



# The Pool

## Vicki Wilson

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# Editor's Preface

Each month, Unmanned Press publishes an original short work of fiction from an emerging and underserved writer. We hope over the course of a year readers will pay attention to these writers, ask questions, and look for more of their work. November is the launch of our Short of the Month series and we are delighted that we can present to you: *The Pool* by Vicki Wilson.

*The Pool* was a story that immediately captivated our interest because it forced us to dwell on loss, and how, as individuals, we digest it. Death, war, acute misunderstandings, and all sorts of other circumstances can erupt and fracture a life and prevent resolve between people or a community. Yet time will cruelly propel forward, regardless. So loss, if not a stone to carry, can become something of a frozen asset and manifest into an obsession, which one might turn to, again and again, as if looking through a keyhole, hoping to see something, perhaps something *different*. And a successful story is interesting largely because of an ability to touch emotions, and that's the kind of story *The Pool* is—strong. Bring all your friends. Read it around the table. Share it. Send it to your e-reader. Definitely start a fan club. And, enjoy!

Yours,

The Editors

I'm sitting on my deck. Having a beer. Watching them dig.

The backhoe pulls up a hunk of dirt the size of an upright piano. Something falls from the bucket. It looks like a soccer ball. Or an old plant pot?

No.

It's a skull.

It bounces right where the diving board of my in-ground pool was going.



“It’s probably just a deer skull. Or a dog’s.” The man who owns the backhoe is scratching under his gray hard hat.

It doesn’t look like an animal skull, so no one answers him. I know he even thinks it’s human. He just told my wife to call “the

authorities” because they have to be brought in on “things like this.” She shivered when he said it, and I know she’ll have trouble sleeping tonight.

“Guess we’re done for the day,” another backhoe guy says.

“Stick around,” the backhoe owner says. I bet he’s hoping the police will need him and his digger. I bet he thinks he can charge them *and* me for the day.



Katherine and I have lived at 6850 Wide Pond for twenty years, and that’s twenty years we’ve been saving for a pool for our backyard. Her teacher’s salary. My sawmill pittance. Despite its name, our road doesn’t have water near it. Which is OK, because ponds draw mosquitoes.

In-ground pools don’t.

In-ground pools cool you off after a hard day of lifting logs. They take away the sawdust smell and replace it with chlorine.

Katherine even talks about skinny-dipping. I like the idea of it—the skinny dipping—bringing something new to our love life.

Where we live, there's no one to see us if we wanted to get naked on the poolside. I don't really think you can do it in the water. We'd need to crawl out of the pool, dripping, onto the patio and—

“I'm Captain Solomon, and this is Marty.” Captain Solomon is a six-foot fat guy in grey police trousers. He stands in front of me holding out his hand. I shake it. Marty, also fat, but shorter, shakes my hand, too. I didn't hear their car pull up, didn't see them walk out back to where I stand.

“I hear you found a skull,” Solomon says.

“I didn't,” I say. “The backhoe did.”

Marty smirks. I wonder who Marty is.

“This is Indian territory,” Solomon continues, like I never said a thing. “I wouldn’t be surprised if this was an Indian burial ground. Or something.”

Katherine is watching us from the sliding glass doors on the back of the house. I can see that she has her fingernails in her mouth, chewing from one finger to the next, one-two-three-four, as she watches. Solomon, Marty and I move closer to where the backhoe found the skull. We circle the location, all of us looking down at the loose dirt.

“It’ll take about two weeks for the lab to analyze the bones,” Solomon says, noting something in a note pad.

“Two weeks?” I say. “Don’t tell me that means we can’t touch this dirt until then?”

“I’m afraid that’s right.”

“Shit.”

“Don’t worry. The land ain’t goin’ anywhere.” I’m starting to think Solomon is a dick. Because the land “ain’t goin’ anywhere” but the summer is. The hot weather. My skinny-dipping weather is going to fly right by. Everyone knows when someone in a uniform tells you two weeks, it really means four.

“Two weeks,” I repeat. I look up at Katherine, who’s still in the sliding glass doorway, and roll my eyes and shake my head at her.



The potato salad is made with a mix of Hellman’s and Miracle Whip, and Katherine puts a touch of mustard in it, too. I suppose that’s why whenever we go out to eat somewhere and potato salad comes on the side, I never like it, because no one else makes it like that. But when Katherine makes it, and we’re sitting out on the deck at the picnic table eating it along with a

good burger, I can eat a pound or two of the stuff. I've eaten half a pound already.

Katherine is staring out at the potholes in our backyard, not talking. She has her fork half raised, and there's a tomato slice stuck to the end.

"Boo!" I say.

She jumps and the tomato pops off the fork onto the floor and falls between the boards of the deck. "Not funny," she says.

I smile. She smiles. It's funny.

"Stop worrying about the skull," I say. She's had a few nightmares already. Not the screaming kind, just the kind where I wake up, and she's as close to me in the bed as she can be, and she's breathing in a way that I know she's awake. Then, I ask her, "Bad dream?" and she says, "Yes." She never tells me what she dreamed.

“Don’t you wonder what—who—it is?” she asks.

“Not really. It’s probably old—from the Indian days.”

“But what if it isn’t?”

“It is.”

Katherine and I don’t talk about the other bones they found. We just talk about the skull because it’s easier that way. But they did dig and find other bones, more than the bones in just one person. My backyard looks like a quarry.

“Even if it is Indians, it’s still—creepy,” Katherine says.

“It’s just bones.”



“Mr. Rackle? This is Marty, the investigator from the Sheriff’s office.”

So that’s who Marty is.

I’m holding our phone with the cord because I couldn’t find the cordless. I was outside when the phone rang, laying landscaping stone in the front yard only, because we can’t touch the back.

“Yeah? This is Tim Rackle.”

“We got a match on the bones. We’re holding a press conference today at the station. Wanted to let you know because the media will probably call.”

I’m not thrilled about a press conference. The media from as far away as Providence have already been calling.

“Well? Who is it, then? The bones?” I ask.

“It’s two people. Two girls, seventeen and eighteen. They went missing in 1974. We don’t think the murder happened on your property, though. That was just the dumping ground. ”

“Jesus.”

“Don’t tell the media, though. We’re not releasing details, just that we got a match. We’ll control the announcement. Not all the next of kin know yet.”

I don’t want to know. I don’t want to tell the media. I don’t want to tell my wife.

“We’ll be sending some more people over tomorrow,” Marty continues. “I’m afraid this means that your pool is going to be held up a bit longer.”

I don’t care. I don’t want to skinny dip where dead girls were.  
Murder.

“Jesus.” I say it one more time and then we hang up.



Tonight, we eat dinner inside on the dining room table with the doors shut. The phone has rung all day. I know what the media are after: the quote from the homeowners saying how freaked out they are by human bones in their backyard. I won't give it to them.

Katherine and I cooked a frozen pizza.

“Where is the other skull, then?” she asks.

I wondered if she'd think about that. The diggers only found the one.

“Could be an animal carried it off, I suppose.”

“I don't know if I can live here anymore.”

“Let’s not jump into anything.”

The phone rings again, but I have already shut off the answering machine. We won’t answer.



The library is empty except for me. The librarian looks at me funny when I walk in, because sawdust is stuck in my arm hair, I suppose, and I’m sweaty in my old white T-shirt. If I took time to shower and change, though, I would hardly have any time left on my lunch break, and this was my only time to get here. I can’t go tonight and leave Katherine at the house alone.

“Do you have old newspapers? The local Republican?” I ask the librarian.

“How old?”

“1970s.”

“We have them on microfiche.”

She leads me to a desk with a big screen and taps the top, indicating I should sit down. I do. She walks over to a metal filing cabinet and comes back with one box of what look like tiny movie reels.

“Here,” she says. “The Republican, 1974.”

I open my mouth to ask her how she knows, but she says, “I know you’re Mr. Rackle. Try the June issues first. I think that’s when it happened.”

Small town.

She leaves me to figure out how to put the reels on the machine, but it’s easy and I get them on fast. The first week’s worth of papers I read has the story on Tuesday.

*Teen Girls Missing: Carly Roach, 18, of Sugar Heights, and Katherine Smith, 19, of Nordick, were reported missing earlier today after they failed to return from a weekend bike ride on the Autumn Trail. Family members say that Roach and Smith were good friends who biked often in that section of...*

The story describes what the girls wore: matching Mickey Mouse sweatshirts and shorts. Later stories appear less optimistic.

#### *Roach and Smith Feared Dead*

*And then, in July: Man Captured in Connection with Local Girls' Disappearance: Thirty-eight-year-old Adrian Marks has been charged with the disappearance of two local teenagers in June. Marks is a drifter with no last-known address...*

“Mr. Rackle?” I jump. The librarian stands to the right of me.  
“It’s almost one. I thought you might need to get back to the sawmill.”

“Thanks. I do.” I start to collect up the films and box them.

“Here. I can do that for you.”

I say thanks again. I’m rattled.

“How far did you get?” The librarian is looking at the tape on the reels that mark the dates of each film.

“Through July.”

“Mmmhmm. Well, just so you know, because you look like you need to know, the guy—Marks—got the electric chair in Texas in 1976. Turns out he’d had a history, even without these girls.”

“You read all this?” I say, sweeping my hand over the box. I don’t know why people get nosey about these kinds of things, when it doesn’t affect them.

“Yes, about thirty years ago. Katherine Smith was in my class at school.”

Of course.

I say thank you one more time and rush out the door. I’ll be late getting back to the mill, not that anyone will really care. I’m always working overtime.

I don’t know what, if anything, of this I’ll tell Kath when I get home.

One of the girls had the same first name as her. She’s going to think that means something.



“Where were you?” Kath says when I walk through the front door at ten after six. She’s biting her nails. She has a shoe in her

left hand, although I'm not sure why. She already has her sneakers on.

"Just got caught up at work. I came home as fast as I could."

I take off my work shirt, start emptying my lunch pail.

"One of those girls had the same name as me." Turns out Kath went to the school library when she had a break and looked up the story herself.

"Just the first name," I say. Kath does not smile. I should know better than to try to be light. "It's nothing, honey. Just a coincidence."

"They weren't even twenty," she says, dropping the shoe and sitting in a chair at the kitchen table.

"I know. But there's good news."

“What?”

“The guy who did it? Marks? He got the electric chair.”

“So?”

“So their families got justice, and we won’t be stuck in a never-ending murder investigation that holds up our pool for years. They already have the guy.”

“Tim.”

I look at Kath. I know what she’s going to say.

“We have to put our house on the market,” she says. “I can’t live here anymore.”

I don’t say anything. I walk to her, stand behind her, put my arms around her. We have twenty good years in this house. I would fight her on it, talk her out of it, if I felt differently from

her. But I don't. Indian bones, even an old village graveyard, I could deal with. But not this. Not two murdered teenage girls. Pool or no pool, whenever I look out there, all I'll see is their high school senior pictures in black and white, the ones the newspaper printed, where they're smiling.

There's no way in hell anyone's gonna buy this place.



The realtor is skittish but trying to be professional. She loves the inside of the house (and she should. We put a lot of care into it.) but you can tell that she's hedging on going out back. She's glanced out of the back windows a few times, snapping her head around when she realized what she was doing. I don't think she's going to be the realtor for us. When she drove up, there was a TV news truck at the edge of the driveway and she parked as far away from it as she could. You could see her calculating the distance.

“Well, you’ve certainly made the place top-notch,” the realtor, Vicki, says. “Hardwood floors throughout. Granite in the kitchen.”

Katherine nods. “Sure. Vicki, are you comfortable with this?”

That’s my Katherine. No hedging.

Vicki hesitates. Then, “Truthfully, no. And not just because of the...murder. I think, professionally, you’re trying to sell too soon. You’re going to need to wait until this isn’t fresh in the minds of buyers. Or, you’re going to have to sell at a ridiculous price just to get it off your hands. I’m not sure this is the time...”

Vicki stops talking because both Katherine and I are not paying attention to her. We’re looking out the back window. A man, gray-haired, is standing in our backyard, his hands in his pockets.

“I’m just gonna...” I say, moving toward the sliding doors in the back of the house that lead onto the deck.

“I’m coming too,” Kath says.

Vicki says she’ll see herself out.



The man doesn’t turn, but he obviously hears us walking up behind him because he says, “Is this where they were?” before I can say anything.

I’m careful. I’m not sure who this guy is, and I motion for Katherine to stay back a few feet. He could be media. He could be police. He could be deranged.

“Excuse me sir, but who are you?” I ask. I’m careful. I stay back a few feet, too. I’m a big guy from the sawmill, but you never know what anyone’s carrying nowadays.

He turns to me. His face is the kind of empty where there is so much emotion, it can't fit all on one face, so it doesn't even try. He holds out his hand. "Norman Smith."

I shake his hand and, behind me, I see Katherine's right hand go to her mouth. "I'm Tim. This is my wife...Katherine." I motion toward her.

If he is shocked by the name, he doesn't show it.

"Kathy was my daughter," he says.

But Katherine and I already know that. Katherine moves up to stand next to me on my right side. She says, "I'm so, so sorry."

Norman smiles, and it's the smile from Katherine Smith's senior picture. "It's OK," he says. "It's a long, long time."

It's anything but OK. We can see that. But Norman wants us to feel comfortable. I'll bet he's had thirty years of making people feel comfortable about his daughter's murder.

"I hope you don't mind," he says, "but I wanted to see where they found them."

"No, of course," Katherine says. She's shaking a bit. "We can leave you alone..."

"No. I like the company."

Norman walks around, his hands back in his pockets. He looks up at the sky, to the right and left at the trees, and over the hill. Sometimes Katherine and I forget, but we have a really beautiful view. When the weather's clear, you can see for a mile or two.

Norman pauses and seems to take a deep breath before he speaks. "Pretty. Peaceful. If I'd had her to bury, I would've wanted her someplace like this. That's something, I guess."

I can hear Katherine swallow one, two, three times.

“You guys have kids?”

“No,” I answer.

Norman nods. “Well, thank you for looking out for my girl. And for Carly. She was a good girl, too.”

I don’t know what to say. Katherine is squeezing her hands together, rubbing them.

“They’ve had a nice place here, but I’ll bring them home now, when the police let me,” Norman says, nodding. “It’ll be good to have them home.”

Then Norman walks over to Katherine and takes her hands in his. He looks her right in the eyes. “So. Your responsibility is done now,” he says. “You hear?”

Katherine nods. He doesn't move, so she nods again.

He lets her hands go.

Katherine exhales.

I do, too.



If we'd have kept up with the idea of having our in-ground pool, we would've waited until the fall. That's when everything was resolved, around October. I'm not sure places even dig pools in October. Probably if you pay enough.

We moved out at the end of September. It was too much for us, looking out at our backyard every morning. Maybe stronger people would've stuck around. We got a new realtor, a woman named Maggie Loscuza, who was known as The Bear in real

estate circles. We bought a house in town, near the ice cream place. We used our pool money, and Maggie finally sold our old place to a couple who moved here for a job, construction I think.

In the spring, they put in their own in-ground pool. They used the dimensions we would've used. They used the hole we started.

I don't know if they knew the history or not; I guess it wouldn't bother some people.

When I drove by the house one day in summer, they were swimming in their pool. There were two girls with them, probably a little younger than teenagers, using the diving board. I think one was their daughter. The other must've been a friend.

I didn't tell Katherine. She would've shaken her head, asked me why I told her. She would've said I had no business being out there. She would've asked me why I went back there, and I wouldn't have been able to answer.

The End



