

Myrtle Beach Daze

by Julie Britt

When my cousin, Carol, invited me to spend bicentennial week with her family at Myrtle Beach, I immediately went to J.C. Penney to search for the perfect bathing suit.

Carol and I spent a lot of time picking out clothes, shoes and hairstyles that enhanced our feminine allure. Snug tops emphasized perky breasts and slender waists. Tight hot pants hugged our behinds and exposed lengths of tanned legs. We weren't dressing for sex. That would have been wrong. We were only 17, not to mention unwed. We just wanted potential boyfriends to notice our timely fashion sense and get a hint of what might be theirs if they were patient enough to wait for love in God's good time.

The first day at the beach, we paraded down Ocean Boulevard in our new denim cutoffs and tube tops. We giggled as boys honked, whistled and called out compliments.

"Ooh, baby, come to Papa!"

"Sweeeeet!"

"Marry me, darlin'!"

When the compliments turned to raunchy innuendo, we ducked into the Gay Dolphin, a souvenir shop whose inventory included thousands of treasures from the sea — genuine sharks' teeth, shells of every hue and the mysterious sand dollar with its reminders of our Savior's sacrifice. We had learned at Sunday school that the little star in the middle of its rounded side symbolizes the star of Bethlehem, and the five slits in the delicate shell represent the wounds Christ suffered on the cross to save us from our sins. A poinsettia-like flower surrounds the star. I guess that's just supposed

to stand for Christmas in general. The flat side's Easter lily design reminds us that the story didn't end on the cross.

We'd occasionally buy a sand dollar just to break it open and free the five tiny doves of peace. Once, on a low tide, I found one on the beach. I was sure that meant I'd have good luck.

Carol and I spent at least an hour on the beach each day so our skin would have that natural glow from too much sun and salt water. The wind and surf added more body to our hair than a boatload of Farrah Fawcett's Wella Balsam.

At night, emboldened by our tans, big hair and sexy tank tops, we'd wander into an oceanside pavilion to see who all was there. We plunked quarter after quarter into a pool table as we spied on our masculine counterparts.

The game, which we never mastered, gave us an excuse to lean provocatively and wiggle just so as we tried to line up the perfect shot.

"Faith, we need to have dates for the Fourth," Carol announced as we racked the balls up on our first night.

"That's just two days away," I said. "We could just hang out by ourselves."

"Fat chance," Carol said, wrinkling her nose.

"Don't remind me," I muttered.

"Of what?" Carol asked.

"That I'm fat," I said, chalking up the pool cue I had carefully selected, as if I knew one from the other.

"I didn't say that," Carol said. "Besides, you're not. Mom says you're 'pleasingly plump.'"

"The only things that are pleasingly plump are babies and sofas," I said, wondering when Carol and Aunt Marge had discussed my weight.

Carol was right. I wasn't really fat. Just sort of, well, lumpy. Her curves had grown in at the right places. Mine were still undecided. I was still hoping my breasts would grow into the washcloth-enhanced fantasy proportions of my youth.

At least I had long legs. Carol's were stubby, but no one noticed. Who needs legs when you've had cleavage since sixth grade?

We'd discovered the previous summer that tube tops enhanced cleavage considerably. They even made me look sort of alluring. Carol looked like one of "Charlie's Angels" in hers, with her long blonde hair flowing over her shoulders and her pouty lips tinted with Cover Girl's hottest red lipstick.

We'd decided tube tops were definitely daytime attire. They tended to roll up or down when stressed, and leaning across a pool table was risky. We were good girls, after all. If we'd bared a virginal bosom to the crowds at Skipper's Fun and Games, we would have been too mortified and embarrassed to ever set foot on the Grand Strand again. We'd have had to spend summers at Crystal Lake back home, where younger teens who couldn't drive hung out with parents and church youth groups.

We'd decided to play it both sexy and safe in our Bobbie Brooks tanks. They showed off tanned shoulders, dabbed with a touch of Charlie, and enhanced our curves only a little less than the tubes.

I discreetly tugged at my strapless bra, whose bones were poking me mercilessly, as I lined up my next shot.

“What if we, well, what if I don't have a date for the fireworks?” I asked.

Carol appraised me from across the table, one hand on her outslung hip.

“We'll find someone for you,” she reassured me. “Whoever I get will have a friend.”

“Great,” I said, abruptly copying her confident pose.

“Hey, watch it!” a masculine voice said.

My generous jutting hip had bumped the speaker's cue arm, apparently rendering a crucial shot worthless.

“Sorry,” I mumbled, painfully aware that my face, neck and shoulders were turning beet red.

The interrupted pool shark laughed rudely. His slinky girlfriend comforted him with a noisy kiss and a drag on her lipstick-stained cigarette.

I managed to avoid further contact with them. They were obviously wild, a word our Sunday school teachers used to describe people who drove fast cars, drank beer, stayed out past ten and had premarital sex.

So far I'd stood strong against the temptation of premarital sex by avoiding relationships with boys. Cold turkey. That's how I would protect myself. I wouldn't give the devil an opportunity to lure me into a situation I couldn't handle. I was almost positive I couldn't

withstand that temptation. Constant Bible study and beseeching God to deliver me from evil hadn't kept my eyes on Jesus and my thoughts holy when I was alone. I knew I wouldn't have a prayer if a boy ever liked me enough to kiss me.

But, honestly, I was more concerned about not having some sort of physical encounter with a boy than withstanding temptation. Was something wrong with me? Was it normal to go through life without having that experience?

I'd believed God had set me apart for some higher purpose. Maybe that's why he'd helped me avoid entanglements with boys. That distraction would have taken my eyes off the cross. With my weak character and the devil's insistent evil, I could've succumbed to the pleasures of a boy's flesh, then God wouldn't have been able to use me for his glory.

I knew the consequences. Two girls in my Sunday school class had gotten pregnant out of wedlock, and had dropped out of school and church. Their reputations were shot.

Lessons from the Bible and temptation were fighting in my mind. I felt weak. I was ripe for the devil's rotten lies, but I was praying for strength only halfheartedly. I still wanted to be pure and holy, a fitting instrument for God's purpose, but I was also real curious.

Carol's stories of passionate kisses and fevered caresses with her endless supply of boyfriends made me jealous and confused me a little. She'd managed to fool around and not go all the way, even when Chuckie Thomas had played that suggestive Raspberries song over and over one night while they were parking at the river.

"I'm not going to, so you might as well turn that off," she'd told him, straightening her skirt and hooking her bra. I'd had a million questions after she told me, but my little brother, Josh, had come

barreling into my room, demanding that I let him take my "Hotel California" album to his girlfriend's house. By the time I'd dashed his hopes of impressing Cindy Stephens with his taste in music and air guitar technique, Carol was bored with the Chuckie story and was flipping through "Seventeen."

"I wonder if Cheryl Tiegs was fast when she was in high school?" she asked after Josh had left. "Look at that cool turquoise eye shadow with the gold flecks," she said, turning from Cheryl's swimsuit layout to an article called "Making Him Notice You in a Crowd."

Both of us were wearing that color at the beach. So far, we hadn't been noticed, which irked Carol.

We crossed the arcade to the air hockey table, reaching it just ahead of two pimply faced youngsters.

Subtlety was out. We put our all into the game, sending the pucks sliding and clacking, back and forth, leaning into the table to get the best shots.

It worked.

We'd barely finished our second game when three boys sauntered over.

"Hey," the leader started brilliantly. "Whatchall doing?"

"Nothing," Carol replied, tossing her hair over her shoulder and looking up at the newcomer through her great lashes, courtesy of Maybelline. "Whatchall up to?"

"Not much. Me and Scottie and Earl just been riding around," he said, making a slight gesture with his elbow toward the others. "My

name's Freddy.”

“I'm Carol, and this is Faith, my first cousin.”

I'd apparently been invisible until Carol mentioned me. All three boys finally glanced my way. Three pairs of eyes quickly scanned my body, starting at my boobs, traveling to my legs, then back up to my boobs, where they lingered a fraction of a second before turning back to Carol. I swear, not one of them saw my face.

“Y'all want to walk on the pier?” Freddy asked, still staring at the vicinity of Carol's chest. She'd crossed her arms slightly in front of herself for a self-conscious second, then she leaned back on the air hockey table, arms behind her, striking a fairly seductive pose.

“Okay,” she said. “But let us powder our noses first. We'll meechnall right here.”

“Far out,” Freddy said.

As soon as we reached the ladies room in a noisy corner by the jangling pinball machines, Carol turned to me, jumping up and down.

“Did you see how cute he is?” she squealed. “I bet he drives a Camaro.”

“Yes, he's cute,” I said, trying to muster some enthusiasm for Carol's good luck. “What am I supposed to do while you're walking on the pier with him?”

“You're coming, too, silly. He asked both of us. You get your pick of the other two — Sandy and Darryl.”

“Scottie and Earl,” I corrected. Okay, I had paid attention, in spite of

their inattention.

“Right. One of them was kinda cute. You’ll have to figure out which one he is. Try to flirt with him. Maybe that one with the big ears will find another girl,” Carol said, looking doubtful.

“What are we going to do out on the pier? It’s hot and smells like fish,” I said.

“Yeah, but it’s dark at the end,” she said, as if that explained everything.

We rejoined the trio and headed for the pier, dodging pool-playing teens, assorted fishermen and the occasional kid begging her mom for an ice cream cone.

The humidity enveloped us when we walked through the screen door onto the fishing pier.

“Ooh, it’s hot,” Carol said, lifting her silky tresses off her neck.

Freddy slowed down to enjoy her performance. Like dominoes, Earl and Scottie bumped into him, then bounced off and started stubbing their Converse-clad toes on the rough planks of the pier, hands stuffed in their pockets.

Carol and Freddy laughed at them, then headed down the pier. Freddy put his arm around her shoulders, and she wrapped hers around his waist, pulling him close and gazing up at him adoringly.

Scottie and Earl, or Earl and Scottie — I still didn’t know who was which — looked at each other, then at me, then at each other again.

“Earl, I think I’m going to cool off inside,” the cute one said, nodding briefly to me as he walked away.

I watched Scottie go, then looked at Earl and his ears. I had apparently just witnessed some sort of invisible coin toss. Some hidden signal had told Earl, "This one's yours."

I hoped Earl had won the prize — me — because it was his turn, not because Scottie thought he could have better luck later.

"Well, come on, then," Earl said, reaching for my hand and angling toward the end of the pier.

Limply grasping his sweaty palm, I went along. It was clear I wasn't going to be swept off my feet. But I didn't have anything else to do. I knew Carol would be busy for at least a couple of hours.

There was a salty ocean breeze and a nearly full moon. What do you call that? Gibbous? That word had been on my SAT vocabulary section. One of those multiple choice things. I believe we had to choose the name of a tailless monkey — gibbous, gibbon, gibber, none of the above. I wondered if a gibbous moon makes a gibbon speak gibberish?

Oh, Lord, Earl's talking to me and I've been exercising my vocabulary, I realized. Fortunately Earl wasn't a fast talker.

"I mean, you know, do ya wanna go, you know, down yonder at the end?" He finally finished a sentence, more or less.

"Well, uh, I dunno, okay, I guess," I replied. Good heavens; it's contagious.

"Far out," Earl said, apparently not minding my sudden lack of verbal skills.

With our slippery fingers still entwined, we made our way past a

sunburned fisherman unhooking a sand shark — his fourth, judging by the pile in the middle of the pier — from his fishing rod. A woman tanned the color of my grandmother's mahogany sideboard was gutting some impressively large sea creature in a big sink nearby. A couple of frat boys in khakis, pink Izods and worn Docksiders lounged carelessly against the rail, sipping something from big plastic cups. I caught one guy's eye. He laughed and punched his friend.

“Young love,” I thought I heard him say as we hurried past.

We continued dodging sand sharks, rays and piles of gore. Past the sheltered picnic tables was the fabled end of the pier. It looked pretty harmless in the daytime, but now, with a strange boy holding my hand, and Carol and Whatsizname huddled on a bench in a dark corner, it was scary.

I felt like I was walking the plank as Earl steered me toward a bench a few feet from my kissing cousin. This is one of those places Preacher Smith tells us to avoid, lest we succumb to sins of the flesh, I thought. Oh, Lord.

Maybe Earl is a nice guy, I told myself as I sat on the bench a few feet away from him. We could just talk.

“Comere,” Earl said, scooting toward me and yanking me over at the same time.

“Umph,” I uttered wildly as our noses collided, lips barely grazing. I lost my balance and fell, not too gracefully, against Earl's bony shoulder.

Before I could right myself, Earl seized the day, and me, grabbing the back of my neck with one hand, putting his other arm around my waist. His aim was better this time. He pressed his tightly closed lips

against mine, which were clamped shut like a vise. The pressure reminded me of getting my braces tightened. Good thing I don't still wear them, I thought.

We sat like that for what seemed like years, but it must have been less than that because when Earl finally pulled away, the same moon hung there, illuminating Carol and Freddy, whose hand seemed to be under her tank top.

I felt Earl's hand move toward my bra hook. I looked at his face, which was just inches away. I wondered vaguely about the aerodynamics of his ears. Hee haw. The pier seemed to be swaying gently in the sustained ocean wind. I could see Carol's hair floating in the breeze. It was still tangle-free, in spite of the atmospheric and amorous challenges it had weathered. I could feel mine knot up like a macramé wall hanging. Could Earl suddenly fly away like Sally Field had a habit of doing? Dumbo...

Earl didn't seem to mind the wind. He had an intense look of concentration on his freckled face. His ears were bright red, his tongue poked at the corner of his mouth as his hand roamed over my back. A look of relief briefly crossed his homely features as his searching fingers finally found the elusive hooks. He started plucking at my back like it was a banjo. Lucky for me, he was no Earl Scruggs. My virtue was safe with my Earl. We would have been there until the Second Coming, my bra still safely fastened, if I'd have stuck around.

But I didn't. Shoving the startled boy aside, I jumped over Freddy's outstretched leg and hightailed it back down the pier, toward the lights, tourists and safety.

I heard the frat boys' guffaws as I sailed past. I cleared piles of dead, staring sharks and dodged flying fish hooks as fishermen continued to cast their hopes into the sea. They seemed unaware of the sins

that had nearly been committed a few yards away.

Clutching my side and gasping for air, I didn't stop until I reached our cottage three blocks away. I couldn't go inside without Carol. Explaining to Aunt Marge what had happened out there would have been as bad as going through it again. I couldn't get Carol in trouble, no matter what she was doing on the pier. So I crept up the stairs and hid in a dark corner of the porch where I could look across rows of stilted houses and watch for her.

