," Tong called it, remembering the ancient tales that stopped being told on Conclada, and didn't have to know about anymore.

A man came off the boat, with strange things on his body. "Clothes", Tong explained. "There are places where people put heavy skins on their body, and the hotter it gets, the more skins they put over them." It was a humorous story about funny people who lived far, far away. But the man coming in toward the shore in a small boat let go from the larger one had many skins on his body.

He landed, and announced his name. "I am John White," he said in a language that Concladians all understood. He seemed to be very unhappy, particularly when the ship behind him with other men like him turned around and left. He yelled at the ship, shaking his fist at the men on it and a man up in the sky who he called 'Jahovah'. Jahovah didn't answer back, as did any of the Concladians. But John White had more in his little boat than all the Concladians did in theirs. Bright shiny things, many with sharp edges and straight angles. Like when you put one finger against another. Nothing curved in it, sharp, hard and non-friendly things. One of the things was making a sound, a tick,tick,tick that never stopped.

Tong asked what it was.

"A clock," White said, feeling very important about himself for no reason the Concladans could determine, or understand. "It measures time," he said. "Time...time!!!" he kept screaming out, talking to the Concladans like they were less than people, or even less than fish.

Blok picked up one of the long bars in the boat. It had small markings on it, all the same distance from each other. White grabbed the bar from him. "That is a ruler. A yardstick. It measures distance!" he screamed. Blok felt confused, then insulted. Tong came along and asked White what he was doing on the island, and if he was hungry.

"Yes, I am hungry," White said, his stomach grumbling. "What do you have to eat on this miserable, poverty-stricken, God forsaken island?"

Tong pointed to the water, and the fish swimming in it. Seeing that White was hungry, Tong motioned for everyone to join in. It was time to get more fish anyway, and White seemed like he had a large body, which needed many fish to keep it fed.

White watched the Concladans swim in the water, circling around, playing with, and finally catching the fish. He saw was confused because everyone was working together, and at the end of the catch, shared the fish equally. Tong gave him three fish to eat, one more than any Concladan got.

"Thank you," White said, with a smile that made his lips move around a lot, like a snake-fish, or a snake, trying to act like a chief, one that didn't need fish.

"You are very welcomed," Tong said back to him, boldly showing off his mouthful of black and white teeth.

CHAPTER 3

White spent many days on the island. Or so it seemed to him. He never took off his clothes, and never let the women, or men, take them off for him. He kept looking over the horizon, waiting for another big ship to come, but it didn't. He hated talking to children most, and hated speaking the Concadan language. He yelled a lot at Jahovah, who still didn't yell, or even whisper, back to him.

Then, one day, White figured out that it would be a long time before another big ship would come back for him. He wasn't hungry in the body, but his mind was starving. He needed something.

"Purpose," Tong said to Blok during one of the sessions with him on how to be a wise chief, protector and friend. "White needs a purpose."

"But what can he give us that we don't already have?" Blok said. "He is bad at catching fish and rocks, and I don't think we need someone who yells up to the sky all the time."

"This is true," Tong said. "There has to be something he can do."

"Or something he has?" Blok said.

"Huh?" Tong said, fading into the 'other world' again.

"White has things in his boat. Like the ticking stone, and the bar with many notches on it," Blok said.

"Which can do what for us, the fish, and Holkin?" Tong asked.

Blok didn't know the answer, but thought that someone else would. "Let's ask White. He may know what to do with the ticking stone and the bar with many notches on it."

"It's called a clock, and a measuring stick!" White screamed at both of them.

"Which can do what?" Tong asked.

White thought moment, then another, then another. Blok saw that he was thinking about something new. Tong sensed that it was not something that Conclada had ever seen, or thought about, before.

"You know what you have here on this island?" White said.

"Trees, rocks, water and fish," Blok pointed out.

"And each other," Tong smiled.

"And something else that has been making my life a living hell for even a short time here," White said.

"The heat?" Blok smirked, with a kind laugh, pointing to the skins still on White's sweaty body.

"No!" White screamed out. "Boredom. Boredom. Boredom!"

The marooned visitor to the island walked up and down the beach, screaming, then thinking. "We need something to stop the boredom."

"What is boredom?" Blok asked Tong.

“Something that is causing him much pain,” Tong said of the man who seemed to be a chief in his own land, and now had to be someone or something else here. “Maybe if we can get him to play in one of our games.”

“That’s it!” White spouted out, with a sparkle in his eye that intrigued Blok, and scared Tong. “A game! We’ll all set up a game. And the masters, the rulers of the game will be...”

Tong and Blok looked at each other. All the games they played had no rulers or masters. But White seemed determined that his game has rulers and masters. But who could they be? Jahovah never said anything and Holkin was too human a Great Spirit to be Master of anyone or anything. As for Tong, a chief was a servant of his people, and he didn’t feel like being Master of anyone, except Blok, when he thought that the best way to serve people was to rule over them, of course..

White ran to his boat, the objects in it still there. He picked up the ticking stone. “This clock will be the master,” he said. In his other hand, he grabbed the bar with the many notches in it. “And this measuring stick will be the ruler...This ruler that is ruler that can measure distances!” There was something else in the boat also. “And this scale will measure what a man is really worth!” He put a few pieces of shining rocks on one side, a rock from the beach on the other. White seemed happy for the first time since he landed on the island, but Blok and even Tong couldn’t figure out why.

“So, what is the game?” Tong asked.

White pointed to the water, and the school of fish swimming in it. Tong and Blok looked at each other again, confused. White brought both of them into his chest, his back hunched, talking in a whisper. “I’ll explain it to both of you. It will be fun! And profitable.”

Tong knew what fun meant, and had heard the word profitable, once. It was from a man who was not very happy, in his childhood. Blok seemed fascinated with White’s idea. “Go on, tell us about your game,” he said.

CHAPTER 4

White told Tong to get everyone in Conclada to come to the beach at the next rising of the sun. Tong asked them to come a little bit before. It made White feel important, more important than he felt since he came in to shore on his little ship from the big ship. But being important and special was nothing special to anyone in Conclada. No one was more special than anyone else, so everyone felt good, and special.

White took out the ticking stone and commanded everyone to call it a 'clock' and to say 'tick, tick, tick' with it. It was a funny game, and everyone enjoyed it. Even Mump, who said his 'ticks' a little after everyone else. It sounded like music when Mump joined in to the 'tick tick' song.

Then White held up the bar with the notches on it. He said it was a measuring stick that you could use to see how much tall or short you were. He made a long rope with each knot one 'foot' long, and measured how tall or short everyone was and gave them a number. He said that number was more important than their name. "Numbers more important than names?" said Blok, who was taller than any other Concladan, even Tong. "This is very strange."

"And important," White said to Blok. "Because you have the highest number on the island. Do you know what that makes you?"

"Blok with a high number?" Blok laughed, with everyone else.

"No!" White barked back like a dog, very upset, hurt and angry. "That makes you number one Concladan. In the game of tallness." White put one of his animal skins on Blok.

Blok was confused. Tallness was never very important in Conclada. "But", he started to think. "Maybe that is why Tong talks to me so much. And why he lets me organize the fishing."

Mump scratched his head. "What is 'organize'?" he asked.

"To regulate, control, say who is on top and who is on the bottom," White said.

Everyone else scratched their heads, even Tong. "There is no top and bottom on Conclada," he said.

"There is always someone on top, and someone on the bottom," White proclaimed. He took the rocks out of Mump's fishing net and piled them up. "See. One rock on top of the other. The slow swimmers on the bottom, the average ones in the middle, the fastest ones on the top. And if you want to catch more fish, you have to determine who is the fastest swimmer."

"Why?" Ewek asked with a big laugh, rubbing his big belly that shook like a jellyfish.

White marched up to Ewek, stomping his feet on the ground, very angry in his eyes. Like 'Jahovah's' eyes must be when he talks back to White.

Ewek stopped laughing. Everyone else stopped smiling. Vlek and his brother Klek looked at each other, asking why the sailor from the big ship was acting so 'small' in the heart. With his only arm, Dornk offered White a handful of fish, spiced with the freshest papaya and mangos from the trees, but White threw it on the sand. Blok asked Tong if he had any medicine to cure the disease in White's head, and heart. The women too looked at the sad sailor from the land of the Big Ships, as did their children. They sang a song for him but White told them to shut their mouths. It felt like Holkan also wanted to cheer White up. He asked a pelican to drop something from its back end on White's head, a good luck charm to Conclava, but the sweaty and angry man from the land of the Big Ships and shiny toys wiped the brown 'good luck' pudding off his head and screamed at Jehovah again.

Everyone was worried about White, but he didn't seem to be worried about anything else except one thing. "The game is the important thing. And the winner of the game is number one, the top rock on the pile. The losers in the game are on the bottom. But by playing the game, they will become better swimmers, and catch more fish."

Tong spoke. "But, we have enough fish for everyone."

White took a deep breath, and stomped on the ground some more. He stormed up to Tong, stepping up in his boots to make him look taller than the grey haired chief who was the same as everyone else. "You have enough fish, but don't you want to have MORE fish?"

Tong took his time answering, but as the ticking stone ticked away, Blok felt the need to answer first. "Yes, more fish would be better than enough fish," he said. Tong didn't agree, but didn't say anything. Blok answered first, and according to White's new game, the person who answers the question first was the one who had the right answer. He then went on to explain the rest of the game.

All the men gathered at the Sunrise side of the Rocky Cove, and were told to swim to the Sunset side. Normally, no one swam in the Rocky Cove, but White said it was the best place for the game because he could measure the distance from the Sunrise rock to the Sunset rock very easily, and without getting wet. It seemed like a fun game, since swimming was enjoyed by everyone, even if there weren't any fish to be had. Then, White said there was something else about the game. Everyone had to swim in a straight line from the Sunrise to the Sunset rock. This did not make sense to the Concladans. Tong swam like a flounder on the bottom of the water, Blok like a bass just below the surface. Vlek and Klek got from one place to another like two dolphins who shared the lead and surfed in each other's wake. One-armed Dornk paddled like the one-finned Pearl fish. Ewek floated on top of the water, letting the current take him where it will, and when he had to, let go with a blast of gas from his 'non-mouth hole' like a whale to get where he wanted to. Mump, whose brain was 'special' and eyes not always opened, swam like a sea-lion, but always had to be told which way to go, or he would crash into a rock. Everyone knew that the way fish got from one rock to another was different, some faster, some slower. Some swimming on top, some on the bottom, and some on top of each other. It made sense, learning to swim like the fish. Then White said something that made Blok think, and Tong worry.

"You people catch fish. That makes you better than the fish," the Sailor who seemed to acting like a chief said. "So, you have to swim better than the fish. And the only way to be better than the fish is to try to be better than each other."

Mump was slow in some ways, but smart in others. He raised his hand. "Who says who is better than anyone else?" He asked. Everyone agreed, even Blok. Holkin never said anyone was better than anyone else. Maybe Jahovah did, but he was too scared or ashamed to speak to any Concladan, or even White.

"Yes," Tong asked, respectfully, of the man who lacked respect for others, and himself. "Who says who is better and faster than anyone else?"

"This!" White said, picking up the ticking stone. "The clock! Which measures time. And time is the master of us all. Time and space measure who is the fastest swimmer."

"And who can catch the most fish?" Blok asked, without consulting Tong.

"Yes! Number one tall man!" White said.

"What do you get for being number one tall man?" Mump asked. He took a rock from the top of the pile White had made. "This rock?"

"This STONE!" White said, making the rock more valuable than a fish, or even a person. He gave the stone to Blok, who was 'number one tall man' and tied it around his neck, raising his hand up in the air.

He clapped, and cheered. The women and children clapped and cheered along. The other men did too, a little more slowly and with less happiness, but the game made White happy, and since he came to Concladan very sad and angry, it was a good thing to see him happy.

After the clapping and cheering was over, White told all the men to gather on the Sunrise Rock. He told them to wait till he lowered his hand till they jumped into the water, very close to the sharp coral reef below. Then, in a very loud voice that entertained the children and charmed the women he said, ‘ready, set, GO!’ He started the ticking stone. It ticked very loudly.

Blok dove into the water, his strong and tall body pushing much water behind him, very fast. Tong dived in too, trying to land in the water at the same place as Blok, but the feet of the old man weren’t as strong as the young one and he banged his shoulder against the coral reef. It hurt, but he kept swam as strong as he could anyway. His grey hair turned whiter with each stroke, and his chest hurt with pain. Still, he kept going, even though the medicine man he trained with told him it was unhealthy to swim when your chest hurt and your shoulder was bleeding. Sharks could get you, or you could stop breathing.

Vlek and Klek slid down into the water. It took them longer to get in, but they were not hurt by the rocks or coral reef, and they swam like a pair of dolphins. Vlek, being naturally a little faster than Klek at the beginning of each swim, but not at the end of it, moved ahead, and waited for Klek to swim in his wake, but White said the clock was ticking, in a very loud voice. Vlek looked at Vanna, who was cheering. She was a woman he and Klek both liked, and found himself swimming faster than he normally did, and instead of making a wake for Klek to follow in, he swam beyond his brother, leaving his brother behind. But it wasn’t too far along that Vlek got tired. He wondered what was wrong as he struggled to swim, now against the current. ‘Klek!’ Vlek shouted out, hoping that his brother would be in front of him, since Klek was a better swimmer at long distances than Vlek was. “Where are you? I need your wake?” But Vlek was very much behind Klek, caught in a current, washing to shore. Vanna seemed disappointed in Klek, and cheered Vlek to move on. But Vlek couldn’t. He was the ‘first swim’ lead dolphin and without his brother, he had ran out of energy. He ran out of enthusiasm when he saw Blok take the lead, a bleeding and hurting Tong behind him. He turned to look at Vanna, but she was looking at White with the kind of affection that he thought she had for him.

Mump, being very muscular and with the kind of bones that didn’t make him a tall man but a great swimmer on the surface of any waters, swam like a shark through any current. But without people to tell him where to go, the always-eyes-closed swimmer who was weak in the muscle between the ears kept banging into rocks, coral and even other swimmers. Though he swam fast, it was not in a straight line, and the game was to swim fast in straight line, a strange game which White made very popular with the women, and children who were watching.

Ewek floated around the Cove, and no matter how hard he paddled or how much he ‘flatulated’ from his ‘non-eating hole’, he remained behind. Dornk’s one arm could get him where he needed to go for catching fish, but the shortest distance between two points for him was always a curve, not a straight line. Blok and Tong, and once he was screamed at, even Mump, were faster at swimming straight lines than Dornk.

White got bored with the game quickly. While the race was still on, he invented another game. He told the children that whoever threw the most papayas and Pelican brown droppings at Ewek and Dornk would get a free fish, or if they didn’t want that, a shiny toy from his boat. He told Vanna and the other women it would make everyone faster swimmers, and asked them to laugh at the slow swimmers. No one ever laughed AT anyone in Conclada, but it seemed like an interesting game, and White was the master of the game, with the children really liked his shiny toys, so the women did it.

Ewek and Dornk did swim faster, with sad frowns on their faces, but they were still very behind Blok and Tong. Mump was catching up. Disguising his voice as Tong’s, White told Mump to turn out toward the ocean. He did, getting caught in a current that smashed him against a sandy beach. He wasn’t hurt, but it took him a long time to get back into the race.

Blok climbed up to the Sunset rock first, feeling very good. Vanna smiled at him, as did the Children, and White. Three ticks of the ticking stone later, Tong set his feet on the rock. His legs hurt a lot, and arm was not connected to the shoulder the way it was before the race. His chest hurt, and he could barely breathe. No one looked at him, and no one cheered him, even the children. "The rules of the game" White explained to the old man as he gave the 'winning fish' to the 'winning swimmer', Blok.

Vanna hugged Blok, and all the women in the village cheered him, even the wives of the other swimmers. But Vanna did wait for one other swimmer to reach the Sunset rock. "Vlek! Come here!" she said, throwing flowers his way. Somehow, Vlek made it to the Sunset rock. He was tired, and he had a bad pain in his stomach. He could barely get out of the water. Vanna gave him a peck on the cheek.

"Where's my brother Klek?" Vlek asked, looking into at the lagoon, seeing his brother washed to the shore, having never reached the Sunset rock.

"With the other losers," White said, putting a small ring of flowers over Vlek's neck. A small ring, much smaller than the big one around Blok, or the medium one just out of range of Tong's outstretched hand, as he tried to get up off the rocks, gasping for breath, alone.

Vlek called out to his brother Klek, asking him to swim to the Sunset rock, even offering him the ring of flowers around his neck, but Klek waved his hand in sorrow and shame. Vlek looked at the others in the Cove, Mump, Ewek, and Dornk. All they could do was tread water. Vlek pulled out a boat to go get them, but White put his hand on his arm.

"No... We need this boat for something else, something more important than them," he said.

"What is more important than people?" Vlek asked.

"Your victory celebration, number three!" White gave Vlek a fish. It smelled like it would be very tasty, and Vanna gave him a big smile. Children gathered around him. Blok was carried to the fire on the beach by the women and children. With all the strength he could muster, Tong crawled down from the rock, looking up to the sky, asking if Holkin was interested in a conversation with him. Ewek, Dornk, Mump and Klek eventually came to shore and ate their supper of papaya and mangos, without fish, alone.

CHAPTER 5

Such as it went every day for the next many days and nights. Every day, a new number one swimmer would be picked with another 'game', each game set up by White. Blok was the new number one winner every day, and though he became strong in the body, he became weak in the mind. He insisted that Tong try to beat him, and started to laugh at the old man every time he came in number two, number three, or any other number which White called 'loser'. Tong tried his best, but became sicker and more injured with each 'game'. He stopped talking to Cancladan's and spoke with Holkan a lot, in that way that aging men did before they joined their Ancestors. He even tried to talk with Jahovah, since White wasn't talking with him anymore, and even an angry god could get lonely, but Jahovah never answered. Maybe he was a loser too, and no one spoke with losers.

Vlek almost came in number one a few times, and Vanna liked that. As White predicted, Vlek became a better swimmer, faster and stronger, and learned to pace himself. Vlek asked his brother Klek to swim and fish with him, even when there wasn't a game, but Klek stopped swimming all together, then stopped fishing. His belly went hungry, and his once-strong muscles went weak. He walked, talked and felt like an old man.

When it suited 'the game' Mump came in close, and was given a 'special' garland of flowers as his reward, made of thorns and dried Pelican pudding. He liked it, being 'special' between the ears, and became a stronger swimmer too, but he stopped trying to think on his own, and often swam into rocks, hurting his shoulder and losing many fish.

Dornk's one strong arm grew weak. As he kept losing the 'swimming game', he was asked to not come fishing, and then stopped swimming, even though it was the thing that once gave him the most fun. Indeed, he stopped having fun doing anything. As did Ewek. The muscles around his waist which were once considered good, and the jiggle of the skin on the belly that amused the children, were now laughed at by the children, the women, and the winners of the swimming game. Indeed, there were two kinds of people in Conclada under Holkan's big blue sky. Those who laughed at others, and those who were laughed at. The only exception was Tong, who stopped talking to people and talked only to Holkan. The man who was considered wise was now considered foolish, and useless, particularly by Blok, number one swimmer and number one tall man and number one most everything else who Tong had chosen as his adopted son and Conclada's Chief Friend-Servant. He now had a new title, given to him by White.

"King Blok!" White would call him. Everyone else did too, even though they didn't know what a king was. But White seemed to know what a king was. The once-lonely Sailor from the land of the Big Ships was now anything but lonely. He was more powerful than King Blok, and the more popular Blok got, the more powerful White seemed to become. White decided that Conclada didn't have to listen to Holkan anymore, and he certainly didn't care about Jahovah now that everything was going well. He said that there were three new gods to worship. Gods that were 'absolute', a word he used to mean 'never changing and always there.' The first god was time, as measured by the ticking stone. The second was distance, determined by how many yardsticks and rulers there were between one place and another. The third was white rocks, a rare thing on Conclada, as most of the stones on the island were brown, red or black. Every day, the people who fished would bring in the fish, and they would exchange them in White's hut for rocks. White would then prepare the fish, and all the other fruits, and vegetables and other things people needed on the island, including animals skins from the wild beast he hunted, and give them rocks for it. The more rocks a man had, the more he could eat and bring home to his family.

Some men, like Ewek, Klek, Dornk and occasionally Mump, would not fish at all. The women and children felt sorry for them and gave them rocks to trade for fish, but they ate wild berries and mangos. They were too ashamed to go to the village to get fish, too ashamed to swim for fun, and even forgot how to swim at all, even when they needed fish to stay alive. They considered themselves better off dead, not even worthy to talk to Holkin. Jahovah was punishing them for being losers, White told them, but would forgive them, maybe one day. But the men didn't know what they did wrong. "Being born," Ewek would say. The others in the small camp that burned Pelican pudding droppings instead of wood to stay warm said the same. And White was right. The 'game' did make strong swimmers stronger, and the island did

have more fish than it ever had. At least for the winners of the game and the women and children who were now with them, learning other games from the Sailor from the land of the Big Ships who seemed to be getting a bigger belly than even Ewek.

CHAPTER 6

It came to pass many moons later that another boat with a big sail came into Conclada. The boat did not have as large a sail as the one that left Captain Jack White on the island. But it was a Big Sail boat non-the-less, a single man sailing it who had white skin, just like Captain White. Tong saw him first, from the rock on which he had his talks with Holkin. Holkin had not said much lately, and Tong, his body ailing, his mind seeing things that others said were not there, thought the ship was something from ‘the other side.’

The sailor had long, white hair, a wrinkled face and thin legs. Hardly a body of a swimmer, or even someone who could run very fast. The way he held onto the sail, it seemed like he was afraid of the ocean, though he seemed to love it so much. There was something around his neck, a sac-like vest that seemed to be able to float in the water. Every part of him seemed to remind Tong of the ‘losers’ who never won any prizes, or fish in White’s games, even the ones he set the children to playing with, then against, each other.

But there was something about the man’s eyes. They were sorrowful, and beaten, but he was still Alive behind them. Like Tong used to be, as he thankfully still remembered.

Tong thanked Holkan, then expressed an appreciation to Jahovah, just in case White’s god who grunted but never spoke had anything to do with the visitor’s arrival. “My name is Tong!” the once Chief Protector-Servant yelled out to the ship.

“Albert!” the man in the small ship with the big sail said. “Can you tell me where I am?” he asked.

“Maybe we can figure that out together,” Tong said, hoping the man would understand his language. He did, thank Holkin, and perhaps Jahovah.

Tong found enough strength in his ailing body to swim in the water and catch them a supper of fresh fish. Albert helped, though with his ‘life preserver’, as he called it, he could not go below the surface of the water to go where the fish lived. Tong thanked Holkan for the fish, and Albert for helping him to catch it. They talked about the places they had been as young men, their experiences as older ones, and their thoughts about what lay beyond the horizon, and beyond their lives as men. Then conversation came to what was on the island. Tong didn’t want to talk about it, but Albert insisted. As soon as Tong mentioned Captain Jack White and the Big Ship that brought him to the island, Albert became worried.

“You know this man who thinks he is a god?” Tong said.

“I know of him,” Albert answered. “Where is he?”

Tong pointed to the village, the huts now all different from each other. ‘Number ones’ lived in large huts, number two and threes in smaller ones. Number ‘nothings’ lives in non at all. Behind King Blok’s hut was a house that looked nothing like anything on Conclada. It has wood walls, a roof, and sharp, right angles to it, just like Albert had seen in the land of the Big Ships from which he had fled, looking for a land of civilized people who could share his compassion and appreciate his wisdom.

“We have to do something,” Albert said with much urgency in his voice.

“What can we do?” Tong replied. “Captain White rules King Blok, King Blok rules the number twos, the number two’s rule the number threes, and the number threes think they rule the number nothings. And there is nothing we can do to change that because there are three gods who rule everything.”

“Which gods are they?” Albert challenged, taking out a book with many markings that looks like drawings, numbers and, as he called them, ‘equations’.

“The Absolute gods,” Tong sorrowfully replied. “Time, distance and money, or as we were once told, counting. They are always the same and we are always measured against them.”

Albert laughed, in a way Tong hadn’t heard in many moons. He was not laughing at anyone, or with anyone. Though maybe he was sharing a joke with Holkin.

“Time, distance and wealth are absolutes,” he said. “They don’t change and we are always measured against them.”

“Maybe in Captain White’s arithmetic, and calculations and ‘science’” Albert smiled.

“What is arithmetic, calculation and science?” Tong said.

“Things you know more about that you think you do, my friend,” Albert assured his new friend, and Comrade. “Come, we have much teaching to do,” he continued, helping Tong down from the isolated Rock that had been his home and place of banishment for as long as he could remember.

“‘Teaching’ is not a game which is played here anymore,” Tong warned the Old Man with the white hair who seemed to know everything about the world, but nothing about navigation.

“But learning is always going on,” Albert said, bringing his nap-sack of toys, and books, and courage. That courage would be needed, as Tong saw it.

“Does Captain White frighten you as much as he does me?”

“More,” Albert said.

“Where did he come from?”

“Some place you and your people are better not knowing about,” Albert said. “A place where there is too much fish and everyone is still hungry.”

Tong looked at the waters below him. His calculations were right, and finally there was someone who would believe him. “The number of fish in the water is smaller than it should be for this time of year. The fish on the island are being caught too quickly, or were going away. Soon, the only people who can eat fish will be the number ones, and maybe the number twos. And the number threes are the ones who were doing most of the fishing, giving the fish to the number ones and twos. What are we to do?”

“Stop the games, and show the players that THEY are the masters of their OWN game, and life.” Albert said.

Tong didn’t understand the meaning of the words, but he trusted the sincerity behind the man who said it. But would heart beat might, and ignorance? It hadn’t so far.

CHAPTER 7

When Albert walked into the village with Tong, nobody noticed them. Captain Jack, or Duke White, as he liked to be called, was organizing another game. This game was about who could tell the most sensitive story, and all the children were told by their mothers, and fathers, and number ones who became their fathers, to do whatever they could to see that all the other children's stories were loser stories. The stories were supposed to be based on fact, and each child was told another false story to tell another child, so that that child would steal it and tell a bad story.

"This used to be such a good place to live, especially for the children," Tong said.

"And it will be, very soon," Albert said. He saw a man wearing many animal skins, and called out to him.

"Captain White!" he said. "Why is it that you are not a Captain anymore?"

White turned around, angry. He asked Albert who he was and how he got to Conclada..

"I am a scientist," said the Old Man whose body was not built to be able to swim, run or lift heavy objects. "I was looking for Truth and got lost, or maybe I didn't."

Blok didn't understand what Albert was saying. Neither did Vlek, or his brother Klek. Neither did anyone else in the village, or around the village. White started to laugh, and invited Blok to laugh along with him. After 'number one' Blok laughed, the number twos did the same, then the number threes. The number 'nothings', Ewek, Dornk, and because he was not entertaining that day, Mump, felt sorry for Albert, because he was soon to be another number nothing, just like Tong. But Albert didn't feel like a number ANYthing, and he started to talk about numbers.

Albert picked up the ticking stone. It went tick tock, as it always did. And everyone who 'sang' with it, went tick tock to it at the same speed. But Albert started to tick tock slower than the clock, then faster, then added ticks between the tocks. Everyone stopped laughing when he threw the clock up into the air at very fast speed, and the clock stopped ticking. When it landed in his hand, the clock went tick tock again.

"What happened?" Blok asked.

"The magician did a trick," White sneered. "An Old Man's Old magicians trick."

"Maybe or maybe not," Albert said. "I made the clock move fast, and when it did, time went slower, or maybe faster. But it changed."

"That is not possible," Vlek said. "Time is absolute. It never changes and we have to measure ourselves against it. How else can we know who is number one, two and three?"

Everyone agreed, which made White smile with pride, and the kind of satisfaction that displeased Albert and worried Tong. Then Albert looked at the sun, setting in the direction White called West, and the Concladans called 'end of day'. Everyone knew that the sun was a long distance away, so Albert asked them a question.

"The clock here says it is 6 o'clock, the time the sun sets. Is this right?"

"Yes," White said. "The sun sets at 6 o'clock. Here on the island."

"So when does the sun set out on the coral reef, which is closer to the sun?" Albert asked.

"A little after 6 o'clock?" Vlek proposed.

“And beyond the waves, where the big fish swim in the deep water, just this side of the horizon?” he asked everyone.

“More ticks after 6 o’clock?” came out Mump’s mouth and his ‘special’ muscles between his ears. He started to count the ticks, but got confused. Albert stepped in as White got angry. People were beginning to think what Albert was trying to teach them.

“So, this means that time is different for everyone, depending on how fast they move and where they are when they are moving, or standing still. Time is not absolute, and each of us lives in our own time.”

Everyone nodded ‘yes,’ except White, whose face became very red.

Albert then walked over to the alter where Jack White had put the measuring stick, the one with the many notches. He took the stick into one hand and a large melon in the other. “The world is round, like this melon, right?” he said.

Everyone agreed. Even Captain Jack.

Albert put two dots on the melon, and tried to measure the distance between them. He did one measurement with the stick bent, the other with it not bend, and another with it twisted. Then he measured the distance between the points the ‘long way’ around the melon. Every measurement was a different number. “So, you see, distance is relative. Different depending on how you measure it.”

The Concladan’s agreed. And White was even more red in the face. “What does this mean?” he yelled out.

Albert smiled back at White, and carved out a piece of melon for him to eat. The Captain threw it on the ground and growled at the Old Man. “What all of this means is that distance is relative too” the white haired White man with the scrawny body said. “It is different for everyone.”

“Which means nothing, because here on Conclada, our games the most important thing we do, The swimming, running and climbing games, that determine who is number one.” White said.

“Which means nothing, because they measure people in relation to time and space, which are relative, so there is no number one, two, or three. And since everything is relative, number one could be number last, if you count backwards, which makes the last one to finish the first one to win.”

The Concladans nodded their heads. It made sense. They looked to Albert for more explanations about themselves and the world they thought they understood.

“And there is something else,” he continued, putting Vlek at one end of the camp, Klek at the other. He put a red pole in front of Vlek and a green one in front of Klek. He pointed to the sun. “Light comes to us from the sun and the stars at a constant rate. So does light from this red pole and the green pole. The red pole is closest to Vlek, so he sees it sooner than the green pole. The green pole is closest to Klek so he sees the it sooner than the red pole. So, Vlek and Klek live in different universes, since they see things differently. But, because of Spirit, and Faith, and connections between us, which you call Hulkin, we ‘feel’ one world that we all share. So, if we all live in different universes, we can never really measure who is number one at swimming, running, climbing or story telling.”

It made sense to everyone, even Blok. He looked at Tong and said that he was wrong and sorry with his eyes. Tong forgave him, without making him feel guilty. That was what Jahovah did, and people Jahovah made like White.

But White wasn't finished. He stormed up to Albert, with a handful of white rocks in his hand. "He who has the money makes the rules. And these rocks say that I make the rules!"

"Only if white rocks are considered more valuable than black or red rocks," Albert said. "What if black rocks are thought to be valuable? Then that would make you a poor man, and the number nothings who live outside the village as the rich ones."

Again everyone nodded 'yes', except White. He yelled at Blok, then Vlek, then all the Concladans, even Tong.. "This rock is white! I have white rocks! We all agreed that white rocks are the most valuable rocks!"

"If that is a white rock," Albert said. He moved closer to it, opening his eyes and putting it into the sunlight. "These rocks look more grey or brown to me than white."

"Yes, they do," Blok said, taking off his animal skins, and the crown White gave him to be a king with. Vlek followed, sharing his own rocks with his brother Klek. Then Mump, then, Dornk, then Ewek and even Vanna, who had learned to consider how valuable a man is worth by how many rocks he had.

White was left with a pile of rocks that bore his name, which were not worth anything. He felt very sad, angry and alone.

Tong smiled, everyone in the village looking for him for advice. "We should all go for a swim, our own way, and if we get fish, that's good, and if we don't, then that's good for the fish."

Everyone jumped into the water and swam, happy and smiling, each their own way at their own speed, as they had done before Captain White and the Big Ships came to Conclada. But two men remained on the beach.

"What are you going to do to me?" White asked Albert. "You won, and I lost, and because I lost, I have to be punished."

"We both won," Albert said. "I'm a winner, and you're a winner. We're always winners as long as we keep trying, in our own universe, helping others to win in their universes."

"I don't understand," Captain Jack said to Albert.

"We both will, soon." With that, Albert put on his life preserver and went into the water. He invited Captain Jack to come join him. They caught many fish that day, and feasted well that night.

Such were the events that happened on the island of Conclada, as reported and seen by the inhabitants there. Each living in their own world, they all told it differently. But since they shared the same world, the message of the story was the same.

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