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EMU'S RETURN

by

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It was autumn when Emu returned to his fishing shack after fifteen years of prison. The sun had long since lost its summer brightness, and the clouds, instead of floating in lazily from the north-west, darkened and sped down on the Cove from the north-east. It was the period between the chill cool of fall and the bone-freezing blasts of winter.

The other fishermen had returned from the outer harbor earlier than usual that day and there he was, sitting out in front of his shack on an upturned nail

keg polishing his tuna harpoon. The fifteen foot oak pole shone and glistened in the brief sunlight that filtered through occasional breaks in the clouds, and Emu's eyes were satisfied.

"Emu," said Ola going up to him, black sea boots clomping on the dirt path, "you are back?"

"Yes, Ola," answered Emu, not losing a stroke with his buffing rag, "you see right."

Ola stood for a few minutes, still amazed, while Emu gave the harpoon a few finishing strokes. Putting aside the rag, Emu picked up the brass dart which fitted over the end of the harpoon.

"See, Ola," he said, "she fits. After fifteen years, she still fits."

Ola was bothered. This wasn't the same ~~Emu~~ he had known fifteen years ago. Not this man with gray hair curling around his ears, matted beard, and stooped shoulders. He tried to picture the Emu he had known -- thick blond hair, deep chest, gentle blue eyes. The eyes -- that was it. The eyes made the big difference between the Emu of fifteen years ago and the Emu he saw before him now. They were no longer gentle. They were the eyes of a madman.

"Fifteen years, Ola," Emu continued to mutter, gently stroking the harpoon as he did so, "fifteen long years away from all sight of the sea. Not once

hearin' a gull screamin' and tearin' at an old fish you toss him. Fifteen years of tryin' to imagine I could hear the sound of ocean on the rocks, the sound of the motor on my boat, or the fog horn out there on Thatcher's. Ah, Ola, I used to sit in my cell for hours at a time and just groan like the foghorn out there tryin' to make myself believe I was back on the sea. No good, Ola, no good imaginin'. No good tryin' to make yourself believe a broom handle is your harpoon and you're out on the end of your tuna stand. No good, Ola."

His voice died away, and he looked down into the dirt. Ola slumped down on the doorstep and reached inside his oil pants to bring out a crumpled pack of cigarettes stained brown with salt water. The wind had sprung up heavier making him cup several matches before he was able to draw smoke.

"You've changed, Emu", he said finally.

"Where's Karl?" asked Emu, ignoring Ola's statement.

"Out with his brother haulin' the trap. He'll be in soon. Wind's comin' up pretty strong out there, so he'll have to. Why?"

Emu patted his harpoon, his hands shaking slightly as he did.

"Me and Karl," he said, "we got business. Fifteen years ago we make a date for this day. Now we keep it."

Ola leaned back against the door, eyes puzzled, smoke trailing out of his mouth and nose. Overhead, the rolled clouds had completely conquered the blue sky and were strengthening their bridgehead, lowering and darkening. The ocean showing outside the harbor was black and ugly with tiny patches of white caps lightening the surface like white paint splatches on black canvas.

"How come you're out, Emu?" asked Ola.

For a moment, Emu's eyes almost lost the mad light that shone through them like lightning in a blue summer sky.

"Why? Why am I out? Look at me for a bit, Ola. Tell me what I am now that fifteen years ago I wasn't. Remember me when we fished together? Me and you, remember? Highliners of the whole Cape. Fifty tuna in one month. Never missed with the harpoon, did we? My arms, remember them? Strong, healthy arms they were then. Big veins, hard like granite. Now look, Ola, look at them now. Thin, old, like a sick eel. Arms that once hauled in a thousand pound tuna all by themselves. Look at them, Ola, and then guess why I'm out. Look at my chest. Here, I show you. See, not the chest you knew. Not this thing all sunken in. It's inside though, Ola. That's where the hurt is,

inside. Right underneath, in the lungs. That's where the hurt is."

Emu rebuttoned his shirt, covering the scraggly gray hairs on his chest. Ola sat silent for a moment, his lungs rhythmically drawing and expelling the cigarette smoke.

"How much time you got?" he asked.

"An hour, a day, a week, who knows? It'll be long enough for me to finish my business with Karl, and then, who cares?"

"What you gonna do with Karl, Emu?"

The madness flowed back into Emu's eyes, and he grasped his harpoon again. He swung it around until the razor-sharp point of the dart was resting on Ola's chest.

"She is thirsty, Ola. For fifteen years, she hasn't tasted any blood, and now she's thirsty for the blood of the man that killed me -- for Karl's blood."

Ola slowly pushed the harpoon away from him. As he did, Emu suddenly slumped over, his face contorted with pain, as his body humped itself until his chest was pounding on his knees. The spell lasted for about a minute, and when he sat up again, his face was flushed and worn.

"You're surprised at what I say, Ola?" he continued. "Surprised to hear me say that Karl killed me?"

He bent over again briefly, but then straightened up again, wiping his mouth as he did, and sank back wearily against the side of his shack.

"Yeah, you might be," he muttered. "You might be at that. Remember the night Swenson got the knife in em? Yeah, you remember, only it wasn't my knife, Ola, it was Karl's. He lied, Ola, he lied about that being my knife and about me. I was drunk that night. It took a long time to remember just what happened. It wasn't my knife that killed Swenson, Ola, 'twas Karl's."

His voice lowered still further till Ola had to strain to hear. It was almost as though Emu ~~was~~ talking to himself, remembering fifteen years past what had happened.

Overhead, the clouds twisted and wreithed their mad rushing way along, lowering still further, pushing the sea before them, buffeting one another about in their race to be first.

"You'll never do it. You can't, Emu. You look at your arms for a change. How can you hold a harpoon with those, much less heave one? You can't do it."

Ola had been shaking Emu hard by the shoulder, but now Emu shrugged his way out of the tight grasp.

"You're my friend, Ola," he said. "I want you to do me a last favor. O.K? Take me out in your boat."

Find Karl, and let me do what I have to. Give him a chance. Not like he did me and Swenson. Hollor to him. Tell him, get his harpoon and get out on his stand. Then, we each get a shot" -- and his voice faltered -- "you let me die on the sea. Nice and clean, Ola" -- and he was pleading now -- "don't make me die on shore. You gotta let me get Karl. Then,.. " -- he spread his hands expressively.

Ola looked steadily at Emu. His brain was suddenly sick as he saw the pleading, child-like eyes, and the ghost of his former friend. He was right, he thought. The sea was the only place for a fisherman to end it for himself and for those that had hurt him during life.

"Come on, Emu," he said, "we'll meet him on the bay."

Outside the Cove, the bay was menacing. The boat pitched violently as it hit the first of the chop, and the heavy wind flung bits of spray back into the open cockpit. Ola's yellow oilskins were soon wet and glistening as he stood at the helm listening anxiously to the grinding propellor as it now and then churned out of the water.

Emu stood on the tuna stand, six feet of board out in front of the bow, and braced himself against the safety line. The iron brace jutting up at the very end of the

stand fitted his waist perfectly. It seemed impossible with the boat pitching and tossing so that he could keep from falling overboard, but with his hair flying wildly about his face, he grimly held his harpoon and peered ahead.

Out on the bay, they saw Karl's boat and the two faces in it that strained toward them. Emu motioned at them to Ola and shouted something, but the wind demolished the words. Then, he turned again to Karl's boat waving the harpoon and shrieking.

Soon the boats were so close together that the startled faces of the two men in Karl's were clearly visible. Karl's boat had a small cabin on it, and he stepped out on the forward deck of it to see better. There was no doubting what he saw.

The ocean was a mass of froth as it leaped and stormed at the two boats. The screaming banshee that was the wind made talk impossible. Karl recognized Emu and knew what he wanted. He quickly leaped down into the cockpit of his boat and fished out his own harpoon. Finding it, he carefully worked his way out on his stand holding onto the safety lines as the sea leaped up beneath him in vain attempts to sweep him into its watery depths.



For a brief second, Emu was close enough to Karl that he could have reached over and touched him with his hand, but for some reason, he stayed his harpoon. Then, a crashing wave sent them apart again as the wind, increasing by the second, picked up bits of foam from the surface and threw it into the men's eyes, blinding them.

Emu shook his head trying to rid his eyes of the stinging spray. Suddenly, he felt weak all over, and his throat throbbed. When he finally opened his eyes, it seemed to him as though there were no storm at all, as though the whole thing had been an ugly dream.

Heaving a sigh of relief, he looked down at his thick muscular arms and grasped the harpoon tighter. Pointing with the end of the pole, Emu showed Ola where the big fish was, and Ola steered accordingly.

With narrowed eyes, Emu aimed his harpoon at the big tuna, and then, with a quick throw, the harpoon left his hands and the sharp dart dug deep into the dark flesh.

A cloud darkened Emu's sun and sent down long dizzying rays that burned and choked. They reached down, black, thick, and wet, and swept Emu deep down into their depths.

Emu had returned.

THE END