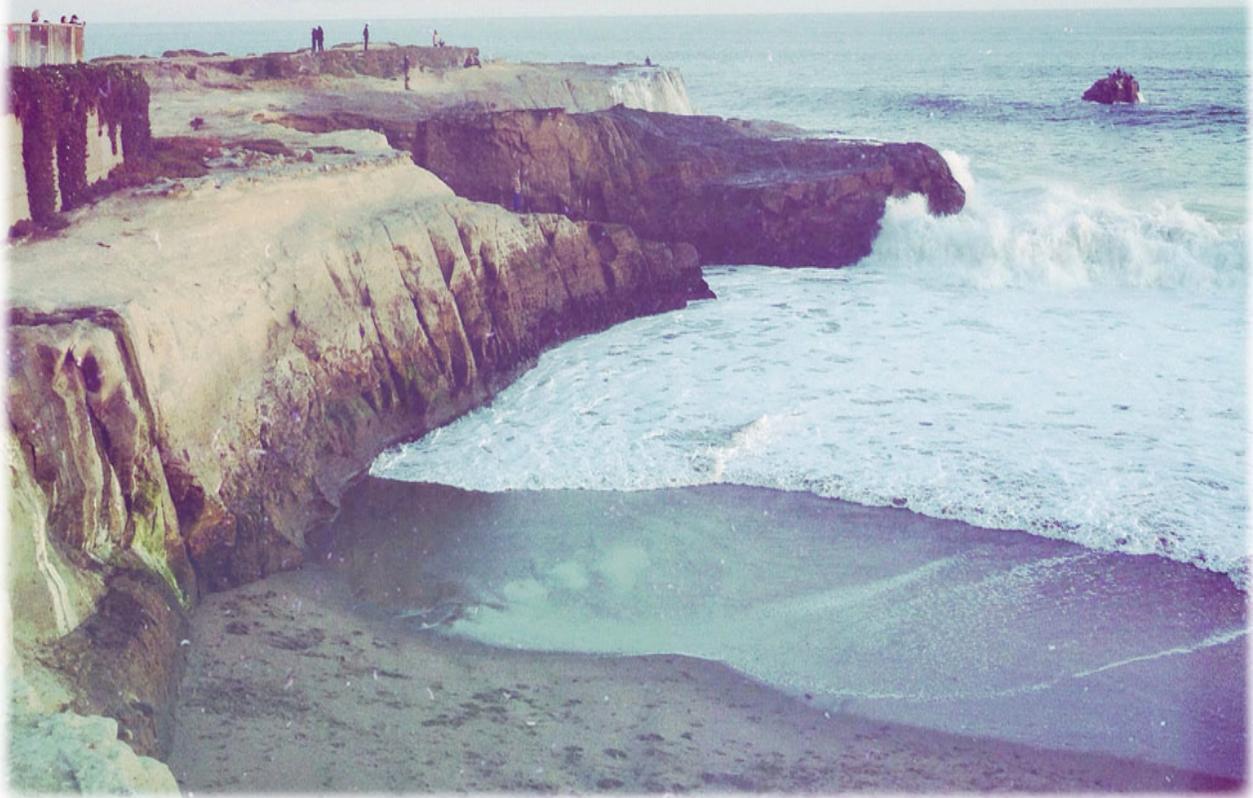


Scale Model

Rachel Kolman



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Unmanned Press, LLC
San Francisco



Scale Model was originally published by Unmanned Press, LLC
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Editor's Preface

Meeting new people can be fun and exciting, and other times it can be awkward or scary without having the backdrop of some sort of depth that will attest to an individual's decency. Short of that knowledge, one is left with personal instinct, which though one may deny, is inherently susceptible to imperfect judgments.

But maybe the mystery is half the fun. And when it is all over, you might think, "I could do that again," because there is always legroom in the unknown. And *Scale Model* by Rachel Kolman provides that latitude. So, sit down, stretch out, and enjoy the sixth story in our series of twelve.

Yours,

The Editors

Kelsey walked past a man on the beach building the Taj Mahal out of sand. She lowered the clipboard in her hands, no longer thinking about charting the dead fish washing on the shore, and instead watched this man scoop up sand and pat the wet clumps into smooth towers. The Taj's round dome top was flawless and shimmering in the late afternoon sun. She wandered away from the cold water hitting her ankles and closer to the sandcastle builder.

The man's khaki shorts were frayed at the knees, and there were no tan lines across his neck or arms. He had brown hair that fell to his shoulders. He blended into the beach, with all his various shades of brownness.

Kelsey stepped closer and could now notice the intricacies of the arched doorway and little sculpted windows. He was smoothing out the thin pillars surrounding the building, trying to keep them from crumbling under their own weight.

"Why don't you make those wider?" Kelsey asked from a few yards away, a comfortable enough distance. She didn't mean to question his work, but she wanted an excuse to make conversation.

He looked at her. His hair was tucked behind his ears, strands still sticking to his forehead. She wanted to offer him a hair tie.

"Wider? Won't that throw off the balance of the building?" He stood up and regarded his work, hands on his hips.

"No, I don't think so." Kelsey walked to the front of the sculpture, standing in the man's shadow. She was awestruck by the incredible detail of the little designs inside the spandrels. "Keep the pillars shorter too, and they won't distract from the main building," she said, trying to keep her tone light and friendly. He didn't say anything else, so she added, "It's marvelous, though."

Now he smiled at her. She thought he might have been waiting for her praise.

"Thank you." He looked her up and down, and Kelsey pulled her clipboard over her chest. "What's that for?" he asked, pointing at the board.

She lowered the clipboard. “Charts. There’s been a lot of dead marine life washing up on this beach. I’m watching it, graphing it.”

“So you’re a biologist or something?”

“No, I work in the tourism industry. No one’s going to want to come to a beach with dead animals everywhere.”

“Sure they will. It’s interesting.”

She narrowed her eyes. “No, actually it’s quite disturbing. I found a baby shark just over there.” She thumbed over her shoulder.

“Really?” His eyes widened and he looked where she was pointing. “Where?”

Already he was walking away, searching for the dead fish. Kelsey followed slowly behind him, curious that he would leave his sculpture. She could have kicked it down.

He found the shark and bent down, resting his elbows on his thighs. He poked the shark’s head with his finger.

“Don’t do that,” she said, too quietly, because he didn’t stop. The ribcage peeked through the shark’s body where the grey cartilage had ripped away.

The man opened the shark’s mouth with his finger, looking at the remaining pointed teeth. “What do you do with these animals?” he asked, still looking at the shark.

“Nothing.”

“Nothing?”

“I’m just charting the frequency of them. That’s my job,” Kelsey told him, though she wished there were something she could do. She wished she were in charge of cleaning up the gulf instead of just watching it.

“Let’s bury it, then.” He stood back up with an air of resolution. It didn’t match with his stringy long hair and boyish face, Kelsey thought.

“Here, in the sand?”

“Yes. I want to make a grave.”

“What about your other thing? The Taj Mahal?”

“I need a break from that. No one will touch it. No one ever does. And there are only ten people on this beach.”

It was true. The beach area surrounding Fort De Soto hadn’t been getting many visitors that summer. The fort was undergoing renovations, hoping to open again by the end of July. The company she worked for thought the tourist decline had less to do with the fort and more with the dead fish. Kelsey, only an assistant field researcher, didn’t get to decide if this beach was worth investing their money in. She could only watch as the fish continued to wash up.

“You’ll help me bury it?” he asked. Kelsey paused, maybe for too long, because he said, “You don’t have to.”

“No, I will,” she said. It was an oddly sentimental gesture from the same man who had looked her up and down. “I’m Kelsey, by the way.”

“Adam. Where should we build the grave? I don’t want it to wash away.”

He carried the small body a few yards away from the shore, in the direction of the Taj Mahal. Kelsey couldn’t look directly at the dead animal, at the rows of small bones. Adam sat on his knees, feet tucked under him. “Help me dig some sand up.”

Kelsey knelt on the other side of the shark and started scooping. This close to the water, the sand felt cool and damp, easy to mold.

As they worked, he said, “So there’s this sand building competition tomorrow, on the beach right in front of the fort. There are twenty of us, and we all have to build a scale model of the fort in its heyday. We’ve each got a roped-off section so no one will touch our sand. Anyway, you should come by and see it tomorrow, if you can. I think it’s starting at noon.” Adam smoothed out the grave with his fingers, a perfect bowl to fit the shark’s small and fragile body.

Kelsey would still be at the beach tomorrow, contrasting dead fish versus tourists. “Okay,” she said. She wondered if he asked because he was interested in her or interested in promoting his work. She couldn’t tell by his noncommittal tone.

Adam slid the shark by its tail inside the hole. “Let’s fill it up, and then I’ve got to make the sculpture, a tribute to our shark friend.”

They shoveled sand over the body. Kelsey was glad once the ripped carcass was covered. She sat on her feet as Adam formed a mound over the grave. In a few minutes he created the body of a miniature shark, its tail pointing up and fins out to the side. He flipped open a folded knife from his pocket and carved details into the shape of the dorsal fin and in the happy, smiling shark face. Kelsey watched the small sharp blade slice off the rough layers of sand, and she wondered if he carried that knife with him everywhere.

Adam stood when he was finished. “Fare thee well, shark friend,” he said, looking down at his work. “What do you think?” he asked,

offering a hand to help Kelsey up. She took it and he pulled her up quickly, playfully.

She let out a little laugh, surprised by the flirtatious move. “It’s fantastic. You’re pretty good at this.”

“Pretty good?” He laughed, hands on his sides. “I’ve won awards, you know. Been featured in magazines and stuff.”

She was sure he wanted more praise, but she just said, “Mmm,” and nodded. Kelsey stood next to his side and viewed the shark sculpture, the thin row of teeth in its little mouth curved into a perpetual smile, happy to be forever swimming in sand.

Kelsey arrived at the Fort De Soto Sand Art Competition the next day at ten past twelve. After spending the morning walking the four miles along the coast and counting the dead marine life, she wandered over to the competition, joined the small groups huddled on the sidelines, and watched the artists.

Adam was already building the perimeter of his fort model. He wore the same shorts as yesterday, his back bare and bronze. The crowd was mostly parents with young children, the moms and dads holding the kids up high so they could see the adults playing in the sand. A bay area news team covered the event, the cameraman resting his gear on his shoulder and sweating in the midday heat. The competition would end up as a fluff story for the local evening news, a cute piece between the gunshots and car crashes. Locals were the only ones who cared about events like this, not the tourists.

Kelsey walked behind the crowd and over to Adam’s square of sand in the top left corner. The contestants were in a grid of four by

five rows, each with at least six feet of sand to themselves. No one was allowed to walk between the rows, so she was glad he was on the end, close to the audience. He was probably enjoying being able to put on a show.

For a minute, she watched as he used a trowel to create the smooth fort walls. She looked back to the real, massive fort a dozen yards behind them, imagining its faded, rough stone as fresh and smooth. “Hey,” she said, lifting her voice so he would hear. When he didn’t answer, she said, “Adam.”

He looked up. “Oh, hey,” he said, smiling quickly and then continuing his work. “You made it.”

“Yeah.” She stepped closer, up to the edge of his sand. “Looks good so far.”

“These guys don’t stand a chance,” he said, laughing. “I was thinking about the design all last night.”

“How long do you all have?” Kelsey asked, because twenty minutes had already passed and many of the contestants were moving painstakingly slow, putting in the small details as they went. One even knocked down his structure and started over.

“Four hours. Winner’s announced at five. I built the Taj yesterday in only two, so I’m not worried.”

“Impressive.” She knew he didn’t need the encouragement, but she wasn’t sure what else to say.

“Are you going to stay around?”

“For four hours?”

“I want you to see me win.”

“I’ll come back,” she said, intrigued by his eagerness. “I have to finish some other things for work first.”

“Okay. See you at five.” Adam didn’t look up at her as he moved on to building a lookout tower behind the fort, his fingers molding the sand into something more vulnerable than the solid structure behind them.

Kelsey arrived back at the beach to see Adam being interviewed by the news team, his face bright as he talked to the reporters. Adam was covered in sand, his hair in clumps tucked behind his ears, a small trophy clutched in his hand. It was only a few minutes past five, but Kelsey assumed the winner must have been obvious and there was no real deliberation. Kelsey overheard words like “masterpiece” and “phenomenal,” although she couldn’t distinguish if the praise was coming out of the reporter’s mouth, or Adam’s.

She sat in the sand next to his winning model. It almost seemed to be made from something not as permeable as sand. She wanted to poke a finger into one of the smooth walls to see if it would even leave a mark. Kelsey wondered so much about Adam – if he lived off his sand art or if it was only a hobby, if he was a local or had traveled here for the competition, why he had wanted to bury a shark with her yesterday, why he had insisted that she stop by today.

Adam walked over after his interview, a grin still on his face. “So, you like it?” he asked, plopping next to her in the sand. “Good, yeah?”

“Yeah, it’s incredible.” She again took in the careful crafting of the stone building, the lookout tower, the two cannons that still sat in

the courtyard of the fort, the little rolled balls of sand next to the cannons, piled perfectly.

“It’s my third competition win this month,” he said, leaning back on his elbows in the sand. They were quiet for a moment until he said, “Ugh, I’m filthy. I’m going to jump in the water.” He hopped up and headed to the water, diving under when he was deep enough. He surfaced and slicked back his hair, his shoulder muscles flexing. She didn’t know how he had this much energy after spending four hours working in the sun. She wondered if he would ask her to dinner later. If she would sleep with him later. The thought thrilled and terrified her. She had never slept with a guy she’d just met.

He came back to the beach, his khaki shorts dark and heavy and low on his hips. “Hey, I want to show you the parts of the fort that I was thinking of when I was building. I was in there for two hours last night. It was sort of eerie.” He smiled. “Come on.” He offered his hand and pulled her up quickly like he had the day before.

She began following him, then stopped. “The fort’s being renovated though. It’s closed to the public.”

“That doesn’t mean anything. I got over the fence no problem yesterday.”

Even though Kelsey had been a Florida resident all her life, she had still never been inside this fort. She heard there wasn’t much to it, except for maybe some plaques on the walls detailing how the fort was used in the Civil War and later, the Spanish-American War. She didn’t find it terribly interesting but still, she was breaking in to see it with Adam, a man who buried dead things and created

sand models of places that also held dead things. The thought made her heart kick faster in her chest.

Adam reached the fence first. There was a padlock over the short wire gates and a clear sign that warned against trespassing. They were far enough from the beach and the few lingering spectators that hopping a fence wouldn't be noticeable. "Up and over," he said, clearing the barrier in a swift jump. "Your turn." He pushed his hair out of his face then offered his hand to her. Kelsey paused for a moment, knowing that this wasn't very smart, but she wanted to be a little reckless, to let her curiosity drive her, and she climbed over the fence with Adam's help. She smiled, her cheeks hot, and Adam took her hand.

"You've got to come check out this view." He led her up the stone staircase on the side of the fort, the one clearly rebuilt for tourists, and said, "Take a look at this."

Kelsey stood still and took in the way the beach curved around the front of the fort, creating a soft edge, and she imagined men storming this beach a hundred and fifty years ago. The soldiers who stood where she was and watched the gulf for ships. The men loading the cannons, the loud booms deafening everything, the quietness that would linger afterwards, the smell of smoke and gunpowder still fresh in the air. She wondered why tourists would avoid this beach solely because of dead fish when they could be viewing history.

And then Adam pulled her away, saying, "I want to show you the inside."

The interior chambers faced the courtyard where the cannons sat, empty black hallways and open windows with steel bars on them.

“They’re like cells,” she said.

“Yeah, with little stone beds. Think about sleeping on those.”

“I’m pretty sure nobody was doing much sleeping.”

Adam wandered through the open, dark hallway, and Kelsey followed, her hands tensing into tight little balls. The hall in front of her stretched into blackness.

“I don’t really like this,” she said, looking behind her and seeing the remains of sunlight quickly fading.

“Come on, it’s cool. Hey, you wanna play a game?”

“No, not really.”

“Hide and seek. Once you go around this corner, though, it gets so dark, you’ll have to use your hands to feel around.”

She wished she hadn’t left her phone in her car. “Hide and seek? Are we twelve?”

“Don’t be like that. I was just suggesting it.”

“Well, I don’t want to play.” She wanted to coax Adam out of the dark hallway, but couldn’t think of a good enough reason.

“Hey, come here.” He reached out for her, grabbed her hand. He smelled of sun and salt. “I’m just trying to have some fun. Here, we’re just going to go around the corner. I won’t let go of your hand, promise.”

He led her into an open room that she couldn’t gauge the size of. It was cold and smelled of dirt and stone.

“Pretty cool,” he whispered. His fingers were on her face, feeling for her lips, and then he was kissing her. She felt like they were two

teenagers sneaking away from a tour group to make out somewhere. He didn't have to drag her away like this, into the darkness.

Kelsey ended the kiss quickly. "Hey, how about we go somewhere else, huh? Maybe get some dinner at the pier?" She leaned against the wall behind her, pressing her palms on the cold stone.

"I like it in here, though. I've been in the sun all day, I need something without light and sand." He walked around the empty space. "Helloooo," he called out, to hear his own voice echoing on the walls. "Hey, come on, close your eyes and I'm going to hide. It'll be fun. Just count to ten, and come find me."

"This is ridiculous," she said.

"I know, babe. Let's be ridiculous."

She used her hands to guide herself along the edge of the wall, stepping back to the hallway. "Okay," she said, changing her tone to something lighter. "I'll count to ten. Go hide."

"Close your eyes."

A fleeting moment of fear went through her, that the instant her eyes shut something would happen. She thought of the knife still folded in his pocket, imagined the fingers that had been on her lips on her neck instead, holding tight, draining everything. She imagined him burying her in the sand, too. Building a monument.

But she closed her eyes anyway, fingertips digging into the wall, and started counting out loud. She couldn't hear his footsteps, and she thought that he was probably being extra sneaky, trying to really get her.

She opened her eyes and was greeted with blackness. “Okay, I’m coming to find you,” she called out. Kelsey quietly slid around the corner, back into the hallway with the fading sunlight. She looked around quickly to make sure he wasn’t hiding somewhere around her, but she thought he was probably in the farthest, darkest corner, ready to pop out and scare her when she was close.

Kelsey held her breath as she stepped out of the dim hallway and into the falling sun and the fresh, salty air. She walked faster across the courtyard to get back to the gate. She paused and looked behind her, but she didn’t see his khaki shorts and tan skin anywhere. She struggled to jump the fence by herself, adrenaline pumping, and hurried across the beach to the parking lot on the opposite side, kicking sand up around her, her heart thudding heavy and alive.

She wondered how long he would wait for her inside the fort, if he would call out for her in a few minutes. If he would walk around the fort in circles, if he would be upset that he didn’t get her phone number. She wondered if he would still be on the beach tomorrow, making more graves for more dead fish. Or perhaps he would move on to creating models of the White House, or Cinderella’s castle, or whatever would look most impressive to the locals—never tourists. Just making scale models of a real thing, just sand and water.

