

Sand Castles

by Nancy J. Crowe

I hadn't made one since I was a little kid. But when I saw that pile of pails and shovels and stuff that some kids left on the beach, I couldn't resist.

The beach was pretty dead, anyway — always is around that time of day. Everybody's either having dinner or getting ready to. Not that there's a whole lot of action in that part of Florida, anyway. My friend Steve wanted me to go to Lauderdale with him for spring break. He went last year and came back with a bikini (an empty one, but still), and he had his license already, so he didn't have to spend too much time talking me into it.

Then my mom started in on me. I knew she wouldn't tell me, no, I couldn't go. No, Mom has a better weapon than that. It's called Guilt, with a capital G.

"Alan, dear, you know how long we've been planning this vacation to Fort Myers. Cindy's flying in all the way from California, and Marla and Charles — well, you know how Charles hates to leave his job."

I jammed my hands into my pockets. "Yeah, I know, but you don't really need me around for all that. You have me around here every day."

Mom's eyes got kind of watery, and I knew right then I could kiss Lauderdale goodbye. "You haven't seen either of your sisters in so long. It gets harder and harder for us all to get together, and your father and I aren't getting any younger. Is it so much to ask . . ."

"You heard your mother, Alan," Dad said, peeking around his newspaper. "She didn't even mention all the hassles I go through, letting that clown Lenny Wassermann run the shop for a whole week. You have a responsibility to your family, young man. You might as well learn that now."

Oh, well. So there I was, sitting there in my Budweiser T-shirt and cut-offs. The sun had gone down just enough so that it wasn't so hot anymore, but it was still warm. This is kind of sappy, but I like Florida even when it's not crawling with girls. I like looking at the gulf and thinking that it goes on forever, the sound the waves make, and the warmth. You just don't find that where I live, except in July and August when kids fool around with the fire hydrants.

I took the big tin shovel and made a huge mound of sand, using the wet stuff close to the water. I knew I looked like a geek, but I didn't care. That whole week had been pretty geeky, anyway.

I was still kind of embarrassed when I saw Cindy coming up the beach. She was with this guy who was so tan he might have been black, except that his hair looked like straw. He said good-bye to her and headed back the other way as soon as she was about 20 feet away from me.

“Hi, kiddo. What’re you up to?” she asked me, coming up close. “A sand castle! Looks more like the Hoosier Dome.”

“Well, don’t just stand there looking. Help me out,” I said, squinting up at her.

She rolled her big brown eyes, which were just like our father’s. “Oh, gimme that red pail. I’ll show you how to make a **real** sand castle.” She sat down and started cramming all this wet sand into the pail.

She was a mess, honest — she looked worse than I did. Her hair was hanging around her face like dark brown seaweed, and her legs were white in some spots and blotchy red in others. And she didn’t have on any makeup, the way she did when we picked her up at the airport. The only color in her face was her slightly red nose.

Wouldn’t you know it — a bunch of college guys showed up out of nowhere just then. One of them had a boom box on his shoulder with Cyndi Lauper screeching at full volume, and another carried a cooler, probably full of beer. Cindy shook her seaweed-hair back and gave them this idiotic smile. I wanted to dig myself deep down into the sand, like one of those little crabs.

I’m not here, I thought. I’m in Lauderdale with some cute girl — or maybe two. I’m not building sand castles with a 28-year-old woman.

“You better put some stuff on your legs when we go in,” I told her when I could talk again.

“Oh, it’s no use. You know how easily I get sunburned.” She went right on packing sand. How should I know how easily she got sunburned, or what she liked to eat, or what she did in California besides work for a foot doctor?

I started digging a moat around my castle. Maybe it would be a stadium, after all. “Where’ve you been all afternoon?” I asked her.

“Oh, up and down the beach. This guy, Nick, he showed me a little bar down on the point where there aren’t too many tourists. Said it’s not bad at night around this time of year.”

“You gonna be here for dinner tonight?”

She glanced up at me and turned her pail upside down to make a big turret. It crumbled at the top a little. “Noooo. I told Nick I’d meet him later.” She didn’t smile. I wanted to ask if I could tag along, but I thought I’d better not.

“Well, what’s this?” I heard another female voice say. It was Marla, and she must have just walked out of our apartment building. I’ve never understood how she could be related to Cindy and me. Even on vacation, she looked neat. Her blouse was clean and tucked in, her jeans didn’t have any holes, and she had her hair in a little braid in back. “Are you kiddies playing in the sand?” she teased. With her blonde hair and a smile that never needed braces, Marla looked more and more like a younger version of our mother.

“I’m showing Alan here how to build a sand castle,” said Cindy. “You remember the ones we made up at the lake when we were kids?”

Marla nodded. She folded her arms and looked out at the gulf, like she lost a boat out there or something.

"You okay, Marla?" Cindy asked.

"Oh — yeah." Marla smiled, and then she sat down by me on the sand, hugging her knees. She even had perfume on. "The fresh air feels good."

Cindy refilled her pail to build another wing of her castle. "See, Alan, if I had some little plastic cups, I could do this right. Whoever left this stuff here doesn't know anything about sand castles. Come on Marla, you make one, too."

Marla shrugged her shoulders and laughed nervously. "Oh, I can't build those things anymore."

Cindy put down her shovel. "Marla, what's wrong?"

"Oh—it's okay. Charles and I just had a fight."

"Charles? You gotta be kidding?" I couldn't believe it. I'd been sharing a room with him ever since they got there, and he was the most agreeable roommate you could ask for. He folded all his clothes and put them away, and he didn't care if the radio was on or off, or if the window was open or shut. That was fine at first, but then I realized what a boring guy he was.

"Over what?" Cindy asked, not seeming surprised.

"Well, it started over the car. You know we had to have it fixed before we came down here, and it cost us a lot of money. That's my old Buick, the one I had in college. He wants to get a new car for himself, and I said there's no way we can afford that right now, unless he gets that promotion he's been hoping for. Even then . . ."

"Well, what's to fight about?" I asked. "If you can't afford it, you can't afford it."

She gave me a motherly pat on the knee, but she still didn't smile. "It—snowballed, as usual. We just can't talk to each other anymore. But don't worry about it, you two, okay?" She gave us the same eyebrows-lifted, teeth-bared look that my baseball coach gives us when we're losing a game.

Cindy threw more sand in her pail. "Oh, Marla, you're always doing that."

"What?"

She tucked a dark strand of hair behind her ear. "When you have a problem, you say just enough about it to get everyone concerned, and then you smile and say, 'Don't worry about it.' Ever since we were kids."

"Cindy, it's **my** problem," Marla said in that motherly voice.

"Yeah. You always got me out of trouble, but I couldn't touch your problems with a ten-foot pole," Cindy grouched.

Marla's blue eyes lowered to the dry sand she was sifting through her fingers. "What else could I do? I'm the oldest."

"Only by three years. It's different now." Thud! Another semi-perfect wing of Cindy's castle was erected.

"Hey, Marla." I gave her a little tug on the sleeve and pushed a small pail and shovel where she could reach them. "You sure you

don't want to build a castle?"

She looked from me to the pail and shovel and back again, and smiled — like a sister this time. "Well, all right."

"There we go," Cindy grinned. After a minute or so, she asked, "What's Mom up to?"

"She went shopping on the mainland. I think she bought a couple of skirts," Marla said absently, picking up her shovel.

Cindy snorted. "She probably scouted around a few bridal shops, too."

"She been after you to get married?" This was news to me. "I didn't notice."

"Of course not. Males don't pick up on those things." Her hair fell forward again, and I couldn't see her face.

"Now, Cindy, you know how Mom is. She just wants you to be happy." Marla made a neat little turret with her pail.

"I know. She just doesn't understand how I feel. She won't listen."

"She did the same thing with me," said Marla.

"Yeah. Now look what's happening."

My eyes were snapping back and forth from one sister to the other, as if they were playing tennis. I'd never heard them talk to each other like that before. Not that there had been too many opportunities.

"What do **you** know about it?" Marla snapped.

"Nothing. You won't tell me anything. You have this — this Superwoman, Superdaughter, Supersister image of yourself. It's like you wear armor all the time."

"What was I supposed to do?" Marla fired back, her eyes hard and fierce, leaning toward her. "Charles was a nice man with a good job. What was I supposed to do, run around with someone new every week the way you've done since you were 12?"

"Cindy's lips tightened into a straight line. She looked like she'd been hit.

"Cindy, I'm sorry." Marla sighed. "I'm taking it all out on you. I guess I've done that before, too." She put her head down on her knees.

I couldn't stand it. "Hey, Marla, don't cry." I scooted over next to her, getting sand in my shorts. I put my arm around her. "It'll be okay."

"Oh, Alan." She leaned on me just a little bit. "I know you don't understand any of this." She wiped her cheeks, which were already red from the sun. Cindy was looking at both of us like we were bad puppies. I guess she thought I'd sided with Marla against her.

"Listen," I began. Don't blow it now, Alan. "Mom and Dad probably got on you guys all the time about stuff like boys, right?"

"And clothes," said Cindy.

"And grades," said Marla, going back to her castle.

"Well, they do it to me, too. Dad wants me to work at the shop this summer. He's been talking about me being in the business, taking it over — that kind of stuff."

They looked at each other. "Well, is that what you want to do?" asked Cindy.

"No! I mean, I don't know. I kinda wanted to work at the House of Pancakes this summer. My friend Steve already works there, and he said he'd try to get me a job."

"You can imagine what Dad'll say about that." Marla stood up and looked around for some shells. "His only son..." She filled her hands full, not really looking at what she picked up, and came back.

"Why do they want us to do it just like they did?" I asked both of them. "I mean, you guys getting married, me running the shop. It's just the same thing all over again."

"I guess they're happy," Marla said, gazing out at the gulf. The sun made the water all bright and shimmery, almost too dazzling to look at. "What they did worked for them, so they figure it'll work for us, too."

"That's pretty egocentric, though, isn't it?" Cindy said, shaking her hair back.

"I guess it's different when you have kids. You want to keep them from screwing up so bad that you try and make them play it safe." Did I, who had fought with my father just a week ago over a skateboard race, actually say that?

Our three castles looked like some sort of experimental housing development. Marla's was small and neat, Cindy's was big and a little crumbly, and mine — well, my castle was still a shapeless pile of wet sand, surrounded by a moat.

Then I got an idea. "Now," I said, brushing sand off my knees, "we can build a condominium for Mom and Dad."