

Community Pool Advisor

by Matt DeVirgiliis

The early morning heat and humidity suffocated the air in the Raleigh suburb. Those who were out and about were either barley clothed or sweating buckets. But it was Monday, so most were forced to exit their cool homes and apartments, schlep their way to their cars, and scoot to work.

In the Trail's End apartment complex, Lydia Hightower got herself ready for a different day: she planned to enjoy the heat at the pool.

Built like a walrus - short, thick arms, no neck, and a rotund body - she plopped her way around her one-room apartment and tossed necessities for her day at the community pool into her mesh bag. Lotion, a spray bottle, a towel, a white, fuzzy visor, and a Danielle Steele paperback, all were thrown in. She pulled her front door closed, locked it up, slung her bag over her plump shoulder, and headed toward the center of the nicely landscaped complex, toward the pool.

The kidney-shaped pool was no more than five feet deep and surrounded by a sidewalk. Reclining chairs and small tables sat on the pavement. Palm tress and wispy-leaved shrubs bordered the outside of the pavement, and a black metal fence surrounded the entire area. Guests entered through swinging gates.

Lydia walked through a gate and trotted along the sizzling sidewalk, looking for a chair shaded by a palm. The chairs were comfortable, but even in the shade they needed a beach towel strewn across them to keep them from getting too hot. She picked a chair, nicely shaded and toward one end of the pool, and put down her bag.

Not too many people were in the pool; it was still quite early in the morning, just barley nine thirty. A few mothers gave their young kids swimming lessons in one end. Two mothers played with their kids on the steps at the other end, keeping them entertained and cool.

Lydia slid into the pool and rubbed lotion on the exposed areas of skin. She lathered her flipper arms. She lathered her sun-worn face. And she lathered her chest, rubbing some between her chubby breasts.

"Good morning, Lydia." A young woman paddled to Lydia's side.

"You too, Suzie. Kids up early this morning?"

"Seven o'clock as usual," said Suzie.

"Early to rise means early to bed. And that's never a bad thing," said Lydia.

"That's what you always say," said Suzie, as she pushed her way through the water and away from Lydia.

Lydia sat the fuzzy, white visor over her fuzzier, whiter, curly hair. She wiped sweat beads from her forehead, dipped her hand in the water, and splashed her face. More kids and their moms filled the pool area. Lydia read her romance novel. The kids laughed and splashed, kicked and cannon balled. Lydia read.

Wyatt, a skinny toddler ran around the edge of the pool, past Lydia. Lydia shot her arm out and grabbed his tiny wrist. What's chasing you, Wyatt?

"Nothing," said Wyatt. "I just want to get to the other side."

"So you're a chicken?"

"No," he said, not quite getting it.

"Do me a favor, Wyatt? Smack the sidewalk with your hand." Wyatt's little hand slapped the pavement. "Now, was that hard or soft?"

"Hard," said Wyatt.

"How'd you like to crack your noggin on that?"

"It would hurt," he said.

"It would," agreed Lydia, "so you should walk cautiously to the other side of the pool." Wyatt scampered slowly to the other side of the pool. Lydia picked up her book and rested her dimpled elbows on the side of the pool, putting the book in front of her face.

"He'll learn from you sooner or later, Lydia."

"Morning, Walt."

Walt put his small duffel bag down on a reclining chair and pulled lotion and sporty sunglasses out of the bag. He lathered up his chiseled face and chest, very fit for an older man. He pushed back his salt and pepper colored hair and put on his sunglasses and sat on the edge of the pool, hanging his feet in the water. "What book you reading?"

"A steamy romance. Why?"

"I have time for a book."

"Work dried up?" asked Lydia.

"For the next couple of weeks. No one wants a carpenter, at least not an uninsured carpenter."

"Get insurance," said Lydia.

"How'd you make out at the doctor?" asked Walt, trying to change the subject.

Lydia squirmed a bit, looked up from her book, and switched on him quickly. "Don't you mind me, Walt, you have kids to think about. My health is just fine. Now why don't you get insurance?"

"That costs money. And I don't have it right now."

Lydia put her book face down on the pavement. "Why didn't you get it while you had work?" asked Lydia.

"I have to pay the rent and send money to the ex and kids." He gently kicked his feet forward and backward in the water, sometimes letting his legs float to the surface, his leg hair spreading and separating like the legs of a millipede.

"If you get insurance, would you get better work?"

"I would."

"Will you get better pay?"

"I would," said Walt.

"What could you do with that better pay?"

Walt put his head down and watched his legs kick the water, like a child in timeout. "I could buy a house. And I could send more money to my kids."

Lydia tapped his arm. "Well then get that insurance. You have every reason to get it and only money holds you back. And you can

probably make that cost up quickly if you're getting better jobs and better pay. If you'd like, I can give you half to get you started."

"Thanks, Lydia. But I'll pay for it. I'll fill out the paperwork tonight."

Crying bellowed from the other side of the pool. Wyatt lay on the pavement, screaming and holding his bloody chin with his hand.

"I had better check on him," said Lydia. She left her book on the ground and started swimming across the pool. She stopped, turned around, and looked back to face Walt. "Don't cut your chin, dear."

"I won't," he said and smiled, "I won't."

The night brought a slight breeze, but it was a thick and heavy breeze, a choking hazard. Walt sat in his apartment - building A, number 117 - and cracked the window next to his desk and flicked on his computer. Taking a sip of bourbon, he ran his hands through his hair and started entering personal information into fields for an online carpenter's insurance form — last name, first name, middle initial, social security. He filled his glass with more bourbon and plowed from one page to the next. "Damn paperwork," he complained through his teeth. "She should fill out paperwork. Not me," he said as he gulped another glass of the golden bourbon.

Across the way - in building D, apartment 261- Suzie patted Wyatt's chin with a cotton ball and peroxide in the bathroom. He screamed and yelled. "Stay still, Wyatt. It won't take much longer, but if you keep squirming I'll have to do it again." She held the back of his head and firmly pressed the moist cotton against the underside of his mangled chin.

He sat on the toilet and cried as his mom finished up the procedure with a small butterfly bandage. Sniffling, he rubbed his nose with his forearm and then squished his head into Suzie's stomach. "That wasn't too bad, was it? Now, who wants a lollipop?" Wyatt leapt off the toilet and darted out of the bathroom.

Walt paced his apartment, now drinking straight from the bottle and every now and then glancing at the bright computer screen, the only thing lighting the dark room. He tossed his head back, almost in a spasm, and finished off the bottle. Then he walked to the

computer, drug the mouse so the cursor sat over the *Cancel* button, and clicked, clearing all the fields he'd filled in and aborting the process altogether. "Less money for me is less money for her," he said as he plopped himself on a couch and passed out.

Lydia was in her apartment — building A, number 345. She was ready for bed, her hair up in curlers and her face covered in a green, pudding-like mask. She sat in front of the television with a large piece of pound cake. She took a first bite and savored it like it was the first piece of cake she'd ever eaten. After a few moments, she took another forkful and then another and another, each time more quickly until she was shoveling it at a sprinter's pace. Her fork clinked the empty plate, and Lydia giggled to herself and patted her overgrown stomach. As she leaned back, getting comfortable in her food comma, she grimaced and clenched her left breast. "Christ," she said, "must've eaten it too fast." She clenched again and then once more, but that last time was all she had left; her arm went limp and then her body followed; and she lay there like a harpooned walrus, with the empty plate laying across her belly and her curlers falling from her white puffy hair.

The wind blew a heavy hot thickness across the night and everyone in the Trail's End apartments settled into bed. Wyatt slept soundly in his Toy Story sheets; Walt passed out quietly on his couch, the whiskey bottle close to his side; and Lydia lay on her couch, her plate resting on her belly like a flat headstone. And it was quite and hot straight through to morning.

