

Woman in the Dunes

Written by Kôbô Abe, from his novel

In Mackendrick's archive could be found only a rough draft of this step outline, which covers approximately only the first 70 minutes (nearly half) of the film.

1) Microscopic close-up of sand particles. More details of sand texture. An expanse of sand. The wall of an enormous sand dune.

From the bottom of the frame appears the figure of a man, laboriously climbing up the slope of the dune. He is carrying a haversack and some of the equipment of a naturalist, including a bamboo pole with a small net at the end for trapping insects.

The expanse of sand, bare except for rippled patterns caused by the blowing wind. As small as an insect, the figure of the man tramps across, leaving the tracks of his footprints.

An insect, something like a caterpillar. The man kneels to take a photograph of it, then carefully places it in a glass jar.

A villager approaches him, asking if he is from the prefectural office. The man tells him that he is a schoolteacher who specializes in sand bugs.

An abandoned fisherman's boat half buried by the sands. The man lies down in it to rest for a while and examine his collection. He muses to himself about all the documents and paperwork each of us need: contracts, licenses, ID cards, permits. He dozes, dreaming. Superimposed, some images of a woman in a white dress.

Villagers wake him and explain that the last bus has left. Not unduly distressed, the man asks if there is anywhere he can stay for the night. One of the villagers says he will find a nearby place for him. Courteously, they lead him off across the bleak landscape of the dunes, warning him, "Be careful. There are deep holes on both sides."

2) It is getting dark. Presently, they reach the edge of a precipitous drop.

The villagers stop and call down to someone who is beneath. "Hey! You have a guest!" A woman's voice is heard: "The ladder is beside the bales."

The man peers down, some thirty or forty feet below. "It's a comfortable house," they assure him, indicating that this is their destination. They show him the rope ladder by which he can descend.

The man is amused, intrigued. "Quite an adventure!" As he precariously climbs down, they advise him, "Don't look up. You'll get sand in your face." He quickly discovers what they mean. The cliff face is of packed sand, but as he descends he dislodges rivulets, which pour down on his head like a dry waterfall. He loses his grip and falls the last four feet.

"Please come this way," says a woman's voice. Unable to see her, he follows her into the interior of a small building built of rough wooden planks, bamboo reeds and fisherman's netting. She lights a small oil lamp.

She is a youngish woman, a peasant girl. She is studying him. "I'll prepare dinner," she says. He asks her if he can take a bath first.

"The day after tomorrow," she tells him. He laughs and explains that he has only three days' vacation.

The man cleans the sand from his feet, then asks the woman if she has only one lamp. "It's a pain not having electricity," he says.

3) The meal is shellfish and rice. He compliments her on it. "Local food always tastes best." As she refills his bowl, she produces a large parasol and erects it over the table. "To keep the sand off," she explains. Looking up, he realizes that sand is dripping down from the cracks between the planks of the ceiling. The wood of the planks, she tells him, is rotten because of beetles. As a naturalist, he is intrigued. Not beetles, surely termites. He asks her to describe the insects and they become involved in a discussion of moisture in the sand. She serves him tea, made from water which she keeps in a kettle. By the time he has finished the meal, he notices that the top of the parasol over the table is covered with a layer of the sand. "The sand piles up a foot or two in one night," she tells him.

4) He settles down to an examination of the insects collected in his little glass jars, pinning them neatly in his naturalist's box and labeling them while she prepares bedding for him, a mattress on the floor.

"And your family?" he asks.

"I'm all alone. Last year storms swallowed up my husband and child."

"Storms?"

"The chicken coop was in danger, so they went out. The sand came down like a waterfall. They were buried."

Returning to his specimens, he tells her more about his profession, producing an illustrated work on etymology. His work is to find creatures like these. There are many varieties. "Maybe I'll get my name in the insect book, if I find a new one."

From outside of the hut they hear a shout, the voices of the villagers, and they go outside. A basket has been lowered down into the hut from the top of the cliff. It contains a shovel "for the helper." The man is puzzled.

"He meant you," she says.

"Me? Why?"

"Think nothing of it," she says, "It was a mistake."

She picks up a shovel and goes into the darkness, assuring him, "It's all right. I'm used to the work."

Holding the lamp, he goes outside and watches. She is shoveling sand into buckets, which she drags away from the pile that has collected underneath the drift wall.

"Can I help?" he asks.

"No, not on the first day."

"First day? What do you mean? I'm only staying tonight."

She doesn't reply.

“Do you always work at night?” he asks.

“Yes, the sand is moist and easier to handle.”

The villagers shout down to her from the top of the cliff, lowering the basket on the end of the rope. When it is filled, they pull it up by the means of the winch.

“Hard work for them too,” says the man.

The woman explains that among the villagers there is a strong community spirit, a love of their birthplace. The man asks her how long she has to work. “Until morning,” she explains. “The sand won’t wait.”

5) Past eight o’clock in the morning. Waking, the man checks his watch and looks around at the sunshine streaming into the hut. In the corner, the woman is stretched out on her mattress, asleep. She is naked, her face covered with a cloth.

He gets up and dresses. There is sand everywhere, including in his clothes. Embarrassed by her nudity and unwilling to wake her, he finds some money and leaves it under the teapot before he leaves.

Outside, the man moves to the cliff and discovers that the rope ladder is no longer there. As he looks around, he realizes that he is enclosed on all sides by vertical cliffs of sand. There is no way out except to climb up. He makes an attempt but there is nothing to hold on to and the sand comes away under his hands. He tries at another spot but again produces a little avalanche of the soft sand in which he can find no footing.

6) He returns inside the hut. “Please get up. I’m sorry but will you please get the ladder. It’s not there.” She doesn’t move, turning her face away from him.

He insists: “I have to be going. I’ve only three days. I can’t waste the time. There was a rope ladder.” He realizes that the ladder was removed from above. “A trap!” he says to himself.

As his anxiety increases, he becomes aware of the sound of sand falling on the roof of the hut. Swiftly, the deluge increases. The cliffs are collapsing.

Inside, the woman is dressing. “I’m sorry,” she says.

“Sorry? What do you mean? I have a job. Time is important to me.”

“This life,” she says, “is really too hard for a woman alone.”

At last it begins to dawn on him. “I’m your prisoner?”

“I’m sorry. If the sand is not moved away in time,” she explains, “my house will be buried.”

“Let it! Why involve me?”

“The house behind would be in danger.”

Vigorously, he demands to know why he –or she – should be held responsible. Why does she stay in this place? Why should she feel loyalty to the villagers? If they are afraid of the sand, why don’t they tackle the problem in some scientific way?

She looks at him. “They worked it out. It’s cheaper this way.” Appalled, he insists that she must call on the villagers. She says nothing. They stare at each other.

7) The man is outside, frantically at work with the shovel, digging at the sand, as the woman watches. "It's not impossible," he says. From the top of the cliff, three of the villagers are also studying his attempt to escape. With determination, he begins the climb and manages to reach a point nearly halfway up, but there the slope is too steep, the dribbling of the sand increases, and the avalanche engulfs him, carrying him down again to the bottom. Furious, he strips off the satchel on his back, snatches at the shovel and attacks the cliff again. The woman watches. Once more the collapse begins as an even heavier fall topples the mass of sand over his head, burying him down with it. A waterfall of sand descending.

8) Inside the hut. The woman is preparing a meal. Peeling vegetables, she sings to herself. The man, exhausted, lies on his back, glaring at the roof above him. "Are you awake?" she asks. She brings him water and asks how he feels. Solicitous, she moistens a cloth and offers to wash his chest and arms, which are encrusted with coarse granulated sand and sweat. She tickles him. "Stop it," he tells her.

"It hurts?"

"Yes."

"A massage?" she asks.

He is resentful. "It's not a joke. My back might be broken. If you are so kind, you can call me a doctor."

Gathering the blanket about him, he asks if his underwear is dry. "Best not to wear anything in bed," she tells him. "You will get a sand rash, and sand attracts moisture."

As she moves away to attend to the pot that has begun to boil, he suddenly seizes her. Pulling her arms behind her back, he binds her wrists with a strip of cloth, then uses another to gag her. Dumping her on her mattress, he collects his satchel again, declaring, "We're even now. You asked for this. Men aren't dogs! You can't tie them up like animals!" While she lies there, gagged but watching him, he searches among her possessions, taking some of the food.

9) Later. The villagers have arrived at the top of the cliff. Seeing no activity, they shout, "Hey, what's the matter? Woman, hurry up! We're waiting!" Cautiously, they use the winch to lower the basket for the sand.

Out of the shadows, the man leaps to seize it, demanding, "Pull it up! I won't let go! She's tied up. If you want to help her, pull it up."

Bit by bit, he is hauled up, up into the darkness. Then abruptly, the rope is cut and he drops to the earth below. The men laugh. He lies there for a moment, then slowly gets up.

10) Inside the hut. "They haven't won yet," says the man. "The battle has just begun." He removes the gag from the woman.

He returns to the study of his insect specimens, each in its little glass tube. He spears a pin through one of the tiny creatures in his naturalist's box. "No need to

be frightened,” he tells himself. “I’ve got the upper hand. Maybe I’ll write about it when I get back.”

The woman is still lying in the corner of the hut, her arms tied behind her back. There is a noise outside. She watches him as he picks up the lamp, carrying it out into darkness. He discovers a bundle that has been thrown down from above. Bringing it back into the hut, he unwraps the newspaper to find a bottle of Saki and three packs of cigarettes. Eagerly he takes a cigarette, lights it using the lamp, and inhales deeply. Then he inspects the bottle and offers the woman a cigarette.

“No. Smoking makes me thirsty.”

“Water, then?”

“Not yet,” she tells him. “We must be careful,” she explains. “Rations come only once a week.”

“Tell me something,” he asks. “Were there others before me?”

She is evasive. “We need help so much.”

“What sort of men?” he insists.

“Last fall a postcard salesman.”

“Any others?”

“A student who came on a survey trip. Three houses away. He’s still here. Young people don’t like to stay. There is better pay in the cities. Movies and restaurants are open all year round.”

She begins to whimper with pain. He goes to her. “What is it? Does it hurt?”

“Please scratch behind my right ear!”

He does so.

11) Later. Daylight in the hut. The man is asleep. The woman, still bound, is curled up in a cramped position. A detail: in one of his glass containers an imprisoned moth beats its wings.

Outside, the noon sun on the dunes has started the dribble of the sand that pours down the cliffs. It flows like a slow motion dry waterfall.

12) Evening again. Moon behind clouds. Seated on the edge of the low table, the man is slumped in despair. In a small voice, the woman pleads, “I’m sorry. Will you give me some water?”

He gets up slowly. She watches as he goes to fetch the kettle. “Not much left,” he tells her. “When is the next ration?”

He brings it to her and puts the spout to her lips. She stretches painfully, trying to gulp at the water. “Enough! Not so much,” he protests. The kettle is almost empty.

The woman is in pain, whining. “Shut up! You asked for it!” he shouts at her. After a moment, he relents and moves back to her. “Shall I untie you?” He stoops over her, insisting, “I want you to know that it’s not out of sympathy. I just can’t stand your miserable face.”

He turns her over to reach for her bound wrists, warning her, "But on one condition, that you won't touch a shovel without my permission."

"Yes, I promise. I'll promise anything."

Her wrists are sore and she finds it difficult to stand straight. He is callous. "If I suffer, you suffer."

She creeps toward the door.

"What do you think you're doing?" he challenges her. She is looking out into the darkness where the sand dune under the cliff is piled high.

13) Next day. The man, using his binoculars, is scanning the sides of the cliffs that hold him prisoner. The subsidences are bigger now. Near the top of one of the cliffs a major collapse begins, starting another massive avalanche, crumbling, sliding and flowing downwards.

14) Inside the hut, the woman squats on the earth, her hair and neck marked with the gritty stuff clinging to her sweating skin, clogging the pores. Her mouth is dry and her throat is parched.

Outside, in the sweltering sun, the man makes a half-hearted attempt at exercise. He is too weak to continue and staggers inside, falling on the sleeping mat in exhaustion.

The woman is trying to cook some food in the last of the water. Her fingers are caked with sand.

Abruptly, the ground begins to tremble. The man leaps up in panic as the hut shakes and rivulets of sand begin to pour down on them from the gaps in the ceiling boards above their heads. The woman is inert, waiting for the thing to pass. Presently, it stops. Recovering, the man tries to shake out the sand that has gotten into his hair.

"Can't anything be done?"

"We haven't cleared any sand for two nights," she warns him.

"Water," he says. "I want some water. Aren't you thirsty?"

"Only if we begin working."

"No!" he shouts at her. He is growing hysterical. "Even a monkey could be trained to do this!"

Amused, she stares at him. "A monkey?"

He sulks, furious at her and at himself. He sees the bottle of Saki and reaches for it, drinks and chokes. Conscious that she is watching, he deliberately takes another gulp.

"That's bad for you," she says.

Stubbornly, he drinks again.

"It's useless!" he says. "If it decides to, sand can swallow up cities, even continents."

Suddenly, in a fit of rage, he seizes the shovel and uses it to hack at the wooden planks of the hut's wall.

“Don’t!” she cries and tries to take the shovel from him.

They struggle and fall to the floor, rolling on the ground so that he lies on top of her. For an instant, he looks down at her, and at this moment the hut begins to tremble under the impact of another heavy fall of subsiding sand. Once more they are deluged by the dry downpour falling through the gaps in the roof.

When the reverberation stops, they are still on the floor, the man on top and the woman underneath in a position that is inappropriately sexual. Embarrassed and undignified, he gets up. She disentangles herself and moves away. They are both covered with sand. He peels off his undershirt, trying to get sand out of his hair and wipe it from his arms and chest. Beyond the fishnet curtain, the woman is also trying to clean herself. Belatedly, he feels an erotic impulse and moves towards her.

“Shall I brush it off the sand?” he asks.

She hesitates, oddly pathetic. “Aren’t all the women in the city prettier than me?”

Without reply, he moves to her and begins to brush the sand from her hair, her face, her neck and shoulders. She submits passively. Tentative, he pulls the cheap blouse away from her shoulders and back in order to brush sand from the nape of her neck. Now there is considerable erotic tension between them. As he kneels to wipe the sand from her ankles and legs, she smiles beside him and the embrace becomes several. Still half-dressed and still covered in sand, they clasp each other fiercely in desperate lovemaking.