

An underwater scene with a school of fish swimming in clear blue water. The fish are silvery and their movement creates ripples on the surface. The background transitions from a lighter blue at the top to a darker blue at the bottom.

THE  
EIGHT CURRENTS



by Joseph Barbaccia

# **The Eight Currents**

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# Part 1

## Happiness



## Chapter 1

Jeddo remembered the beatings.

One in particular stood out in his memory. It took place by the horse coral at the edge of the village when he was 13 years old. He recalled being face down in the dirt; an older boy was sitting on him pulling his head back by his hair with one hand and slapping him in the face. He cried uncontrollably, his mouth gritty with dirt. As Jeddo stood lost in the past, he could again feel the hot tears tracking down his soiled face.

“Queer! Wuss!” the red faced older boy yelled.

Standing directly in front of Jeddo's face, another older boy the same age as the boy on Jeddo's back, threatened a small group of Jeddo's friends. Too scared to stop the abuse, they looked on in horror until one of the group, Jeddo's best friend Jona, ran from the coral and made a bee-line to the nearest house to get help from an adult. Through his tears Jeddo saw Jona run off; he thought he was deserting him. "Not my best friend." he anguished.

Seeing Jona escape, the two older boys gave Jeddo one last slap and, cursing and threatening the entire group with worse punishment if they told, quickly ran off towards the forest.

Jeddo wasn't really hurt badly. He recalled feeling mostly scared and ashamed that his friends had seen him cower and blubber like a baby. More importantly, he had lost face. And worst of all, Adella was there to see it.

Adella was tall, thin, almost boyish girl, with copper red hair that glowed hot in the summer sun. She and Jeddo had spent most of that season together. Boating, fishing swimming, kite flying. Up until that day they were inseparable.

Jeddo recalled it was about an hour earlier that Adella and he had joined up with a few other friends at the coral. Surrounded by shade trees, it was a cool place to be on a hot summer afternoon. A couple of horses lazily ambled over to the group. The languid contentment of summer hung from every shading branch.

The older boys, Bustor and Tomas, arrived just as the friends were talking about a party to be held later on that evening. Jeddo, as usual, felt scared just seeing them. They were always trouble. He watched as the two boys spied the group and whisper conspiratorially to each other before sauntering over. Immediately they began making lewd remarks and gestures at Adella.

What could he do? Jeddo knew that if he interfered with Bustor and Tomas he would get pounded. But he couldn't just stand there and let them say such things to Adella. Terrified, he asked them in a feeble voice to "Please quit it."

That's all they needed to hear.

His reception at home after the incident was not what Jeddo needed. He recalled his brother's and mother's reactions were both predictable and unhelpful. He cringed as his mother smothered him with too much care and affection and sulked when his brother mocked him for not standing up to the two bullies.

It was his father's reaction that surprised and disappointed him. At first he was concerned about Jeddo's wellbeing. But as soon as he knew Jeddo was unhurt he distanced himself from the boy. Jeddo was heartbroken. He needed some help in understanding just what he was feeling, but his father said nothing more than "You'll be OK, son."

"I wish my grandfather were still alive," Jeddo thought. "He always knew what to say to me when I was feeling bad. I didn't know I would miss him so much. At least I have the knife he gave me before he passed. In a funny way, I feel better just having it with me."

All this happened over three years ago. But the pain and humiliation of that day persisted like a stain he couldn't remove.

After the beating that summer Jeddo only saw Adella once or twice more. She and his other friends drifted apart from him. He could not forgive or forget his own failures. "They all know that I'm afraid of my own shadow. I'm such a wuss. I hate myself." He thought.

This low self-esteem, in turn, effected how he imagined the world saw him. He mostly stayed at home now. To protect himself from a world with which he was too sensitive to deal with

effectively he turned to creating images. This reduced his fears and he found he enjoyed working with his hands and imagination.

In time, creating images helped Jeddo rejoin his group of friends, though it was never the same as it was before. Now he felt a degree of separation. He continued to be one of the group, but an outsider. Different. He was accepted more for what he used to be rather than what he was now.

Today the sea was high with the anticipation of a full moon and the cloudless pale blue dome of sky above seemed to quiver with potent energy. Between the black sand beach's high dunes and where the coastal rain forest thickened into impenetrable green sat a weathered grey house.

Jeddo's family home. Constructed of old forest wood, with a sagging roof, its small windows looked out upon a sandy yard littered with irreparable fishing equipment. Neglected traps, nets, buoys, and floats lay half-buried under the afternoon sun. A modest vegetable garden, guarded by a giant baobab tree, dozed behind the house.

Around front, driven deep into the earth, stood a wooden totem pole carved with intricate images of local animal spirits. A myriad of sea creatures predominated. From sea stars to sharks; all were moving in a spiral up towards the apex of the sculpture. Atop the pole was a spread-winged raven staring westward. Its smoothly sanded form was stained black with charcoal, and its eyes were two large purple cowry shells. Opposite the totem, supine on carpenter's horses, lay another pole in the final stages of carving.

In front of this, under the shade of a coconut palm, Jeddo was taking a short break from his carving. And, like many times before, his mind had wandered back to that difficult time of his life.

A raven's cawing stirred him out of his reverie and once again he concentrated on aligning a chisel at just the precise place. Lean and dark skinned, he looked younger than his

sixteen years as he arched his taut body over the unfinished work. His dark brown eyes concentrated on his task and his thick black hair, which hung freely to his shoulders, helped him focus. Quickly and surely, with intent as fierce as the afternoon sun, he brought a heavy wooden mallet down upon the chisel head. With a loud *crack*, a chip of reddish wood flew through the air to join a mass of others on the sand. The boy stood back, reflected, and then repositioning his chisel, keenly bent to his work once more.

Before he could swing again, the sound of a conch shell horn rebounded off the forest trees and reverberated throughout the dunes. The young man rose and turned his head toward the sound as another horn blast cut through the air. At first exasperated, Jeddo remembered his responsibilities and with resignation set his tools down on the incomplete carving, then turned to walk a path leading down to the beach.

At that same moment his mother came out of the front door. A few strands of wispy grey hair slipped down onto her dark face, which was deeply tanned and finely wrinkled from years of coastal sun. Unconsciously brushing the hair aside, she called out his name.

“Jeddo!”

She held out a water-filled gourd and a hand-woven basket. “Take these to your father and brother,” she said more softly. “They may need some fresh water. And I would like you to put some of their day’s catch in the basket for supper, so please come right back.”

Jeddo turned awkwardly—almost falling—and hurried back to her. Taking the two items, he accepted her proffered kiss. “Yes Mother.”

With a gnarled finger pointed at Jeddo’s head, as if to plant this information deep into his forgetful brain, she added, “Tell your father there will be potatoes and onions tonight as well.”

“I will,” Jeddo replied. Then, unsteadily, he ran up the path to the beach, first accidentally dropping the gourd, then the basket, before reaching the top of the dunes.

As Jeddo came to the crest of the dunes, he looked back towards his mother and saw her give him a look of love and concern. She tilted her head slightly and bit her lip as if looking for an answer to something. Then she parted the doorway’s colorful shell curtain and stepped back inside the modest home.

Jeddo turned away from his home and gazed at the vast panorama of the shoreline. For over thirty kilometers east and west, the fine black hard-packed sand ran straight and true. Directly ahead, where the beach and sea came together, Jeddo saw two men using logs to move a small solidly built dhow up from the ocean’s edge. They strained, one pushing, the other pulling the dripping, fish laden sailboat up past the high-water mark.

Wanting to be of help to his father and elder brother, Jeddo half ran, half fell down the dunes. The coal black sand, hot on the soles of his feet, caused him to run even faster. And the faster he ran, the more he tumbled, tripping over nothing, falling over everything. By the time Jeddo reached them, the two had positioned the boat, secured it with an anchor, and were beginning to hang the nets to dry. Sea gulls conspired loudly overhead.

“Father, Mother asked me to bring you this,” said Jeddo, gasping for air.

White hair and dark skin creased by many years of sea and salt marked the older of the two men, who took the gourd with a nod of thanks, tilted it back, and drank. After what seemed an interminable time he lowered the container and handed it to his oldest son.

The slow moving younger man smiled a thank you at Jeddo as he took the gourd. With a quick backward tilt of his head he drank deeply.

Jeddo's father, Felo and his brother, Otel shared an almost wordless world where virtually all communication was effected with gestures and subtle facial expressions. His father and brother spent so much time together without him that Jeddo couldn't always attune himself to this silent language. He was uncomfortable in the silence, wanted to break it. He saw the abundance of fish in the wooden tub in the bow and knew it had been an exceptional day.

"Otel, my brother, how was the sea today?" he asked.

Though there was only a two years difference between them, Otel towered over Jeddo. He was even taller and darker than their father, Felo. "She was very generous," replied Otel.

"Mother says. . . ahh, Mother says. . ." Jeddo struggled to remember and then brightened. "Mother says there will be potatoes and onions for tonight's meal and wants the best of the catch to prepare."

"Take these," said Jeddo's father, bending down to remove four large fish from the tub.

Jeddo held out the basket, accepted the surprising weight of the shining catch with a grunt, and carefully covered them to keep off the buzzing flies. He glanced up to the dhow's still unfurled sail. It was covered with a simple, colorful geometric pattern in red and black that had been used in this part of the world for centuries. He had painted the sail over two years ago and now saw that it needed a freshening coat. Even though a few owners had traded half a day's catch with Jeddo to decorate their fishing boats, he was most proud of the carvings and paintings he had made to distinguish his family's boat from the dozen or so other dhows in the area.

The vessel had been in the family for four generations. His great grandfather had commissioned an itinerant boat builder to design it and, with the help of relatives and friends, had built the family's first dhow. Over ninety years later the boat required little maintenance and was as solid as ever. The only work that had been added in that time was the carvings of a small

school of jumping fish Jeddo made for the bowsprit and gunnels. His father had allowed this only after many practice carvings showed how Jeddo's ideas would fit the irreplaceable dhow.

After handing over the fish, Jeddo's father noticed where the young man's eyes lingered. "Jeddo, as soon as you have finished the totem for the community house, I need you to repaint our sail. It looks a bit faded. Yes?"

Instead of decorating sails, Jeddo knew his father would much rather he go fishing with him and Otel. In the past four years he knew his father had just about saved up enough coins to have another dhow built so eventually the family would increase their earnings. His father had hoped that when the time came to purchase a new boat, he would be ready to take the new one out to sea with him. Otel would then have the family dhow and hire someone else along the coast to fish alongside him.

However, Jeddo knew deep in his heart that he would never be a fisherman. For some unknown spirit made him completely unbalanced on board a sailing vessel.

Jeddo understood his father had difficulty accepting the fact at first and had more than once forced him to fish with him and Otel. Whenever Jeddo's father required him to do this, Jeddo inadvertently hurt himself. Sometimes others. And the damages Jeddo caused or the loss of equipment happened so often, that to his relief his father relinquished and stopped taking him fishing. Jeddo knew deep in his heart this clumsiness, coupled with a proneness to create havoc, even at home, did not lessen his father's love for him. And there was one area where he recognized his qualities shone forth.

Whenever Jeddo was drawing, painting or carving, his mind was clear, his hand steady and his stroke sure. Jeddo could see that his father knew that this was his calling. But he could also see the worried look on his face when they talked about it. His father was worried because

the plain and simple people of the area did not have much need of these skills. Jeddo couldn't count the times his father had asked him how he thought he would support himself or a wife and family? "Perhaps something special will happen and all will be well. Though Jeddo knew that in the hard life of a fisherman, something special usually meant something bad.

At first Jeddo beamed at his father's words. Though carving was his first love, he was happy to work with paint again. But his happiness was weighed down by the knowledge that his father had asked him to paint the sail only so he would have something else to do other than fish. He blushed and felt slightly ashamed because of this and, although he knew his family loved him, suddenly separate and quite alone.

These weren't new feelings for Jeddo. Even though he had been a part of something bigger than himself, through either his family or community all his life, it had been years since he truly felt comfortable in his village. But up until now there was always some connection. He was never completely separate. Never totally alone. This new state was at once scary and exhilarating.

"If I'm not part of the community, what am I? Who am I?" he thought. "If I'm not like the people around me, if I don't fit in here, where do I fit? What can I do now? What could I become or do someplace else that I couldn't do here?"

"I'd better be going home," he said to his father. "Mother is waiting for the fish, and she might need some help in the preparation."

At this Otel burst into laughter. "Only if she desires to ruin our evening meal!"

Jeddo was hurt and gave Otel questioning look. Feeling more unconnected from his father and brother than ever, he ran up the beach toward the house.

“Otel!” snapped Felo, “Your brother cannot change who he is. And though he cannot do common things without mishap as you and I, you should respect your brother.”

Otel just shook his head and said nothing.

Jeddo ran into the dunes until he could not take another step and fell in a heap. “How could my brother be so mean?” he thought. “I’ve never criticized him like that. And why didn’t Father reprimand Otel? Doesn’t he know how I feel?”

Troubled and exhausted, Jeddo escaped his worries by day-dreaming of places and people far removed from his small fishing village. He recalled stories he had heard from an old traveler who once rested by their home. The traveler had told Jeddo of a city with carved stone towers situated far to the west, a place where hundreds of artists were hard at work creating sculptures for every city square. A place where his abilities would be welcomed and encouraged. The old man had called it the City of Dreams.

Jeddo recalled the sketches and models he had designed of imaginary facades of luxurious homes and cooling fountains hidden in the depths of this city. If the city were real and not just a story told by an old man in exchange for food, Jeddo would desire nothing else but to travel there and transform his designs into reality. In his mind’s eye he could even now see the three meter high fountain sculptures shining white and wet in the bright costal sunshine.

“But even if it exists at all,” he thought gloomily, “I’ll never get there.”