

## Aquarium

*By Jacob Duarte Spiel*

Fish absolutely terrify me.

The gasping mouths, festooned with serrated, steak-knife teeth or - worse - with slick, empty gums. The gigantic, staring eyes, dark and wet like a bathtub drain. They flit through the sea, brainless automatons, doing the primal bidding of a brutal evolutionary process. The ones in the deep ocean are even worse, sickeningly deformed by the conspiracy between their genes and the environment.

But that's just the window dressing for what *truly* scares me. Most animals grasp at knowledge, they want to know the world to the absolute limits of their intelligence. Monkeys use tools, crows have oral tradition, even bees dance to communicate. With fish, there is none of that. They eat and screw and die and their DNA gets twisted into ugly knots, and then? Then one of those dead-eyed monsters unexpectedly brushes against your leg while you're swimming.

Heh. So you're probably wondering, if I hate fish so much then why did I work at the aquarium for so long?

Turns out the road from fear to fascination is a short one. It's hard to be constantly scared without, eventually, trying to understand why.

Thus, the picture books about sharks, thus the weekend trips to the lake with my parents, thus the animal biology degree, thus the PhD. Thus, thus, thus.

That's not to say I ever stopped fearing fish, but by the time I stepped through the doors of the aquarium that fear had been buried under 16 straight years of education and exposure. I thought I had it beat.

But you're not here for the story of my life.

You're here for the story of the darkfish.

Imagine, way, way off the West Coast, in the heart of the Pacific, a fishing vessel is out looking for albacore tuna. They have GPS, maps, but somehow they manage to get lost. Whether blown off-course or a captain who's prone to drinking I don't know, but the result of it is that they end up fishing in the Pacific Garbage Patch. You might have heard of the Patch. Prevailing currents draw all the trash we drop in the ocean towards a single location. There, the microplastics, the styrofoam, they all cling together, forming a zone of swirling toxic garbage three times the size of France.

Now if they knew they were in the patch they wouldn't have dropped their nets. After all, nothing they pull from there is going to be fit for market. Ignorant of this, they waste an entire night and morning chasing a good-sized school. They bring the catch on deck only to throw the dead tuna away after they get their bearings.

But they'd also caught something... else. And that? That, they took back to shore. Alive.

That's the story the chairman told me. After everything that happened, I'm not sure I believe him. Maybe it did come from the patch, a creature all twisted up by human waste, or maybe it was something all too natural. Something we had nothing to do with.

What I do know for sure is this: about a week later that fishing vessel docked at East Sooke harbour and, that same day, the aquarium chairman and the lead researcher flew out to East Sooke and returned with a small slip of paper. It was a receipt. A receipt for a dollar amount so painfully high that the chairman pinned it to the annual budget report like a purple heart.

As the lead researcher stood silently behind him, the chairman informed the research team, myself included, that we could expect a new addition to our permanent collection. Something that would finally put us on the map. However, we would have to prepare quickly. It was to arrive in three days.

Of course I was interested.

Those next three days were the most hectic I ever experienced at the aquarium. Everybody's workload doubled. Nobody walked anymore: for those three days you were either jogging or sprinting, depending on how urgent your task was.

One of our divers, Darren Kloss, told me he spent 50 of the 72 hours underwater, transferring the five hundred residents of our massive coral reef tank to make room for what was coming. Nearly got the bends from all the diving and resurfacing. Luckily for the aquarium's health insurance, Kloss was a laid back guy.

It was as if the entire research department had been injected with adrenaline. Only one person lacked that jittery, manic energy: the lead researcher. Normally a decisive woman, her orders now seemed unclear and contradictory.

One night, I visited her office seeking guidance on one of the experiments I'd been tasked with. The room was lit by a single reading lamp hovering above his desk. Her hands were spread spider-like across dozens of papers, which were covered with overlapping diagrams and numbers, some simple, some complex. When she saw me, the pages instantly vanished into one of her many file folders. Almost like she was embarrassed.

After she'd answered my questions with terse, one-syllable sentences, I made the mistake of pointing to the one sheet of paper still on the desk. It was an order form for one thousand pounds of bright white aquarium gravel.

"Is that for the darkfish?" I said, blurring out the name I'd overheard the chairman use, a name that, at the time, I understood to be an ironic reference to the NDAs.

She stared at me for a long moment during which the temperature seemed to drop ten degrees.

"If it is a darkfish," she answered.

I didn't ask her to clarify.

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The three days passed, but the darkfish never arrived.

The chairman informed us that unseasonably choppy seas had made crossing the Strait of Georgia impossible. We would have to wait another week. In the meantime, the lead researcher would be assembling a team to do background research to prepare for our newest exhibit. The chairman then read out a handful of names, mine among them.

Later that day, the lead researcher handed each of us long, handwritten lists of subjects that we would be expected to draft reports on. Then she left for her office, muttering the whole way.

Together, we looked over our lists. Some of the subjects had been underlined, some had been crossed out, some had been crossed out and then re-written. All of them were unusual, to say the least, and only a few were even tangentially related to marine biology.

"Theoretical exceptions to thermodynamics" was one of my topics, sandwiched between "pre-Darwinian theories of evolution" and "mass hallucinations". Someone else had been tasked with mapping the metaphysical ramifications of "Karmic rebirth".

While everyone else spent the week waiting for the darkfish to show up, we lived in the aquarium offices, sneezing at the dust that floated off our ancient library books.

I'd punch-out at 8pm and leave through the door near concessions, only to see my colleagues huddled together near the coffee stand. Their shoulders would be tight against each other as if they were protecting themselves from the whipping winds of a storm. I don't think they were going home at night.

All this time, the lead researcher refused to talk to us. She didn't even respond to our emailed reports. It was a frustrated, angry silence. It pulsed from behind the locked door leading to her

private labs. It lined the edges of our research papers, torn-up and scattered in her recycling bin. It haloed a fist-sized hole in the wall I found next to her office.

But while signs of her were everywhere, I did see her for the entire week. She spent the time holed up in her office. Whenever I hauled my books through the back hallways I took special care to pass by and, if I was feeling brave, I'd even stop and listen at the door.

Usually it was quiet, but occasionally I could hear muttered greek and latin. Scientific names. Perhaps the thought that by saying them aloud she could conjure an understanding of what they'd caught. Taxonomy as witchcraft. Some names I recognized: *Chlamydoselachus*, a family of mostly extinct sharks. *Muraenidae*, the moray eels. Others were too arcane, even for me.

I only learned he'd settled on an identification on the day the darkfish finally arrived. That morning, the exhibit's adhesive plaque arrived from the printers. It was large, big enough to be read from 30ft away. Genus: *Squatina*, the angel shark family. Species: *perditus*, meaning "lost".

But we would never call it that. "Darkfish" had stuck.

We unveiled *Squatina perditus* on what turned out to be the first warm night of the summer. The nice weather and a well-timed advertising campaign drew a crowd to the aquarium along with a few curious journalists who had been unable to weasel any information from our employees.

We weren't required to be there, but I had yet to see the darkfish and I wasn't going to miss my first opportunity. I stood front and centre, facing away from the curtained tank, along with the rest of the biologists.

The chairman said a few words, the bleary-eyed lead researcher said even fewer, and then they dropped the curtain.

The crowd instinctively pushed forward to get a better view. Then, they stopped, eyes wide. I wasn't supposed to, but I turned, eager to get my first look.

And there it was, floating in the middle of the tank, fifteen feet up. Finally, the darkfish.

It wasn't just a clever nickname. The fish was... black. Oil black? Inky black? None of that does the colour justice. It was a perfect black void, as if someone had plucked a fish out of existence and forgot to fill the blank space they left behind. It seemed to suck all the light from the tank into its smooth, featureless flesh.

Yes, featureless.

While the darkfish had a vaguely shark-like shape, the same torpedo body and scimitar-blade dorsal fin, from where I stood I couldn't see a mouth or eyes or gills or anything that broke up the utterly black skin. Despite the lack of detail, there was no doubt it had the outline of a predator.

At the sight of it, there was a chorus of oohs and ahhs from the crowd. A few cameras went off. The reporters hastily mapped out their column inches for the next edition's "date night" or "new in town" column.

I saw the wisdom now in devoting our biggest display tank to it. The creature was huge, nearly 12 feet long, and made bigger by its otherworldly appearance. It was best seen as it was: completely alone.

And yet, despite the mass of people and flashing phones, the darkfish had yet to move. Not an inch. It didn't even flare its fins against the slight current that bubbled from the water pump.

I realized that the lead researcher was speaking again, giving a halting summary of what she had discovered so far. The anatomy spoke to a creature from the depths, she explained, one that no longer needed eyes in the dark of the deep ocean. Its lack of mouth was less understandable, but, and here the head of research struggled, there were, and I quote, "many plausible theories being considered." I mentally reviewed the eclectic subjects I'd spent the past week researching and saw nothing that could lead to a plausible theory.

As she spoke, the darkfish continued to do exactly nothing, it simply floated motionlessly. By the end of the speech, the energy of the room had shifted from entranced to merely bored. Some people were still staring at the tank but many were glancing down to check their phones. A couple next to me looked at each other, shrugged, and walked down the hall toward the regular exhibits. The darkfish just floated, high above us, its blind head tilted slightly down, as still as a dead specimen in formaldehyde.

The chairman pulled Kloss aside and whispered in his ear. He ran to the employees-only area and reappeared with chunks of bloody albacore tuna in a bucket. Then, carefully, he began to scale the feeding ladder. Like magic, heads snapped up to watch his progress. Everyone loves a feeding, something about watching the savagery of nature played out in a controlled environment, and if the feeder is risking his life standing 50ft up on a rickety ladder? Well that's just gravy.

The tech lifted the lid, displayed the chunk of meat to the waiting crowd, and carefully dropped it into the water, right in front of the dark fish. A perfect shot.

Two hundred sets of eyes watched the dead tuna gracefully descend from the surface, pass within inches of the darkfish's nose, only to land in the gravel below. Uneaten and un-pursued. The darkfish looked like a predator, but I suppose looks aren't everything.

It might as well have been a curtain coming down. The reporters meandered off, a bit puzzled. Then the rest of the disappointed crowd disappeared in ones and twos. After about 15 minutes the only people left were aquarium employees and, since this “special reveal” was after hours, we started closing up.

I went to collect my things from the back room, so I wasn't there when it happened. But I heard what happened next.

As I was leaving, the sounds of a commotion roiled down the hall, getting louder and louder as I approached. Angry voices, shouting, a scream, all of it overlapping. I ran the rest of the way, feeling a knot in my stomach.

A whitecap of sound hit me as I came around the corner. Every employee was still there and everyone was well... freaking out. I couldn't even get anyone to explain what the fuck was going on. The chairman was shouting at the lead researcher, who was shouting right back. Both of them were pointing at the tank, but not up at where the darkfish hung, still motionless. They were pointing at the gravel.

And that's when I saw it.

There was a wide conical divot dug into the gravel, like an inverted pyramid, that wasn't there before. In the centre was a single bright, white oval.

Somehow, in the 5 minutes since the end of the event and without a roomful of people noticing, the darkfish had laid an egg.

I circled the tank, and as I did the huge tufts of kelp passed between me and the egg, blocking my view for a moment. Every time I expected the egg to have vanished. It never did. I pressed my hands against the glass to look closer. The egg was large, the size of a football, and white and hard-shelled. Not like any fish egg I'd ever seen.

Now I knew why the chairman was so mad. See, there's a policy in aquariums that for rare or endangered fish. We can't move eggs until after they hatch for fear that we might damage the brood. We can't touch the egg. We also couldn't examine it in such a large, public tank without shutting down the whole aquarium.

I mean, fuck, a one-of-a-kind specimen and we'd missed a perfect opportunity to study it. It would have to sit there until it hatched, mocking us along with every marine biologist in the country.

Under other circumstances, I would have found the whole thing funny. But not now. I looked up at the darkfish and felt a whisper of fear raise the hair on my neck.

As the chairman and lead researcher went off to strategize, the rest of us finished closing up. All the while the darkfish hung high above us, silent and immovable, its shadow laying across the egg like a blanket.

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As I shuffled to my car through the nearly empty parking lot, a luxury sedan lurched out from the shadows and stopped in front of me. The driver's window rolled down and the chairman stuck his head out.

He asked if I could come in early the next day for a special project involving our latest attraction. It wasn't a request.

I arrived at dawn to find the chairman helping Darren Kloss into his diving suit. Kloss had dived with the animals for years. Sharks, eels, lionfish. The guy was fearless. I never saw him sweat, or even look anxious. Today, I saw both.

The chairman laid out his plan. Kloss would carefully remove the egg and I would "discover" it while cleaning the darkfish's holding tank in the research lab. The other employees would go along with it, thanks to the NDAs, and we'd all get a chance to understand this - and here the chairman searched for the right word - to understand this 'fascinating' creature.

I said nothing. Again, it wasn't a request.

Kloss made barely a ripple as he lowered himself into the tank. Carefully, he swam down behind the creature and brandished his aquarium net, absurdly small next to his bulky scuba equipment. The darkfish did not move from its post in the centre of the tank, directly above the egg.

Kloss approached the divot and looked to us for confirmation. The chairman, with a microsecond of hesitation, nodded.

Something, I don't know what, made me glance up. The darkfish was gone.

Terror blitzed through my body. All my fear - the fear I'd spent 16 years burying under knowledge and expertise - it all came back in an instant. Gone. Gone. Impossible. I scanned the tank, seeing nothing but the blinding white gravel and the shadows of kelp.

Moments before Kloss touched the egg, one of the shadows struck.

Kloss reeled back, his fins stirring up whirlpools of sparkling gravel as he tried to kick his way to the surface. But for some reason he couldn't. Kloss was strong swimmer but now his body was

unbalanced. He kept drifting, his left leg kicking more and more weakly as a cloud of his own blood slowly obscured him. The entire time, a thick stream of bubbles flowed from around his mouthpiece. He was screaming.

Suddenly, the chairman fell backward as something gristly and red dropped past us behind the glass. A chunk of Kloss's thigh.

In a flash, I was up the ladder and pulling Kloss out of the tank. His eyes were wild and bloodshot behind the scuba mask. We kept looking back at the darkfish, waiting for the next strike, but it had again taken up its usual post, facing forward, and slightly down, as if nothing had happened.

The chairman drove Kloss to the hospital and I stayed to clean up the mess.

After that, I was under strict orders to keep my mouth shut but, if I absolutely had to, to lie and say Kloss was on vacation and could not be reached. It never came to that, the egg had everyone's attention. A single, missing diver didn't even rate.

The next week was a seemingly never-ending research assault on the darkfish. Scientists surrounded the tank day and night, prepared to take notes on any and all interesting behaviours. But, to their chagrin, the darkfish remained motionless and inscrutable.

The fish continued to refuse any food it was offered, whether albacore, cod, or shellfish. Still, I always excused myself from these attempted feedings, remembering the thick slab of Kloss's leg I'd pulled from the tank, with edges so smooth it looked to have been professionally amputated. Not a single piece missing.

I didn't want to see how a fish without a mouth could do that.

In fact, I didn't want to see the darkfish at all. As much as possible I kept to the back hallways, avoiding the exhibition floor entirely. Even other fish began to take on a sinister quality to me.

And yet, I became obsessed. I knew - *knew* - that the secret of the darkfish lay in the egg. If I could understand it, I could restore normalcy. I poured over textbooks and phylogenetic trees. In a moment of wild panic I even broke into the lead researcher's office. He'd taken a leave of absence, but his personal research notebooks regarding the darkfish were still there.

They told me nothing. All the pages were either blank, or had been ripped out.

I wrote down every theory about the egg I could think of. Only one made any sense. The darkfish's egg had a hard, opaque shell, like a bird's egg. Perhaps the darkfish's ancestors were sea-faring birds. After all, whales and dolphins had once been land mammals that returned to the sea. Why not a bird? Was that so crazy?



I clung to that theory like a liferaft. Every time I passed by the darkfish's tank it seemed to make sense. Really, it did.

It did.

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I was working in the lab a few days later when the chairman came over the loudspeaker. "Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "we have a special treat for you today: it appears that the egg is hatching".

Impossible, I thought, no egg could gestate that quickly.

From all over the aquarium, people rushed to the tank. I pushed to the front under the pretense of keeping the crowd calm. Really, I just needed to know. I needed to put the mystery behind me.

Sure enough, the egg sported a thin crack in its perfect white surface.

And then, all at once, the crack raced along the eggshell, forking off and expanding until it covered the entire surface.

It shattered. My face froze as I watched the pieces of shell drift down to the gravel like rose petals. As I saw what had been inside that egg.

That old, familiar fear pulsed through my veins. And yet the... thing that hatched... it was no fish.

At first, what it looked to be just a ball of pink and grey flesh. It was tethered to the remains of the heavy eggshell by a thin white umbilical cord, like a balloon on a ribbon.

But then the ball began to shift and unfurl, revealing a misshapen head, six limbs, a thin, sickly tail.

The thing in the egg, it resembled a large rat or possum, but for every similarity there was a horrifying difference.

Its body was a mish-mash of parts covered by a thin layer of patchy skin, furred in some places, scaled in others. One leg had webbed toes. Another seemed to be covered in chitin. A third limb seemed to be dissolving as it made contact with the water. I could count its ribs, and was chilled to find it had three more on one side than the other.

Most disturbingly, I counted five eyes, scattered carelessly across the face like seeds. They were closed, but not for much longer.

The creature, whatever it was, twitched suddenly and I flinched backward. It hit me that I'd been hoping the thing had been born dead. No such luck. Instead, its eyelids creaked open, revealing irises in shades of puce and yellow ivory. The thing blinked sluggishly and looked out onto the world for the first time.

Behind me, I could feel the crowd staring. Their questions rising like a tide.

But, I couldn't have answered, even if I had an answer, because at that moment the creature opened its mouth wide and began to scream.

Countless bubbles streamed silently from its mouth as it started to twist and thrash. A wave of nausea hit me. Bubbles. The wretched thing, it had no gills. It was drowning.

Its malformed body spasmed violently, jackknifing back and forth, wrenching its scoliotic spine as it tried to escape from underneath the thousands of litres of water in the tank. It convulsed again and one of its gnarled paws struck the thin white cord, slicing it in half, setting it adrift. The creature began to float slowly upward.

Then, from the back of the tank, a shadow approached.

Horrified as we were, none of us had noticed when the darkfish abandoned its post. Now, we watched as it moved effortlessly through the water. A predator. A predator for certain.

I stepped back into the shelter of the crowd. The fear. I can't describe it.

The darkfish swam slowly toward its spawn and as it did its body ceased to be featureless. Four flaps I'd never seen before began to pull back from the tip of the darkfish's nose. In an instant, the darkfish had peeled its entire head open revealing not cartilage, muscle or bone, but a gaping internal void, just as dark as its skin.

Its offspring didn't even notice its mother's presence until the head snapped shut around one of its legs. The darkfish yanked, ripping the limb off with a crack loud enough to be heard through the aquarium glass. The thing from the egg shrieked with a blind, mindless intensity as it shook the stump where its leg had been.

And then the darkfish circled back for more.

Again and again the fish unpeeled its head and tore at the dying creature, taking its time. Each strike unfurled a fresh ribbon of sickly blood from where there once was flesh, a limb, or an

organ. I too could feel myself cracking, being stripped away piece by piece. I wanted to close my eyes or scream or do something, anything that would give me an answer.

But there was nothing I could do except watch.

By the end, all that was left of the pitiful creature was a cloud of blood, growing fainter as it dissipated into the clear tank water. The darkfish flicked its tail, circling the tank once, before swimming back down to where the pieces of the egg shell lay. Once there, it carefully swallowed each blazing white shard.

It was over. Or so I thought.

The darkfish nestled down into the divot and was still. A numbness flooded through my body. I knew, somehow, what was about to happen. There was an impossible logic to it.

I soon saw I was right. When the darkfish moved away again it had laid another, perfect egg. Identical to the last.

The dark fish went still again and allowed itself to naturally float upward before again ceasing its movement at the exact center of the tank.

From where it floated, it seemed to stare straight through the glass, not at the crowd, but past it. Past the walls, past the world, past everything. Its universe contained nothing but itself and the egg fifteen feet below, its unaware child.

In the silence that followed, the chairman regained control. He ordered the space cleared and sent all employees home for the day. The next morning the few journalists who believed the hysterical calls from members of the crowd were met by a tank covered with huge sheets of plywood and a sign informing the public that the exhibit was under maintenance. We answered no questions.

By next week the plywood had been fastened permanently and painted the same colour as the walls under the silent eye of the lead researcher. There was no way of knowing a tank was hidden there. Once the job was finished, the lead researcher quit without warning.

When customers asked about the darkfish the tour guides were told to explain that it had been sent to another facility for examination. They soon stopped asking.

Me? I left the following month. The fear had come back to stay, worse than before. I couldn't be in the same room as a fish, any fish, let alone carry out experiments. I tendered my resignation and the chairman accepted it without comment. It was over.

And yet...

I found myself staying late on my last day. After double-checking that everyone was gone, I grabbed the 50ft ladder. There was something I needed to know. I climbed to the top of the darkfish's tank, now a nondescript pillar in the middle of the display area. Thankfully, the service door had been left unlocked and I eased myself into the unlit space above the tank. I turned on the flashlight on my phone.

Even after weeks of negligence, the water was still perfectly clear. The kelp was still green and there was no algae clinging to the walls. Even the gravel was still a blinding, pure white.

And yes, there it was, floating dead centre. That blank space where a fish should have been. I'm certain it took no notice of me, but as I gazed down upon the darkfish I- I felt a spark flicker to life inside me. An urge for knowledge as old as humanity.

But just for a moment. It vanished when I glanced down. There, at the bottom, was that shining white oval nestled in its divot, and I knew what it contained.

I climbed down, dropped my keys on the chairman's empty desk, and walked out the aquarium doors for the last time.

I've had a lot of jobs since then, but nothing has grabbed like marine biology used to. Heh. Sometimes I wonder if I'll ever go back to it.

<*sighs*>

No. No. It's not going to happen. The aquarium taught me one thing: Some knowledge just isn't worth grasping for. Not because its dangerous, but because it simply... isn't there.