

POOL MAN

He tightened his diver's weight belt as he stared into the chlorine-saturated abyss. He pulled on the mask and felt it plow curved grooves into his cheeks. The Southern California sun was galloping between clouds and felt good on his shoulders before he succumbed to the cold shock. He heard a click from behind. When his wife popped open the sliding glass door, he didn't wait for her wrathful tone to burn a path toward him. He worked the regulator into his mouth and flung himself sideways over the edge.

He gave a few and let the deep end tug at him until stray pebbles pressed into his hands. He was shirtless and his baggy trunks, depicting white whales, represented the only thing close to sea life in the pool. He would rest on the bottom like a manta ray and remain there until his air ran out. This was his church, his sanctuary, his escape. The slower he breathed, the longer he could stay down.

Once the shivering had subsided, his lungs moved with ease. He might set a personal best today, assuming he could calm his mind, which would be a major achievement after things went awry last week at the conference down in Palm Springs. *Bad cheese? Jesus.* His hotel company had used that supplier for years and he never thought they'd be the ones to ruin the day. When those unlucky cell biologists weren't bending over toilets, with convention lanyards tucked out of the way, they were analyzing the food poisoning with genuine intrigue. *Good thing it didn't happen when the trial lawyers were in town.*

As the dive computer counted away, the daily annoyances attacked next, beginning with the domestic front. He knew his wife was pissed at him because he wasn't on the surface getting

the yard ready for a summer dinner party tomorrow evening for her clients. She was a high-end wedding planner and everything always had to be over the top. He was hoping an earthquake would intervene in the next twenty-four hours. The last thing he wanted to do was get tangled up in another social event. He'd had enough small talk to last a dozen lifetimes and these people were ultra-wealthy, which only made him feel poor.

The chilly pool temperature, meanwhile, reminded him of the failing water heater in the house, which sent his fifty-seven-year-old body into convulsions every time the pilot light blew out and he had to resort to icy showers. Maybe it was punishment. The heater had come with the house after the contractor hurriedly bulldozed a section of the desert into a gated maze of shoddiness. Wood frames popped when he opened windows, skylights leaked when it rarely rained and the finish on the wood floors started coming off soon after they moved in. For whatever reason, he kept that old water heater going, finessing and relighting the flame, coaxing it to live another day. Instead of replacing the unit, his wife wanted to buy a new house. Blowing money was about the only thing they had in common, other than horror movies.

Speaking of his wife, his mind shifted to her breasts, which was her main topic of conversation lately. In addition to the water heater, her saline implants were at the end of their useful life and the plastic surgeon suggested that she could go a tad bigger. While the novelty of it normally would've jumpstarted their marriage, the gulf between them was growing at an accelerating rate. In addition to the exorbitant cost, not to mention health risks, those fake boobs had other drawbacks. On a ski trip to the Sierras, all he could remember was her complaining about being cold the whole time. "I've got bags of seawater sitting on my chest," she said. "The things I put up with for you." Of course, she came into his life with the implants already installed. And

speaking of seawater, she wasn't a big fan of the ocean, always worried about sharks. But she did like sunning herself topless on secluded beaches. He'd go for long swims and one afternoon last spring decided to push himself far down the coast to see if she still cared about him. Instead of calling the Coast Guard, she simply packed up the towels and chairs, canceled their dinner reservation and ate alone at the beachside bar.

Back at home, he needed an outlet and tried returning to his sporadic meditation practice, but every time he attempted it in the guest bedroom, she'd bang pots and pans in the kitchen or run the vacuum cleaner, her two least favorite activities. He'd learned about meditation years ago at a retreat in the Bay Area. "Just let the brain calm down on its own," came the soothing elder female voice, billowing across the multipurpose room's bamboo floors. He was there with his then-lover eating vegan food and ducking from coastal rain in bare feet on flagstone walkways. At an evening dharma gathering, the instructor talked about ridding oneself of material possessions and all he could think about was his new BMW—pearl blue with custom rims—in the parking lot. He'd worked too hard to let go of that.

No talking was allowed during the retreat, although he and his girlfriend did cheat here and there, much to the visible scorn of the older woman in the cabin next to theirs. Even harder was abstaining from sex for three days, which was actually a rule imposed by his girlfriend as part of their cleanse. He kept his horniness at bay by pleasuring himself in the shower. No wonder that relationship didn't last more than two months. By the morning of the third day, meditation was becoming harder, almost impossible with the number of regrets and misdeeds he'd piled up over the years. He felt an unquenchable need to open his eyes and run. Just when he thought he could take no more, he heard the chime and it was time for lunch. Now was his chance. He

grabbed a piece of Tibetan bread from the lunch table, found his keys in the cabin and sprinted for the parking lot. He needed to feel the torque of that six-cylinder engine and hear a live recording of Led Zeppelin blasting through the aftermarket sound system as he carved through the turns on the coastal highway. But when tried to start the car, nothing happened. His new BMW was suddenly worthless. “Christ almighty,” he yelled. Twice.

Was it a sign or a test? He didn't know. He slammed the door and leaned up against the car. A nature trail across from the parking lot caught his eye. It weaved through the redwood trees and up a hill. He happened to be wearing his trail running shoes, which were even newer than the BMW, and he was a former star football player. Sure, he could take that hill. He crouched and pretended his old coach was standing there with a stopwatch. *Go*. The shoes' supple treads dug into the dirt and propelled him forward. He tore around the first turn feeling he was about to run the fastest forty yards in his life. Then the trail turned skyward and his lungs, heart and legs each started failing in their own spectacular ways. He made it to the top of the hill but at what cost? His right calf muscle was on fire and his tolerance to pain had vanished along with his football career. He landed back on his meditation cushion in a heap of sweat and surrendered to his girlfriend's glare.

He'd come a long way since then. At the bottom of the pool, he had no need for anything, other than oxygen. He slipped back a few feet from the south wall to rest under the sun's bent rays, not that the move added much warmth, but he needed to last at least two hours and twenty-six minutes if he wanted to be on par with the endurance level of professional divers. Bubbles flew skyward as his breathing further slowed. He was in his cocoon now, a faded blue rectangle that'd been scraped by heavy machinery into an already parched landscape. That same pool de-

sign must've been repeated all over town, so unlike the hotel pool with its fancy stenciling, trickling fountains and swim-up bar. At least scuba diving helped him rediscover his own pool. How much did the damn thing cost? He couldn't remember. It was buried in a heap of distant debt and wasn't something the dive computer could calculate. How was he going to put two kids—from his first wife—through college? They definitely weren't the scholarship type. They were off at their cousin's birthday party in L.A. This was his weekend, his turn at shaping them into decent human beings, and yet he couldn't blame them for wanting to escape the spousal bickering. They were probably sitting around playing video games or watching porn. Before they decamped for L.A., they all went out as a "family" to a new Chinese restaurant in town. He was distracted for the most part, but a fortune cookie spoke to him: "As one grows to understand life less and less, one learns to live it more and more."

He went back to appreciating the raw simplicity of redirecting air through lungs, valves and hoses. He found another paint chip to stare at, but even that couldn't steer his mind away from women. *Don't fight it. Don't fight it.* He gave himself permission to explore or at least reflect. He never thought he'd end up in the hospitality business, but as a young man with little ambition, he discovered that each hotel event he presided over brought new streams of possibilities. He could drift from one woman—passionate about constitutional law—to another—excited about hairstyling—and venture to their rooms in unambiguous anonymity. It was astounding that he never got caught. These conquests became hardwired in his brain as he relived them, embellishing details here and there to keep them fresh. He could feel an erection pounding in his trunks, but this was his pool and he was safe. These were only thoughts, anyway, nothing to feel guilty about.

At some point, with more years under his belt, he decided to clean up his act and that's when he met his first wife who was in town from Kansas City for a nursing convention. She had that cliched, Midwestern wholesomeness about her, which was in short supply in his circles. She also had the kind of beauty and silky hair that women admired. As a couple, she added instant depth with her love of traveling, gardening and cooking. The sons came, and the baseball games came (she wouldn't let them play American football) and the years came. It was all great until it wasn't. It was all great until a series of dark days caused them to reassess their lives.

Once free, he went back to his old ways and tried to recapture his youth, but he wasn't the same specimen, which depressed him so. Years later, when he met his second wife—his now-wife—she was, ironically, by the hotel pool with big breasts squeezed perfectly oval by a yellow bikini top, flanked by the sparkle of two empty Martini glasses. If anything, he'd gotten good at sizing up people. He'd fed her some stupid line about her being in town for a modeling convention. Of course, there was no such event. He'd observed enough conferences that he could feign knowledge on almost any subject, except for ornithology and, maybe, astrology. She giggled, nose crinkled up like a wet cocktail napkin, and said her modeling days were long since over or else she wouldn't be letting the sun "have its way with her skin." She instantly made him feel attractive again. Twenty years his junior, her bulbous sunglasses hid eyes that would permanently change shape after their quick courtship and quicker courthouse wedding. He should've known better. Why the rush? Because she was a wedding planner, she said she didn't have the energy to plan something extravagant, which made sense at the time, and he was happy to forgo the expense. But he didn't know about her severe mental issues: the medication and missed medication, the unbridled anger that could come out of nowhere. She once slashed his new tires in the

driveway (fucking Pirellis, no less). The only remotely deep conversation they had prior to signing the marriage certificate had to do with children. She didn't want to wreck her body with pregnancy—possibly preserving herself for another husband down the line—and he already had two sons, so that they could agree on that score.

The fact was, he didn't want to lose her. Sure, being the second go-around, he should have thought about finances, but she seemed successful and spoke the language of the rich or at least Southern California nouveau riche. He'd find out later that she burned through clients left and right and half a dozen venues never wanted to do business with her again. He also spoke the language and must've fooled her as well.

Five years together? They hadn't even outlasted a cheap water heater. Who was at fault for failing to keep the flames going? It didn't help that she became jealous every time he talked with another woman. When he'd pick up the kids from his ex-wife, she would accuse him of trying to get back together with her, which was impossible. Too much pain there. Lately, she'd been suspicious of his activities—his emotional distance—ever since he started trail running for real in the hills with the dog and shopping for new clothes. He told her that it was becoming harder to burn off gourmet hotel food with age, which was actually true.

But it wasn't the running, the natural human need for locomotion, that held his life together lately. On his way to the office one day he'd stopped by the convention center to check out an extreme sports extravaganza and was drawn to a booth with a model in a coconut bikini top and hula skirt. After studying her tassels, he was proud of himself for pushing his way through a circle of admiring men in suits and walking on. Next door he found the latest in scuba equipment, perched on carpeted pillars, with video loops in the background of waving fins and

darting fish. He fondled the products—taking in the softness of silicon and rubber, the coolness of steel and aluminum—as if it were the skin and jewelry of a new lover. It seemed forbidden.

A salesman started packing his hands with glossy brochures of Turks and Caicos, the Caribbean, the Galapagos. There also was a list of dive clinics and he skimmed past the California locations and stopped on Texas. The salesman told him about an old missile silo containing a hundred feet of clear water. As it turned out, he was being sent to Dallas the following month for a management seminar, featuring some corporate blowhard, no doubt, and the silo was a mere two-hour drive away.

“Don’t worry about snakes and spiders,” the dive instructor said over the phone. “With the absence of natural light, there’s no life to worry about, except yours, of course.”

He was more relieved that the instructor was male, not some bubbly young woman worthy of corruption. He’d be able to concentrate. This was important. He ended up ditching the conference and spending most of his time in the water. Among the cold war remains, where a thermonuclear missile once stood erect, he found peace.

In his own pool now, his mind had achieved neutral buoyancy. Thoughts were intermittent as his eyes opened and closed. He could peer into the paint chip as if it were a magnificent canyon.

He was feeling good about himself after donating to various ocean-oriented causes to protect coral reefs and prevent overfishing. He even signed up to sponsor a child on an island nation he’d never heard of that was in desperate need of relocation to escape rising sea levels. An adorable brother and sister sitting on a fishing boat had caught his eye in a scuba magazine. It could’ve been him had he been born on that side of the world. Yes, it felt good to do *good* things.

He also drew satisfaction on another level. His first wife became remarried a few months ago, which put an end to the alimony payments. He kept that fact a secret and started redirecting the money to his causes. The wedding occurred at his own hotel, right under his now-wife's nose. It became a game to see how long he could keep it going before she found out. If he didn't divert the money, she'd find a way to spend it.

Why did he have to work himself to death in a job he despised in order to afford more things? Couldn't he take his diving gear and live in a hut on an island? He'd been thinking about this more and more lately. He'd also been running the numbers. The house was nearly paid off, he had his retirement accounts and he had plenty of junk to sell. His wife would be an asshole for sure, but maybe he and his first wife could pay off or prepay the kid's tuition and he'd have his remaining fifty percent, which could last forever in a developing country. How could she ask for alimony if he quit his job and did volunteer work instead? All of a sudden the assets he no longer cared about had morphed into pure gold to help fund his grand adventure.

Then there was an explosion. He thought his eardrums had burst. Gas line? Meteorite? He scoured the bottom of the pool for cracks. Nothing. Light flickered above him. Something had invaded the pool. He turned his head and saw the dog's black stomach bobbing, four legs churning and the V-shaped wake zeroing in on a tennis ball. His wife must've thrown it, which was strange because she never played fetch with Charlie. As soon as the dog had climbed the steps, there was another explosion. She must've really wanted him out of the pool and working on the yard. He knew that black lab could go all day, but it was only a matter of time before his wife's slender arm wore out. She never lifted anything heavier than diamonds.

He tried to concentrate but couldn't compete with canine energy. There was no escape. He decided to play a game with his imagination. If he could dive down the drain, where would he go? He mentally turned the screws and lifted the cover. The pipe enlarged and swallowed him whole. He flew down it like a banana peel, sweeping left then right...but always down, down. It was dark and he let gravity take him westward. Then there was a warming sensation: sand and salty foam. The pipe had spit him out at Huntington Beach where he'd grown up and learned to surf. His now-wife, in some other realm, couldn't fuck with him here. He grabbed his longboard and smelled french fries broiling on the pier as he paddled out. The waves were cutting perfectly.

But then, after one dunking by a rogue wave, he retrieved the board and caught his breath. His mind, as if he'd entered a dream within a dream, whiplashed to his worst day of high school. It was the state football championship, college scouts were lurking and he was quarterbacking a sure win. That was until everything went murky. He threw an interception, then another, and even fumbled. Each mistake led to a score by the other team and the end of his football career. No one wanted a choker. He was mocked in the papers and torn apart on local radio. He went back to surfing and welcomed the start of college, a serious athlete no more.

Since Huntington Beach provided nothing but heartache, he returned to Palm Springs in a blink without the need for elaborate plumbing or imagination. At least Charlie was done fetching, probably drying off on his outdoor bed. He went back to staring at the paint chip and got his breathing under control. The record was still within reach. He noticed the sun flickering and figured the clouds were moving in. He tranced in and out.

The pool took on a dark hue. He rocked himself forward and back to warm up. He was still determined to make it. He turned sideways to watch the heavenly ora. No one else in Palm

Springs or on Earth, he figured, had the same view, even though they might have the same pool. He went back to rocking.

Then something else hit the water. It wasn't an explosion like before but a punching, taunting splash. He looked up and saw four cylindrical poles jutting the surface. Three more splashes followed and he watched as the sinking deck chairs rotated midstream. The table itself made the biggest splash. It flipped over and its glass tabletop dislodged from the base and slid down. The umbrella went in next but only sank halfway. Cushions came in quick succession, then the gas grill, which tried to float, but its cavernous cooking barrel filled with water through the air vents and it, too, headed for the bottom. *Good God, she's totally flipped.* So much for those clients. He sat with his air tank against the wall and awaited the next volley. This is how his childhood pet, a goldfish named Spike, must've felt when his aquarium got redecorated. He'd forgotten about that yellow-bellied little guy. When it came time to move across the country, his father had told him to flush Spike down the toilet where "he'd be safe." *Jesus, Spike, I'm so sorry. I didn't know any better.*

Once the deck furniture was taken care of, his clothes hit the water and scattered about. How could he have been stupid enough to leave his laundry by the back door? She emptied the utility closet with amazing efficiency—books, magazines, CDs, an old TV remote, hotel-branded mugs—thanks to his obsession for organizing things into boxes.

He looked up at the blurry diving board, trying to figure out if there was a message in the strange order of projectiles. What was next? His first inclination was to unstrap from the tank, fly out of the pool and confront her, but that's what she wanted him to do.

A grayish substance swelled, which was followed by a curious flicker. It turned pink and purple, black and yellow. *Holy shit. The pool's on fire.* He'd left the gas can by the shed, mere feet from the pool. How many gallons were in it? He didn't know, but it was enough to cover most of the surface. Sunlight and fire became juxtaposed. His half-cremated underwear spun around.

At the same time, he realized he was running out of air. She'd probably snooped through his computer and found his submersion spreadsheet. She knew, almost to the minute, what his goal was today. He had to stay calm.

He watched his clothes do a chemical dance and bob like jellyfish. His golf bag rocked as it filled with water and sank bow first under the weight of clubs and balls and whatever else he'd shoved into the pockets years ago when he took up the game to move up the company's semi-crooked ladder. The newspaper, most likely the sports section, burned up almost entirely. Its remains encircled a life jacket. Come to think of it, he didn't care about mainstream sports anymore. He just read the headlines to keep up with guests, especially on the elevator.

By the time his toolbox went in, the fire was out. The red box fell sideways and the lid waved at him when it landed. A few wrenches and a screwdriver tumbled out as pirate treasure must. She was on to the garage now and presumably the power tools, but if she ruined those, he couldn't finish any of the projects around the house. His new circular saw raced for the bottom with its cord slithering behind.

Then came his framed college diploma from UC San Diego, which stared at him from the surface. He had an economics degree, no less.

Most of his things, now charred or waterlogged, were made in Asia and had traveled tens of thousands of miles across oceans. As his air tank grated against the wall, he realized his junk, from the finest big-box stores, had seen more of the world than he had.

It was an impressive debris field. How many things had he used up and thrown away over the years? How much of his short-lived purchases ultimately ended up in a landfill? He was starting to feel badly about that and made a deal with himself to cut back. No, he wouldn't replace this crap.

The garden tools went in next and left clouds of mud in their wake. A spare auto tire remained defiantly on the surface. Flames flickered on melted cushions. He was beginning to see the humor in it as if she'd recreated a famous naval battle. To the neighbors, it probably looked more like performance art. Everything went quiet as the seconds stretched. Islands had formed and merged into whole continents, millions and billions of years of plate tectonics compressed into an afternoon. It's too bad he didn't have his underwater camera to capture the evidence. He drew another breath. His last?

During the chaos, he marched past the record and failed to celebrate. If only he could develop gills like Spike and stay down forever. The surface became still. The battle was over. He closed his eyes and let his arms rise up. He shut down the region of his brain that was trying to calculate the impossibility of still having air left in the tank. He surrendered to some waterborne goddess, dancing around the periphery of his mind, and felt a gentle current.

Darkness.

He saw a baby's body floating in embryonic fluid.

The blue face of a stillborn.

The red face of his first wife.

He sucked what precious air was left. He opened his eyes and took the sting of his own salt.

Through the murkiness of his now-life, he could see a perfect blue, sunlit hole, just big enough to swim through.

THE END