

## Day at the Beach

While Alice swam out to the tethered red buoys, Joyce read a trashy romance novel on the beach as she swatted gnats away from her coconut-drenched skin. She was blonde and fair. Alice, who worked for a plastic surgeon, insisted she wear protection.

Nearby, a radio blared classic rock. Down by the shore, kids scooped up moist sand with paper cups and plastic shovels, building a sandcastle.

Alice wasn't the only one in the water. A couple of kids waded in the surf. An old woman in a yellow swim cap doggie-paddled. A bald man side-stroked toward the ropes. The water was choppy, the buoys rode the waves up and down.

They were nurses at the hospital and, in a rare turn of events, both had the day off. Alice had packed a lunch of cheese, French bread, Bosch pears and a half-carafe of white wine, as well as wine glasses, a serrated knife, and a small vase with a red plastic tulip.

Even though Alice was a good swimmer, Joyce looked up from time to time to check on her friend's progress. She herself was deathly afraid of water.

She was starving and several times eyed the tote bag. For breakfast, she'd eaten a bowl of oatmeal, for her cholesterol, but it never held her for long. Thinking Alice wouldn't mind if she took a thin slice of cheese, she cut off an edge and nibbled.

Alice had made it to the buoys. She was waving. Joyce waved back.

Led Zeppelin's "Stairway to Heaven" carried on the wind. Joyce hated the song. It reminded her of an uncomfortable time years ago, in high school, when she'd gone to the prom with a boy for whom she'd had no real interest. The following Monday, she'd ignored him, and he'd cried at her locker, an awful scene, she'd had no intention of upsetting him. Yet neither had she wanted to lead him on, which seemed cruel and heartless.

She and Alice lived alone. At the hospital, they had seen things that made them want to live their lives on their own terms.

A seagull squawked overhead. She looked up, saw it hanging in midair. Her stomach growled. She took out the loaf of bread, sliced off the heel. Unlike Alice, she was a large-boned woman, with a passionate appetite. Alice, a gourmand, did all the cooking. Joyce gazed out at the water, scanned heads—the bald man, the teenager, the old woman swimming laps. She didn't see Alice, couldn't locate her pale blue swimsuit.

She ripped off her sunglasses, squinted back the sun.

The bald man swam furiously toward the buoys and dove under the water. He came up waving. Joyce started for the shore, her bare feet kicking up sand. When she got to the water, her first instinct was to run out to her friend, but instead turned to the man with the radio. "Please, can you help! They need help!"

He opened his eyes, looked out, and sprinted into the water, reaching the buoys in no time. He and the bald man pulled Alice to the shore, dragging her lifeless body onto the beach.

Trembling, Joyce knelt down and grabbed her friend's ice-cold hand. The men stood back.

"Alice," she said using an evenly-tempered voice.

She had worked the ER many years ago and knew how to stay cool and calm, but now, her heart throbbed in her ears and she hovered over Alice, not moving, until something in her said *Now!* and her nursing instincts kicked in. She felt for a pulse; there was none. Then she tilted Alice's head back, pinched her nose, and covered her mouth with her own. She breathed a few steady breaths and started chest compressions. Alice didn't respond. More breaths, more compressions. The whole time Joyce's heart jack-hammered in her ears. *C'mon Alice, please, don't do this to me.* She listened to Alice's chest; nothing.

That morning, they'd debated: red or white wine. Alice had wanted to make an angel food cake but had run out of time—besides which, she'd groaned, they had no icing. "And I don't have time to make homemade," she'd said.

The only time Joyce had actually performed CPR was years ago, on a child who'd fallen at the grocery store and had knocked the wind out of himself. She'd rushed over, got down on her knees, and worked on him until he came to. The anxious mother, tears in her eyes, thanked her,

offered money, but Joyce refused. “I’m a nurse,” she’d told the woman, as if that explained everything.

Still, no pulse. The men’s faces swirled above Joyce. She kept breathing, compressing, moving mechanically. Her thoughts scrambled. She left her body momentarily, hovered above, watching herself work on her friend.

“Hey, I think her eyes just moved!” the bald man said.

“What?” Joyce stopped.

“Look!” the other man said. “She’s trying to open them!”

Alice’s eyes fluttered. Joyce turned her on her side and pounded her back. Water gushed out. Then Alice vomited the Eggs Benedict and mimosas they’d had that morning for breakfast.

That night, watching their favorite reality TV show—the young couples sitting around an in-ground pool drinking shots of tequila—neither woman derided the participants’ stupid lives as they normally did. They didn’t try to guess who would be the next one voted off.

Finally, Alice turned the TV off and said, “You know, everyone says this, but out there today I really did see my life flash before my eyes.” She looked blankly at Joyce. “I was sure I was leaving you.”

Joyce wanted to ask what else she’d seen. But all she could think of was how cold her friend’s lips had been.