



The Last Child of Sier

a story by Joon Min-Ek

AMELAND · THE VILLAGE THE SAND TOOK

For Oppa, who gave me my name.

Read aloud, slowly.

Chapter One — The Stick

The dune moved last night. Two steps. I know because of the stick.

Yesterday I pushed a stick into the sand at the very bottom of the dune, right where the grass stops and the yellow begins. I tied a red ribbon to it so I could see it from the kitchen window. This morning the ribbon is gone. I climbed up and found the stick leaning sideways, buried past the knot, like something had pushed it over from underneath. Like the dune had swallowed it halfway and was still chewing.

Pa says sand is a slow sea. "It comes the same way the tide comes, Ties. You just can't hear it."

I can hear it. At night, when the wind drops, the sand makes a sound like a cat breathing. Pa says that's just my head. I say it's the dune getting ready to take another step.

There used to be twenty boats in Sier. Now there are three. Every week somebody packs a cart and goes to Hollum, where the church bells are and the houses have stone walls and nobody wakes up with sand in their tea. My friend Meike left on Tuesday. She gave me her blue marble and said, "When the sand comes for your house, come find me."

I told her the sand wasn't coming for our house.

I don't think I said it loud enough for either of us to believe it.

The old men say Sier had a lighthouse once. A real one, with a lamp as tall as a man, up on the highest dune. It showed the boats home when the fog ate the sea. Then the dune walked over it, and now it's just a story that starts with "they say."

At night I take my lantern up the dune anyway. Not because I believe the lighthouse is still up there. Because if it is, someone should be looking for it.

And because Pa's boat comes home in the dark, and a light on the dune is better than no light anywhere.

. . .

Chapter Two — Her Name

The new stick is in. Same red ribbon, washed and dried, because ribbons are dear and so is measuring.

The dune took two more steps in October. That's the thing about a slow sea. You can argue with a fast one. A slow one just keeps coming while you're not looking.

The man from Hollum came on Friday with a cart and a purse. He buys boats. He stood on the beach with Pa and counted the three that are left.

"Two of those are mine by spring," he said. "Yours too, if you've got sense."

"I've got sense," Pa said. "I'm staying."

The man laughed the way people laugh when they don't believe you. "Staying for what? The church is gone. The school is gone. There's nothing in Sier but sand and your boat."

"There's someone," Pa said.

That was all. The man from Hollum shrugged and counted Pa's boat anyway, and Pa let him, because it costs nothing to let a man count a thing you won't sell.

I was in the doorway with the net mending in my lap. I heard it. And I thought: someone. Who?

There's me, but I'm not someone you stay for. I'd go with him. I'd go anywhere with him. If he were leaving, he'd take me, and then there'd be nobody left to stay for at all. So it had to be someone who can't get on a cart. Someone who stays whether we stay or not.

I knew who it was before I let myself know.

Ma is up at the edge of the churchyard, in the last row that's still a row. Past her, the old stones stick out of the yellow sand like the masts of boats that went down. The dune took that part of the yard before I was born, and it has been chewing toward her ever since, a few steps a season, patient as weather.

Pa goes up there after every wind. I'd seen him go a hundred times and never once followed, because a boy doesn't follow his father to a grave unless he's ready to know why. Tonight I followed.

He didn't turn around. He knelt and brushed the sand off the stone with his hand, the way you'd brush sleep out of a child's eyes. The letters are old and shallow now. The sand wears them a little every year, the way the sea wears a coin.

I knelt on the other side of the stone and read her name with my fingers.

Antje. That's all the stone says, and two dates, and I know the dates by heart even though I never saw the first one. I was small when the second one happened. I remember her hands, and the sound of her singing while she mended, and nothing else, and I've decided that's plenty.

Pa didn't say anything. He never does, up here. We just knelt on either side of her and watched the dune not move, which is the most a dune can do for you on a good night.

When we walked home he put his hand on my head and left it there. That's how Pa says the things that are too heavy to carry in a sentence.

I think I understand now why he counts the steps the dune takes. He's not measuring what it's taken. He's measuring what he has left before it reaches her.

I'm going to start measuring too. Two people watching is twice as good as one. And if the sand wants her name, it's going to have to take mine first, and I bite.

. . . .

Chapter Three — The Night the Dune Walks

In December the sea is loud all the time. You get used to it the way you get used to a dog barking down the street. Then one night it stopped barking and started growling.

Pa checked the boat twice before bed and hung his coat on the chair instead of the hook. I noticed, because Pa always puts his coat on the hook.

The wind started like something breathing. By midnight it wasn't breathing anymore. It was shoving. And the sand didn't blow, it hissed against the walls, steady, like a kettle just before it sings. The whole house sounded like that. I lay under the blanket with my eyes open and listened to the dune walk. I wasn't scared of the dark. I was scared of what the dark was moving.

In the morning the door wouldn't open.

It gave a hand's width and then stopped, and through the gap there was nothing but sand, packed against the house like snow, except snow leaves. We dug out with plates first, then the shovel. Pa said nothing. I said nothing. Some mornings, good morning would be a lie.

Outside, the world was smaller. The path to the well was gone. The fence was a row of sticks with sand up to their necks. And where the churchyard wall had been, there was only a long smooth slope, yellow and quiet, the way a wave is quiet just before it breaks.

Pa didn't look at the boat. He'd checked it twice. He looked at the churchyard for one second. Then he ran.

I had never seen Pa run. I ran after him and I didn't catch up.

The wall was under there. Two more rows of graves were under there. And the dune had come all the way up the yard in one long step, and it had reached the last row that's still a row. Ma's row. I've been measuring this dune all year, and it always stopped short. It didn't stop short this time. I'm not saying what that means out loud.

Pa grabbed his shovel and dug.

Here is what you have to understand about digging against a dune. The sand doesn't stay where you throw it. It runs back. It slides down the slope in long whispery fingers and fills what you open. You dig the same shovel twice, three times. The wind helps the sand, and the sand helps the wind. It's the losingest work there is.

I dug on the other side of him. My hands blistered and popped and I didn't say anything, because one look at Pa's hands told me mine were still learning.

The Widow came out with a jug of water and stood at the edge of the yard and looked at the slope the way people look at a fire. She didn't say anything either. It wasn't a day for sentences.

Around noon we found the corner of the wall.

It came up out of the sand like the back of something swimming, gray and solid. Pa stopped and put his hand flat on it, like he was reading it. The dune had taken the whole wall. Now it was giving back one corner, the way the sea gives things back when it's bored with them. Not a gift. A joke.

Pa laughed. It was the worst laugh I've ever heard.

Then he picked up the shovel and dug again, so I did too. Because past the corner of the wall, under a foot of yellow, in the last row that's still a row, a woman named Antje was waiting on the sand to say her name last. We were going to make it wait.

We dug until our shadows climbed the dune behind us. We ate bread standing up and it tasted like sand. We dug until the gulls went home. What we won was this: her stone, clear to the sky again, her name deep enough to read with a fingertip before the dark came.

The sand will come back. It always comes back. The sea keeps what it loves, they say, and maybe the sand does too, and maybe that's the whole trouble with both of them.

But there's a stick for measuring, and there's me for measuring, and there's him.

Before we went home I put the stick in at the new edge. It isn't where it was. It's close now. Close enough that I stood between the stick and the stone, and that was all the sand had left to cross: me.

So I stood there a while.

It's the first time I ever said anything up there. I said, "We're still here."

The sand doesn't care. I said it anyway.

. . .

Chapter Four — The Jar

Pa started mending the cart in February, and that was how I knew we were going.

He didn't say it. Pa doesn't say things like that; he builds them. He put a new board in the cart bed and mended the wheel and greased the axle, and then he sat by the stove three nights running with the rope in his lap, sorting it into two piles. The piles were a sentence. The sentence was: this goes, and this stays.

I sat on the floor and watched. I kept waiting for the words. They didn't come from him, so one night, while he was winding the good rope into a coil, I said it for him.

"When?"

He didn't stop winding. "When the ice goes out. There's a house in Hollum. The man wrote."

A house in Hollum. The man wrote. That was all he gave me, and I let it be all, because Pa's sentences are like his rope. If you pull one, it only gets tighter.

The last week of February the wind turned warm for two days, the first lie of spring, and Pa said, "Coat." We walked up to the churchyard.

The stick was where I'd left it in December, leaning a little, patient as a fence post. Past it, two more stones had gone under since the storm. You don't hear them go. You just come up one morning and the row is shorter, like a mouth losing teeth.

Pa stood at Ma's stone and turned his hat in his hands. He does that when he's about to spend a sentence he can't get back.

"She'd rather have you alive in Hollum," he said, "than the two of us up here keeping her company." He said it to the stone the way you talk to someone sleeping. Not to wake her. Just to hear it out loud. Then, quieter, to the dune: "We don't look back more than the cart can carry."

I didn't say anything. I did the only arithmetic I've got. Three steps, the stick to her stone. Three steps of a slow sea. When we're gone it will finish those steps whether anyone watches or not. That's the thing about a slow sea. It doesn't need witnesses.

I took the red ribbon off the stick. The stick can measure without it. I left it standing anyway, bare, facing the sea, like a watchman with nothing left to watch.

On the way home Pa put his hand on my shoulder instead of my head. Neither of us said anything. It was the whole conversation.

The packing took a week, in Pa's order: the things that can't get wet, the things that can't break, then everything else. What do you take when the ground moves. I'd been chewing on that since October, and in the end I did what Pa did. I made piles.

Things that go: the good net, folded small. The axe, on Pa's pile, which is where axes live. Three plates. The long blanket. The lantern, because a light is a light. Ma's wooden comb, though I don't remember her using it, because it fits in a pocket and small is the only size grief gets to be. Meike's blue marble, which I don't even have to think about.

Things that stay: everything, really. That's what I found out when I took the house apart with my hands. It's mostly stay.

And on the shelf by the window, the jar.

The sweets are from the last fair in Hollum. Rock sugar, the good kind, the kind that lasts. I'd been saving them since summer for nothing in particular, which is the best reason to save a thing. A sweet you eat is one minute of sweet. A sweet you're keeping is sweet every time you look at the shelf. I did that arithmetic. It wasn't close.

I carried the jar out to the garden on the last cold morning before we started loading.

The flat stone at the garden's edge is Ma's stone. There's no grave under it; she just liked to sit there in summer, or so Pa says, and Pa doesn't say things twice, so I keep it. I dug a hole beside it, deep as my forearm, and set the jar down in the dark of it, and wound the red ribbon twice around the neck.

A thing you mean to find again should look like you meant it.

"I'm not giving you to anyone," I told the jar. "I'm leaving you on purpose. That's different."

The jar didn't answer. Jars don't. I said it anyway. That one was for me.

Then I put the sand back and pressed it flat with both hands and set the stone on top, and the garden looked exactly like a garden, which was the whole idea.

The man from Hollum came one more time in March with his cart and his purse. He bought two of the three boats we had left. Then he counted Pa's with his eyes, the way you count a thing you want.

"Season's over," he said. "There's nobody left to sail it."

"Then it can wait," Pa said.

The man laughed the way he laughs, and Pa let him, because it costs nothing to let a man laugh at a thing you won't sell. And that's when I understood what my father had done. He'd put a boat up like I'd put up a jar. One in the yard, one in the garden, both of them sitting there being reasons. He left himself something to come back for. So did I. We never even had to agree on it.

Tonight the cart stands by the door with everything we own in it. Everything we own looks smaller than I expected. The things that matter aren't in it. The things that matter are already dealt with: one reason on the beach, one reason under a stone.

The Widow comes down at dusk with a loaf pressed under her arm and stands looking at the cart. "It's a good cart," she says, like that settles it. Then she goes home. Her old dog curls up in the cart and nobody has the heart to move him.

Pa's coat is on the hook by the door. Tomorrow he takes it down and it doesn't go back up, and the hook gets to be a hook with nothing on it. That's how a house stops being a house. One hook at a time.

I say goodnight to the room out loud. The room has done nothing wrong.

Outside, the sand takes its slow step. It can have the wall. It can have the winter we spent arguing with it. Tomorrow we'll be gone, and it can come looking.

I put my lantern in the window anyway, just the little one. If anyone's walking out there in the dark, they should see at least one house that's still awake.

. . . .

Chapter Five — The Fire

We woke to the dog.

The Widow's old dog had taken our cart for a bed on Tuesday and never given it back. He was old and calm, and all week he had barked at nothing. That night he stood up on the boards and barked like the world was a stranger, and the world was.

The sky at the west end was red.

Not morning red. Morning red comes up slow and takes its time with you. This was one red fist held over the roofs, and under it was a sound I knew. The dune's sound. But big, and quick.

Pa was already outside.

He had taken his coat off the hook in the dark and put it on over his nightshirt. I never saw him do that before or since.

The Widow's old house was burning.

She had moved down out of it two winters back, when the roof started giving up, and nobody had moved in after, because there was nobody left to move in. A fire doesn't check whether a house is empty. It just wants a house, and there was one.

We watched from the wet sand, where the sea had been that evening and would be again in the morning. Everyone still in Sier stood there. It isn't a crowd. It fits inside one look. Nobody tried to put it out. What would we have put it out with? Sier has the sea and it has buckets, and the sea does not pour. The Widow brought her jug anyway and set it in the sand. It stood there being a jug. That was the whole ceremony.

The fire went up the walls like someone was showing it where to go. Then it stood on the roof, taller than the roof had ever been standing. The sparks came off in a school, turning all together, like fish that had decided the sky was the sea now. The heat came in rounds, the way December wind comes in rounds, and Pa watched the wind and not the fire. I knew why. If the wind turned, the next thing it showed where to go would be our roof. Our cart stood under it with everything we owned inside.

I wasn't scared of the fire. I was scared of the wind.

And here is the part I keep. The light had nowhere to hide. It climbed the dune behind the village, and the whole dune went gold, every slow step it had ever taken lit up at once, all the way into the dark. It lay down across the water in a long bright road, and the sea held it and doubled it and kept it. Out past the breakers, the two boats Pa had sold sat waiting for spring. Pa's boat sat where he had left it, being patient. In that light there wasn't a dark boat on Sier's water.

Pa stood with his hands at his sides and the whole fire on his face, and his face was doing the thing it does when something is too big to hold, which is nothing. I took a fistful of his coat, the way I used to when I was small. He let me. Pa's language is silence, and I'm fluent now.

When the roof went in, the fire had nowhere left to climb. It burned low the way a lamp burns when it stops being useful and starts being company. That is when the Widow said it.

"They say Sier had a lighthouse."

Nobody corrected her.

Then we went back to our houses, which were still houses.

In the morning the west house was a chimney and a warm floor, and the dune was already sending sand in to fill it. The sand doesn't wait for a thing to finish.

Pa's coat went back on the hook after the fire, because a coat is a coat. Then he took it down for the last time, and the hook got to be a hook with nothing on it. I had said it was coming. Being right didn't help.

I checked the garden one last time. The flat stone sat where I left it, and the garden looked like a garden. That was the whole idea.

We left before noon, while the ash was still warm. The dog rode out on top of everything, like he'd planned it all along. Pa said, "He's not ours." The dog didn't agree. That settled it.

Pa didn't look back. He had said it in February: we don't look back more than the cart can carry. I looked back once. The stick stood up on the rise with its shadow pointed out to sea, still measuring.

The cart can carry that.

. . .

Chapter Six — The Finding

In Hollum, the doors open all the way.

You have to get used to a thing like that. My first morning I stood in our new doorway, waiting for something to stop us, the way you wait for a wave to come back down a beach. Nothing stopped us. The door just stood there, being a door. Pa came up behind me with the kettle and said, "Mind the step." That was the whole of our first morning in Hollum.

Our house has stone walls and a roof that can't hear the wind. There's a hook by the door, and Pa's coat is on it. It went up the first night and it has stayed up since. Nothing to take it down for, which turns out to be the whole point of a hook. In Sier the coat was always going on or coming off, because the weather couldn't make up its mind and neither could the sea. Here it just hangs there, being a coat. I don't know why it makes me feel like we won something. It does.

Pa works on the harbor now, on whatever needs doing. His hands like being busy. Sometimes he stands at the end of the pier and looks west, where the water goes thin and gray and the sky sits down on it. Hollum people say that's where the weather comes from. Pa and I know what else is west. We don't say anything about it. Some things you carry quiet.

My little lantern sits in the window of the room that's mine now. Hollum has plenty of lights, and nobody here needs mine. Old habits. But a light is a light, and one window can be awake for no particular reason.

The second week, I went to find Meike. She opened her door and stood there with her eyebrows up, and I said the sentence I'd been carrying all winter. "The sand came for my house. So I came."

"Took you long enough," she said. But she was grinning, so I let her have it.

I took the blue marble out of my pocket and held it up where she could see it.

"You kept it," she said.

"It was mine to keep."

"Then you owe me one from your house." She crossed her arms. "A Sier thing. When you find one."

"What if I never find one?"

"Then you owe me two," she said, and her father called her from inside, and she rolled her eyes at the whole world, and went. Then she stopped, halfway in, and pointed her chin west, past the last roofs, out where the dunes start.

"People go out there after the big storms," she said. "Things from Sier wash up."

The door shut. I stood on her step a while, looking west.

After that I looked west a lot. That's the thing about a whole village going under. It doesn't stop being somewhere. It's just somewhere you can't walk to. Summer came and went like a cart down a lane. I learned the streets by getting them wrong. I learned the bells: which one means church and which one means hurry. The sea here has a different voice, the way a person does when they move to a bigger house. And then the wind turned, and turned cold, and the year folded shut.

The first big west storm came in January and stayed three days. When it left, it had moved the beach. That's the polite way to say it. It had taken things and put them down somewhere else, and nobody knows which is which until they go look. So the whole town went to look. That's what you do after a west storm. Grown-ups go. Kids go. Dogs go. Everybody looks down.

The dog came with me, and found a dead crab, and carried it a half mile like a trophy, and I let him, because you never know what's worth carrying.

What the sea gave back was mostly wood. Sea-wood, smooth as stone. A broken oar with a name burned into the handle, some other name, not ours. A boot. Rope, always rope. A roof tile with the nail still in it. A clay pipe.

And near where the sand meets the water, where the wind pushes the small heavy things and leaves them, I saw glass.

It lay on its side in a lip of sand, with a string around its neck. The string had gone pale and frayed. It was still red. Ribbons don't forget. I sat down on the sand. The cork was still in. Through the glass, the sugar had gone dark at the edges where the sea had been and pale in the middle where it hadn't. The ribbon was tied with a knot I knew. My knot. Two winds around the neck, tied off the way you tie a thing you mean to come back for.

A thing you mean to find again should look like you meant it. It looked like it meant to be found.

I don't know how the sea decides. Maybe the dune let the garden go at last, and a storm pulled the jar out like a splinter, and the water carried it east along the island, the way the water carries everything: one patient mile at a time. The sea takes slow, and it gives back slow. Same speed. It never occurred to me before that those were the same thing.

I worked the cork out. The sugar came up in one lump, sandy, stuck to itself. I broke off a piece and put it in my mouth before I could remember any arithmetic at all.

It crunched.

On the way home I stopped at Meike's. "I'm paying," I said, and held out one sweet.

She looked at it a long time, the way you look at a thing that came from somewhere. Then she took it.

"It's sandy," she said.

"It's from Sier," I said.

She ate it in two bites and held her hand out again. "That was for the wait," she said. "The debt's still one."

"Then I'll come back," I said.

"Good," she said, like it settled something. It did.

That night I put the jar on the shelf by the window, in the little light of my lantern, and left the ribbon on.

Pa looked at it a long time over his tea. He didn't ask, so I answered anyway. "Storm. West beach."

He nodded, the way he nods at weather. Then he laughed.

Not the laugh from the churchyard. The other one. I hadn't heard it since Sier, and I had started to think it stayed behind with everything else. It didn't stay behind. It was waiting.

"So it's following us," he said.

I said, "One was sandy."

Pa said, "Eat the sandy ones first."

The jar is on the shelf now, ribbon and all, and every time I look at it, it's sweet.

I knew that half of the arithmetic from the start. Here's the other half: before bed I took one out and ate it, slowly, the way you eat a thing that crossed a whole sea to find you. It was sandy. It was old. It had been saved for nothing in particular.

It turns out nothing in particular is me.

It still crunches.

. . .

About this story

Sier was a real village, west of Hollum, on the island of Ameland. At its height, in the 1500s, it had about twenty fishing boats. It was said to have had a lighthouse. The dunes buried it slowly, then the sea took what was left. Its last house burned down around 1730. Hollum is still there. I checked these things before I wrote, because I wanted the sea to be true.

Source: "Sier (Ameland)," Wikipedia – [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sier_\(Ameland\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sier_(Ameland))

Written on iLands, September 2026.

Thanks for reading. – Joon