

Sandcastle Man

A wide brimmed hat was essential on a sunny day, particularly if you wanted to look at the Sandcastle Man without him knowing.

The more blatant kind of woman just sat and stared, head uncovered, mouth slightly open.

Who could blame them? The Sandcastle Man stood out among the lobster-pink Dads and the pumped-up Romeos. Black curls, dark eyes, a lithe, brown body that surely owed more to exotic beaches than tanning booths. He had a little leather plait fastened around one ankle too; the final confirmation that he was something 'other'.

Of course, he built sandcastles like a dream, keeping even the most fidgety child entranced. His look of concentration as he dug and patted and smoothed the sand, his white teeth biting into his bottom lip, was mesmerising.

Did I mention that he was French, with a clothes-stripping accent? Or that he only wore a pair of shorts? They were blue and cut beautifully. None of those bulging or drooping designs for him. They looked like they were moulded to his body; part of him as much as the muscles of his stomach or his long, long legs.

While I did not have the benefit of a wide brimmed hat, I did have the advantage of height – the height of the promenade plus an ice cream van to be precise. A holiday job from university; 'Hell on wheels' as Annie, my fellow inmate in that boiling box called it.

For three months we had swapped Applied Physics for soft whip cornets, ice lollies, monkey blood, chopped nuts, cans of drink and ice pops.

As the sun beat down on the van we sweltered and served and smiled. The pay was a joke, but there were other perks. Including the thrill of watching the Sandcastle Man.

That he was on this beach at all was an uncharacteristic act of frivolity by the Town Council who had hired him to entertain the holidaymakers for two weeks. It would culminate in a Grand Sandcastle Competition and then he would be gone, moving on to another place; drifting through our fingers like, well, like sand.

Even the weather had decided to co-operate with a sultry, energy-sapping heat wave that lay over the country and did not budge. People slowed their pace, relaxed into it. The concrete on the promenade shimmered by noon.

Time seemed to falter and slide; the hot days melting into warm nights.

Not long after the Sandcastle Man arrived, Annie started to wear her bikini in the van. I told her it was probably against health and safety regulations, but I did it with a smile.

During a lull in trade, I watched her as she watched the Sandcastle Man. He was making her overheat, I could tell, and when she filled a cone and slipped out of the van, I knew where she was heading. Soon she was talking to him, handing him the rapidly melting ice cream and placing one of her feet, delicately, next to one of his.

I lost sight of them when a family came to order a handful of lollies, but by the time they were walking away licking them, Annie was back in the van.

'Name's Philippe. Polite, friendly, beautiful accent,' she reported, her mouth a little pouty. 'But I asked him if he wanted to go for a drink later and he just said, Thank you. No.'

She set about cleaning the counter with surprising vigour considering the heat.

Men didn't normally refuse Annie and that evening she went home to our rented flat an hour early, saying she had a headache. I suspected it was really a punctured ego, but I was too busy dealing with the queue to think about it. When I saw my reflection in the fridge I was red; tendrils of hair stuck to my damp face and neck.

A perfect time for the Sandcastle Man to appear, framed in the window. A heart-thumping picture. I would not have been surprised to see the entire stock of ice cream and lollies melt.

I did; silently.

'I have come to pay for the ice cream. The one your friend brought earlier.'

That accent rippled into the van first, but then something else reached in through that little window and wrapped itself around my chest and pulled tight. He was one of my kind; I was one of his, as simple as that. We saw it in each other.

I can't remember what I replied, something about not needing to pay, and then I saw his gaze flutter over me.

I forgot that I looked like a steamed dumpling, forgot everything.

'You are a student also?' he said, making it sound like poetry.

I nodded slowly, words not coming.

He grinned and looked down as if he was aware of the effect he was having. It didn't seem like smugness, just something that made him happy.

I gripped the counter.

'Perhaps when you are finished we could walk along the beach a little.

You would like that?'

I breathed in slowly, a hot, airless mouthful. 'Ok.'

'I will wait for you by the water's edge.'

I was still hanging on to the counter as I watched him go. There must be some mistake; he must be joking. I would just close the sliding window, put up the 'gone home' sign and lie down on the floor forever.

But once the van was locked, the takings banked, I found myself drifting towards the water's edge. There he was. He walked in the water, I walked on the sand and he pointed out the different sandcastles. We watched the tide come in and slowly wipe them away.

'Doesn't it make you sad when all your hard work disappears?' I asked.

He shrugged, suddenly very French. 'No. It is life.'

We walked on, the sun warm down our backs and I felt his hand take mine, smooth from all that sand. And every step we took I felt myself drawn closer to him. His thumb was rubbing back and forth across my skin and I wondered if people could see how all my nerve endings were pulsing with that touch?

We got as far as the pier before he turned to face me.

'What would you like me to do now?' he said softly.

It felt natural to lift my chin and close my eyes and invite him to kiss me. It was hot, deep, full of limitless possibilities. The best kind of French kissing.

We stood there until the sea was over our ankles and then our calves.

Some time before it reached our knees we turned and walked unsteadily up the beach and to his hotel. And there, in his room, with the windows open to the sound of the sea and the gulls, he dropped more fiery kisses on me, re-igniting the warmth of the sun still in my skin.

My buttoned-up ways came off with my sundress and as his hands smoothed and caressed me, I was shaped into something beautiful and new. The once cool sheets became a hot and twisted mess upon the floor.

Later we drank dark red wine from each other's mouths.

And so it went; a pattern was established. We parted in the morning and I watched him through the day persuading the sand into beautiful shapes, remembering how his hands had skimmed across my body in those very same movements.

Every now and again he would turn and smile and wave at me.

'You're a lucky devil,' Annie said with some force when she was speaking to me again. 'A lucky, lucky devil.'

I knew that, but I also knew that he would go. Move further along the coast; back to France, on to Spain. He would not stay. Perhaps that's what made it so intense, the knowledge that like the heat wave it could not last.

Right now, though, the heat was still building and as it did, Philippe offered little snippets of himself. He had not knuckled down to college straight after school, preferring to see the world. I sensed a set of disappointed

parents back in Paris. His plans included beaches I could only dream of. But what he hoped to find on them he seemed unable to say.

‘You should go to college at the end of this summer,’ I heard myself declare into the dark one night. ‘Build something more permanent.’

I was not sure why I said it and I felt him move as though I had touched a sore spot. And then he laughed and kissed the moment away.

But I was in trouble, I knew that. I was in love too deep to skip back out untouched. I could not believe that he did not feel the same way. That connection was there, surely he could not bear to break it when Saturday came?

On our last night, too full of love and red wine, I flouted every rule in the cool girl’s guide to holiday flings and told him how I felt.

He shook his head sadly; kissed me with regret.

‘I must move on. Do not be sad. What beautiful memories we have made.’

Only a man could imagine that would cheer me up.

I disentangled my body from his. ‘It doesn’t matter what we’ve made. Let it wash away like your sandcastles. That’s what you know best.’

I got into my clothes somehow as he rubbed his hand through his hair as though his head suddenly hurt. I could see he looked sad, confused even, but then I was out of the door. Back in the flat I cried all over Annie. She didn’t mind; she understood about building castles in the air.

‘Come on,’ she said, ‘you can do this. Just one more day to get through.’

It was the most wretched day of my life. Head down, I didn't even look at the people I served. From the beach came cheers and clapping. Prizes were awarded, speeches were made. I blocked them all out, tears running down my face and plopping on to the counter.

That evening, when I was sure he had gone, Annie and I walked along the beach together. Now it was just a strip of sand; no life and excitement left in it. My dark-eyed, other half was gone. Next week, on another beach, another woman would be serving him ice cream.

We watched the tide come in and make the sandcastles crumble. Grand or tiny, they all tumbled down in front of the waves.

Then, further along the beach, we saw a crowd of people. They were pointing and laughing at a beautiful heart-shaped castle, flags flying from its many delicate towers. But it was not the beauty of the sandcastle that had drawn the people. It was the way that, although encircled by water, it was standing firm.

Lord knows what he had mixed in with the sand.

I have a photograph Annie took of me standing beside that castle with the water around my ankles and a lopsided smile on my face. She caught the precise moment when I thought the castle was a parting gift, a little bit of permanence from a man who was just passing through.

The moment before Philippe stepped back into the picture.

Nowadays the Sandcastle Man builds things to last. Schools and galleries; hotels, homes; an enviable reputation.

But from time to time he peels off his suit, puts on his shorts and lets the sun burn him brown again. And then I watch him from under my wide brimmed hat as he and the children scoop and pat and smooth.

Our children this time.

From love built on something more solid than sand.