

The Swimming Pool

John Boston

Jim Halverson was a no-nonsense, straight-to-the-point, type of individual. He was fifty-three years old, divorced with no children. He had an excellent job working for the state of California and was eligible for retirement in only three years. His pride and joy was a complete backyard renovation that included a deep in-ground swimming pool. It had a small waterfall and auxiliary lighting. It had transformed his run-of-the-mill ranch house in southern California into something truly extraordinary.

There wasn't a blade of grass out of place at the Halverson residence. Jim spent Saturday morning doing his chore list, which included sweeping his driveway and mowing the grass. The rest of the world might be going to hell in a handbasket, but at his house, life couldn't be any better.

The pool was in many ways, a complete waste of money. Jim only used it during the summer months, on the weekends. He hated letting others use his pool for fear they might pee in it. Peeing in the pool was a major no-no as far as Jim was concerned.

The neighborhood had changed quite a bit over the years. More and more *non-Americans* were buying houses. Mainly Asian and Indian families. Jim had been left the house by his parents and was lucky enough to hang onto it in the divorce. He had many acquaintances in the neighborhood, but few friends.

Friends were nothing but trouble and after his divorce, he was done with trouble.....*and women.*

The neighbors would stop by and make small talk. He knew they were waiting for him to drop a pool invite, which he almost never did. He avoided younger people, but older people were not much fun to be around either. He was in that awkward age of not being young, but not being a senior citizen either.

He did invite the Pruitts over. John and Lacy. He had known them for years. He was quite surprised when they showed up at his house with two kids. The invitation was for them only.

"Jim, this is Casey and Jennifer. They're my grandkids."

"I see. Kids, I only have one rule here and that is no peeing in the pool."

"Oh, Jim, they're almost teenagers. They aren't going to pee in your pool."

"The last guy I caught peeing in my pool was almost forty. Needless to say, his pool privileges have since been revoked."

They ate barbecue. Jim and John talked about work. Lacy just kind of zoned out and spent most of the afternoon on her phone. The kids seemed to be enjoying themselves. When it was time to leave, Jim knew what was coming. He really debated just telling them no, but friends at his age were few and far between. He didn't want to upset John and Lacy.

"Jim, can the kids use your pool? They'll be staying with us for the next week or so," said John

"Fine with me, just remember my one rule kids. I don't have many rules, but the few I have better not get broken."

"They'll be fine Jim. I can come over with them."

"Okay, you still have your key, right?"

"Sure do."

"Okay, I'll leave the gate unlocked."

Jim didn't think much of it. He knew John and Lacy would make sure nothing went wrong, but he didn't like the idea of anyone using his pool when he wasn't there.

There were just a few too many variables in that equation for his liking.

It was Wednesday afternoon. He came home at exactly five twenty-two. He walked into the kitchen to make some dinner and figured he'd better. He put down his mail when he looked out into the backyard through the screen door. His backyard was a complete mess. He walked outside and nearly had a heart attack when he saw one of his lounge chairs at the bottom of the pool. This was in no way acceptable in the Halverson household.

He fished the chair out of the water. Thankfully, it didn't seem to have done any damage. There were used towels and empty soda cans everywhere. Jim was fuming. He knew he had to take a step back before he confronted Lacy and John. He and John were good friends. He and Lacy, not so much. He spent the next half hour cleaning up the backyard and ran the cleaning cycle on the pool filter. California didn't let its residents waste any water, so the water had to be returned to the city water supply, even with chlorine in it.

He had a quick supper, then decided it was time to have a little *heart-to-heart* with John and Lacy.

He meandered his way over to their house, which was right next to his. He always knocked on the back door, even after knowing them as long as he did. He couldn't stand people that just barged into the house as if they owned it.

"Knock, Knock," he said as he poked his head in.

"Hey, what's going on?" asked Lacy

"Lacy.....how shall I put this? Your grandkids destroyed my backyard today?"

"What? No, they didn't."

"They did. Look, I don't mind if you use the pool, but you can't leave the place a war zone."

"Jim, they weren't at your house today."

"They weren't?"

"No. Casey had a ball game and Jenn wasn't feeling well. She hasn't left her bedroom. The kids haven't been over there today."

"So, who the hell destroyed my backyard?"

"I don't know."

"Well.....the plot thickens."

Jim decided to take matters into his own hands. One of the big reasons why he chose to buy his parent's house is because it was built in the 1970s, long before the dreaded words HOA came into existence. The downside of that is that there are no gates or fences to keep out unwelcome guests from the neighborhood. The Hollywood hills go on forever. Anyone on the street above him can look down into his pool and perhaps decide to take a swim whether they have an invitation or not.

He ordered some wireless security cameras. They wouldn't be at his house for two days. He could check the cameras on his phone. It was a nice security feature. He didn't really know anyone in the neighborhood well enough to ask around, not that anyone would have confessed. He assumed it was kids, but who knows? He didn't get much from adults either.

He spent the next two days at work. The cameras were waiting for him in his drop box in front of his house. He walked into the backyard and was stunned to see four of five kids swimming in his pool!

Jim had caught them in the act. Damn kids weren't even smart enough to take off before five o'clock.

He put his packages down. The kids didn't even seem to pay any attention to him.

"What are you kids doing?"

Only two of them even looked at him.

"I said, what the hell do you kids think you're doing?"

"Swimming. What else would we be doing?" said one of the kids.

"Alright, that's enough, kids, party's over. You kids just can't show up at somebody's house and start using their pool, it's called trespassing. That's a crime."

"We just wanted to use your pool, that shouldn't be a crime." said one of the girls.

"Did I give you my permission to use my pool?"

"No."

"Kids.....get out of my pool and don't come back, unless you have an invitation. The next time, I won't be so nice," said Jim angrily.

"I like this pool. I make sure no one pees in it." said one of the kids.

"Well, I certainly appreciate that, but the pool is closed until further notice."

"I sure would like to use your pool, mister. We all would. It would mean a lot to us." said one of the kids. Jim kind of assumed he was the leader of this motley group.

He turned and saw Lacy walking towards his gate. He walked over to her.

"Lace.....do you have any idea who these kids are?" said Jim pointing.

"What kids?" she asked looking confused.

"The ones in my....." he stopped mid-sentence as he turned and saw that the kids were now gone.

"You've got to be kidding me, where the hell did they go?" he said and ran towards the house. The house was locked, so he ran around in front. He ran around the house where he keeps the garbage cans and couldn't find any of them. He walked down the street and still there was no sign of them.

They must have just hopped over the fence and ran down the hill, but if they did that, Lacey would have seen them. How the hell did those kids disappear so fast?

Jim walked back to his house and unlocked the back door. He went out to his garage and put a padlock on the gate to his pool. The kids could still climb the fence, but it might make them think twice. He walked over to John and Lacey's house.

"Hi there, stranger," said John

"Hi there yourself, bud. Guys, I've got a bit of a problem here. It seems I have some unwanted guests who have been using my pool."

"Really, who?"

"Neighborhood kids, I'm assuming. I've never seen any of them before. Yeah, I came home from work, and there they are, just sitting there, right in the backyard, having a grand old time. There were empty soda cans in the pool."

"No kidding? Jim, I've been in and out all day, I didn't see anyone or hear anyone in your backyard," said Lacey.

"Well, they most certainly were there. I'm just glad I caught them. The thing that really irks me is that the kids didn't even seem to care that they were trespassing. It was like my pool was community property."

"Do you want to call the cops?"

"Don't know what good it would do, except maybe put a good scare in them. They would just tell the kids to go home."

"This neighborhood has changed so much over the years, I barely recognize anyone anymore. When we first moved here in 96, we had block parties and softball games. Everyone knew everyone else. Might not have liked them, but at least you knew who they were. I drive down the street now and don't recognize anyone. All of my friends have moved to Las Vegas or Phoenix. California isn't very attractive anymore unless you're a deadbeat or a millionaire." said John as he sipped his coffee.

"Well, I'd greatly appreciate any help I can get. I put a lock on the patio gate. If you see the kids there, I guess you'll have to call the cops."

"Jim, you might not want to call the cops," said John

"Why not?"

"Well, your parents had that house built in the 1970s. They never imagine putting a pool in. If the kid's parents make a big stink, the city could say you have to put a security fence around the pool. Most pool installers won't even build unless you have a fence built first. I don't think yours counts as a security fence."

"A security fence? Those things cost thousands!"

"I'm just letting you know. The city of Hollywood is getting more ridiculous with each passing year. They fined some guy down the street for having too many trash cans on his curbs. They were brand new metal cans!"

"Yes, John. I don't think we need to call the police. If I see anyone in the pool, I'll give them my best mom voice. I'm sure it won't be too hard to track down their parents."

"I spent a fortune on that backyard. The last thing in the world I want is to have an accident there. When I think of all the dumb things we used to do as kids, it's a wonder we're even here."

He was off for the weekend. Much to his dismay on Saturday morning at around noon, he poked his head outside his bedroom window and could see some kids playing in his pool. He snuck out the front door and walked over to John and Lacey's house. He knocked on the front door, but the only one who answered was Casey.

"Hi Casey, are John and Lacey home?"

"No, they went food shopping. Something I can help you with?"

"Maybe there is. Want to go for a swim?" he asked.

John planned that Casey would show up and mingle with the kids, maybe find out where they lived. Anything he could use to find out who they were. They walked over to the house and when they got to the patio gate, the kids were gone.

"Man, those kids move fast. Casey, did you hear or see any kids today?" asked Jim

"No?"

"Nothing? Not a thing all day, you heard nothing?"

"No."

"You were sitting out on your patio, this morning, right?"

"And you didn't see anything?"

"No Jim, I didn't see anything. Look, I got stuff to do. I'll take a rain check on the pool." he said and walked back towards the house.

He just couldn't understand how these kids could disappear so fast. It didn't make any sense.

It was like they were ghosts or something.

Jim had an important decision to make. Did he involve the cops and perhaps invite a whole lot of trouble? He could do nothing. He quickly realized that wasn't much of an option either. He would have a giant lawsuit on his hands if one of those kids drowned in his pool. As much as he hated not knowing the unknown, he knew he had to have something on file with the police in case something went horribly wrong. In Jim's case, he had no idea just how horribly wrong things can go.

He reluctantly left for work Monday morning. He spent the day before installing the cameras and making sure he could record them on his phone. They were motion activated and would send him an alert if they detected motion.

He never did call the cops. He figured the next time he caught them in his yard, he was going to put the fear of God into the kids. He was going to use his dad voice. If that didn't work, he'd just yell and scream like a madman. He just had to hope it wouldn't come to that.

The cameras detected nothing all day. He finished up his work and left promptly at five. He pulled into the driveway at five twenty-one. He stuck his head out around the back and didn't see anyone. Maybe the kids had gotten the picture.

He was in the middle of making dinner when he stuck his head out the kitchen window to look at his pool and that's when he saw her. A girl was floating face down in the pool. He dropped his dish on the floor and ran outside. She wasn't moving. He dove into the water and pulled her to the edge. She wasn't breathing. He ran over to Jim and Lacey's house and nearly broke the back door.

"Guys.....there's a little girl who drowned in my pool, call 911!"

John and Lacey quickly put down their plates. Lacey called 911 while John and Jim ran back over to his backyard. Jim stopped in his tracks.

The little girl was gone.

"What the hell, she was right here!"

Jim and John searched the backyard for her. When they didn't find anything, they searched the house. Jim ran back to where he had left the girl and looked over the side of his fence. No way could the girl have made it down the mountain in the time he went to their house and back. There was just no way.

"Jim.....there's nobody here. Are you sure she was dead?"

"I don't know. She certainly looked dead. Her face was blue."

"Obviously she wasn't."

"Yeah, thank God."

Jim could hear the wail of the sirens as they turned onto his cul-du-sac. There were two police cars with the ambulance. Jim met them at the door and tried to explain to the officers and paramedics what had happened. They were naturally skeptical.

"I'm sorry guys, I don't know what happened to the girl. I pulled her out of the pool and ran over to John's house. When I came back, she was gone."

"Gone? Where'd she go?" asked one of the officers.

"I don't know. Obviously, she wasn't dead. I guess she just wanted to scare me. It certainly worked."

"We have to search your house. You aren't on drugs or anything, are you?" asked one of the officers

"What? No. Look, I should have called you guys sooner. Some neighborhood kids have been using my pool without my permission when I'm at work. They leave the backyard a mess."

"This is a nice backyard. I've been thinking about doing this to my house. How much did this cost you?" asked one of the paramedics.

"A lot. Look, I'm sorry I wasted your time."

"We still need to search the property."

Jim said nothing as the officers and paramedics searched his backyard. They went through his trash cans and looked inside his garage. By now, several neighbors had gathered outside his house to see what was happening.

"I don't know what to tell you, sir. Next time you need to be sure you have an emergency before you dial 911. Don't be surprised if you get billed for our call-out. The city doesn't take too kindly to fake 911 calls." said the officer.

Jim said nothing and just went back into his house. He was both angry and embarrassed. He had gone 53 years without ever having an interaction with the police. He had never even gotten a speeding ticket. Now, he was going to be the talk of the neighborhood for weeks to come. John called and asked him to come over.

John gave him a beer as he came into the kitchen.

"Boy, I really messed up."

"Jim.....John and I have been looking for these kids for the past couple of days. We haven't seen anybody. Are you sure you're feeling okay?" asked Lacey.

"Come on, Lacey, of course, I'm fine. I swear she was in the pool, guys. You see my clothes are drenched.

"John, we asked your neighbor on the other side, Mr. Ling, if he could keep an eye on your property as well. We just called him. He's nearly eighty and spends all day in his house. He's a great security system. He says he hasn't seen anyone at your house either."

"Well, somebody's there, Lacey."

"Jim, kids are about as quiet as a chainsaw. There's no way, they could sneak over and use your pool without someone seeing them. No one has seen a thing." said Lacey

"I'm not crazy Lacey. The kids are very real. I'm not trashing my own backyard."

"You know, I've got a bunch of vacation time I have to burn before I retire. I might just hang around the house for the next couple of days.....and I'll be watching your house for most of it. If those kids come around, we'll catch them.

"I might just take a couple of days off myself. I've got a few projects around the house I'd like to finish."

"Don't worry bud, we'll get them. Every young punk probably starts out this way and thinks it's okay....well, it isn't. If their parents won't do their job, I guess we will." said John

Three days passed. Not a peep from the mysterious group of kids. Every time Jim looked outside the window, he saw nothing. John kept an eye on the backyard as well. He was beginning to get a little suspicious of what was going on over there. How in the hell can a bunch of kids use a pool fifty feet from his backyard and not make a sound? Didn't really make any sense. He and his wife had been keeping an eye on the property since Jim's first incident and still had not seen or heard anything. Even Lacey was beginning to get suspicious.

"Honey.....this is crazy. The only house in the neighborhood with any kids belongs to those Indian couples at the end of the street. I don't think they even let their kids out of the house." she said while making lunch.

"Well, I don't think he would make something like this up. Jim's a pretty straight shooter."

"I know.....I just can't understand how we haven't seen or heard anything in his backyard. I saw him putting up security cameras last week. Maybe they got something."

"Maybe. We can't have kids just showing up at our house, uninvited and using the pool. It could be our house next." he said, opening a beer and sitting at the table.

"I just worry about him sometimes. Years of loneliness and solitude can break anyone, even a guy like Jim," she said.

"He's fine. Wait till we catch these punks. He won't seem so crazy then."

"If we catch them.....*if we catch them.*"

Jim felt confident enough to venture to the local supermarket to stock up on groceries. He was gone for about an hour and a half. As soon as he pulled into the driveway, he knew something was wrong. He took his perishable inside and walked into the kitchen. He looked out his back window and could see the kids having the time of their lives in his pool. He nearly had a heart attack when he saw one of the kids standing on the edge peeing into his pool.

Jim flew out the backyard door Just as he was about to tackle the little punk, peeing in his brand-new pool, he saw John standing over the edge of the gate, waving to him.

"Jimmy, you coming over for dinner and cards tonight? Lacey invited her friends over.....they are height and weight proportionate and single."

Jim was totally confused. Maybe John had already called the cops.....*maybe he didn't.* Either way, he should be helping him round up these little assholes until the cops show up.

"Well, there they are. Like they own the freggin' place."

"What?"

"The kids."

"What kids?" said John confused.

Jim's entire body went numb. He felt a bolt of fear shoot through his body. None of this made any sense.....*how come John didn't see any of the kids? Were they real.....or just existing in his mind?*

"Never mind. Not tonight, I've got something for work to take care of."

"On a Saturday night?"

"Yeah.....tell Lacey, I'll take a rain check," said John as he headed back towards the house. He didn't even say anything to the children. A little girl was sitting on the steps leading up to the backdoor of his house.

"Why are you doing this to me?"

"You got a great pool, mister." said the little girl, exposing a missing tooth as she smiled.

"This is my pool. None of you are welcome here. Get out of here before I call the cops."

The little girl stopped smiling. She had a nasty look on her face. It scared Jim so badly, he stepped away from her.

"We just want to use your pool. That's all any kid wants," she said as she walked away.

Jim was about to go back into the house when he stopped himself. These kids weren't calling the shots here. He was the grownup here. He spent a small fortune to create his own little piece of paradise and now these little punks were going to ruin it. This had gone far enough. He turned around and saw all of the kids were now staring at him. Some were in the pool, some were out of it. Some were sitting on his lawn furniture. He walked up to the biggest kid there. He had a freckled face and a bowl cut.

"You kids get out of here.....now!" he said angrily.

"We just want to use your pool, mister." said the freckled kid.

"Go use someone else's pool. Use the pool at the park, it's free," said Jim

"It's not the same. We like this pool."

"Well, you can't use this pool. Tell me, how would you like it if I just showed up at your house one day and acted like I lived there?" asked Jim

The freckled kid just shrugged his shoulders.

"This idiot was peeing in the pool and you were all swimming in it!"

"We sure do like your pool mister. Can we use it?" asked the freckled kid again.

"What? Didn't you hear a word I just said? GET OUT OF HERE! I DON'T EVER WANT TO SEE ANY OF YOU LITTLE SHITS HERE AGAIN!" he shouted.

The freckled kid turned away. He put his towel over his shoulders and began to walk away. He stopped as he got to the gate.

"It's not fair," he said.

"What's not fair?" asked Jim

"You have this awesome pool and you don't let anyone use it. You don't even use it. It's just not fair." he said tearing up.

"Life isn't fair. Get used to it. The older you get, the more unfair it becomes." said John. One by one, the kids quietly turned and walked away, in a single file, through the gate, and into the street. Jim was determined to follow them this time, but one by one, they just seemed to vanish.....*like ghosts*.

Jim went into his house and poured himself a drink. He was shaking. He hadn't been this rattled in years....by a bunch of ten-year-old kids no less. He looked up and saw the freckled kid at his back door.

Jim opened the back door. The kid was standing there motionless, with his towel around his neck and bare feet.

"Can I help you?"

"Are you going to let us use your pool?" asked the kid

"No. That is my final answer. I see you kids in my pool again and it's going to get ugly."

"Are you sure?" asked the kid.

"Positive," said Jim.

"Okay then, if that's how you really feel. Just remember Jim, if we can't use your pool.....*then nobody will*," he said coldly. As he turned and walked away.

Well, that was weird. Maybe they finally got the picture. He thought to himself as he finished his drink.

Jim decided to head over to John and Lacey's for dinner. He didn't even knock, he just let himself in. He could tell right away that something was off. They were both very quiet.

"Hiya neighbor," said Jim.

"Hi. Jim.....who were you talking to earlier?" asked Lacey

"My uninvited house guests. I think they finally got the picture this time. So, what's for dinner?"

Lacey and John looked uncomfortably at one another. John wouldn't even look at him.

"Jim.....are you okay? I mean, mentally," asked Lacey as she turned to face him.

"Yes.....as far as I know."

"Jimmy.....we watched you. We watched you come home. We watched you walk out to your backyard. We watched you have a conversation with someone who wasn't there. You were talking to yourself. There were no kids in your backyard." she said.

"What are you talking about? Of course, there were. I wasn't imagining they were destroying my backyard."

"Jim.....there weren't any kids in your backyard. You were just talking to an invisible person," said John.

"Guys.....what are you talking about? Of course, they were there. I spent the last fifteen minutes cleaning up after them." he said suddenly getting a very uneasy feeling as to where the conversation was headed.

"Jim.....you called the police to say there was a dead girl in your pool. We watched you talking to yourself today. So, I've got to ask.....are you okay?" asked Lacey.

"Of course I'm okay. I'm not making this up, there really were kids in my pool, Lacey," he said both angrily and somewhat hurt.

"Jim.....if they were there, why can't we see them? You say you can't even follow them, they just seem to disappear. No ten-year-old kid can just disappear, they have to go somewhere. We're just worried about you is all."

"There's certainly no need to be worried about me. I'm fine. I don't understand how you didn't see any of these kids, I really don't."

"We didn't see them because they don't exist, that's why. These kids are all make-believe in your head, Jimmy," said Lacey

Jim said nothing as he folded his hands and put them on the kitchen table.

"It's nice to know I could count on you guys when things get tough," he said and headed towards the door.

"Come on, Jim. Sit down, dinner's almost ready," said John.

"No thanks. I lost my appetite," he said and stepped out the back door.

Neither John nor Lacey tried to stop him. He walked back to his house and poured himself another drink. He would probably need a few more before the night was over.

The phone rang at 7:00 AM the following morning. Jim had a slight hangover from the night before. He rolled over in bed and picked up the phone. The new guy in the office had locked himself out of the office. He had left his badge on his desk and asked Jim if he could come down and open the door for him. Jim wasn't in any condition to do anything, but the rumor was this wonder boy was going to be running the show pretty soon and Jim didn't want to make an enemy out of him. He got dressed and made himself a cup of coffee to take with him on his way to the office. He looked out the back window and could see a girl floating in his pool, face down. He was tempted to run out there and have a look, but he knew he couldn't do that. None of these kids were real. It was all in his head. As upset as he was last night, he knew John and Lacey were right all along. He was going to have to confront his demons sooner or later but now was not the time. He walked out the front door and drove to his office which was about twenty minutes away. Freeway traffic was pretty light for a Sunday morning. The new kid was very bright but had zero real-world experience. He hugged Jim when he showed up and promised him that his kindness would not go unrewarded. The two of them talked for nearly half an hour when Jim told him he had to get going. He couldn't wait to see what surprises the neighborhood kids had in store for him when he got home. He stopped at a coffee shop for more coffee and a danish.

As soon as he pulled into the cul-du-sac, he saw the police lights and a small crowd around his house.

Jim was greeted by some neighbors as soon as he pulled into his driveway. There were two police cars and two ambulances parked in front of his house.

"What the hell is going on?" asked Jim.

"Jesus Christ, Jim.....it's bad.....it's really bad." said one of his neighbors.

Jim ran into his backyard just in time to see the paramedic putting the lifeless body of Jenn into a body bag. It turns out it was Jenn who was floating in his pool this morning.

"What the hell happened?" he asked softly

"Are you the owner of the house?" asked a police officer

"Yes. Where are John and Lacey? I've got to see them."

"I don't think that would be a good idea right now, sir. They're both in a state of shock. John found her this morning at about eight-thirty. Did you know she was coming over to use your pool?" asked another officer.

"No, no, I didn't."

"Her brother said she wanted to take a swim before they had to go to the airport. They were both supposed to go back home today. Imagine that. We're going to have to ask you some questions here, Mr. Halverson. This drowning doesn't make any sense. She was on her swim team in school." said another officer.

"Those kids.....those horrible little monsters. They're the ones that did this. They killed her!" said Jim.

"What kids?"

"The ones who have been sneaking into my backyard and using my pool like it was theirs. I told them not to come back. that's what I told them." said Jim quietly as the horror of what had happened was beginning to sink in.

"Right.....Mr. Halverson, we'd like you to come downtown with us to be interviewed by our detectives.

You can have a lawyer with you if you would like to bring one." said an officer.

"Am I under arrest?"

"Not yet. It's completely voluntary. It certainly would help clear things up. We'd like to hear more about these kids who have been using your pool. Said another officer.

"Of course. These kids have to be stopped," said Jim.

The officers led him away from the crime scene and towards a police car. On the way to the police car, Jim stopped as the gang of kids was stopped right in front of the police car.....*as if they were waiting for him.*

"Hey mister, can we use your pool, now?" asked the little girl with the missing tooth.

Jim said nothing as he was led into the back of the police car and driven downtown for his interrogation. These kids had to be stopped. Jim was going to make them believe.....he was going to make them believe.....*and maybe even make himself believe it too.*