

There I was, single and two months pregnant, on a scuba diving trip in the middle of nowhere. How had my life gotten so out of control? And how could I get it back?

The answer was waiting for me in

# the blue hole

A NEW SHORT STORY BY ERIKA KROUSE

**L**iving in landlocked Colorado, I don't know why I wanted to learn to scuba dive, but I signed up for the classes anyway. Maybe I just wanted to be able to stay underwater for long periods, undisturbed. Maybe I just liked the wet suits. Anyway, I did all that ridiculously hard stuff in the pool—ridiculous because it shouldn't be hard: breathing underwater, touching the bottom and falling backward off the edge with 40 pounds of junk on your back. I panicked when water got into my sinuses. I lost a contact lens. For the last pool test, we had to blindly sink to the bottom of the pool and put on all our gear, with no air and no mask. I passed that test, thinking the whole time about the other one, the one I had failed the night before. I had used three home pregnancy kits at once. On each little stick the fine pink line looked like a thread, a scratch, until I couldn't avoid seeing it for what it really was: a terrible mistake.

I was in graduate school. For, oh God, philosophy. I couldn't have a baby. What would I do with it? I had never changed a diaper. I didn't think I could learn such a thing. And the father, Rick. Ricky. We had broken up the month before. He had found another woman, and I had found the two of them. Actually, he was out buying cigarettes when I let myself into his apartment with my key. The other woman was naked, eating an orange in his bed. Her red hair was tangled in back. She said, "You must be Katie."

I lunged for her and she lightly slapped a foot at my throat without even sitting up. I choked. She said, "I'm a black belt in tae kwon do. Back off." Then she went back to her orange and I left.

Rick called me two days later. "Don't be unreasonable," he said. "It's only been a few months. We never talked about a commitment."

"Oh Jesus."

"You make assumptions, Katie. You should communicate more."

"OK. Fuck you."

"Listen." He was suddenly calm. "I want you in my life, all right? But I also want my freedom."

I said, "You want your cake, and you want your cupcake."

"Which one are you?" he asked.

I told him, slowly, "The cake."

"Oh."

This was not a good set of genes I was incubating. And I didn't have money, or friends, or health insurance, or a job. I was living off my student loans, thinking of continuing for a Ph.D., banking on my hypothesis that the degree would take me forever and world civilization was fixing to explode or implode anyway and I'd never have to pay back a dime. I'd come out dead, but ahead.

I couldn't have a child in this world. Buildings were blowing up. But should I tell Rick? I needed \$600 for what would be the most unpleasant experience of my life. I'd never get the money from Rick. He was even more broke than I was. But I had faith. In what, I wasn't sure, but it was there, somewhere. I was only two months pregnant. I had some leeway. I would go to the Blue Hole, and then I'd do whatever needed to be done.



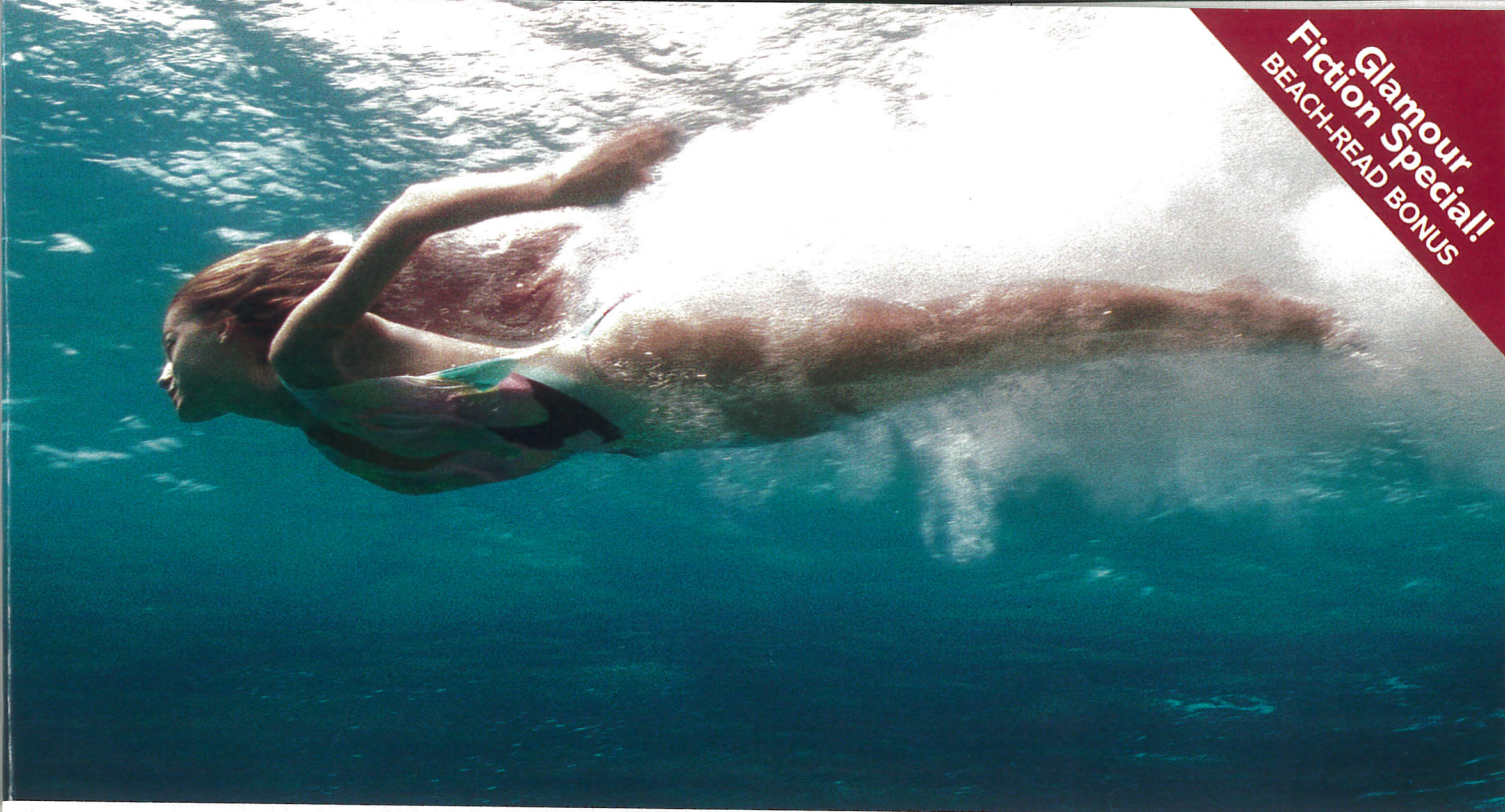
In the desert town of Santa Rosa, New Mexico (population 2,500), you can find the Blue Hole, a natural sinkhole more than 80 feet deep. The cheapo scuba schools take you there to do your open water test, the last part of scuba certification. It was early March, chilly, but the dive masters told us that it didn't matter because the water temperature is 64 degrees Fahrenheit all year round. My body is 98 degrees Fahrenheit all year round. I thought, maybe this baby thing will take care of itself.

Packing for the Blue Hole, I got dizzy and had to sit down. Morning sickness? I wanted to call Rick, if only to spread the misery a little. I sat there with the telephone in my hand, trying to remember his number. I had known it by heart only a couple of weeks ago. Maybe that was the problem; maybe my heart was broken, and his number had leaked out. I finally hung up.

There's something depressing about packing a suitcase, no matter the trip. You look down at your clothes, all the stuff you need to sustain yourself as a human being—underwear, jeans, sweaters, lotion, contact lens solution, hair gel, antidepressants, shoes. Razors. It used to be that opposable thumbs were enough. Now, what we view as survival is really something else—vanity, comfort. Safety. I packed some condoms.

Because I'll tell you what: I wasn't going to let this baby thing





slow me down, no way. I was 28! That's the golden year, goddamn it. The age I'd be falsely claiming from now on. I didn't believe in miracles—I believed in opportunity. There was only one way to get my life together, and that route didn't involve breast pumps and baby joggers. Happy Meals, gut-blasting worry. College funds.

Still, it nagged at me. It didn't seem fair that for one of us to have a life, the other had to give it up.

It puts everything in perspective to remember that the human body is 98 percent water. I tried to imagine that fetus inside my liquid body, a tiny pea floating alone in an ocean. What were the odds that such a thing could survive, anyway? In me?



I drove the eight lonely hours to Santa Rosa, watching the altitude as I went south. I'm a Colorado native. I grew up with a healthy fear of weather and a tendency to pack for survival. Every autumn I gain five pounds, and every spring I lose them. I'm used to mountains hovering on one side of me, serving as a constant compass. But these New Mexico mountains were distant, dusty, almost transparent, then gone once I neared Santa Rosa. I arrived at 10 in the evening, eyes aching from negotiating a cracked windshield.

Santa Rosa was barely a town, with just a few lonely street lamps and motel rooms for 20 bucks a night, those with Spanish cable TV for \$25. The scuba school had rented an entire motel, and I checked in at the front desk. The woman there had dark circles under her eyes, and she had clearly been napping. Behind her was a beige curtain, and her little daughters peeped at me from behind it. They were wearing T-shirts but no pants. TV laughter gunned across the room, a bed squeaked, and I realized that she and her family lived in that little space there, just behind the dirty curtain.

After that, it seems spoiled to say that my room sucked. It was freezing inside, and I searched for the heater. How could there be no heater? The bathtub was spattered with scum and frozen mold, and the drain was clogged. The room boasted a painting of a cowboy so ugly that nobody would ever steal it, and a lamp bolted to the nightstand, which was bolted to the wall. Nothing in the drawers. Not even a Bible. Which was good, good! I smoked a cigarette

on the balcony outside, where it was actually warmer than inside.

The scuba school had booked me some random roommate but she wasn't there yet, so I chose the better bed, near the door. I brushed my teeth up and down, up and down like my dentist taught me last week, and then gave up and sawed the toothbrush across my gums. Ran into bed, shivering, pulled up the polyester blankets, and tried to sleep in the fetal position with the covers over my head. I considered calling the front desk about the heat, but I didn't want to wake up the poor lady again. After an hour, I put on all my socks and pulled my jacket on top of me, then piled the contents of my suitcase over the blanket. I slept precariously, trying not to spill anything over the sides. The top of my head prickled where I had left an air hole. I dreamt of cold, cold water.



In the morning, there was a woman in the next bed. She sat up and said, "Hi. I'm Stacy. Where's the fucking heater?" She had light brown hair and a birthmark on her cheek, and was large-muscled, with long, loose breasts. Stacy phoned downstairs and then hung up, smiling. "It's behind the desk," she said. "But of course."

We scurried over to move the furniture, turned the heater on full blast, and sat in front of it. Stacy's hair blew out in right angles. She lived in Boulder, my town, and was an editor for a cycling magazine. She had arrived at two in the morning. Stacy said, "I have breakfast, if you want." She stepped out onto the landing and returned, tossing a chilly bag over to me. There were about six sandwiches wrapped in foil. They were labeled: PB&J, TuMu and TuMa.

"What's TuMu?"

"Turkey with mustard."

"And the others are..."

"Mayonnaise."

I stared at her.

"Not everyone likes mustard," Stacy said.

"Not everyone likes turkey," I said.

"That's why the peanut butter and jelly."

We headed out the door with sweats over our bathing suits. People were tramping across the landing toward a room in back, so



# It was too far to the surface. We're going to die,

we followed. Duke, our scuba instructor, was handing out wet suits.

Duke was like an evil grandfather. He had a shark bite down his leg. He was sexy, old and low-voiced, with indifferent blue eyes and a white T-shirt over his wrinkled tan. All semester I had peered over the side of the pool at him with stinging eyes as he surveyed me with amusement. "Go down and get the thumbtack with your eyes closed," he had ordered. "Now go down to the bottom, do some quantum physics and come back up eating a burrito." I hated him, and liked hating him. He called me Cody even after I insisted for six weeks that my name was Katie.

Duke handed me a Men's XXL wet suit, so I ignored him and scrounged for my own. I found a small pale-pink one that fit so tightly I couldn't bend my knees. Stacy and I thumped stiff-legged down the stairs, neoprene robots. With some difficulty, we folded ourselves into Stacy's Civic, and she drove us to the Blue Hole.

The Blue Hole was off a dirt road, and it was just that. A blue hole. Very blue, and perfectly round. We looked over the ramp at big orange carp, and some catfish that looked like bonsai-size sharks.

"I think I can see the bottom of that thing," Stacy said. There was a ramp suspended about 20 feet down, with buoys tied to it, and another one at 35 feet. She reached over the edge to touch the water.

I asked, "How is it?" The wind whipped at my hair.

She shook her head.

We were the first in, Team One, and the rest of the school watched us carefully. "Oh no," I said as I entered the water. It stung as it rose above my crotch (like electric voltage) and belly. I looked at their faces above us, all wearing the same anxious expression. "Not warm," I told them. A few of the younger girls started whining.

But it wasn't so bad once we started doing the stupid tricks they told us to do—submerge yourself, take your mask off, pull your regulator out of your mouth, blah blah blah. Get a rock from the bottom of a ledge. I flipped around like a skinny fish. Then I kind of hung out underwater, since it was warmer than the air.

I suddenly remembered I was pregnant, and put my hands over my abdomen. My fingers were white and curling up like claws. How could those carp live in here? You'd think they'd die of the cold. I unzipped my wet suit to let the freezing water flow against my belly. My skin quaked at the contact, and then I couldn't feel it anymore.

Still submerged, I watched Stacy do her maneuvers. She was trying to reattach her weight belt. She struggled, weights skidding around the nylon strap. The belt slipped off her waist and through her hands, right past me, and sank down, down, down to the bottom of the Blue Hole, 80 feet below. A small cloud erupted as the weights landed, and silt billowed up far below us. Stacy jerked her head to look at me through her mask. I hadn't even stretched out one hand to grab the belt as it fell. I stared back at her, suspended underwater in an open wet suit, thinking, I am not a good person.



It took two baths and an hour in front of the heater before I was warm again. Stacy refused to get into the bathtub with all the slime floating around in there, so she shivered in fits for hours.

We went to Rosalita's for Mexican food and dancing. Among the locals, a big crowd of scuba people drifted around the bar. There was a lot of gossip about a girl who had thrown up into her regulator. Another girl had become hypothermically unreasonable and punched her "buddy" in the mask.

I looked around the crowd. Most of them were kids from the uni-

versity, interspersed with a few aging hippies. A man named Ted gravitated toward Stacy and me, and the three of us formed a dry-erase friendship based on age compatibility. The college kids listened hard when Ted began narrating his failed marriage, and I saw that they believed they would never, ever have to endure such a thing.

After a few more beers, people started talking about their ethnicities. I thought about the fetus inside me. I'm half Polish Jew and half Greek, and Rick's parents were Turkish and German. I wondered if the baby would hate itself, if it would sing Nazi songs in Yiddish, or reenact Ottoman wars. Then I wondered if that was racist, and what kind of kid would this be, with a racist mother and no father figure? Except it would never be born.

I asked Stacy what her ethnicity was. She shrugged. "I'm adopted. I know my biological mother was a college student, but that's it."

Ted sang "Love Child," and Stacy corrected him: "Sex child." "Your biological dad?" I asked.

"A nonissue."

While we were respectfully silent, Duke swung by during a Jimmy Buffet tune to tell us that we should go to bed early. "And quit drinking," he said to me, although I was the most sober one there. The underage college students hid their bottles in their laps.

"What's that thing you have in your hand, Duke?" Stacy asked.

Duke looked at his Corona bottle and smiled. "I'm not getting wet tomorrow." He took a long swig.

"So you think," I said.

"I'm just going to laugh at you from a folding chair," he said.

"Maybe the folding chair will be wet," I said.

"Hey, Duke," Ted said. "Did you pick out the hotel? Because it smells like something died in my room."

"Probably one of my students from last year," he said.

Stacy asked, "Have you ever had a death here?" Duke laughed, and Stacy frowned. "No, really, I mean it. It's colder than hell in there. It's dangerous. Couldn't we have gone somewhere warm?"

"Pay me two thousand dollars more and I'll take you to Cozumel," Duke said. "But for \$300, you get Santa Rosa."

I sipped my gin, wincing at the taste. Duke looked sharply at me, "No more drinking. Don't give me the satisfaction of watching you bend over in the bushes tomorrow."

"Oh, honey," I said, gesturing toward the college students. "Not in front of the kids."

Duke raised his eyebrows, shook his head and walked off.

Stacy and I laughed. I looked at the college kids and told them, confidentially, "He's got a thing for me." I could tell from their eyes that some of them believed it. And that some of them thought that it just wasn't fair; that I'd get extra chances in the Blue Hole.

I threw up in the bathroom after dinner, wiping my mouth with toilet paper. As I walked out with streaming eyes and a sour mouth, Duke was leaning against the wall outside the bathroom door. He asked, "You all right?"

And I don't know why I did it, but I fell forward until my head was on Duke's chest. His breathing stopped. He smelled like old steak. Then I picked up my head and walked away quickly, before he had the chance to touch, to offer comfort, if he would.



Santa Rosa is a town of snow globes, Route 66 signs and Betty Boops. That night, on the way out of Rosalita's, we stopped in a darkened gift shop that shares lobby space with the restaurant.



# I thought, and wondered if I was carrying a girl.

Ted shook a Betty Boop snow globe and watched the snow cover her plastic cleavage. "I have to own this," Ted said, and shoved it in his pocket. He walked out, and Stacy and I scrounged in our pockets for spare dollars, which we tucked under the cash register.

"Lauralee," Ted sang loudly to an empty street. "Oh, Lauralee."

"His wife?" Stacy guessed in a whisper to me. "His mom?"

"Lauralee. Hey! Get your hansoffame," he said to Stacy, who had started to guide him toward the motel. "I'm gonna do what I want!" he bellowed and staggered off toward a gas station. We watched him go, our nylon windbreakers swishing as we shrugged together.

Back in the room, Stacy took another hot shower while I called Rick. When he answered, I said, "Hey. It's me."

"Me?" he asked.

After I hung up, I felt a little cramp and held still, listening for it. I scrounged in my memory for what I knew of miscarriages, what my friends had told me. Pain and massive amounts of blood. I didn't feel any blood, and no real pain. Not physical pain. Yet. Tomorrow was the longer dive, five hours. In and out of the water, over and over. Duke predicted snow.

We woke at six to the kind of glow that only comes with snow. I looked out the window. There was a fine half-inch coating on everything—the wet suits we had put out to dry, the chipped railing, the ridged aluminum floor. Stacy and I went outside and retrieved the wet suits and booties. After trying to thaw them in front of the heater, we waited until the last possible second before dragging our warm bodies into them and stomping to the parking lot. We drove quickly to the dive site, our teeth already chattering.

The Blue Hole was no longer blue. It was filmy, steamy, almost soap-scummy. Snow blew around the air and into our hair. The dive masters stood next to the trucks in down jackets and gloves, yelling orders.

We found regulators, snorkels, masks and fins, and strapped on our vests, tanks and weight belts. I had a sudden glimpse of postapocalyptic life, when we'd all be forced underground, wading through murk and fog, carrying oxygen to survive.

This time was much worse than yesterday. We kept jumping in and out of the water, refilling our tanks, doing stupid stuff. A dive master told Stacy to swim across the hole and back, dragging me. "You do it," she said, throwing her mask at him. I talked her into it, and she nodded once, lips purple.

Ted had bolted out of the water and was now vomiting bright yellow bile into the bushes. Stacy and I started toward the steps to help him. Duke blocked my path, looking down at me.

"Not so bad, is it?" Duke said. He was wearing a fleece jacket, hat and gloves, cradling a cup of coffee with steam coming out of it. The sky was white behind his head.

"I'm going to kick your ass," I said, teeth chattering.

He grinned down at me. "Get back in there, Cody."

"Katie."

"What?"

"My name is Katie."

"Guess what?" he asked, so softly that I leaned forward to hear him. Then he suddenly barked, "I don't care! Finish your test, Cody."

"I hate you," Stacy told him, voice low.

While exchanging our tanks, I couldn't feel my feet or my ankles. My calves were growing numb. And I had to pee. It was gross, but I didn't care anymore. Concentrating while Stacy was swearing next to my ear, I suddenly felt the release, and the heat trailing down my legs and into my booties. It felt so good, I almost cried there, soaking in my own urine. Everything was beautiful now, broken glass shining like a sudden lake in the parking lot.

A dive master in a parka bent down and helped me strap on my gear. He said, "This is your last tank. Good luck."

The test was almost over. All we had to do was swim around the hole three times with our buddy at a depth of 35 feet. Stacy and I practically ran into the water. Now that the pressure was off, it was kind of fun. We pumped our legs hard, swimming down.

Pointing to a catfish, I turned to Stacy. I took a breath through my regulator, but there was no more air.

I tried again, my lungs pulling, straining. Nothing. I fumbled for my backup regulator and pressed the purge button. No bubbles came out. It was like sucking on a vacuum tube.

They had forgotten to refill my tank.

Vague hand signals came to me—patting my mouth, drawing a finger across my throat. But I was panicking already. My lungs were aching. Air, I thought. Air. Air. I love air, only air.

Stacy was looking away. I grabbed at her regulator. She gripped with her teeth, shook her head, pulling at my hands. I pushed her in the face. Stacy's head slid backward. I breathed in, one tiny breath of water. I choked on it, then gasped in a deep lungful. I looked up, but it was too far to the surface. I began to slip down the hole. I was drowning. I remembered the little pea floating inside me. We're going to die, I thought, and wondered if I was carrying a girl. Stacy's face was fading into blue. I closed my eyes.

Then I felt Stacy grab my hair and pull me up toward her. In that strange moment while I was dying, yet still living, Stacy put her regulator into my mouth while she reached for her own extra one, air spilling upward from her lips.

I breathed from Stacy's tank, eyes wet inside the mask, choking out bubbles. I struggled to fit air into my lungs above the well of water already there. It hurt. Stacy's hand was still gripping my jacket. I held the regulator to my mouth like it was a lost lover, a lost child.

My lungs were beginning to drain. I turned and retched, then put the regulator back in my mouth. Everything was working. Stacy peered inside my mask. My body shook convulsively.

But it was still my body, my own.

I looked down at it. All right, I thought. You can have seven more months of me. You want to live? Then live. But that's all I'll give you.

The water above was pale cerulean, snow spotting its soft outer skin, bubbles rising in a long stream from our mouths below. Then I looked down to the dark bottom where I had almost gone, where everything is still. Nothing moved. Stacy grabbed my jacket and kicked hard. We broke the surface. Stacy yelled for help. There was sound. There was light. I cried hard in the open air, this harsh place, suddenly surrounded by every other living thing. ©

*Erika Krouse is the author of Come Up and See Me Sometime.*

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