

## PORPOISE

Rufus sat just aft of the coaming round the hatch, moving easily to the boat's motion, mouth open to the wet salt of the air, tail-stump wagging about twice every minute. He had this habit of slow-motion tail-wagging when the boat was out and the gulls hanging like grey coat-hangers, in sight but out of reach. Norm and Galli and the lad kept occasional eyes on Rufus' bum, waiting for the wagging to stop, waiting for him to perform the ritual of sitting motionless for a long minute and then getting up and stretching his legs, one at a time, and then just standing there and staring outboard with great concentration. He did that whenever they got close up to a school although Galli said he didn't believe it.

"Ah, for God's sake, Norm! He's not a setter or anything! The way you go on you'd think he'd been trained! Jeez, he's only a bloody bitzer!"

Norm looked superior.

"I know, I know ..... I've heard it all before. An' I'm tellin' ya once an' for all, mate ---- Rufus knows!" He sucked on the end of his cigarette and flipped it over the side. "This is what, eight, nearly nine years now, an' it's what he's always done, ever since he was a pup. Time we get up on the fish, that's what he does. Always!"

"Balls! He's a dumb bloody mongrel --- nice old dog, mind --- and when he gets cramps in the bum he does what every other mongrel in the world does. He gets up! It's just that you reckon more to it than there is, that's all."

"Matter of opinion, innit?" Norm looked out at a thin

scud of cloud collecting itself in the middle distance and eased back on the throttle, letting the boat come up into what wind there was so that the forepeak began to rise and yaw a little under the dog's paws. Rufus rode sweetly with the movement, stepping sideways and repositioning himself to point his muzzle in the right direction. The lad pushed a thin finger out and giggled at Galli.

"There y'are, Gal --- he's got the scent!"

Galli let a lad-sized snarl show round the bottle he was swigging from but made no answer.

Less than a hundred feet away the sea's surface changed as they watched. The long and even swell ruptured in a narrow band, the texture of the waves breaking suddenly into something thicker, more white appearing and then more black as the shining seamless bodies moved into the bottom of the air at the top of the water.

Norm called to the dog.

"Good boy, Rufe! Good on ya!"

He edged the throttle back another notch, holding the throb of the motor just above the idle, and said to the lad, "That's porpoise all right! 'Way ya go then."

Galli had said the previous night, "You wouldn't, would you Normie? Porpoise?"

"Got to mate. No other choice."

They'd eaten big steaks and a lot of mushrooms and drunk a fair amount of beer with them and then they'd gone on to the whisky, maintaining the never-discussed, no-rules, no-winners contest they'd been carrying on for years. A simple business of drinking whisky, no more than that. Opening a bottle and tossing the cork away and then

opening another when that one was empty and just going on as though nothing was happening. Taking it in half tumblers with no additives. Not getting rotten. Just finishing in a shared sympathy of silence and falling into bed and getting up at three o'clock to get the boat ready. It was always like that when Galli went up the coast for a few days.

They'd been at the head of the second bottle when Norm started on about the porpoise.

"No other course, that's all. Bugger all bait in the place --- hasn't been for a week --- an' I got these three blokes want to fish up big."

"Ah, there's got to be something! What about the freezer?"

"No way. I told you on the phone, didn't I? Reason you're payin' top quid for fish down below is because they're not runnin'. They don't run, we can't catch 'em an' you lot can't eat 'em." He poured for them both. "Plenty of 'em away up north, any amount. We're havin' an empty, that's all."

"How long's it been going?"

"Fifth day tomorrow."

"You been sitting on your arse four days then?"

"No, mate, not me! I get out there because I c'n tell when the change is on that much quicker, can't I? Saves time an' petrol." He'd sucked at the whisky and wiped the back of his hand across his lips. His eyes were a little vacant and his voice thinner than it had been. "An' I got these three blokes day after tomorrow want to fish up big. Gointa need bait, right? Have to be porpoise."

Galli had stared, eyes wide with the effort of holding them wide.

"Well, if there's nothing running, how d'you know there's them out there? The porp --- the porpoise?"

Norm had shaken his head sadly.

"You're a bloody wonder, you are! You been comin' out with me off an' on for twenty years and you still ask stupid questions! I know because I know, that's how! I'm a professional, ain't I? A professional fisherman, so I know!"

"Yeah, all right ..... only porpoise?"

"Look --- there's sixty-seven different kinds of shark out there, mate, an' there's tuna an' barracuda an' probly The Great White Bloody Whale for all I know! An' y'need bait for every one of 'em! So we'll go an' put the point in a porpoise in the mornin, see?"

Rufus and the lad were organizing the rope, the lad pulling it clear of the locker and onto the deck near the break i the rail, the dog waiting till it was neatly flemished down and then sitting on it carefully to hold it in place.

Norm said to Galli, "Right, just keep her on that heading and those revs for now. When I wave, edge her in towards 'em a bit ..... they'll come in then an' start up-an'-downin'. Soon as you see me get set, cut her right back till I strike, then give her the gun again, OK?"

Galli nodded and thoughtfully thumbed open another can of beer, watching as Norm went forward. The harpoon came out of the rack of three and Norm quickly shackled the lead chain onto the ring in the end, the chain's other end spliced to the rope on the deck. Rufus watched the salt-

rough fingers carefully, tail wagging fast now in approval. He moved behind the man as the sliding rail went back. The school was about forty feet off, fair to starboard, seething through the water easily, snouts and bodies curving through the water in perfect shapes, opening the wave-faces ahead of them and curling down so that the tail-flukes caught the thin morning light and the flying sea-drops whipped away from them like thrown diamonds. Norm turned, hand to his mouth, and called up, "There's bait there all right!" His arm lopped in a wave and Galli turned the bows in a little towards the porpoise, sure that a series of bright leaping eyes saw him do it, saw the gentle swing of the bow and glimmered with pleasure. The school turned inwards, the thirty or so big bodies swinging their blunt backs towards the boat's stem. A moment later they were plunging under the bows and up and out the other side, wheeling and spinning and thrusting, out of the water, under the water, under the boat and back and back and back again. Playing. Shouting and laughing at one another. Enjoying the companionship the boat had brought them. Out of the edge of his eye Galli saw Norm's arm go up as he leaned outboard, one hand fast to the rail, the barb black at the end of the harpoon shaft. Galli cut the motor and in the sudden stillness he heard clearly the squeaking, giggling chatter in the water till the arm swept down and the harpoon went and he punched the button to start the motor coughing again as Norm belayed the hissing rope round a deck cleat. Galli pushed the throttle forward and swung the boat away from where there was now nothing but the sea.

He went forward to help Norm and the lad bring the porpoise inboard. It lay in the water passive, snout down, the barb in its black-green flank as the sling went beneath it. When the lad turned the winch over the captive came out of the water heavy against them, nearly six feet long, fat and sleek, opal and emerald and mother-of-pearl where the light caught the multiple curvatures, oyster-grey and pink and lime on the belly, a few sea-lice moving on the skin as it began to dry in the stiffening breeze. It went down onto the deck all of a single piece, every plane running smoothly into every other plane like a master-craftsman's blown crystal. There was blood where the barb was buried and more as Norm eased at it and then sliced, small and careful, to release it. The porpoise was alive, flank torn but no mortal damage done, and the lad and Rufus hunkered down alongside it to examine it thoroughly. Back in the broad forehead behind the enquiring beak the eyes were very alive, glinting sideways at the lad and the dog, staring up at the men staring down. There was a tremor in the shimmering athlete's body and the faintest sort of whistling noise and it was changing colour in the air, the shimmer going, becoming a more matt green-into-black. Norm rinsed the head of the harpoon and grinned. "Bait!" Galli nodded, saying nothing. Norm put the harpoon down and took the knife again, a long thin blade, disfigured by years of use.

"She's a beauty, isn't she?"

Galli nodded again, then said, "She? Is it a she?"

"Oh yeah .... for sure."

The porpoise looked unflinchingly at Norm as he stooped,

the light running unevenly along the blade in his hand. She swung her broad head just a little as he moved close and then looked up at Galli and then back at Norm and out through the rail, into the deep of the sea.

Norm put the point of the knife at the back of the porpoise's head and her eyes rolled as she tried to look backwards. The tremor was more marked and now there was a long, shaking sigh. Rufus stood up, the hair on his neck stiff and the lad rose with him, moving close beside Galli. The sigh came again and ended with a thin whistling note, a rising sound, a query.

Norm put the knife on the deck abruptly and stretched to his full height, staring out at the crust of white wavetops simmering on the sea. Then he bent and took the porpoise by the tail, sliding her, tacking, towards the side. Galli bent with him and together they slipped her under the rail and out and down, watching her turn in the air for a second and then turn in the water and be surrounded by the enquiring beaks and the curving, curling, caressing shapes of the school. Two feet below the white wavetops for a few seconds. And then entirely gone.

Norm went back to the wheel and turned the bows towards the land. Not speaking, Galli opened more beer and passed a can to Norm. The lad watched them, puzzled, and Rufus lay aft and went to sleep. Norm stared at the forepeak, pitching as they headed in across the swell.

"Bloody good bait, porpoise." He emptied his can and crushed it, hurling it far over the side. "Got nothin' for them three jokers now, nothin' for 'em to fish up big with."

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