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By the Lake
by Jeff Hecht
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Science Fiction

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"How do you keep your little lake so peaceful and quiet, Rachel?" Jennifer asked, as the younger woman opened a bottle of California red wine. The vintage was drinkable, but nothing Jennifer would serve to guests.

"It's taken a lot of work over the last few years," Rachel replied, setting the bottle on a tray with two wine glasses, brie, and crackers. "Nothing like setting up the company, of course, but it does have a connection. We stock it with our own fish."

"I hadn't realized that." Jennifer's investment firm had taken Aquatic Genosynthesis public, and she thought she knew all the company's major projects.

"It's under research and development on the balance sheet," Rachel said, sliding open a wide glass door and leading the way onto the deck.

"It sounds like a nice little tax dodge," Jennifer said. She had to keep alert for CEOs siphoning too much cash out of their companies; it might depress the stock value.

"No, it's one of Ron's projects. He thinks recreational fishing could become quite a large market. He's working quite hard on it; he takes his father out on the lake almost every weekend to evaluate the results, like he took your husband."

That had amused Jennifer. Her husband was an accountant, and after her 25 years in investment banking he normally didn't set foot on anything smaller than a yacht. "Do you think Ron can help him catch something? The poor dear hasn't been fishing since his eighth birthday." She could see their boat near the shore, moving slowly, although she couldn't hear a sound from its little engine.

Rachel set the tray down on a glass-topped table between two chairs. "I'm sure Ron can help him, but Ron's father was really the one who had the idea. Ron's dad was a biologist at the state fish hatchery for 40 years before he retired last year. He knows an amazing amount about the feeding instincts of various fish, and what sort of lures can attract what sort of fish."

Jennifer settled into a lounge chair. "What does that have to do with genetically modified fish."

"Ron's dad thought the feeding cues were genetically controlled, so when Ron was at the university he had his grad students look for genes that control what the fish respond to. They found several genes for specific responses, like striking at something that moved in a certain way, or generated specific noises."

Jennifer got the idea. "Is that how the fish recognizes its dinner?"

"Exactly. For fish farming we engineer in fast growth and limit breeding outside of the environment we control, to protect our investment. For recreational fishing, we modify other genes to modify feeding response."

"How does that make them more attractive for fishing?"

"Ron designed an artificial lure -- a kind of high-tech fly -- that creates a pattern the fish are programmed to strike at. We've tested it and the fish go for it every time. At the company we were able to step up their growth rate, and our latest trick is to adjust this behavior so the fish don't start striking at the lures until they are large enough to impress the fishermen. We stocked them in this lake last year, and they're already big enough to start striking. A few of the old-time purists don't like it, but it attracts the casual fisherman."

"And how big a market is this?" Jennifer asked. A big market could justify a secondary offering, which could earn her a fat commission.

"Billions," replied Rachel, then paused and looked onto the water, evidently distracted.

Jennifer's eyes followed and saw a wake far down the lake. Her ears picked up the whine of a jet ski motor.

"Damned moron!," Rachel said. "We had the public boat ramp blocked, but they still manage to get in."

"The noise is annoying," Jennifer said, glad to see that Rachel's lake wasn't perfect. "Our lake association keeps lobbying our state legislators to ban jet skis, but they want more campaign contributions before they introduce a bill."

"This isn't just an aesthetic issue, Jennifer. The wakes damage the delicate shore ecology, and the noise chases off birds and frogs, and upsets the fish."

"Can you use your genetic technology to make the fish less sensitive, so it wouldn't bother them."

"I suppose that's possible, but we're going in a different direction." Rachel picked up a pair of Zeiss binoculars from the table to look more closely at the water. "We have a new experiment with pike, and if it works, you might see something in a minute."

"Why pike?" Jennifer knew only the fish that came on plates.

"They are voracious predators. We've speeded up their growth rate, and now are fine-tuning their instinctive striking response to just the right noise level. Watch over there," she said, pointing.

The jet ski sped uncomfortably close to a small child a raft as it changed course, turning back up the lake. Jennifer followed Rachel's gesture and saw a dark shape moving from the middle of the lake. Suddenly it broke the surface and a huge mouth gaped open in front of the jet ski. There was a huge splash, with water spraying in all directions and blocking their view. Then the giant mouth, the jet ski, and the kid riding it were gone. Waves spread silently outward from the spot.

"The response threshold is perfect. That should show the bastards," Rachel said, putting down her binoculars.

Jennifer picked her glass of wine from the table and sipped. It was a much better vintage than she had realized. She had underestimated Rachel. "I can see a very big market. I'm sure our lake association will be interested."

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