

The Coconut's Tale

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*There once was a coconut on the sea,
Up and down he sailed did he,
He found an island made of sand
And washed himself upon the land.*

It was true! There really was a coconut on the sea, the waves tossing him up and down, now gently, now roughly, until at last he spied an island sticking out of the water. Coconuts, as you know, have eyes—three of them!—and they see very well.

“Ahoy! Over there! Bring me there,” he called to the waves, but the waves just kept waving.

“No! No!! That a-way! That a-way!” he cried—but lacking arms he couldn’t point and the waves didn’t know where he wanted to go.

So he made a spell, a magic spell that only coconuts can make.

*“Waves, waves, push you me ~
Onto that island in the sea!”*

And a wave came and picked him up. It rolled and tumbled and tossed him high onto the sandy island. He landed with his eyes facing down. Now he had no choice but to use them to sprout roots and grow.

By the time he was one foot tall he hadn’t seen anybody thereabouts. By the time he was three feet tall still nobody had come by. And when he was ten feet tall he could see for sure that he was the only one on the island—except for the sand and sea and surf—and certainly the only living thing aside from sand fleas, and they don’t count for this tale.

*A coconut grew on an island fine,
 All alone and could not dine
 With any person, plant or beast,
 And that was lonely to say the least.*

So it was, and the coconut had nothing to do but grow. So grow he did—then grow some more. He had a fine, slender trunk, but no branches at all—none! He also had a fine set of leaves, ‘fronds’ as he called them. He looked like a tall, lanky boy with a moppish head of hair.

*A coconut grew so tall and slim
 It seemed that branches weren't for him;
 He had a mop of floppy leaves,
 And just one leg without any knees.*

“Oh, I wish I had branches,” sighed the coconut tree. “Then I’d have two or more moppish heads and we could pretend I wasn’t talking to myself and have wonderful conversations.”

But he didn’t. Instead, he watched the sea and all its moods ever changing. He watched the clouds and all their shapes ever tumbling. He watched the sun and moon and stars as they crossed the sky ever turning. He watched the sand and surf and listened to the pounding of the waves go on and on and on.

Until one day there came a man.

At first he thought it was a strange beast bobbing up and down on the waves. But it wasn’t. It was a small life raft and a man was huffing and puffing and ouffing and pouffing on a tube. He was really red in the face. After a while he stopped huffing and puffing and the boat got flatter and flatter in the water and began to sink. Then the man started huffing and ouffing and the boat grew again. The boat drifted slowly towards the island, but the wind shifted and began to take him past.

*A coconut saw a man at sea,
 He looked as desperate as can be,
 Therefore
 A magic spell the coconut swore
 To push the man towards the shore.*

The wind and waves came up, they blew and they sloshed and pushed the boat towards the island. But the boat was in bad shape and soon it was filled and sinking. The man swam towards the beach, but he was too tired and sank beneath the waves.

The coconut tree called out:

*“Quickly, waves—on count of four,
Throw the man upon the shore—
One, two, three ... FOUR!”*

The waves came and cast the man upon the beach. For a long time he lay as if dead. The tree thought maybe he was dead. He knew that humans and animals die. There was nothing to do but wait and see, so wait he did.

*The man he lay upon the beach,
The waves were washing on his feet.
Long it was and still he lay—
The sun went on and on all day.*

At last the man stirred. He crawled up the beach towards the tree. He rested his back against the trunk and hung his head. He must have fallen asleep for he stayed there all night.

In the morning the man stood up. He walked the whole way round the island. It didn't take him long. There was just him and the coconut tree, and the sand and the sea and the sky (and the sand fleas who don't count for this story). He sat against the trunk again, on the shady side. Every now and then he changed position to stay in the shade. In the late afternoon it rained, as it almost always did. The man gathered a fallen coconut frond and held it up. This way he could catch more rain and direct it into his mouth.

*The coconut saw the man was slim,
There really was not much of him,
With sun and sea and sky so high,
Without no food he'll surely die.*

That night the coconut decided to talk to the man.

“Hello, Man,” he said.

The man jumped up and ran from the tree as if he'd been whacked on the ear. He turned. He stood and stared at the tree for a long time. The tree was dark against the starry night sky, its fronds flapping gently in the ever blowing breeze. At last the man came back and settled down again.

The coconut held his peace and said nothing.

The next day the man searched the shore. He swam in the ocean, diving often. He did this the whole way round the island. There was sand and surf, and sand and surf, and more sand and surf. Nothing but sand and surf (and the tree)—(and the sand fleas who don't count).

He came back and sat in the shade.

"Well, at least I have that," he said, but the coconut tree didn't know what he was talking about.

The afternoon rains came and he held up the frond to catch water and direct it to his mouth. He drank the whole time it rained.

Oh, the man was slim and had no fat.

There was no food and that was that.

He had some gristle on his bod—

Not much use to the poor old sod.

In the evening the man sat facing the sunset. The days were relentlessly without red: sky-blue, water-blue, sandy yellow, yellow sun, gray clouds, gray bark and dull leaf-green were all the colors he saw. Now the sun glowed red against a scraggle of bright clouds before plunging into the sea. He drank the colors like wine. Then, quickly, the stars come out—and the planets and the moon. The moon was half past empty and waning. It would soon be gone. At last the man returned to the tree trunk and leaned his shoulder against it.

"Hello," said the coconut tree again.

The man ran away—but slower this time. He was getting weak.

"Who's that?" he cried. He sounded afraid.

"Me," said the tree. "Who do you think?"

The man didn't reply. He stared, breathing heavily.

"I'm the only one here," he blurted out at last.

"No, you're not," said the tree. "There's me. Come and talk—no one's watching."

The man stood a while. At last he shrugged his shoulders and came over. The tree could feel the man's heart beating. He was agitated.

"What do you have to say for yourself?" the man said at last.

"I was just saying hello," said the coconut tree, "—to break the ice, so to speak."

The man relaxed a bit.

"I get the feeling you're real," he said.

"As real as you," said the tree. "What else?"

"Trees don't speak," said the man.

"Men don't listen," said the tree.

"Why can I hear you then?" asked the man.

"There's nothing important to distract you, I suppose," said the tree.

"That's silly," said the man. "I'll soon be dead by the looks of it. That's plenty of distraction."

The tree bent in the breeze and his fronds rustled.

"That's not distraction," the tree said. "That's focus."

The man was silent.

"I guess," he said at last.

*The coconut tree, how tall was he,
His head was higher than the deep blue sea,
He watched all night and he watched all day
And saw that death was close.*

The man didn't do much the following day. What was there to do? He stayed in the shade of the tree, moving as the sun moved. The rains didn't come. The clouds formed, the wind picked up, rain fell at sea, but none fell on the island. The man stared and stared.

Night came. This was the third night and the man was weak. Very weak. He'd been on his last strength when he'd arrived and now his reserves were almost gone. He slept for a while.

"Hello, again," said the tree when the man stirred.

It was late. The darkest part of the night.

"You're back," said the man.

"I never left," said the tree.

They sat in silence for a while.

"How did you get here?" asked the man.

"I floated here as a baby," said the tree. "A wave washed me ashore, and here I am, all grown up and lonely."

The man chuckled. It sounded like a cough.

"Lonely?" he said.

"Yes," said the tree, "there's only one of me—until you came along, that is—and you aren't much like me so you only half count."

"I hadn't thought of it that way," said the man, smiling. "I thought I was the only one here."

"We are too worthy in our own eyes," said the tree.

"Yes," the man agreed, nodding.

"But we also need someone else," said the tree. "Look at you—you're so lonely you're talking to a tree in the middle of the night!"

"You're the one who started talking," said the man.

The tree was silent for a long time. "I guess," he said at last.

"What kind of company would you really like?" asked the man.

"Another tree," said the tree. "Another coconut tree, that is. Then I could make coconuts and go sailing on the seven seas again."

*Oh, the coconut tree was lean and tall,
He was big and the man was small,
They talked all night till it was day
But that did not keep death away.*

The sun rose but the man did not get up. His heart was weak—the tree could feel it beating steadily, but without much force. As the sun strengthened the man didn't follow the shade. He just lay on the sand. Only when the rain came did he stagger to his feet and gather water. Even that was too much. He fell on his back with his mouth open. Afterwards he did not move. He stayed there as night fell and the surf pounded relentlessly. The moon appeared, thin and sharp, the last night of its waning. It was dark.

Far out on the waves a light rose. At first the tree thought it was a star coming over the horizon, but it kept getting brighter. It was a ship, a rare sight in these parts.

"Hey-ho!" cried the tree. "Hey-ho, Mister Man!"

The man did not stir.

The tree watched the ship a while longer. It was approaching.

“Wake up, Mister Man!” called the tree—but the man’s mind was too far away. He slept. Perhaps it was his last sleep, the tree wasn’t sure. The tree watched the light some more. Now there were rows of lights, two of them. Soon the ship would be sailing past the island.

“Hey-ho, my windy ones,” shouted the tree to the wind.

*“Listen to me!
Set a storm upon the sea!
Hey-ho! Hey-ho!
Blow, my windy ones, blow!”*

The wind blew. It blew bellows and gusts and gales. It howled and it hammered and the waves grew tall. The ship bucked and heaved and fought the waves but made no headway. It swung around in the lee of the island to escape the worst of the weather and dropped anchor.

The storm kept up all night, and with it came rain, lots of rain. It wetted the man from head to toe. It moistened his lips and soaked his parched body. He revived as morning dawned and opened his eyes.

“Look, Man,” said the coconut tree. “There’s a boat out there just for you.”

The man raised his head. He got to his feet, grabbed a coconut frond and waved it over his head. He staggered to the waterline and waved and waved while the wind blew hard and tossed him about the beach. At last a dingy was let down. Four men came rowing.

*“Hey-ho, my Windys,” cried the tree,
“Your job is done, as you can see,
A storm you brought and wet rain too—
Stop!—and leave the sea so blue.”*

The storm stopped. The wind died, the waves died, and the sun rose higher in a clearing sky.

The man turned and looked at the tree. He walked back and put his hand on its trunk.

“Did you just do what I think you did?” he asked.

“Hey-ho,” said the coconut tree. “We trees are magic! Don’t you know?”

The dingy took the man towards the boat. The tree watched him being lifted aboard and the boat sail away. It became smaller and smaller and vanished from sight.

*A coconut tree upon a sand-
bar, flat and dull and not so grand--
He was there on his very ownsome,
You can bet that he was lonesome.*

A year passed before the man came back. His boat was small, but big enough to sail the seas. It had white sails and a jib and room for two or three. He set anchor close to the shore in the lee of the waves and paddled over in his dingy. He was not alone. He brought a woman.

They climbed the beach to the tree and the man stroked the bark.

"Hello, Man," said the tree, but the man didn't hear.

The man returned to the dingy, lifted out a canvas bag and walked back. He stopped ten feet short and took out a coconut. He buried it with the eyes facing down. Then he covered it up and patted down the sand.

"Bye, Tree," he called as he left, and sailed away across the deep blue sea.

*A coconut lived upon the beach
Life was fine—O, what a peach!
Beside it grew a partner small
He-she-it would soon be tall.*

Seven years and many conversations later the coconut tree bore a big bunch of coconuts. They grew green and full and fell with a sandy thud upon the ground. A storm came up—whether magically or not we cannot say—and washed one coconut far away.

*A coconut sailed upon the sea,
Up and down the waves sailed he—
He was off to find some land
Wouldn't that be great and grand!*