

The Sand Castle

By Alma Luz Villanueva

“Have you dressed yet?” their grandmother called. “Once a month in the sun and they must almost be forced,” she muttered. “Well, poor things, they’ve forgotten the warmth of the sun on their little bodies, what it is to play in the sea, yes. . . .” Mrs. Pavloff reached for her protective sun goggles that covered most of her face. It screened all **ultraviolet** light from the once life-giving sun; now, it, the sun, scorched the Earth, killing whatever it touched. The sea, the continents, had changed. The weather, as they’d called it in the last century, was entirely predictable now: warming.

Mrs. Pavloff slipped on the thick, metallic gloves, listening to her grandchildren squabble and she heard her mother’s voice calling her, “Masha, put your bathing suit under your clothes. It’s so much easier that way without having to go to the bathhouse first. Hurry! Father’s waiting!” She remembered the ride to the sea, the silence when the first shimmers of water became visible. Her father had always been first into the chilly water. “Good for the health!” he’d yell as he drove into it, swimming as far as he could, then back. Then he’d lie exhausted on the sand, stretched to the sun. Such

happiness to be warmed by the sun.

Then the picnic. She could hear her mother’s voice, “Stay to your knees!” To herself: “She’d be a mermaid if I didn’t watch,” and she’d laugh. Masha would like belly down, facing the sea, and let the last of the waves roll over her. She hadn’t even been aware of the sun, only that she’d been warm or, if a cloud covered it, cold. It was always there, the sun: its light, its warmth. But the sea – they traveled to it. So, she’d given all of her attention to the beautiful sea.

She saw her father kneeling next to her, building the sand castle they always build when they went to the sea. Her job was to find seashells, bird feathers, and strips of seaweed to decorate it. How proud she’d felt as she placed her seashells where she chose, where they seemed most beautiful. Only then was the sand castle complete. She heard her father’s voice, “The Princess’s castle is ready, now, for her Prince! Come and look, Anna! What do you think?” She saw herself beaming with pride, and she heard her mother’s laugh. “Fit for a queen, I’d say! Can I live in your castle, too, Masha? Please, Princess Masha?” “Of course, Mother! You can live with me always...” She remembered her mother’s laughing face, her auburn hair lit

up by the sun, making her look bright and beautiful.

The sun, the sun, the sun. The scientists were saying that with the remedies they were employing now and the remedies begun twenty years ago – they'd stopped all **nuclear testing** and all manufacturing of **ozone-depleting chemicals** was banned worldwide – the scientists were saying that the sun, the global problem, would begin to get better. Perhaps for her grandchildren's children. Perhaps they would feel the sun on their unprotected bodies. Perhaps they would feel the delicious warmth of the sun.

All vehicles were solar powered. The populations took buses when they needed transportation and people emerged mainly at night. So, most human activity was conducted after the sun was gone from the sky. Those who emerged during the day wore protective clothing. Everything was built to screen the sun's light. Sometimes she missed the natural light of her childhood streaming through the windows so intensely the urge to just run outside would overtake her. She missed the birds, the wild birds.

But today, they were going out, outside in the daytime, when the sun was still in the sky. Masha knew they were squabbling because they hated to dress up to go outside. The clothing, the

gloves, the goggles, were uncomfortable and **cumbersome**. She sighed, tears coming to her eyes. Well, they're coming, Masha decided. They can remove their goggles and gloves on the bus.

The sea was closer now and the bus ride was comfortable within the temperature controlled interior. Those with memories of the sea signed up, bringing grandchildren, children, friends, or just went alone. Masha had taken her grandchildren before, but they'd sat on the sand, **listlessly**, sifting it through their gloved hands with bored little faces. She'd tried to interest them in the sea with stories of her father's swimming in it as far as he could. But they couldn't touch it, so it, the sea, didn't seem real to them. What was it: a mass of **unsomethingable**, **hostile** water. Hostile like the sun. They'd taken no delight, no pleasure, in their journey to the sea.

But today, yes, today we will build a sand castle. Masha smiled at her secret. She'd packed everything late last night to surprise them at the sea.

Why haven't I thought of it before? Masha asked herself, and then she remembered the dream, months ago, of building a sand castle with her father at the sea. It made her want to weep because she'd forgotten. She'd actually

forgotten one of the most joyful times of her girlhood. When the sea was still alive with life. *Today we will build a sand castle.*

They trudged on the thick, dense sand toward the hiss of pale blue. Only the older people picked up their step, excited by the smell of salt in the air. Masha's grandchildren knew they'd be here for two hours and then trudge all the way back to the bus. The darkened goggles made the sun bearable. They hated this **forlorn** place where the sun had obviously drained the life out of everything. They were too young to express it, but they felt it as they walked, with bored effort, beside their grandmother.

"We're going to build a sand castle today – what do you think of that?" Masha beamed, squinting to see their faces.

"What's a sand castle?" the boy mumbled.

"You'll see, I'll show you...."

"Is it fun Grandmama?" the girl smiled, taking her grandmother's hand.

"Yes, it's so much fun. I've brought different sized containers to mold the sand, and, oh, you'll see!"

The boy gave an awkward skip and nearly shouted, "Show us, Grandmama, show us what you mean!"

Masha laughed, sounding almost like a girl. "We're almost there, yes, we're almost there!"

The first circle of sandy shapes was complete, and the children were so excited by what they were building they forgot about their protective gloves.

"Now, we'll put a pile of wet sand in the middle and build it up with our hands and then we'll do another circle, yes, children?"

The children rushed back and forth from the tide line carrying the dark, wet sand. They only had an hour left. Their eyes, beneath the goggles, darted with excitement.

"Just don't get your gloves in the water, a little wet sand won't hurt, don't worry, children. When I was a girl there were so many birds at the sea we'd scare them off because they'd try to steal our food. Seagulls, they were, big white birds that liked to scream at the sea, they sounded like eagles to me...."

"You used to eat at the sea, Grandmama?" the girl asked incredulously.

"We used to call them picnics...."

"What are eagles, Grandmama?" the boy wanted to know, shaping the dark sand with his gloved hands.

"They used to be one of the largest, most beautiful wild birds in the world. My grandfather

pointed them out to me once....”
Until that moment, she’d forgotten that memory of nearly sixty years ago. They’d gone on a train, then a bus, to the village where he’d been born. She remembered her grandfather looking up toward a shrill, piercing cry that seemed to come from the sky. She’d seen the tears in her grandfather’s eyes and on his cheeks. He’d pointed up to a large, dark flying-thing in the summer blue sky: “That’s an eagle, my girl, the spirit of the people.”

Sadness overtook Masha, but she refused to acknowledge its presence. The sand castle, Masha told herself sternly – the sand castle is what is important now. “I’ve brought a wonderful surprise, something to decorate the castle with when we’re through building it.”

“Show us Grandmamma, please?”

“Yes, please, please show us now!”

Masha sighed with a terrible, sudden happiness as she brought out the plastic bag. Quickly, she removed each precious seashell from its protective cotton: eight perfect shells from all over the world.

“But grandmamma, these are your special shells! You said the sea doesn’t make them anymore....”

“It will, Anna, it will.”

Masha hugged her granddaughter and made her voice brighten with laughter. “Today we will decorate our sand castle with the most beautiful shells in the world, yes!”

VOCABULARY

nuclear testing experimental explosions of nuclear bombs

ozone-depleting chemicals substances that can damage the atmosphere’s ozone layer which has to protect living things from the harmful ultraviolet radiation in sunlight

ultraviolet *adj.* consisting of invisible radiation wavelengths

cumbersome *adv.* without energy or interest; sluggishly

hostile *adj.* unfavorable to health or well-being; dangerous

forlorn *adj.* miserable and lonely; desolate