

That Day on the Beach

The 30th of July 1967 was like every other summer's day in Maryland, U.S.A. Joni Eareckson was planning a beach party with her friends – the phone perched between her ear and her chin as she frantically organised the last-minute details.

'Just a few of us ... we'll hang out at Chesapeake Bay. Come if you can. Bring some food ... yeah, a salad would be great. Butch is bringing the drinks. Yeah ... yeah ... that's Kathy's new boyfriend. He's not bad, and at least he's got wheels. Wait ... hang on a sec, Kathy's shouting ... What do you want, sis?' Joni yelled up the stairs.

'I said, get off the phone! Butch'll be here any minute, or he might be calling me to say he'll be late. You've been on for over an hour. How many are you asking to this thing anyway?'

Joni raised her eyes to the ceiling with a sigh.

'Sorry about that ... it's just my older, overbearing sister telling me what to do as usual!'

'I heard that!' Kathy yelled down the stairs once more.

Ignoring the slamming bedroom door Joni carried on the telephone conversation. 'We're going to be

there about mid-afternoon. We might get a barbecue going. But I just can't wait to hit the water! It's so hot! But talking about hot – I've got the coolest swim suit! Yeah... electric blue, got it yesterday. Dick is bound to love it. But I'd better go – I've got my stuff to pack yet. You know the drill – you never know who you might meet on the beach, so look your best!'

The sound of a giggle came from the other end of the line and then Joni hung up the receiver. Running upstairs to her bedroom she mentally went through the things she would need to take with her in her holdall – lip gloss, sun-screen, sandals, costume. One by one they all got flung into the bag. Stopping for just a minute, she decided to put the costume on under her clothes. It would cut down on the changing time at the beach – and she would be having a long cool dip in no time. Quickly she pulled it on, smoothed it down and taking one last look at her complexion in the mirror she flicked her short blonde hair and smiled. Yes, she was right... Dick would love it. And if Jason was on the beach he might cast a couple of jealous looks her way. They had been an item once but had decided to split. In one way it had been for the best. Joni knew that. Somehow Jason and Joni hadn't brought out the best in each other. 'I don't know if he was that good an influence on me,' Joni mused as she pulled on her shorts and T-shirt once more. 'But Dick is lovely ... and a good friend of Jason's. I think it's going to work out all right.'

But as Joni was about to rush downstairs again, her eye caught sight of the slightly worn Bible on her bedside table. She flicked a bit of dust off the cover. That didn't look good, she thought. How long was it since she had read it, really read it? Joni didn't care to count the days that had passed since she'd spent some time one-on-one with God in prayer and reading his Word.

Only the other afternoon Joni had straddled the back of Tumbleweed, her chestnut mare, and looked across the wide panoramic view that surrounded the ranch. She had prayed then that God would turn her life around ... the shallowness, the sin, the temptations. Joni had been fighting it all but losing spectacularly. The Bible lay there – a silent niggling reminder of the standards she couldn't keep and the life that she knew she was missing out on. There was something wrong. But right now there was a venue to prepare and a schedule to keep to – summer-time fun. Perhaps a quick apologetic prayer would keep God happy and salve her conscience ... but even in the middle of a good intention there was a loud knock on the kitchen door and a frantic call upstairs, 'Joni, are you ready yet? Butch is here already!'

Joni grabbed the beach bag, flicked her hair one last time and ran out the door – the Bible would have to wait for another day and so would God.

Arriving at Chesapeake Bay, it was still wonderfully warm. Butch parked the jeep close to the sands and

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with one arm full of provisions and the other round his new girlfriend, Butch and Kathy headed off to set up the picnic site and then catch some sun. Kathy turned to Joni before heading off, saying, 'We'll get the rest of the stuff later. If you want to go swimming I'll take your bag for you. We'll set up by those trees over there.'

Joni nodded. 'That's great. I said it would be mid to late afternoon before things really got started. Right now I'm going to cool off.' Joni stripped off her shorts and T-shirt and stuffed them inside the bag.

'Love the costume!' Kathy exclaimed.

With a wink and a wave Joni handed Kathy her bag and shot off across the sand to a little outcrop of rocks by the edge of the water. 'These look just the right place for a dive,' Joni thought to herself.

A shiver went down Joni's spine as she anticipated the feeling of cool water skimming across her skin. A long cool soak was just what she needed. In the distance she could spot Butch spreading out a towel and Kathy sitting down beside him. Joni waved at the young lovers. Kathy waved back and then Joni edged out across the rocks to a large flat one – a perfect place to dive from. Kneeling down, she splashed some surf across her body to cool herself before diving in. In the distance, a couple of cars drew up and parked beside Butch's jeep. It was going to be a relaxing, fun-packed afternoon at Chesapeake Bay. 'I'm going to enjoy this,' Joni thought ... and then she dived.

* * *

The water was dark and murky, but Joni had dived there before many times and every time it had been the same. You sliced the water, sinking further; the flick of your toes against the surface told you that you were completely under; and then the weightless, almost airborne feeling as you began an existence in this magical underwater world. But this other world was full of dangers if you didn't reach for the surface and force your head through to the oxygen and life above. Not that danger had entered Joni's thoughts for one moment: when you've done something a hundred times, you don't stop to think on the one hundred and first. You only stop if something goes wrong.

And nothing appeared to be wrong as Joni's body sliced the surface. In a split second the water's skin broke and she slipped beneath. Her arms outstretched, her legs taut, she waited to feel the sensation of her whole body skimming underneath the water – but something happened which changed everything.

Joni's forward movement stopped abruptly and jarringly, as her body crumpled against something hard and unyielding. The sensation of the cool dark water disappeared in the darkness as Joni's other senses took over: she could hear deep muffled sounds of something being dragged or perhaps rolling against the gravelly sand. A loud electric buzzing went off in her ear.

Joni heard these sounds that felt like sensations, yet though she knew she had hit her head against something as she dived, she felt no pain.

Confused and disorientated, Joni suddenly realised that her face was being rubbed against the crunching, grinding sand at the bottom of the bay.

‘What’s happening?’ her thoughts screamed in the emptiness. ‘I can’t move. Am I caught in something?’

As she floated amongst the debris of seaweed and sand, small undercurrents lifted Joni slightly and dropped her further on, just a few steps. Her body flopped then settled, flopped then settled, drifting aimlessly across the bottom of Chesapeake Bay.

Light broke through the dark waters, picking out pieces of shell and coloured stones on the bottom of the Bay. Joni’s thoughts suddenly cleared as the reality struck home of where she actually was.

‘I need to get out. I need air. What’s happened to me. Am I dead? No, I can’t be. I’m alive. I am alive. Oh God, help!’

With that hurried, frantic prayer, pictures flooded into Joni’s head ... her mother, her father, the people she loved – the things she had done, the things she hadn’t done. Just then she heard a voice, muffled but puzzled – sounding, breaking through the water: ‘Joni? Joni?’

Two long tanned legs came towards her as the voice sounded out once again, but closer this time. ‘Joni, what are you doing down there? Joni, are you looking for shells?’

It was Kathy!

‘Kathy’s here! She’ll help. She’ll know what to do.’ Joni thought as she tried to struggle – but she couldn’t even do that. It was as if a weight on her body had trapped her, squashing her into the sand, tying her to the ebb and flow of the tide.

Joni’s eyes rolled round in their sockets. She strained to look up and catch Kathy’s eye, but not even her head could move where she wanted it to. All she could see was the dark shape of Kathy’s shadow moving towards her across the shingle.

Soon the shadow was on top of her – but just then the darkness began to creep in. ‘Oh please, God, don’t let me die!’ Joni’s thoughts screamed.

Just then, two strong arms reached down and grasped Joni under her armpits. In the grappling, stumbling struggle Joni was lifted free of the water and ... ‘Oh, God, thank you, thank you!’ She could breathe.

The anxious face of her sister looked down on Joni as she struggled to hold her above the water. ‘Are you O.K.?’ Kathy asked. The tone of her voice told Joni there was something wrong ... very wrong ... but Joni already knew that.

‘Kathy,’ Joni’s voice cracked, ‘I can’t move. Why can’t I move? My legs are stuck, my arms too. I can’t move anything. Is there wire there or some net?’

But by this stage Kathy was taking charge, ordering curious onlookers to pull over their inflatable raft. ‘Get

that thing over here quick! You on shore call 911. We need the emergency services here ... now!

Two young men swiftly paddled their raft over to where Kathy was struggling with Joni's weight in the water. Another was now running up the sands towards a phone kiosk by the road. Butch stood on the edge of the shore as Kathy and the two men gently laid Joni on the raft and pushed her across the water to the beach.

'Joni, what's wrong? Kathy was worried about you. You were under so long.' Butch leaned over the floating raft and looked at Joni with an anxious expression on his face. 'What were you doing out there? Fishing?' He laughed self-consciously but stopped as he saw Joni's pale face and the tears in Kathy's eyes.

The raft scraped against the sand as it was pushed against the shore and it didn't take long before a crowd gathered.

'Get back, everyone!' Kathy yelled. It seemed as if the beach party had started early and everyone was treating Joni as a side-show. But Joni didn't recognise any of the faces and hated this feeling of being some sort of local curiosity. Anxious whispers and mutters arose from the crowd. Joni tried to listen in but Kathy started pushing people away. 'Move along with you – and somebody call an ambulance!'

As the curious onlookers wandered away, Butch kneeled down beside the inflatable raft and into Joni's line of vision. 'You O.K., kid?' he asked.

Joni couldn't nod, move her head or anything – all she could do was call out.

‘Kathy! I can’t move. I’m so scared. Kathy!’

Kathy was back at her side in an instant. ‘It’s all right, Joni, I’m here. It’s going to be all right. You’ll see.’

‘Hold me please, Kathy. Hold me.’

‘But I am, honey. I am.’

Just then the awful realisation hit Joni. ‘I can’t feel anything. Nothing at all.’

Kathy’s face froze.

‘Come on, Jon. Nothing? How about this?’ She squeezed Joni’s leg, hard.

‘No, nothing,’ Joni whispered.

‘How about this then?’ Kathy brushed her sister across the arm.

Panic rose in Joni. She whimpered, ‘No! I tell you, I can’t feel it! I can’t feel anything.’

Kathy stopped, then reached her arm across Joni’s chest to rest it on her sister’s shoulder.

‘How about that?’

Relief was written across Joni’s face.

‘Yes! Yes! I feel that!’

‘Oh, thank you, Jesus. I’ll be O.K.’ Joni thought. ‘I must have just hit my head in diving and the numbness will wear off in an hour or two.’

Wanting to reassure her sister, Joni looked up at Kathy and smiled. ‘It’s going to be O.K. Don’t worry. God won’t let anything happen to me!’

But then the sirens sounded in the distance and grew louder as the ambulance pulled into the parking lot. Two paramedics appeared, carrying a stretcher across

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the beach. Joni was lifted on top and carried across the sands. The plans and the dreams for a lovely summer's day evaporated. Just then Joni's statement became a question: 'God wouldn't let anything happen to me ... would he?'

The doors closed, the siren sounded and the ambulance drove her away.