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THE GOLDFISH AGENDA

By Suzanne L. Nikolaisen
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Janel was pregnant. She wasn't just a week, or even two months pregnant, but eight and a half months pregnant. She was alone and scared, but she was not in the usual scenario of a single parent. She had gone through hell and back with the continual doubts, and questions. No woman had ever gone through what she had been going through, it was unthinkable - unnatural.

Darkness was flowing over the city of Miami, as though a primal gathering of shadows were gaining strength overhead. Clouds clung to the sky and their bruised bellies were distended with the promise of rain. Inside Janel's apartment there was no light, except for the dim light that the aquarium gave off. Even though it was eight o'clock and the night would only get darker, Janel left the lights off.

Laying on the couch, Janel was half covered by a loosely woven, baby blue Afghan. Her ash blonde hair curled loosely around her shoulders, she was half asleep and ready to crash for the night. Overtime, although forbidden at WaterTech, had been necessary today and she was tired. Tomorrow was the last day before her maternity leave, and thank God she was getting the time off. Jake Gemar, the president of WaterTech, had been trying to get her to go out with him for the last couple of months, even though she was pregnant. She could only guess, but it seemed that he remembered, or more accurately didn't remember, what had happened at the Christmas Party. Somebody must have seen them go off together.

WaterTech, where she worked as system programmer, was a large fish hatchery and research

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company in Miami. The building was two stories tall and glimmered with smooth white surfaces and gold lettering of the company name and building number.

The baby stirred inside her, was it a kick? She didn't think so. She had never felt the baby kick, instead it felt almost as though the baby was just readjusting its body, its movements never hurt her. By the time she had felt ready to have an ultrasound she had become too frightened by the things she had heard around WaterTech. She was praying that she was wrong, but she had eliminated all other ways she could have become pregnant, and now she felt almost crazy, from even thinking of such strange possibilities, but she just couldn't rule them out. *The fish.*

Janel had learned that she was pregnant the fourth week she was into her pregnancy, just two days after she had taken a blood pregnancy test at the hospital. She was still freaked out by the result. There was no way. How in the hell could she be pregnant if she hadn't even been with anybody? Nobody since Mark, there was absolutely no way. It was a nightmare coming true, a fear that was real. Something was happening to her that all of the doctors and scientists in the world would say was impossible, she hadn't had sex, yet she was pregnant.

That same day she had walked in on two technicians talking in the break room, they had stopped as soon as they had seen her, but she had heard enough to wonder. What was the deal with the goldfish? Jake had given her some on Christmas Eve.

"Man, did you see that last batch of Goldies?"

"Yeah, but they won't go out on the market. No way will Gemar let them out to the public."

Why? Were they deformed? She remembered the Christmas party again. Jake had stopped her as she was getting ready to leave. She wished she had just ignored him and left, but she couldn't change the past.

"Hey! Janel!" He had been grinning as he stood near one of the research assistants. Janel had let her gaze continue as though she were still searching for the person who had called her name.

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"Yo! Janel!" He was still grinning, and completely drunk it seemed, his eyes looked narrower than usual. Jake seemed almost predatory, he was crossing the room. She met his eyes and smiled as warmly as she could manage. What did he want?

"Mr. Gemar, Merry Christmas!"

"Jake! Just, Jake! Merry Christmas." He leaned against the wall near her, she backed up a step.

"Great party." She said, he was making her nervous.

"Isn't it? I seem to have a knack for putting on a good party."

Janel almost shook her head to clear her thoughts. Had he said what she had thought he said? Was his ego *that* huge?

"Yeah, the company's been running well lately, major breakthroughs in research, I may open another facility in June."

She tried not to show her dislike of him, as she took another step back, he smelled of beer and cigarettes.

"If you'll excuse me I've got to get going, tonight is my family's Christmas party too." Jake Gemar had stopped grinning.

"You don't have to go so soon."

Shit! He wasn't being fair, she felt the bottom drop out of her evening. She was being honest. It really was her family's party, and he was using his power as her boss to keep her there. She sipped her Diet Coke and glared at the research assistant who was now shrugging into his coat and leaving.

"Have you," he paused as though he wasn't sure he really wanted to go on. "Have you been back to see the fish?" His leering grin hadn't returned, his dark curly hair hung against his face, and his face was damp with perspiration.

"Well, I've seen a good portion of the hatcheries, and ponds. The fish in my office are..."

He cut her off. "Come on."

"Huh?"

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"There are more to see."

"Thank you, but maybe I could see them Monday. I've got to get over to my sister's house."

"No," He stopped, he must have seen her look, she was ready to walk out on the whole damned company if he didn't ease up.

"Not yet at least. Come on, I want to show you." He tried to smile, but it didn't look reassuring.

"Okay, but lets hurry, I do have to go." He smiled broader as it dawned on him that he'd won. She hated herself for her weakness, but she followed him down the dimly lit hallways and then downstairs. She hadn't known there was a downstairs other than the main floor. The hall led off in a different direction than the other hatchery ponds that she had seen, and the stairs were headed underground.

Jake reached out and grabbed her hand, he tried to hold it, but it felt awkward to Janel. He didn't seem to have total control over his hand, it felt as though he was being controlled by somebody with a remote control.

"I'm a millionaire now, a couple of times over." He whispered confidentially. Janel almost ripped her hand free at that point, he was making her nervous. How far was too far? When would he leave her alone? He was already making her uncomfortable by holding her hand.

"Uh, yeah." Was all that she could manage to say.

He let go of her hand and struggled to find the right key to the door. Janel wiped her hand that he had been holding on her denim skirt, he had gotten the key into the door, but it didn't look like he could get it open. With a faint sigh of relief, that she hoped he hadn't heard, she started turning away.

With a frown Jake fiddled with the lock, and then suddenly his face cleared and he grinned. He looked as though a light bulb might very well have switched on somewhere in his brain.

"Security card." Fishing his wallet out of his back pocket he found his clearance card and then ran the card through the scanner. The door swung open. As they entered the room Janel felt the familiar humidity of the other hatcheries. The room was illuminated by gentle lights, and two huge ponds that looked like they were separated by four gates each. The ponds took up at least three fourths of the

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room.

There was an office, situated as though it was a box seat at the symphony on an elevated platform across the room. She could see monitors and printers from where she stood.

"What is this place?"

"Research." He looked out over the huge ponds.

"For what?"

"The best fish, the strongest in the world, I'll be the only merchant that the world's collectors, and top pet stores will deal with. The fish we are creating here have the best of everything color, endurance, they won't die during shipment."

She didn't understand, he seemed to be rambling. 'Strongest' fish in the world? She almost laughed. Carnival of the Water. See Goldie the Great goldfish lift ten pounds with his bare fin. Yeah right strong fish, whatever.

"Well this is nice. I'm glad for you, but I need to be going now."

He looked sad, "Why do you want to go?"

"I want to be with my family."

"I want a family" he said. She looked away from him, she didn't know what to say.

"Would you like to take some fish home? I could give you an extra aquarium and some of these new fish."

"I couldn't really. It's very nice of you, but..."

He interrupted her again. "No, come on pick out some that you like. I'll catch them for you." Great. A drunk trying to catch fish, this ought to be good. She sighed and gave in, at least there was an end in sight.

A half an hour later with a large plastic bag full of shiny skinned goldfish she walked out of the research area. She had chosen the goldfish tank, because the fish had been swimming near the surface, and it looked as though Jake would have an easier time catching them. The other tanks held beautiful but unfamiliar exotic fish, the goldfish had been familiar, she had even had one when she was a child.

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"We try everything out on the Goldies first, they're a strong fish." Jake was carrying the aquarium. Janel really didn't want to know anything else about what he was doing as far as research. She wasn't sure about the morality of his work.

He helped her out to her Toyota, and loaded the large aquarium into the back seat.

"I could follow you over to your place and help you set it up." He offered.

"No, I'll be okay. Thank you, the fish are beautiful."

He waited until she got in her car and was backing out before he went back inside the building. That had been the start of the nightmares.

Janel's energy was shot tonight, she was exhausted. The darkness in her apartment felt good. She covered her eyes with her hand, and discovered that felt better. The aquarium was now on the oak table by the window, it was humming as air pumped into the water. The air bubbled and gurgled. The sound was now familiar and calming. She wondered why she had kept the damned thing, especially after that night in January when the fish had shown up in the bathtub.

The night that the fish had shown up in the bathtub had a nightmarish quality to it. She had worked hard all day and had a headache by the time that she got home, she had wanted nothing more than a warm bubble bath. She had left the water running and as she picked up her robe in her bedroom, she could have sworn she heard a noise in the living room. A splash of some sort, but when she checked on the fish they were the same as usual, the couple that she could differentiate were mellow, and one of the goldfish was swimming laps around the tank.

In the middle of the living room, Janel had stood clutching her robe, listening to the silence of her home. Janel had felt almost certain that something would disturb the tomb like silence that had settled, but nothing did. The fridge turned off, and there were no other sounds, other than the wind outside and the aquarium.

The hallway to the bathroom was dark, but she could see the light on in the bathroom. She couldn't keep the thoughts out of her head that somebody had broken in and that some maniac would jump out of the shadows. Janel had walked down the hall toward the bathroom trying not to make any

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noise. The small noises that her feet made against the carpet seemed to be sucked into the vacuum of silence. She had been in her bare feet and she had felt a drop of water on the rug, it must have been from when she tested her bath water and hadn't dried her hands.

After her bath she had gotten into a t-shirt and pajama shorts, she had gone back into the bathroom to brush her teeth. The water had drained from the bathtub and there had been something in the tub. She had gone over to the tub and found two dead gold fish. That was when the world seemed to turn itself inside out.

Their golden bodies were laying amongst the last stray bubbles in the tub. She almost freaked out, they would have had to be in the tub, when she was taking her bath. They hadn't been there when she had started the water, she was sure of it. She remembered the water in the hallway, had somebody carried the fish to the tub? Had she in some unspeakable frame of mind carried them herself? No, she couldn't believe that. Then what? Had the fish simply hopped to the tub, to swim and die? What the hell for? She was thinking illogically. She had to calm down.

Tonight Janel was waiting. She was sure that the baby was going to come early, and she was totally unprepared for what she was going to have. Trying to prepare herself for a normal childbirth she had taken the regular birth classes at the community center. She knew deep down that there would be nothing normal about the birth or the child.

Jake had been on her case ever since he had discovered that she was pregnant, he was sure that something had happened between them the night of the Christmas Party. But, that was just the thing, nothing had happened.

Sure Jake was rich, he had stopped playing that up lately which she was grateful for, but he was nobody that she wanted to be stuck in a relationship with. He had his moments when he could be a nice guy, but that wasn't enough. She thought about him, he had gotten his hair cut short, lately he had seemed to be trying to be changing for the better.

The shadows in her apartment seemed to be coming together in dark pools and Janel was feeling light headed. She didn't have anybody to call, all of her family was in Utah now. In her planner, as a last

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resort, she had written down Jake's name and number.

The first contraction hit. Her muscles inside felt as though they were on fire, and that was when the thought hit her that she wasn't going to make it. No! She had to! Tears started streaming down her cheeks. She had to. She was afraid, she didn't want to die when she was alone. What would the baby do if she died? With shaking hands she called Jake.

"Jake?" She couldn't control the shaking in her voice.

"Yeah, Janel?" His voice was concerned, she was very aware of how good his voice actually sounded.

"Uh-huh."

"You don't sound too good, do you need me?" His voice was more comforting than she had ever imagined. Maybe there was something there for them. She felt dizzy.

"Yeah."

"Are you in labor?"

"Yeah."

"I'll be there in a minute." He hung up. Maybe he was a nice guy after all, he had sure been trying during the past few months. She was relieved that he was on his way. The pain went away a little and she wondered if it was a false alarm.

A few minutes later the doorbell rang. Wrapped in the blanket she went to the door. Jake walked in and gave her hug, his eyes looked worried.

"You okay?"

"Yeah."

For once he just shut up, it was as though the real guy behind the lab's and the money came through. He was wearing jeans, a t-shirt and tennis shoes, his fancy suits seemed like something from a different past.

"You ready for a little one?" He asked her gently. They were sitting on the couch. He was holding her hand and it felt comfortable this time.

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"I think so."

"All by yourself?"

"I don't know." She shivered, she was covered in a cool sheen of perspiration. The shadows in her apartment were no longer so deep.

"Should I call the doctor? Take you to the hospital?"

"No."

"What?"

"No."

"You're about to have our baby, and..."

"No."

"Who's then!?" He sounded frustrated.

"Look, I haven't been with a guy for about two years, since my husband Mark and I broke up. Honest to God. Nothing happened Christmas Eve, other than you giving me some fish from that weird lab downstairs."

Jake's face paled, but he didn't let go of her hand.

"Who's kid then?" He asked softer this time.

"Look Jake, I don't know. I don't know what's been happening to me. Around the time when I found out I was pregnant I had taken a bath... I know this sounds stranger than all Hell, but I didn't feel anything strange, I swear I didn't, but damn it, those fish! There were two dead fish in my bath tub after the water had drained. It's the only answer I can come up with. I've ruled out everything else. I'm probably paranoid, but..." She stopped, unable to finish, she was really getting more scared, another contraction had started. She gripped his hand.

He was watching the aquarium, the fish seemed to be watching them. Janel had never seen the fish act so strangely.

"Shit, we've got to get you to the office, where they can care for you." He was up, trying to get her to go with him.

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"No. No, office, no scientists, no more WaterTech."

"No more... you quit?"

"Yeah. This is my baby..." The pain was getting worse.

He lifted her up, he was much stronger than she thought, and he carried her down the hall to the bathroom. He set her gently into the tub and then he started pulling out towels, she pulled off her pajama shorts to allow for the birth and then she covered up with a towel. Jake filled the tub full of lukewarm water.

He was frowning, but he sat down by the tub and held her hand, she didn't feel as vulnerable as before.

"Your right." He said.

That caught her off guard. "Huh?"

"No more WaterTech. I'll put it on the market tomorrow, the studies, the genetic engineering... it's not something that I want to be a part of. I've been thinking a lot about it lately, and it's not right restructuring animals. Who cares if we can make a sturdy brightly colored fish, didn't God already do that? I'm going to close out the research tomorrow, so that it is not a part of the business that I sell." He paused, "What ever happens I want to be here to help you. I want to be a part of your life."

Tears were running down her cheeks, it occurred to her that yes she did like him, she could be honest with herself, now that he wasn't so busy trying to impress her she really did like him.

Her water broke, she felt the rush of warm water.

"It broke! My water broke. Shit! Jake, what are we going to do?" She wasn't screaming, but she could feel herself on the verge of becoming hysterical.

"It'll be a normal baby you'll see." He tried to smooth her hair away from her face.

"No, it won't." She was shivering uncontrollably. The contractions were coming regularly and her tears mingled with sweat. Nothing was going to stop the birth now, she could feel the baby moving inside her. All at once, through the pain, she felt the baby come out, it wasn't right. There was something wrong, it hadn't hurt like she had heard childbirth should.

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"Jake!" She was grabbing for his hand, she felt something brush against her calf, she looked down, by her feet there were about ten goldfish in the tub, good size and with shiny black and golden skin.

She was crying she had been expecting a baby, she had been hoping against hope. What terrible thing had happened? Jake was helping her out of the water and wrapping her in towels.

"Look at them." His whisper was like a command.

The young fish were black and golden and as she watched them swim in the shallow water, she realized there was something different about them from the fish in the tank. What was different was their eyes. There was an intelligence to their eyes. They were aware.

"How?" She whispered, and shuddered, he held her tightly.

"The two fish, the ones that died - they must've somehow implanted you with fertilized eggs. Somehow, God this is bizarre, but somehow they must've done it. This is the part I don't get, not that I get any of this, but they must have survived in the air long enough to get to the tub. Once they were in the tub, somehow they implanted the fertilized eggs, or maybe the eggs were small enough that the water carried them into you, I just don't know." He was staring at the fish in horror. "The fertilized eggs must have survived, there must have been eight eggs that survived. I can only make a wild guess that somehow, maybe each month one of the eggs metamorphosed in some way with your human egg."

She was shivering, it was wrong. This should never have happened. The baby fish were watching, from the tub, he was right they seemed to know her.

"What am I supposed to do Jake?"

"All of the Goldies were a fluke, I don't know why I gave you any. They'll have to be destroyed with the research tomorrow, but that can't be helped, we should never have messed with their genetic structure. As for these, We can buy some normal fish and let them learn how to survive on their own, they won't be able to reproduce, there's absolutely no way. Not after such a bizarre crossing of animal tissue, fish and human. We'll have to check them and make sure that they're sterile before we let them go." She wanted to shut all of this out, it was too horrific a nightmare to come true. "We'll move, and

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leave all of this behind us."

Jake carried Janel to her bedroom where he covered her up with blankets, she was no longer alone. She fell asleep.

Jake went back to the bathroom to start getting things going, the quicker all of this was done with the better. With the baby fish in a five gallon bucket of water and the Goldies in a plastic bag full of water, secure in the back seat, he had carried Janel who was still half asleep out to his Mercedes. As Jake was driving home, he knew that he would never be able to look at the world the same again. He had messed in areas better left alone. Hot tears of shame ran down his cheeks, he would never look at any fish the same way again.