

Pool Toys

by Mary Lane

We own this beat up old stroller. We couldn't give it away if wanted to. I've walked and ran miles in it. Now it's only used for trips to our neighborhood pool. I'll bring matchbox cars for my toddler to play with on the pool steps, maybe a ball to throw, and a few small heavy things for my older two to dive after.

One day a golf ball traveled with us to the pool. The children threw it in the water, let it sink to the bottom, and swam after it. Eventually they made some friends with more interesting toys and forgot all about it. Later a group of teens, both boys and girls, at the other end of the pool began throwing a white golf ball back and forth with each other. My daughter immediately noticed and pointed it out. "They've found our ball!"

I smiled. This meant I wouldn't have to shuffle over light blue tile with the hopes my foot would touch something round and difficult to see. "We should just let them enjoy it. You have other toys and you're playing with your friends."

"But I want it."

"We can share it, can't we? Would you like to explain that we'd lost it — thank them for finding it — and tell them you'll be back to get it once they finish with it? It's like we're taking turns. We can take turns, right?"

This made sense to her. She nodded and left a path of wet footprints between the teens and myself. With her red hair in a ponytail, she spoke to them, bright-eyed and smiling. Unafraid. She did not know humiliation and I envy her that. I wouldn't have had the courage to do such a thing at her age.

“The ball is hers?” one of them asked.

I couldn't hear the following responses, but my daughter turned, walked back along her footprint path, and started playing in the water again.

An hour went on and I completely forgot about the golf ball. We needed to leave. I dried the children off, loaded them in the stroller, and my daughter piped up, “Our golf ball!”

“Of course.” I nodded, left the children in the shade with juice boxes and goldfish in hand, and walked to the teens. They had stopped swimming and gathered around a table. A girl with long dark hair down her back bounced the ball on the faded terracotta stone with a “clack clack.” As I neared, the clacking stopped.

“Hey guys. We actually need to go, so if you're all done throwing the golf ball around, do you think we can have it back? Please?”

A boy at the table spoke up. “We don't have it.”

Confused, I paused and locked eyes with the girl who'd just bounced it with the long, dark hair. “I just saw you with it.”

She stared back at me. “Do you see it in my hands now?”

My eyes watered behind my sunglasses as I struggled to process all this. “My daughter is five. Five. She walked over here and asked you for it when you were done.”

The girl stood there in her string bikini, her arms crossed under her chest, pushing her breasts up. “We don't have it.”

I looked at their table covered in towels and book bags. The four or five teens sitting there wouldn't meet my gaze. My skin was burned

something that didn't involve the sun.

The something spread into my eyes, turning to more moisture. I was thankful I still had my sunglasses on. Swallowing, I said, "If I am wrong, if you have brought a golf ball from one of your houses and it is yours, I am a reasonable person and will understand this." I spoke slowly so I wouldn't sound angry. Or cry. "If that is the case, just tell me."

The girl flung her hair over her shoulder. "We don't have it."

"Really?" I scanned the group and a few of them met my eyes for a moment before they looked down.

"Really." She stepped in between her friends and I.

I turned my back on them, focused on my three children in the stroller, and walked away. While I answer to many names, I didn't respond to the dirty name muttered behind me. My vision blurred more from shock than anger. No one had ever called me anything like that in my life.

"Where's the ball?" my daughter asked when I started pushing them toward the gate.

I swallowed the choke in my throat. It travelled to my chest and settled around my heart, making it wet. "They didn't have it."

"They didn't have it? They lost it? They should look for it. You should tell them to help you look for it."

"Dearest, I get the feeling they won't help me." My voice sounded heavier than I wanted.

"They should. If you lose something that belongs to someone else,

you should help them find it," she said, turning to look at me.

I stopped pushing the stroller and smoothed her still-wet bangs out of her face. Part of me wanted to remind her about the bucket of golf balls at the bottom of her father's closet. But I didn't. "I agree. Only I don't have control over them. I've only got control over me. I'm sad they won't help, but I'm not going to start a fight over it if they aren't being nice."

To her credit she turned back around and stuck her thumb in her mouth. I re-adjusted my sunglasses and started to walk again. It wasn't until a clack clack sound echoed across the pool behind me that I let my tears fall.

