

The Pool Boy

“Janet, do me a favor and get my back, will you? Rub it in your hands first. I hate it when it’s cold.”

Marcy handed me a bottle of sunscreen and laid on her stomach, back arched like a model lounging on the poolside recliner. She wore a lime green bikini with a sheer grey shawl perfectly tangled beneath her long, thin legs. Her red hair was a horrible contrast to her swim suit, but it glowed in the sun, true copper like a new penny. When we were little, that was her spy name. As a teenager, that was her fake stripper name.

“Sure, give me a second.” I closed my copy of *People* in which I was reading about Angelina Jolie’s latest bout of rumored anorexia. I crawled over to her chair from mine and straddled her legs. Her skin was warm on the inside of my thighs. A couple guys from across the pool hooted and raised their cups. I immediately felt awkward but Marcy shifted below me, probably shoving her breasts forward and putting on her best smile, recently free from the confines of braces.

“Do they think they’re getting something?” she asked.

“A free show, that’s about it.”

“You should talk to the one in the orange trunks. He looks kind of cute.”

“Kind of being operative.” He was about fifty pounds overweight, which was more than I could say of myself. According to the BMI chart that I saw in my doctor’s office when I went for my routine exam, I was about twenty pounds overweight. I attributed it to my butt. It was my best feature.

“If you won’t take him, I will.”

I crawled back to my chair and rolled my towel into a pillow beneath my neck. I did not comment that Marcy would take a boy from me even if I did want him.

“Remember that time where we were going to the fair and as soon as your mom was about to drop us off she asked us if we had brought

sunscreen and we told her yes because we were afraid she was going to make us go home if we admitted we didn't have it? We got so sunburned that day. Didn't you get grounded for that?"

"You know I got grounded. I missed Kelly's roller skating party that year."

"Your mom was mental about sunscreen."

"She was mad we lied to her."

Marcy shrugged. "All water under the bridge." She tried to reach out to the pool and skim it with her fingers for theatrical effect and couldn't reach. She pretended to pop her wrist instead.

"So how's work been?" I asked. Marcy had a good new job as a secretary at some fancy advertising business. She was a PR major in college.

"Oh, just fine." Marcy looked vaguely across from her.

"What, is it not working out?" Some small part of me hoped that maybe it wasn't all sunshine and roses. Maybe her boss hated her. I told myself that this unkind thought was just the by-product of extreme competition.

"No, I just figured you wouldn't want me to tell you about how amazing it is with you being unemployed and all. Who knew history degrees would be so tough to apply? I guess your dad was right after all."

I wanted to punch her in the face. "No, I'm fine. Volunteering at the museum is great. Everyone is really nice, and they told me that as soon as there's an opening, I'm in."

"Oh, good. So you'll be able to move out of your mom's house?" God, she was good at dropping tiny insults into the conversation.

"Yep. I'm looking at some apartments in the loft district."

"No! You should live in my complex off the canal!"

We were quiet. I pretended we were sleepily sunbathing, but I was too tense to relax. I didn't know how to fill the hole in our conversation. With my other friends, the new girls from the museum, the crew from the university history club, conversation was easy. Sometimes it overflowed and it was difficult to get a word in edgewise. Individually, my best friend Stacy and I could have silences like this without dealing with the discomfort. We'd break it to say something

like “What if Napoleon never went to Russia?” or “Think that bacon would be good on a banana split?” but with Marcy, it was a waiting game. I didn’t remember it always being like this.

Our mothers were friends and our brothers had been practically raised together straight out of the womb. They were inseparable. Baseball, basketball, junior prom, the wedding, they were together till the end. Marcy and I were now technically sister-in-laws, or something like that. She started calling me sis at the reception and I just about wanted to vomit. It didn’t help that she was also the one to catch the bouquet, knocking me down in the process. She said that my consolation was that a cute cousin helped me up. She didn’t seem to acknowledge that he was my cousin, so I couldn’t really say he was cute.

That was the first time I’d seen her since fall semester. Something had changed after we split for college, we just couldn’t mix anymore. Even after a couple of weeks, I was still mad at her. Not just about the bouquet, but about how she spoke to me, about how she told everyone at the head table that she was the maid of honor when really we both were. She made fun of me for not having a date. I’d talked to my mom about it after a little while.

“She’s different now, Mom,” I said as I made us a pot of tea. “She doesn’t act like Marcy anymore.”

“How so?”

“She thinks she’s better than me. She thinks she knows everything. She judges me.”

“She did all those things before. Maybe you just changed.”

“Maybe. But why was I friends with her before?”

“Oh, as kids you got along alright. That means something.”

Over the last few years of college, we’d dwindled to maybe semi-annual visits, each at social gatherings like this where we had a multitude of distractions. There were three communal shopping trips, two Christmas parties, and one football game. I went home with a guy I’d just met after the football game just to get away from her. Not going to lie, though, he was pretty decent in bed. Still, I felt like friends shouldn’t have to look for reasons to escape from each other. Every time we hugged good-bye we’d tell one another that we should visit at school sometime, stay over during spring or fall break. We never

did. It seemed like we only texted when our moms would ask “Why don’t you guys hang out anymore?”

I watched a squirrel crawl over the fence and waited for my phone to ring, for someone else at this pool party to whisk me away, for the cops to chase a robber/crazed murderer on the run through the neighborhood, anything. I thought, if I have to do this much longer, maybe I will start making eyes at orange-trunks.

“Dating anyone?” Marcy always had to ask these questions, like when you go to the dentist and they ask you twenty different questions to make sure they have all your information in the system correct.

“No. You know I’m not.”

“Why so feisty? You know, I have a couple guys I could hook you up with. There’s this one, Daniel. He’s pretty cute. Minored in Women’s Studies.”

“No.”

“Why?”

“Because every douche bag man has minored in Women’s Studies. Makes them more marketable. A womanizer disguised as a feminist.”

“What would you know about feminism, Ms. I Don’t Agree with Women Having Sexual Freedom.”

“I like sexual freedom, I just don’t abuse it.”

“How can you abuse freedom?”

“Ask the Trump supporters. They’ll give you a list.”

“Come on, Janet, don’t talk politics with me now.”

As soon as I rolled over so I could face her I felt something smack me hard on my mouth, I ducked down and a Frisbee clattered to the ground. I could feel where the serrated edge connected with my lower lip and sliced through.

“Fuck!” Blood was leaking slowly and I could taste it. I cupped my hand under my lip. I could hear a chorus of sorry from the pool and Marcy’s laughter. The embarrassment and humiliation were worse than the actual pain. The world was spinning and clouding on the edges with panic. I focused on close, individual faces to regain my bearings. Pissed, I tried to muster a small bit of dignity, licked my lips to try to stop the blood and strutted out of the pool area, hoping that my ass looked good enough to distract from my mess of a face

and teary eyes. Outside the fence I stopped and leaned up against the wood.

I remembered one time when I was eleven years old and got my period at a sleepover. I asked Marcy if she could cover for me and walk behind me when I realized that blood had soaked through my new white skinny jeans. Instead of just following and blocking my spots from view, she took a picture and posted it on Facebook with the caption "Some1 fell on a ketchup packet!" and I was not invited over to a sleepover for a long time. Plus, the rest of the year (thankfully the event occurred in late spring) everyone called me Bloody Janet. This felt very similar and I wondered if maybe I was wrong about Marcy. Perhaps she really had never changed. Maybe I just outgrew her. I contemplated marching right back in there and punching her in the face.

"Are you okay?" a guy asked from behind me.

"What?"

"Is your face okay? You took quite a shot."

"Did Marcy send you?" I turned to look at him. He had shoulder length blonde hair and a surfer body. Much too attractive to be concerned with me.

"Umm, yes?"

"Are you Daniel?"

"What? No, that guy is a douche. I'm Carter, Marcy's boyfriend."

"Oh, great. Nice to meet you." Salt in the wound.

"Nice to meet you too. You know, when Marcy told me about you, I pictured you much less cute."

"Lovely. Yeah, well, I'm sure you would have. Marcy is constantly telling me I should get a reduction here and tone up there."

"She can be a little tough sometimes. It's just because she loves you."

"Is that what she tells you? Honestly, sometimes I don't think she feels love."

"Are you mad about her laughing? Because I thought that was out of line too."

"Sure." It was too much to try to explain everything, and my lip hurt to talk. "Have any ice?"

“Yeah, it’s in my apartment in the back of the complex. The pool’s inconveniently placed almost opposite to it. I’ll walk you.”

“Thanks.”

“So, you and Marcy have been friends for a few years?”

“Since we were babies. Our brothers are married. Care if we don’t talk? This really hurts.” I was having to lick my lips an insane amount to keep the blood from dripping and my tongue felt nasty and coated. I bet I looked like a cannibal with red smeared half-dried all around my mouth. I thought about offering Carter a creepy quid-pro-quo session, but I wasn’t sure he’d get the joke.

We walked around the pool fence, in one door, down the hall, and up a flight of stairs. We reached the end of the building, and he pulled open the last door to the right. I was surprised that he didn’t lock it living in such a large complex. His apartment smelled like incense, and there was a huge bamboo mat in the center of the living room. The rest of the design was white and pink cherry blossom, Japanese austere. I looked around. Clean, not badly decorated. I wondered if he had picked this all out himself or if it was from a past long term girlfriend.

Carter opened his freezer and took out an ice pack. He wrapped a clean kitchen towel around it and held it out. “Don’t worry about the blood. This is my crappy towel.”

It hurt too much for me to even question if he was sure. I pressed the soft coolness to my lip, and I felt the blood begin to congeal to it. I held it tight and breathed in the freezer smell of bagged veggies and the laundry detergent scent of the towel. It was relaxing in contrast to the heady incense and the smoke and liquor outside. I tilted my head back and let the swelling go down as Cater stirred a heaping bowl of pasta salad that was chilling in the fridge.

“Got any water?” I asked.

“What?”

I removed the ice pack from my lips and felt the fabric peel off the wound, leaving a small spot of blood. “Water? I want to rinse this taste out of my mouth.”

“Drink a little tequila. It’ll clean it and burn the taste out.” He poured me a shot and slid it across the island to me. I drank it and

swirled the heat around my mouth for a moment, letting the blood melt from my taste buds.

"Thanks," I said after swallowing.

"No problem."

I put my icepack back on and sat at a bar stool at the counter. My legs dangled off the floor, and I felt a little childish. I scanned the room so that I didn't watch Carter creepily as he prepared food for his guests. There was a sexy vampire novel on the coffee table, you know the ones that have little pieces of offset text at the top that say something like "True love is forever, especially if it's with a vampire" or "A Count in the streets but Satan in the sheets" that sort of thing.

"Has Marcy moved in yet?"

"She's trying to."

"What does that mean?"

"Well, she's got clothes here. And her shampoo is in the shower. She brought over her potted plant because she thinks it gets lonely. And she eats all my food."

"You don't sound thrilled." Oh please, let him say that he isn't happy. Oh please, let him break up with her today over this conversation. Allow me to be the catalyst.

"Isn't it strange that she moves in with a new guy about once every three months? Doesn't that say something to you?"

"Yeah, it says she's a whore."

"Are you a really honest friend, or a really shitty one?"

I went to the sink and splashed some cool water on my face. "Probably both."

We always talked about what type of friends we were together as a way of affirming our relationship. Like, if we put a label on it, that made it more real. I told Marcy that she was the happy go lucky girl, the superstar who owned the world. She told me I was the dorky sidekick. If she was Daphne, I was Velma. My strategy of being overly kind to her did not yield promising results. I wondered if men had more luck squeezing affection from her.

I was still thinking about how great it would feel to just deck her straight into the water, but I'd spent too long away for the dramatic effect to be what I wanted. Now, people wouldn't think it was

justified. I vowed to delete Marcy's number from my phone and block her from my Facebook as soon as I got back to the pool. I would sacrifice my most soft gray sweater that I left at her house last year to cut her off immediately. She'd had it so long anyway that I was sure she'd lost it by now.

"Shall we go back outside then?"

"Yeah, I'm going to grab my stuff and take off."

"What? You can't leave, the party has barely started. I'm grilling kabobs."

"I'll survive."

"Don't just let her win so easy. Show her you can have a good time too." How did Marcy wind up with a guy as nice as this? Poor, tortured soul. Maybe he was right, though. I would look like a loser if I just disappeared. Nobody would notice today, but I'd have to hear about it later. I could already imagine Marcy saying "Remember that time that you got hit in the face with a Frisbee at that pool party and you went home because you were so embarrassed? Everyone laughed and your nose bled really bad?" I knew she wouldn't even listen to me telling her that it was my lip. "Come on, I was there. Plus, you're just saying that because there's nothing less sexy than a nosebleed." I decided I wouldn't give her the satisfaction of knowing I ran away. I would go down and be the life of the damn party. I would make all those stupid boys fall in love with me, and that would make her jealous, even if she did have Carter.

"Fine, I'll go. Just don't expect me to have fun."

"At a pool party? Never." God, sort of witty too. How could he stand Marcy? She must be great in bed, that was the only reason I could supply. "Hold on, you've got blood everywhere."

I looked down and noticed that I did indeed have blood smeared on my neck and chest area. I licked my thumb and tried to scratch it off, but I knew it was futile. Carter was approaching with a wet rag anyway.

"Thanks," I said, reaching out for it.

"No problem." He did not give me the washcloth. Instead, he reached forward and began to wipe the blood away. He started at my neck, rubbing down and I could see a little dribble of pink water slip

over my chest, between my boobs. He stroked down, and I was too surprised to even react. I felt like my breath was gone, like I was back in high school in the gym storage room and Tom the quarterback was reaching into my shorts all over again. I knew it was wrong, so, so wrong, but I liked it, too. Carter was rubbing the blood off my breasts. What the hell was I doing? What the hell was he doing?

"Sorry, I know the cloth is cold," he said, sliding a thumb almost casually over my right nipple. I wanted to push him away then, but I was slightly worried about what might happen if I showed aggression towards him. He was a predator stalking his prey, and I was playing dead.

"There, all better," he said, standing back and admiring his handiwork. "You know, Marcy really does underestimate your beauty."

I just turned and walked out, feeling like something had fallen through my stomach and I was five pounds lighter. I was almost not governed by gravity, but instead of this being exhilarating, it was terrifying, like I was losing a grip on what was real. My face felt tingly. Carter followed me, oblivious to my obvious discomfort. Maybe he honestly just thought that he was being helpful, I thought to myself. Otherwise, how could he act like everything was totally normal?

We walked back out into the hot late afternoon sunshine and it felt amazingly warm in comparison to the chilly air-conditioned apartment. When we came back into the pool area, people were drunk and distracted enough that I escaped notice. The only person who seemed to care was Marcy.

"I saved your spot."

"Thanks."

"Does it hurt? Poor Janet, it doesn't look so bad."

I ignored her and laid back down on my recliner. Should I tell Marcy? She would think I was a liar. But she deserved to know, right? Maybe she really just deserved to be in the dark, to not know what kind of creep she was almost living with.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry I laughed, too. I know sometimes I'm not as good of a friend to you as you are to me. I just don't know how to be a good person like you." Marcy reached over and began rubbing my shoulder.

Now this was a real dilemma. Was she being honest? I couldn't really tell. If she was, this was so heartfelt, I couldn't spurn her. But she had done this so many times! I would not let her manipulate me. But I knew she had my best interests at heart. She really tried, she was just a terrible human. Could she help that? I doubted it. How could I place that blame?

"To make it up to you, I gave Tom your number."

"What? Who's Tom?"

"Orange trunks."

"What the hell? Marcy, I told you I wasn't interested!"

"Sometimes beggars can't be choosers, Janet. I thought you would be a little more grateful."

"Marcy, honestly, do you ever even try to be a decent person? I feel like you sabotage me."

"You sabotage yourself. And your jealousy is ridiculous. Please, do not blame this all on me. I didn't cause any of this. All I did was invite you to my party."

"It's not your party. It's Carter's. This isn't your house and this isn't your pool. He isn't that interested, and he won't let you move in. Also, while you were waiting outside laughing your ass off about how I got hurt, I was fucking him." It rolled off my tongue without me even thinking about it. It didn't feel totally like a lie though.

The pool hadn't gone silent, not like in the movies, but Marcy seemed appropriately dumbstruck. Served her right. I just hoped she was insecure enough to be worried.

"He would not sleep with you. You're fat and ugly and you couldn't do half the things I can for him. What's your problem?"

Carter was noticing our spat, and he came up and sat on the edge of my recliner. "What's the dealio ladies?"

"Janet says that you had sex." She sounded like an accusatory child. I liked that; it gave me a small sense of satisfaction buried underneath the panic.

"Didn't we, Carter?"

"What? No?" His eyes were buggy with panic. So he must have known that what he did wasn't appropriate. "Honestly, Marcy, I just gave her stuff to clean up with!"

“Oh, you’re a liar. And a cheater. What an ass. You two deserve each other.” I made to leave, but before exiting, I took a swipe at Carter’s toned butt. It felt good to get a small amount of revenge. While he seemed unable to react, Marcy was not as inhibited.

She hurled herself at me, knocking both of us down on the concrete. I tucked my head up so that I wouldn’t hit it, but my back took the brunt of the fall and it knocked the wind out of me. That didn’t stop me from pushing her off though, wrestling her until she was on the bottom. Her nails dug into my shoulders as she fought. I could feel my legs scraping on the ground and I could only imagine that hers hurt just as much. It was now a pain tolerance competition. Marcy pushed me back, rolled away a little bit and tried to crouch, but I yanked one of her legs forward and she was on her back. All eyes were on us now. Some of the guys were hollering, clearly enjoying the girl-on-girl swimsuit battle. “Pull out her boobs!” one yelled. I ignored them all and climbed over Marcy, straddling her and pulling my fist back to punch. Carter finally came to and caught my hand. He wrenched me back, nearly pulling my shoulder out of socket. That would hurt later, I was sure.

“Enough!” His ears had turned bright red and his face was blotchy with anger. I was happy to find that any trace of attractiveness was gone.

“Hey man, I called the cops,” one of his friends called from the other end.

“Are you serious? Call back and say it was all a misunderstanding!” Marcy demanded.

There was a chorus of boo’s from the other guys.

“You attacked her!” Carter yelled at Marcy.

“She sexually assaulted you!”

“Oh, he sexually assaulted me? Marcy, you have no idea what a fucking freak you have as a boyfriend. He came on to me!”

“You are both bat-shit crazy, and I am through. Marcy, I think that you and I should break up. We aren’t working out.”

“Ha!” I shouted through the blood that was now streaming out of my reinjured lip.

Marcy didn’t respond. She just laid there on her back and cried.

She cried until the police got there, two cute burly men with Tasers who looked down on us for our little tussle. They asked us each twenty questions and then shrugged off.

“Technically we ought to take both of you in, but as long as you behave yourselves, we’ll let you go just this once.”

“Thank you, officers,” Marcy said flirtatiously, already back on the market.

“How many times do you do this in a day?” I asked the slightly taller officer. I could envision him wearing his uniform on the weekends to cheap bachelorette parties for some spare cash. Under that Kevlar, did he have a six pack?

“Break up fights?”

“Yeah.”

“Quite a few.”

“Ever do anything interesting with these handcuffs?”

The officer seemed rather amused by this, and he even gave me his number before he left, which made Marcy glare at me. “I called dibs.”

“What the fuck, you whore. You just got dumped by Carter and you’re already trying to bone someone else? Also, men are not pieces of property you can call dibs on.”

“Says you. You take all the good ones.”

“That’s because I have a way better ass than you. And boobs. Even Carter agrees.”

“Would you two just shut the fuck up for five seconds?” Carter asked.

“Go die in a hole, Carter,” I said.

“Go fuck your mom and contract syphilis,” Marcy said.

“Good one.”

“I hate you, Janet.”

“I hate you, too, Marcy.”