The Sand Castle
A Short Story by Alma Luz Villanueva

Build Background
Scientific Context  “The Sand Castle” describes the harmful effects of global warming and the destruction of Earth’s ozone layer. In the 1970s, scientists found that certain industrial chemicals were destroying the atmosphere’s ozone layer, which shields people from harmful ultraviolet light. Governments around the world agreed to reduce the use of these chemicals, but even a small temperature change could cause serious problems for our planet.

Reader’s Context  What is your favorite outdoor place? What do you enjoy doing there?

Set Purpose
Previewing the first paragraph of the story will show you that it is set at a time in the future when global warming has changed Earth and the way humans live. Read to find out what the author imagines life would be like in that world.

Analyze Literature
Flashback  A flashback is a part of a literary work that presents events that happened at an earlier time. Writers use flashbacks to provide background information, to develop characters, and to give the reader insight into particular aspects of the plot. As you read “The Sand Castle,” look for examples of flashback and think about what they reveal.

Meet the Author
Alma Luz Villanueva is a Mexican-American poet and novelist born in California in 1944. As a child, she was raised by her Native American grandmother, who taught her poems in Spanish and the stories and traditions of the Yaqui tribe. Villanueva began to publish her own poems in the late 1970s and later began writing novels and short stories.

Use Reading Skills
Context Clues  Preview the vocabulary words from this selection as they are used in the sentences below. Try to unlock the meaning of each word using the context clues provided in the sentences.

1. Rest is a common remedy for many illnesses.
2. Justin’s cumbersome load of packages made it hard for him to climb the stairs.
3. The children lay listlessly on the couch and stared at the rain with bored expressions on their faces.
4. The forlorn landscape consisted of abandoned buildings scattered with trash.
5. The plant died in the hostile environment.

Preview Vocabulary
rem•e•dy  (re´ ma dé) n., something that corrects or fixes a problem
cum•ber•some  (kum´ bar sam) adj., hard to handle because of heaviness and bulk
list•less•ly  (list´ las lë) adv., in a manner lacking energy or enthusiasm
for•lorn  (för lörn´) adj., sad and desolate
hos•tile  (hä́s´ tël) adj., opposed to health or well-being
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\(^1\) 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 swimming 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 dove 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.

---

1. **ultraviolet light.** Invisible radiation from the sun that causes sunburns.
Then the picnic. She could hear her mother’s voice, “Stay to your knees, Masha! Only to your knees!” To herself: “She’d be a mermaid if I didn’t watch,” and she’d laugh. Masha would lie 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 travelled 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 built 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 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

The weather, as they’d called it in the last century, was entirely predictable now: warming.

2. nuclear testing. Tests in which nuclear bombs are exploded in remote areas

rem•e•dy (re´ ma dē) n., something that corrects or fixes a problem
cum•ber•some (kum’ bar sam) adj., hard to handle because of heaviness and bulk
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 undrinkable, 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 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 sunlight 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....”

**list•less•ly** (list’ ləs lē) adv., in a manner lacking energy or enthusiasm

**hos•tile** (hōs’t’əl) adj., opposed to health or well-being

**for•lorn** (fôr lôr’n) adj., sad and desolate
“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 Grandmama, 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!”

Find Meaning
1. (a) Why do Masha and her grandchildren have to wear protective gloves and goggles when they go to the beach? (b) How have environmental disasters affected the land, sea, and climate in this story?
2. (a) Compare and contrast Masha’s memory of her trip to the beach with her grandchildren’s reactions to going to the beach. How are they different? (b) Why do you think her grandchildren react the way they do to spending time outdoors?
3. (a) How have people adapted to life in a damaged environment? (b) What are they doing to try to repair the damage?

Make Judgments
4. (a) What does Masha call “one of the most joyful times of her girlhood”? (b) Why do you think she wants to share this experience with her grandchildren?
5. (a) What do you think has happened to the wild birds in this story? (b) Why do you think the author includes the memory of the eagle in the story?
6. (a) How does Masha feel about the environmental disasters? (b) What does she try to focus on to make herself feel happier?
In "The Sand Castle," Alma Luz Villanueva imagines a world that has been devastated by global warming and ozone depletion. The following selection is a news article about global warming that appeared in *Time for Kids*. The article provides a scientific explanation for some of the effects of global warming that are mentioned in "The Sand Castle." As you read, note what kinds of pollution contribute to global warming and how the greenhouse effect raises Earth’s temperature.

**The Forecast: A Warmer World**

*A News Article from *Time for Kids*

Right now, ancient glaciers are slowly melting and shrinking like ice cubes in a glass of soda. Beaches that were once wide stretches of sand are becoming narrow strips as the ocean level rises. The earth’s climate is changing. The whole planet is warming up.

Changes in climate are part of nature. Over the ages, there have been cold periods and warm periods. But the changes predicted for the next century are dramatic, and some scientists say this time humans are partly to blame.

According to a new report by a United Nations scientific group, the earth’s average temperature could rise as much as 6°F in the next 100 years! That would be a huge change. Over the past 100 years, the average temperature rose 1°F, and even that is considered to be a big change.

These scientists say there is new evidence that pollution from factories, cars and other human sources is causing this “global warming.” They used the latest computer models to make their predictions. If pollution like this continues, the report warns, our planet will be a warmer place by the 2030s than it has been for 2 million years. This will have an enormous effect on the earth’s inhabitants.

Some climate experts question this view. They say that global warming is part of a natural pattern and that human habits are not really at fault. Still, almost everyone agrees that earthlings should get ready for changes in the climate.

**THE GREENHOUSE TRAP**

The earth stays warm the same way a greenhouse does. Gases in the atmosphere act like the glass of a greenhouse: they let in the sun’s light and warmth, but they keep the earth’s heat from escaping back into space. Without this “greenhouse effect,” the earth would be too cold for most plants and animals.

But if there is too much gas trapping heat, things get out of balance. Not enough heat can escape. Temperatures rise around the world. That’s global warming.
THE HUMAN FACTOR

Many kinds of pollution send heat-trapping gases into the atmosphere. The most plentiful “greenhouse gas” is carbon dioxide (CO₂), created by burning wood and other fuels. Trees can absorb CO₂ and turn it into pure oxygen. People make global warming worse by cutting down forests full of trees that would have soaked up extra CO₂. Other greenhouse gases clog the atmosphere too. Chlorofluorocarbons are greenhouse gases that people use to cool the air in air conditioners and refrigerators. Methane gas rises from rotting garbage and animal waste. Nitrogen oxides come from car exhaust and power-plant smokestacks.

HIGH WATER, CRUEL WEATHER

Even a small rise in the earth’s temperature could have a big impact. The U.N. scientists predict that over the next century, polar ice and glaciers could melt, raising ocean levels as much as three feet. Low-lying land along seacoasts and in river basins could flood. Entire islands in the Pacific could be under water. Many people could have to move to higher ground. Other species could suffer.

Global warming could also make weather less predictable, with extreme heat and cold, drought and more violent storms. Rainfall patterns could change. Some farm areas could be unable to grow crops. Places too cold now could be good for farming.

What can we do? Most nations have taken small steps to control the release of gases that trap heat. Nearly everyone agrees that stronger measures are needed, but it is hard for people to change old habits. Scientists now know global warming can’t be ignored much longer.

SCIENCE CONNECTION

Fossil Fuels

One of the major causes of global warming is the burning of fossil fuels, including coal and oil. Automobiles run on fossil fuels, and most power plants burn coal or oil to make the electricity you use every day. This means that whenever you turn on a light or watch TV, you use electricity that most likely comes from fossil fuels. Here are five ways you can help cut down on the use of fossil fuels:

1. Turn off the lights, TV, and computer when not in use.
2. Dress warmly indoors when it’s cold, instead of turning up the heat.
3. Take shorter showers. Energy is used to heat the water!
4. Walk, ride a bike, or take the bus short distances instead of riding in a car.
5. Recycle plastic bags, bottles, cans, and newspapers.

In “The Sand Castle,” how do people limit their use of fossil fuels?
Both “The Sand Castle” and “The Forecast: A Warmer World” focus on the harmful effects of climate change. How does the scientific information presented in the news article relate to some of the issues mentioned in the story?

ANALYZE LITERATURE

Flashback In “The Sand Castle,” Masha’s memories of a time before global warming are presented as flashbacks. What do Masha’s flashbacks reveal about the world before global warming? Why do you think she wants to share these memories with her grandchildren? Cite examples from the text that support your ideas.

EXTEND UNDERSTANDING

Writing Options

Creative Writing Imagine that you are one of Masha’s grandchildren and you are able to travel back to the time Masha is recalling. Write a postcard to your siblings or friends in the future. What would you tell them about life before global warming?

Expository Writing Write a brief character analysis of Masha and how she is portrayed in the flashbacks. What do the flashbacks reveal about her as a girl? What activities does she enjoy? How is the younger Masha revealed in the flashbacks similar to the older Masha? State your main idea in a thesis. Support your thesis with details and examples from the story. Share your work with the class.

Lifelong Learning

Write a Report Global warming is a real threat to our planet and ecosystems. Pretend that you work for the Environmental Protection Agency. Research how global warming affects animals, and choose a specific animal and habitat. Write a report for the EPA’s website on how the animal and habitat are affected by climate changes that are already happening.

CRITICAL LITERACY

Visual Presentation Research global warming statistics. Which areas of the world are most affected by global warming? You may want to focus on a certain problem, such as rising temperatures, rising sea levels, or greenhouse gas emissions. Look on the Internet for global-warming websites that provide tables, maps, and graphs that explain visually the most affected areas. To interpret visual information such as tables, first determine what the rows and columns represent and look to see where the information intersects. For maps and graphs check for a legend that identifies colors, lines, or other codes. Analyze these forms of media and create either a poster-board display of your pictures accompanied by explanatory paragraphs or a visual illustration and present the process to your classmates.

Go to www.mirrorsandwindows.com for more.