

The Last Pool Party

by John Minichillo

Clusters of Home Depot deck furniture, ambience of chlorine, of eighties music murmured from rock-shaped speakers, iced upscale beer and cheapish wine, a *no lifeguard on duty* sign, a *no peeing in pool* sign, the pool kidney-shaped and sensible, the too-blue water refracting a vinyl pool liner, platter of splayed white and yellow cheeses in the pool house, the Moores' screendoor slowly creaked open and clanged shut, a small dog continuously yapping two houses over—all so familiar, like three years hadn't crawled away and the Moores' daughter, Candace, had never drowned here. In this pool. The invitations went out weeks ago, and we all thought what we thought, but none of us could say no, with their back patio crowded and an hour of summer radiance left before the sun would refuge behind the tall maple.

The ghost of the drowned daughter materialized in the alley. She passed through the privacy fence, paused at the edge of the deep end, dropped her white terrycloth robe, took two steps across the diving board, leapt up, planted unsubstantiated feet, and sprang into a one-and-a-half—naked and awkward and beautiful. She released from her tuck, slipped under the surface of the water, and was gone. Returned to that other realm, wherever she resides now. No one surprised she was here to make us look.

There was Dr. Shelley, the retired superintendent of schools; A. A. Anderson of Anderson and Schumacher Law; Cindy Lewis, the Channel Two morning anchor; and as always, Rick, the Moores' spiritual advisor. None of us understood the Moores' church, but at the pool parties, Rick balanced a mini paper plate of pita bread and hummus in his drink hand just like the rest of us.

We stalled around in bathing suits and wraps, or Hawaiian shirts and long trunks. The pool had been brought back, though none of us so much as stuck a toe in. Newt Moore was cautiously cheerful,

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the party Stacy Moore's idea. Their son, Tyler, had had a sister but now was the tragic kid without a sister. He used to swim in the pool until his skin pruned. He used to cannonball unsuspecting guests. He asked, "How long do you think I can hold my breath," and he dove for pennies. He used to dogpaddle energetically. He would spin circles, his head bobbing at the surface of the water. He had to be told to come out of the pool. Then, when he dried out, maybe after ten minutes, maybe after five, he jumped back into the water. And he would tread and tread and tread.

Tyler was going on twelve and not one to live in the past. He had no patience for Rick's presence, his father's hospitality, his mother's theater. If his sister had stuck around, Tyler might have gotten cynical around age sixteen. Without her, he was made wise on the fast track. There was no way Tyler was going to participate in any of this. He spoke to no one at the party but moved between adults, waiting for opportune moments to steal a drink. He disappeared into the house for long intervals at the XBOX, or he rode his bike up and down the alley, locking the brakes so his back tire would skid on cinders and gravel. Why didn't he wear a helmet, where were his friends, was anyone watching him?

Newt Moore was spared the string of Candace's future boyfriends. Had she lived, a boy would have lured her away. Newt Moore ached for that kind of mild hurt as he stared into the heat of the grill, greasy smoke pluming and clinging to him. He would give anything to have his daughter alive: he'd take a part-time daughter, defiant, or even drug-addicted. Other parents didn't know how easy their lives were, and he looked around and envied them, all of them. Newt Moore saw people who still wanted when they had everything.

Carl Clarke stepped up to have his plate filled, and Newt snapped to life. He pointed with his barbecue tongs at the meats he could offer. A little of everything, mesquite smoked, and falling off the bone. He'd made his own sauces, boiling peppers from the Mexican market into paste. Grilling gave him something to talk about.

He said, "Last week I made a four-star chili with pulled pork that would knock your socks off."

"I'd like to try it," Carl Clarke said. "Did you make some for the party?"

"I saved a batch in the deep freeze," Newt said. "But you can take it."

"I couldn't take your chili."

"No," Newt said, "I want you to have it. I can make more. It's what I do."

Stacy Moore was on her way to drunk. She was overdressed but barefoot, in her Carmen Marc Valvo lace camisole over a sheer v-neck gold satin gown. She waved a blue plastic Solo cup of red wine, and she just might end up in the pool. She'd forced us here out of a stubborn refusal to continue to be sad. There was life left in each of us and we were together, better together than apart. She was high on the traveling troupe of Les Miserables that stopped at the college the week before. She couldn't be bothered to follow the news, but had heard, and Cindy Lewis confirmed, that people were dialing the 911 emergency call center with inappropriate requests. Asking for directions. Asking if there were jobs. And Stacy Moore was aghast that our city mulishly sprayed for mosquitoes when mosquitoes weren't the problem.

"We should start a petition," she said.

"I'll sign," Valerie Pratt said. "And Rory will sign."

"They drive around and leave a chemical cloud."

"It could be agent orange or something."

"We'd never know."

The lawyer, A.A. Anderson, who wore suits in public one hundred per cent of the time, had had to go out and buy an outfit, a white short-sleeved silk shirt and a pair of long cargo shorts, with pockets and zippers and reinforced stitching. He found the shorts in a section of menswear he never ventured into, with loud clothes worn mostly by high school students. A. A. felt foolish when he got home and tried on the shorts. But when he discovered room in the pockets for a box of cigars and flask of single malt, he felt smart

about them. A.A.'s son, Brett, was home from college and better dressed at the party, in Bermudas and a Polo. He worked the blender in the pool house, churning out frozen alcoholic smoothies, each batch stronger and more exotic. Mrs. Grandy held up something green he'd made from cubes of honeydew pilfered from the fruit platter.

"He should open a store," Mrs. Grandy said.

"You mean a bar?"

"A drink shop. With a drive-thru."

When most everyone had eaten, A.A. Anderson pulled Newt away from the grill to offer a cigar. Newt was never a smoker, but he recognized the luxury of a Cuban. So a small circle of men stood at the edge of the pool, in the shadow of the tall maple, the amber light at the end of day caught in tobacco haze where it danced in shafts that stretched back to the sunny spaces among the maple leaves. The dead girl was feeling ornery, and she performed the famous dive, a back-flip with a twist that launched terribly and she caught her head on the concrete near the diving board. She floated facedown in the deep end as bubbles escaped her bleeding mouth and she slowly sank. On the set of a movie, the crew would have applauded. At the Olympics, the dive would have been immortalized on YouTube. But in the Moores' backyard, on that otherwise unimportant August night—no one had heard Candace and no one saw—with Tyler the first up to go swimming the next morning. And now the girl's likeness came to rest on the bottom of the pool while light-headed Newt swapped pointers with the men: Apple stocks, Ford, General Foods, Archimedes International. We'd all stopped looking at the pool, out of respect for the Moores, who were good, decent people. But Marilyn Coombes saw the whole performance, and she let out a little gasp when Candace struck pavement. She wouldn't look Stacy Moore in the eye after that. Because no single lifetime could contain the depths of her sorrow. Who were we to offer condolences?

The gas grill cooled in its now quiet corner of the patio, plattered offerings picked over. The sun was done. The pool lights came on,

the citronella Tiki lamps lit. A.A. Anderson's son, Brett, had run out of sweet things to liquefy, and had caught up with a girl on the phone. He snuck out and away through the front door of the house. He was drunk, but young and unstoppable. In his white Mustang convertible, he would meet up with the girl and they would drink on into the night. A.A. sat at the contoured stairs that descended into the pool, his bare feet soaking in illuminated water. He leaned back and kicked playfully, delighted at the sensation of the water between his toes. He blissfully expired the vapors of the single malt. More than anything he wanted to take a dip in the pool. To have his girth buoyed, to hold his breath underwater, and to blot out the party as the loud talk remained above the surface.

Early in his career, the lawyer made money from the accidental death of another girl in another pool. The homeowners were out of town, but liable. He told his clients they could get more, they were entitled to more—how dare anyone put a price on the death of their daughter—but no additional money was worth going to court and publicly accusing that other family. He would do what they wanted, he was in their service. But his professional opinion, and his opinion as a father, was to try to find satisfaction with the award and not to reopen those wounds. With his feet in the pool, the lawyer remembered the Moores, and how they had no one to blame, no recourse.

Rick led Stacy Moore over to the stairs where A.A. sat. And everyone followed. Rick spoke, not just to her, but to the crowd:

“Cleansing waters,” Rick said. “The rivers of life. Ancient springs in ancient veins.” Was he even a preacher?

Rick pulled Stacy by the hand and she moved woodenly, like she was blindfolded. Not so long ago her children played Marco Polo in the pool with their friends, one of them wearing a pair of spray-painted goggles that had been modified just for the game.

Stacy stepped into the water, and she giggled. She felt subversive, about to wreck an extremely expensive dress. There was the notion that all of this was planned, but we allowed them the pretense of spontaneity. Candace rose from the bottom and floated

past her mother at the stairs. Candace was dripping wet and she headed straight into the house like she'd been disciplined, with the screen door clanged shut behind her. In the house were memorized photos. In the hall to the den, Candace remained with the family in their pajamas at Christmas. Here they smiled on a red-and-white-checked blanket at a Fourth-of-July picnic. Here she wore a bride's maid's dress for Newt's little sister's wedding. An eight-by-ten of Candace's sophomore yearbook photo was as immovable as a shrine on the bookshelf in the TV room, balanced with a shot of her on the opposite side of the same shelf, taken the summer before, when they went to Disney, when she was still a kid but too old for the place, the mouse ears rested uncomfortably—because already she felt like a woman. The photos were becoming dated—the hairstyles, the clothes, the chemical processes of the film—and Candace looked lost in time. If she could be willed back to life. If those moments could be relived. Her ghost made a puddle on the carpet as she stood and dripped water from the pool. She stared at the pictures of the girl she used to be. Then she walked through a wall to go mope in her bedroom.

Stacy Moore descended all the way into the pool and the satin dress lifted and floated at the surface, the nearest pool light unflattering in the way it captured the stark image of her fat legs and torso, her pale skin contrasted by the slim strap of her orange thong underwear, with her dark pubic hair only partly covered. Stacy Moore was there for all of us to see, and Rick was next to her in his jeans and a tan Guayabera shirt, unaware of the spectacle he'd made of her. So this moment, if it were planned, wasn't planned very well. And Newt leapt into the water with a towel, to cover her. But she pushed him away, and she took off the dress altogether. She was down to a white bra and the orange thong, drunk and unembarrassed. Rick barked the rest of his New Age baptism, he dunked her, and she came up swimming a crawl stroke that took her to the far end of the pool, where she flip-turned and swam back. Rick moved on to Newt, who was hesitant, but couldn't get away. And Stacy shouted, "Come on in everybody. It's a pool

party!" We let them have the first dance: this middle-aged couple and their kooky friend, swimming with their clothes on, and kicking and splashing.

A.A. drifted off the stairs to walk in the shallow end. And the rest of us got down to our suits. There were probably more people in the Moores' pool all at once than ever before. And someone shouted, "Turn up the music!" And when we least expected it, A.A. Anderson bounced off the diving board into a cannonball with a shockwave felt by everyone. One that made rain. The leaves of the tall maple whispered. Husband and wife kissed. The water pump hummed while the floating clapper on the intake *clop, clop, clopped*. Synapses fired, pulse rates increased, muscles became fatigued, eyelids drowsed, and eyes burned, bloodshot and chlorinated.

Then the party thinned, and it was time to go. The news anchor would be up in a few hours for her morning show. The retired superintendent was obligated to a round of golf. The Moores forgot about their son, Tyler, gone all night on his bike, riding along the railroad tracks, and down by the river. The Moores would make mild love in their bed, and they would sleep past noon. Their son would come home again and leave twice in that time.

Carl Clarke lived a mile away in the same winding subdivision. He walked home in his bathing suit, barefoot on asphalt, his belly hung over the drawstring, his wallet and his keys in his hand, a Ziploc bag of frozen chili like a cold hard football cradled in his arm. Now he stood in the grass of a neighbor's yard to give wide berth to a passing car. No sidewalks here. He swayed as he stood and Carl Clarke took in the stars. He grinned and he laughed. Fireflies danced in the darkness of trees. The dry buzz of cicadas rose and fell along the insect scale, a serenade to summer heat.

The Moores were back.

We had loved them. We had felt sorry for them. But now they were back.

