

## Suburban Destiny by Narielle Living

The morning sun gentled its way into the kitchen, combining with the smell of first coffee and the melodic sound of the wind chimes just outside the door. The butter yellow of the walls reflected the light as the clock on the wall ticked reassuringly. This was Janet's favorite time of day, the time when everything and anything was still possible, the time when dreams still hovered and morning song birds sang of magic. She relaxed in her chair with her hands around a steaming cup of coffee, drinking in this moment of peace.

Her mind wandered, as it always did at this time of morning, to the day's schedule. It was a school day, and there was band practice, and vacuuming, and dinner...

There was a soft sound above, the quiet noise of a closet door sliding open in the master bedroom. In that instant, her peace was shattered.

Janet quickly rose to get breakfast started. Oatmeal for her husband, waffles for the kids, it was the same every morning. Mornings needed to run like a well oiled machine in order to avoid chaos, and it was her responsibility to make certain that happened. Her three children always needed encouragement to get moving in the morning, and her husband constantly needed help organizing himself prior to leaving the house (finding his keys or cell phone charger, needing a last minute ironing on a shirt he forgot to mention the night before, sometimes it seemed as if her mornings grew longer with each passing day).

Her job as housewife was to ensure that everything was perfect inside the home, that this was a place of peace and relaxation. That was something she and her husband Charles had agreed upon twelve years ago, when she first got pregnant. He had told her that working outside the house was no longer an option, that her only priority was to her family. Heady with hormones and the thrill of a new marriage, she had agreed.

Getting pregnant was a surprise to her, since Charles had hinted that he had a low sperm count and it might be a problem for them to conceive. “But don’t you worry,” he had said to her, with that special smile, “I’ll always take care of you. You and I, we are each other’s destiny.”

She began to question the veracity of the low sperm count when she quickly got pregnant, and then almost immediately again with her second child. Finally, after the third child, she talked to Charles about having her tubes tied.

“I’m truly happy we have our children,” she complained to him, exhausted after yet another sleepless night with two cranky toddlers with ear infections and one infant. “I love our children. I’m just not certain I can handle another, and I don’t want to take a chance that it happens. At this rate I’ll never be able to leave the house to go back to work!”

Charles had smiled down at her and reached out to caress her cheek. “Don’t worry, I’ll take care of everything. But I have to say, Janet, I’m surprised to hear you mention going

back to work. Why would you want to do a thing like that, when you have everything you need right here? Besides, we need you to stay home. As far as the procedure you mentioned, I'm very concerned about the risks associated with that. Let me do a little research and we can talk about it again, okay?"

She reluctantly agreed, and was not surprised when the subject did not come up again. When she tried to discuss it with him, Charles simply informed her that he did not think it was a very good option for them at this time. And besides, he said, didn't she love her children?

The idea that getting her tubes tied equated to not loving her children was baffling to Janet, so she settled instead for getting a prescription from her doctor for birth control pills. She was, however, careful not to mention this to Charles. Just in case.

And per their agreement Janet became a stay at home mom. In the beginning she could hardly believe her luck. They lived in a beautiful neighborhood, with a large house and a huge yard. Their neighbors were lovely, the children had many friends to play with and the neighborhood even had a clubhouse with a pool. "I have everything," she thought to herself one day while folding laundry, "I live in a wonderful country, a great neighborhood, and..." she gazed blankly out the window at the perfect expanse of lawn that was hers, "...and I have everything."

Almost everything. There were times when, as much as she hated to admit it, she was bored. Out of her mind bored. It wasn't a boredom that grew from having too much time on her hands. No, this was a boredom that grew from never having to think. Or at least not about the important things. Charles took care of that.

Sometimes at social gatherings Charles would presume to speak for both of them. A recent comment that had become his favorite was, "Oh, Janet and I think that this administration is going to turn out to be the worst ever!"

Privately, Janet loved the new administration. But whenever she tried to voice her opinion, it seemed that Charles had a way of taking apart her ideas and making her look foolish. Sometimes it was better to not say anything at all.

In the past year or so it felt that her life had spiraled out of her control. Janet always had to be prepared, always perfect, ready and waiting. Often Charles would show up after work, around 6:30, with his co-workers and their wives. "Set a few more places at the table, sweetheart! We've got company!" he would say to her in the kitchen, as she frantically tried to figure out if there would be enough food for everyone.

Janet complained about this to Charles, just once. He looked at her, really looked at her, from top to bottom, and said, "Darling, this is what you wanted. You wanted to stay home and play house. Sometimes there is a price you have to pay for getting what you want. Besides, don't *I* take care of *you*?"

Yes, Charles took care of her. There was always enough money to pay the bills, he was always certain to be there for the kids' games and concerts at school, and they lived in a wonderful neighborhood. But sometimes, in the early morning hours before dawn, at a time when Janet could not sleep, she could feel her spirit slipping away from her as she listened to the echo of things Charles said to her that week.

*“That outfit looks great on you, Janet. Of course, it would look much better if you lost a few pounds.”*

*“Don't try to be part of a conversation when you really don't know what we're talking about. Politics and economics require a certain amount of intellect. Why don't you go talk to your friends over there about the latest 'Desperate Housewives' episode?”*

*“No wonder you got a poor grade on that test, Jimmy. Didn't your mother help you with your homework?”*

*“I don't think you'll ever be able to go back to work, darling. After all, what are your qualifications, really? Housework?”*

Janet knew that Charles had a difficult job, and that he often had stress associated with his job. She knew that he wanted the best for them, really he did, but sometimes she felt a curious mixture of sadness and anger at the things he said to her.

She tried talking about this with him once. It was after an impromptu dinner party she had to give at their house, another night when he brought home unexpected guests. He had been harsher than usual that night in his judgment of her, saying things like, “This is an interesting dinner, honey... if you like to chew your meat as if it were gum.” Her favorite comment of the evening from her husband was, “Great dessert! But, do you really think you should be having some yourself?”

“You just made me feel so awful,” she said to him later in their bedroom. “I was embarrassed, and I don’t think that was very nice of you.”

“YOU were embarrassed?” he asked, seemingly outraged. “I bring home co-workers, people that are important to my career, and you served them that mealy excuse for a dinner?” He shook his head at her. “Janet, I thought we were a team. But you’re not holding up your end of the bargain.”

“But you didn’t tell me they were coming!”

Charles stood and took her in his arms. “Now, now, don’t get upset. I’m sure you’ll do better next time.”

It was at that precise moment she grew very still, the air around her sharpening. The clock read 10:30pm, and she knew it had stopped for her. In that instant she felt disconnected from herself, yet she paid careful attention. Standing, with Charles’ arms

around her, she noticed the sharp details of the room. There were rumples in the bed sheets where Charles had lain just a few moments ago, a thin layer of dust on the blinds that she had not gotten around to cleaning that week, and an array of watch, phone and wallet that her husband had left on the dresser. She thought about what it would be like the next time, the next dinner party, the next time she asked about getting a job. She wondered whether or not she would ever be able to get it right for Charles. This was her life, as it always would be. Forever. This was her destiny. There was a current of energy running through her, as if she were being powered by an unseen force, an endless supply of energy streaming directly into her.

“Now, see, all better. Let’s go to bed,” Charles said, oblivious to the new clarity that Janet was experiencing.

“Mmmm,” said Janet, unable to actually form a word.

She lay in bed next to her husband of twelve years and waited. She knew the exact moment he was asleep by the way his breathing changed. Quietly, she got out of bed and went downstairs to the kitchen.

It was after midnight when she began. First, the peeler, to peel the peaches. Then, the chopping board to cut and remove the pits. Everything had to be done just right. Her grandmother had taught her how to do this and she knew it must be perfect. The water was put on the stove to boil, and the sugar was added. After the syrup was made, the

peaches were put in the jar. The syrup was poured over the peaches, covering them thoroughly. The lids were placed on the jar, the jars were turned upside down. Then, for good measure, the jars were put directly into the refrigerator.

Janet had done everything slowly and methodically, performing a ritual of sorts. When finished, she started a fresh pot of coffee and sat at the kitchen table to watch the sun come up.

Her children found her sitting there around seven the next morning. “What are you doing, Mom?” asked Sherri, the youngest as she climbed on her lap.

“Mommy was up last night doing some canning.”

“What’d ya make?” asked Cassie, the middle child.

“Peaches.”

A chorus of groans arose. “Eeeeeewwww, Mom!”

“We HATE peaches!”

“Why didn’t you make something for us?”

Janet smiled at her children, loving them with the ferocity of a tigress.

“How about I bake you something special for after school? Brownies, maybe?”

“Yes!” they shouted, in unison. Janet laughed, and sent them back upstairs to get ready.

A new day had begun.

That week passed quickly. Janet was careful to uphold her end of the marital bargain, always cooking perfect meals, always ready to entertain anyone her husband brought home. She rarely offered an opinion, and focused her energies on pleasing Charles. It was important to her that he be happy, that he had everything as he wanted it that week.

One morning, after sitting at the breakfast table, Janet asked, “Charles, dear, I canned some peaches a little while ago. Would you like them on your oatmeal this morning, or shall I make a pie for you?”

“Is there enough for both?” he asked.

Janet smiled. “Of course, dear. Whatever you want. I’ll take care of you.”

The day after he ate the peaches Charles did not go in to work. He woke up complaining about the brightness of the light in the room and said that he felt extremely weak. He went back to sleep.

When he woke up later that morning Janet noticed his speech was slurred. “Here, have some orange juice,” she urged him. “I’m sure it will help with this flu like thing, whatever it is that you have.”

By the end of the day he could barely move, and was extremely short of breath. The vomiting began later that night.

“Don’t worry, honey, this nasty flu of yours won’t last much longer,” Janet told him that first evening. “Everything will be just fine.”

By the end of the week Charles was dead. “Respiratory failure,” the doctor said, shaking his head.

Janet was at the hospital, sobbing. They had brought Charles in earlier that day. “I thought he would get b-b-better!” she cried. “It was just a cold, you know, one of those things th-th-that he should have gotten better from...” She stopped talking, staring out the window.

“Why don’t you sit down here, and we’ll call someone to come get you?” the doctor asked. He felt bad for the new widow, he could see how upset she was. He had known her husband, and his children were in school with her children. He had even been to their house for dinner parties. Although the doctor had not liked Charles, he thought his wife was a warm and caring person.

He placed a hand on her back, steering her toward a chair. “Everything will be okay. I’m going to call a neighbor for you, and I want you to just rest a while.”

“Thank you, doctor, that would be nice.”

Later that day he filled out the death certificate. He hesitated a moment, then wrote “respiratory failure caused by pneumonia” under cause of death. The symptoms were all there.

The funeral was held the following week. There was a large turnout for a man who, by most accounts, was opinionated and boorish. The crowd came mostly to support Janet and the kids, and that was evident in the way the food was piling up on the dining room table and the neighbors were taking turns watching the kids. Whispered comments could occasionally be heard among the crowd at the funeral, but most people kept their thoughts to themselves. They liked Janet.

The morning after the funeral dawned bright and clear, with a sense of renewal in the air. There was a gentle breeze, and Janet could hear the melody of the wind chimes as the music intertwined with a cardinal’s medley. Another steaming cup of coffee, another perfect morning. When she heard the sound of a closet door sliding overhead, she knew it was one of the kids. Breathing in deeply, she relaxed in her chair, waiting for her children to come into the kitchen.

Janet had some job interviews lined up for later that week. She wasn't certain which direction her life would take but she felt confident and strong. She knew that anything was possible, as long as you took charge of your own life. "There's a thought... being in charge of my own destiny. That's definitely a concept I have to make certain to pass along to the children."

With a final sip of her coffee, she rose to start preparing breakfast. It was time to begin a new day.