

# C A S T L E S   M A D E O F   S A N D

B Y   L E W I S   S H I N E R

JIM WORKED FOR a rental company—jackhammers, barricades, portable signs. He met Karla when he hired some temporaries from the agency she managed. There was just something about her. A sense that if anybody ever sprung her loose she might be capable of almost anything.

They got off to a slow start. She phoned just as he was leaving to pick her up for their first date. She was still at the office and would be there at least another hour. Could she come by and get him instead, late, maybe around nine?

Jim said okay. They had a slightly out-of-kilter dinner during which Karla drank too much wine and Jim too much coffee. When they got back to Jim's apartment, Jim asked her in, little more than a formality. She begged off because of an early meeting the next day. This is going nowhere, Jim thought. But when he leaned over to kiss her goodnight she met him with her mouth already open.

She was a little overweight, with permed hair somewhere between blonde and brown, almost no color at all. Jim's hair was black and thinning, and some mornings he felt like a toy whose stuffing was migrating out of the arms and legs and into the middle. He was in the final stages of his second divorce. Karla had been married once, briefly, right out of high school. That was now a while ago.

It wasn't like they were laughing all the time. Mostly they talked about things that happened at their jobs. None of that seemed important to Jim. What counted was that, from the first, he could see they needed something in each other.

Karla was in no particular rush to have sex. Still, after a few weeks, it was clearly only a matter of time. Jim carefully raised the subject one night as they lay on his couch, watching old sitcoms on Nickelodeon. Karla thought they should make a big deal out of it, go away for the weekend. Maybe down to Galveston.

The next day she called him at work. She'd just seen a thing in the paper about a sand castle contest at Surfside Beach that coming Saturday. "Sure," Jim said. "Why not?"

I T WAS A TWO-HOUR DRIVE to Surfside. Jim had been in a fender-bender midweek so they were in a rented Escort, courtesy of his insurance company. They got there around noon. They had to buy a beach parking permit, a little red sticker that cost six dollars and was good through the end of the year.

Jim was uncomfortable in baggy swim shorts and a T-shirt with a hole under one arm. He didn't want to put the sticker on a rent car and not get the rest of the use out of it.

"Maybe you can peel it off when you get home," Karla said.

"Maybe I can't."

"I'll pay for the sticker, how's that?"

"It's not the money, it's the principle."

Karla sighed and folded her arms and leaned back into the farthest corner of the front seat.

"Okay," Jim said. "Okay, for Christ's sake, I'm putting it on."

They turned left and drove down the beach. It was the first of June, indisputable summer. The sun blazed down on big cylinders of brown water that crashed and foamed right up to the edge of the road. The sand was a damp tan color and Jim worried about the car getting stuck, even though there was no sign of anyone else having trouble.

They drove for ten minutes with no sign of a sand castle. The beach was packed with red cars and little kids, college boys with coozie cups and white gimme caps, divorced mothers on green and yellow lawn chairs. Portable stereos played dance music cranked so high it sounded like no more than bursts of static. They drove under a pier with a sign that said, "Order Food Here," only there was no sign of food or anybody to give the order to. The air smelled of creosote and decay and hot sunlight.

Finally Jim saw a two-story blue frame building. A van from a soft-rock radio station was playing oldies at deafening volume and there were colored pennants on strings. It was not the mob scene Jim expected. He parked the Escort on a hard-packed stretch of sand and they got out. The sea air felt like a hot cotton compress. A drop of sweat broke loose and rolled down Jim's left side. He didn't know if he should reach for Karla's hand or not.

There were half a dozen sand sculptures inside the staked-out area. Jim looked up the beach and didn't see anything but more cars and coolers and lawn chairs. "I guess this is it?" he said. Karla shrugged.

At the far end was a life-size shark with a diver's head in its mouth. It had been spraypainted in black and gray and flesh tones, with a splatter of red around the shark's mouth. Next to it a guy and three women were digging a moat. They all had long hair and skimpy bathing suits.

Jim stepped over the rope that separated them. "Is this it?" he said to the guy, half-shouting over the noise from the van.

"There's the big contest over on Galveston. They got architects, you know. Kind of like the professionals, and we're just the amateurs."

"I thought there would be, I don't know. More."

"The Galveston contest is big. They got, like this giant ice cream cone with the earth spilling out of it, they got animals, they got a giant dollar bill made of sand. I mean, perfect."

Jim looked back at Karla, still on the other side of the rope, and then said, "You do this every year?"

"Nah, this is my first time. I thought, what the hey. It's free, anybody can do it. You should enter, you and the lady. They got buckets and shovels and

stuff over to the van. Hell, they got twelve trophies and not near that many people. You're sure to win something. There's a good spot right here next to us." He pointed to a stake with an entry number on it, stuck in a flat piece of ground.

"I don't know."

"You should at least go look at the trophies."

Jim nodded and the guy went back to work. It was too early to tell what his was going to look like. Jim stepped back over the rope and he and Karla looked at the other entries. There was only one real castle, pretty nice, looking like it had grown out of the top of a low hill. There was a sea serpent with a long tail. The other two both seemed to be some kind of humanoid figures, slowly emerging from the sand.

"This is kind of a let down," Jim said.

"I wonder what they do with them after," Karla said. Jim could barely hear her over the music.

"What do you mean?"

"They're too high up for the tide to wash them out. That's what's supposed to happen, right? Digging moats and everybody running around, trying to delay the inevitable?"

Jim shook his head. "Want a Coke or something?"

"I don't know. Do you want to enter? Get a trophy?"

"I don't think so."

"Come on. It might be fun."

Jim looked at the flat patch of sand, the stake. He couldn't see it. "I'm going back to the car for a Coke. You want one or not?"

"I guess."

**H**E TOOK HIS TIME, trying to shake his mood. Nothing was ever easy. Everything was a struggle, and usually an argument besides. He unlocked the trunk and got two Cokes out of the ice, which was mostly melted already. He popped one and took a long drink, then started back.

He couldn't find Karla at first. He wandered around for a minute or so, then found her down near the water line. She'd taken a bucket and a garden trowel from the contest and built herself an elevated square of sand. On top of that she was dribbling watery mud from a bucket, making little twisty upside-down icicles. He watched her make five or six before she looked up.

She seemed to be blushing. "I used to do this when I was a kid," she said. "I called it the Enchanted Forest."

He squatted on his heels beside her.

She said, "You think this is really stupid, don't you." She took another handful of mud, made another tree.

"No," he said. He looked from the Enchanted Forest to the Gulf and back again. Close to shore the water was brown and foaming, farther out it was a deep shade of blue. He felt something inside him melt and collapse and wash away.

"No," he said. "It's beautiful."

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