

Rhyme Of The Ancient Galapagoose

The after party was held at The Lucky Shag Waterfront Bar, and everyone showed up except Urchin Krill, on account of his untimely demise. The cast gathered around Urchin's favorite bar stool, hoisting pints of Swan Draught in his memory. Guests arrived in the following order:

Darwin – He opened the bar at exactly 4 PM, as he's done for years.

The surviving Krill family - Cuttle, Slug, and Anemone, minus Dr. Maritime Krill, who seldom left his laboratory on Rottnest Island. Darwin made an exception to the Shag's 'No Marsupials' rule, as posted on the front door, looking the other way when Cuttle smuggled Urchin's pet quokka into the bar.

Mayor Blakeney – The disgraced civic leader chased tequila shots, confessing that Lady Blakeney cleaned him out following the fairground debacle. The spiteful woman removed every stick of furniture from their beach house so he had to sleep standing up. It was bold to show in the first place as he was violating a restraining order that Dr. Krill took out on Anemone's behalf. But he wanted to perform one last official duty before coughing up keys to the city.

"I'm pleased to announce the ribbon cutting for the Urchin Krill Oceanic Research Center, to be held this Monday at the wharf," he proclaimed, to raucous cheers.

Geronimo, the Narrator – Ah yes, The Pickled Poet of Perth, as I'm known around town. Critics say I play loose with the truth, but it's not entirely my fault. Mother was an international journalist. She hooked up with a compulsive liar after binge drinking in a Mexican cantina. At least neither of them raised me. I rent a small apartment above the Shag, and believe me, I only wander downstairs when the music gets loud.

Now if you'll excuse me, I'm about to step out for a smoke. This new ordinance banning smoking in pubs really stinks. I've also got to run down to the docks and deliver a message. There's a coelacanth on a lounge, waiting for his drink, and he's dying to find out what's going on inside the Shag tonight.

"Good God," you say. "Have you been tipping pints all day? Coelacanths are mythical creatures. And even if one did exist it wouldn't be found reclining on a lounge chair in Western Australia, sipping cocktails."

You make some valid points. But I'm not talking about unicorns. This particular mythical creature, a fish called Charlize, will spin some heads. Read the rest of the story while I'm gone and you just might change your mind about a few things. Cheers, mate.

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The Krill brothers held regular jam sessions, tethered to bar stools at the Lucky Shag. The Shag was once a Perth hotspot, a place where random encounters on the crowded dance floor often launched maiden voyages. But the action moved on, following a wave of happy hours across town, and the flotsam that washed up now resembled cargo from the shipwrecks of lost opportunity.

Urchin Krill was the oldest of three boys and the most ambitious, a likeable rascal who exchanged stories at the bar for drinks. He was home-schooled in classical literature but felt equally comfortable quoting Tom Robbins, Hunter S. Thompson, or even Garrison Keillor on those days when a Norwegian Cruise liner docked at the conflux of the Swan River.

Cuttle was the family handyman, not given to invention, but he could generally fix things. Slug, a powerful sport, was capable of supplying brute force provided you weren't in a hurry.

And then there was Anemone. She was a slender minnow with Medusa dreads and a nonchalant demeanor. Together, they formed the labor pool for the Krill Institute, a floundering marine research center operated by their father, the reclusive Dr. Maritime Krill.

Nobody remembers the actual day Dr. Krill sailed his majestic schooner into Perth Harbor. That he dropped anchor and remains is a testament to favorable trade winds, coupled with the unsavory motives of a local politician. Krill took a Wadjemup bride and moved to Rottnest Island, 18 kilometers off the Perth coast. He renovated the abandoned penal grounds which housed thousands of aboriginal prisoners so infamously in the late 1830's. These days the odd hermit can be found shuffling between projects, studying the history of the Nyoongar people and categorizing artifacts that his boys dredge up from the warm waters of Thompson Bay.

Urchin follows a routine. He calls for drinks whenever a crowd gathers at the bar, aware that his father is a known scoundrel. Patrons of the Shag want lusty stories that stretch the limits of decency and imagination, so Urchin paints his father in carnival colors: self-centered charlatan, mercurial medicine man, con artisan, merchant marine maniac, and a seeker of misfortune.

Urchin recounts the early years when a young Maritime, the only child of a fishmonger and a seamstress, left their modest home near the Jersey shore to sail across southern seas, piloting an old boat that he found washed up near Longport.

With his larder of red beans and rice running low, Maritime sent word back to the publishers of science journals that he had discovered a new avian species, which he called a Galapagoose. The creature was flightless, nocturnal, preferred live birth, and was endowed with enormous blue feet that were nicely webbed, so it could paddle about effortlessly through turbid seas. Furthermore, it had an iridescent blue plumage that reflected moonlight, allowing it to see

splendidly even during the darkest of nights. Unfortunately, as Maritime pointed out in his dissertation, the bird could also be splendidly seen, which accounted for its precarious existence.

Dr. Krill, as he now called himself, returned to the States and delighted a panel of ornithologists with slide shows and detailed ship logs from his long and solitary journey through volcanic archipelagos. He brought back one vibrant drake Galapagoose for examination. The bird was actually a blue-footed booby, common to the area of his travels, which Krill had live-trapped and sprayed head to tail with booby-blue colored florescent paint. There were other Galapageese out there, he speculated, throwing open a window of hope for propagation. He would need a larger vessel and money for a crew and supplies.

The Charles Darwin Foundation was hard up for new discoveries so they consulted board members and cut a fat check. They displayed the prized Galapagoose in an outdoor cairn, shamelessly charging admission to offset the cost of feed and security. A few weeks later the silly bird lost its luster during a driving rainstorm, but by then Krill was navigating the Strait of Magellan in his new ship, which he playfully christened Chasing Disasters. With full sails and a renewed vision, the craft bore down bravely on the shores of a new world.

It was a decent yarn, one that Urchin had perfected over the years, a spin of truth and tall tales, and the sops gathered around the bar were generally pleased, crying out, "Hear, hear, bring us more beer

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The boys actually despised their father, unwilling to forgive him for naming each child after specimens of his research - echinoderms, gastropods, cephalopods – and they were particularly incensed when he called the youngest, their little sister, Anemone.

“What manner of madness brings a sweet cherub into the world thusly?” they muttered.

“Why not Peggy, or even Geraldine?”

When pressed, Dr. Krill admitted to lapses of character. He truly possessed no scruples, sure the word was a derivative of Slavic tongues that meant ‘screw pals’, and so he did. One appalling example was the treatment of his lovely daughter. When she turned fourteen, he urged her to forego the study of Gabriel Garcia Marquez and stick to the Classics, begging her to sit on Mayor Blakeney’s lap and read him passages from *The Scarlet Pimpernel*.

Mayor Blakeney, in turn, offered Krill full rights and title to Rottnest Island. The vile politician dreamed of Anemone, even during his waking hours, imagining how she might kneel before him, robust novel in one hand, reading passionately while he devoured baguettes dipped in dripping chocolate.

This exchange of real property for elusive favors sparked a near riot in Perth, as Rottnest was a beloved vacation destination, known for clean beaches and spectacular reef diving. Mayor Blakeney held a steady course and declared the entire island a sanctuary for the endangered quokka, mentioning offhand that Dr. Krill was a renowned quokka expert.

Anemone, to her credit, emerged from this asylum of the absurd unscathed, a confident and free spirit. The sassy lass resisted all persuasions, refusing to consider the works of Coleridge, Melville, Jules Verne, or even Hemingway, seaworthy scribes that her father loved so dearly. When Anemone compared their writing to *Sponge Bob* cartoons her father balked, suggesting

he might consider changing her name to Emmuska, or even Santiagra, if only she would visit the delirious mayor in his private chambers.

“Call me Erendira and I could maybe play along,” the innocent girl scoffed, before barricading herself in her room. Anemone passed the days idly drawing Erindira with different pen strokes, adding a small red crustacean figure after each signature. If she were to win the Christening of the Fleet pageant, she would be called upon to sign many autographs.

Looking up from the monologue, Urchin often found half of his audience passed out drunk while the rest were off dancing with strangers. With the jukebox blasting outback cattle herding songs, Urchin had to stand on top of the bar and shout to be heard.

“I took me brothers out diving this morning,” he hollered. “You won’t believe what we hauled up from the depths. Catch of the day. Now who’s buying the next round?”

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Dr. Krill actually was building an ark on Rottnest Island but it wasn’t for refuge in the event of torrential rains. Maritime was a scientist and had little time for fairy tales. He did know that aborigines were some of the world’s earliest ship builders, crossing the Lombok Strait to New Guinea in handcrafted vessels some 50,000 years ago. With Cuttle’s help they built a replica out of weeping peppermint trees, lashing the beams together with vines and chinking the seams with dried reeds, in the native fashion.

The ark was then secured to a pontoon and readied for the voyage to Perth. The Christening of the Fleet parade would take place in a few weeks and Anemone was one of eight finalists vying for Queen of the Fleet. There was prize money at stake, and more.

The Rottnest Preservation Society was making noise again, relentless in their efforts to shut down the Krill Institute. They wanted to turn Rottnest Island into an aboriginal interpretive center, complete with amusement rides and a quokka petting zoo. Dr. Krill shuddered at the thought of getting run off the island. He didn't want to spend his last days in some ratty South Wembley row house. He realized he would need Mayor Blakeney's support now more than ever.

Two factors were in Krill's favor: Blakeney sat on the pageant judging panel, and the despicable mayor got all willy-nilly every time he saw Anemone. The nubile nymph sparked a renaissance inside Blakeney's congestive heart, as if paddles had been applied directly to the flaccid organ. He engaged in wild fantasies, researching Madonna music videos, interested specifically in her use of latex. Blakeney fancied casting Anemone in his own private video. He would dress her in a wetsuit and watch as she tap-danced across Spanish tile and sang throaty love songs.

Dr. Krill's plan featured Anemone configured as a mermaid. The Krill family would ride together on the float, with Maritime playing the part of Neptune, Roman God of the Seas. Urchin was commissioned to write an epic poem which he would narrate using a loudspeaker.

To ensure that all of the Krill family members were engaged in the extravaganza, which was a contest rule, they would wrap chains around Slug's massive frame and place him in front, a beast of locomotion that pulled the float along the parade route, while Cuttle scuttled about in a little tugboat on wheels, close by in case anything broke down.

Maritime had a few other tricks that he kept hidden under his lab coat, some spin to influence the competition. All that can be suggested in advance of the parade was that it

involved Anemone most intimately, and the fact that she had recently turned 16, an age which absolved Australian parents from charges of exploitation. And perhaps there would be an encounter with some creatures from the deep.

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A bachelor party stumbled into the Lucky Shag. The lads were pissed from drinking their way across town and they settled into chairs in front of the big screen. The Aussie Rules Grand Final was just starting, with Port Adelaide taking on Geelong at the Melbourne Cricket Grounds. Urchin was thirsty and realized he would need to embellish the living hell out of his tired repertoire of stories if he expected to pull this gang away from their match.

“It was a fine day for exploring and we anchored off Roe Reef, known for majestic underwater limestone caverns. Waves push sunken treasure into the deep trenches so we dive there often. You’ve probably heard some things about my father, Dr. Maritime Krill? He displays the artifacts we find in our nautical museum on Rottnest Island. The museum is open Tuesday through Friday, by the way, small fee, chance to pet a quokka.

“Slug and Cuttle were diving together and they spied the murky outline of a sloop wedged into a small cave opening. I was topside manning the ropes. They surfaced and described the scene. It’s not unusual to find sunken ships in those waters and most are marked with beacons. If you’re lucky, you’ll find a stray boat hiding behind some towering sponges and brain coral. Nothing beats exploring a virgin wreck.

“It was a small craft that likely took on water during a winter storm. My bet is the crew launched an inflatable and never looked back. Happens all the time with urban skippers. They wreck perfectly fine craft, fill out insurance forms, and pick out a new boat in time for holiday.

We knew there'd be booty onboard so we wrote down the GPS coordinates and returned with our big dive boat."

Right then the footy match got exciting. A Geelong ruckman jumped high above his opponent to win the hit-out during a ball-up. The wedding guests cheered and ran back to the television. Urchin had to raise his voice.

"For the reconnaissance we wore full body wetsuits and carried 80 CF steel tanks. We brought Anemone along and sis stayed on deck so I could join me brothers. We reached the boat and found it well preserved. Sank maybe four to five years ago. The hull was encrusted with the usual barnacles and starfish but the wood was still in decent shape. You'd think wood might rot underwater, but it don't.

"Never know what you'll find inside, rucksacks stuffed full of nautical maps and ship logs, totes with canned goods, bottles of champagne, caviar. There might even be skeletal remains if the storm took a quick turn. And there's always a moray eel hiding in a dark corner to scare the bejabbers out of a mate. I sent Slug in first because he keeps an even keel. Slug squeezed through the main compartment door and I followed. The first thing we noticed was a small bathroom off the galley with the door wide open.

"Slug swam over and squatted down on the biffy. He's a practical joker and he grunted and puckered up his face like he'd eaten leftover chili for breakfast. I got the camera focused and suddenly I saw his eyes grow really big behind his dive mask. He jumped up off the toilet seat, moving quickly, considering it was Slug. I looked closer and spied a gigantic lobster with its claws all up into Slug's bum! The creature apparently made his home in that toilet, and when Slug sat down, territorial instincts prevailed.

By this time the revelers had straggled back to Urchin's roost. Everyone knew lobsters were long gone from the high seas. In fact, very few shrimps remained, but certainly there were no lobsters left. Hadn't been one caught anywhere in years. The last known lobster of any significance was Nantucket Nan, a thirty-pound celebrity crustacean currently on display in the Smithsonian.

Could this story be true? After all, this was Urchin Krill speaking, the son of a deranged scientist who believed whales once walked on land, and was rumored to be building an ark. Urchin smelled fresh pints being drawn from the tap.

"That old lobster just wouldn't let go. I tried to yank the crusty feller off Slug's arse, but his wetsuit started to rip. We didn't want any blood spilled. Shark waters, you know."

Urchin pronounced 'shark' just like his father did, infusing Jersey brogue with Aussie Outback until the word sounded like 'shock'. He often added shark encounters to his stories, for the shock value.

"We surfaced and the lobster held on to Slug's bottom like a preacher in possession of the offering plate. I finally got him pried loose with a channel lock pliers. The lobster was a real beauty. He stood there on the deck, glaring at us and waving those big pinchers around. We backed him into a corner by the life raft and dropped a wire cage over his head. As I speak, we're trying to decide what to do."

One of the wedding guests, a husky fellow with sallow skin and a lazy eye, spoke for the rest.

"I say you're off your knockers, mate. We'll buy drinks all night if you can prove this outlandish claim. Go back to your rat nest. Put the creature into a crate and bring him to us. Otherwise, shut your yam, cuz we've got a footy match to follow."

And the game continued, back and forth, with no clear winner.

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The Krill boys had indeed caught the world's last living lobster. They kept it in a stainless-steel tank, making sure the water stayed a constant 38 C. The discovery brought a new purpose to Dr. Krill's stagnant existence. He moved a cot into the lab and spent all of his time there, observing the creature, taking measurements, and drafting volumes of notes.

Urchin had his own wants, needs, and desires. He regarded the lobster as a gift from Neptune, released to the surface of the sea during a time of great drought, as his throat was pathologically parched. The naysayers around the bar wanted living proof, but Maritime wouldn't let the lobster out of his sight. Urchin had to cast his next narrative toward uncharted waters.

"I'd like to bring Señor Langoustine over for a look-see. That's the name we gave the lobster. But we don't actually possess him anymore."

The wedding guests had returned but they kept their eyes on the TV. Urchin broke out his pastoral voice and a few heathen ears tilted in his direction.

"My old man decided to auction Langoustine to the highest bidder. Auction day arrived and some real high rollers showed up. The Chairman of the Red Lobster restaurant chain wanted Larry for their flagship store in Orlando. He anticipated winning the bid, so he commissioned a local artist to create a fancy lobsterpot out of plexiglass and rhinestones.

"There was a Wall Street venture capitalist running up the bid on behalf of his mistress, who was eager to treat her girlfriends to a traditional New England feast. She fancied lobster served with sweet corn, boiled red potatoes, and chocolate whoopie pie. A scholarly biologist from

Maine arrived late with board members from the Save the Shrimp Foundation in tow.

Management from the Western Australia Museum of Oceanography were interested, but they had a phantom budget. And a couple of Saudi princes rounded out the party, swarthy fools who jetted around the globe, spending money for no apparent reason.

“We crawled through an open window in the back of the auction house and waited until the bidding went through the roof. Then Cuttle lit some bottle rockets to create a distraction. I snuck onto the stage, snatched Langoustine from the tank, and the chase was on. We raced out the back door, followed by a ragtag security detail. Cuttle hollered at me as we ran down the alleyway.

‘Think of this as a bloody footy match, bro. When those mall cops close in, handball the frigging yabby in my direction. We can weave our way to Darwin’s flat.’

“We made it to Darwin’s place and set Langoustine up in the bathtub.”

The wedding guests remained skeptical.

“How come we never heard about this, Bub? You make it sound like big news. Shouldn’t there have been a story on the Yahoo at least?”

Urchin countered.

“You fellows seem passionate about footy matches but you probably don’t read beyond the sports page. The story was covered in all of the major science journals. Fetch me a draught and I’ll bring you up to speed.

“Darwin locked his door and tacked beach towels over the windows. Thought we got away clean, but the Jacks woke an old bloodhound, and soon we could hear the big guy woofing his way down the street. Them doggies got a lonesome bay you can hear a mile off. Various escape

hatches were contemplated as the thickened plot began to coagulate. Darwin voiced what all of us had been thinking.”

‘Let’s just eat the bugger.’

“We looked over at poor Langoustine and he stared back at us like, ‘Noooooo!’

“Now, none of us had ever eaten lobster. With dad doing his research on every swimming thing in the ocean, we were not allowed to eat shrimp. Or crab, or even farm raised tilapia.

About the only seafood we’d had was the Filet-O-Fish sandwich at McDonald’s when it sold for a buck on Good Friday.

“Darwin filled a pickling kettle with tap water and set it to boil. We found a recipe online and added kosher salt, peppercorns, lemon juice, cloves of garlic, and some carrots and onion. The hound hit on Darwin’s door and we could hear the constables arguing over how to deploy a battering ram. I scooped Langoustine from the tub, but he was one slippery customer and not partial to a hot dip. He managed to escape my grip and scooted under the couch.

“Langoustine pinched me every time I reached for him, until my knuckles bled out. Finally, Cuttle put on oven mitts and grabbed him by the tail. We knew lobsters were traditionally dunked headfirst into boiling water, so into the pot he went. He thrashed around and made a horrible hissing sound that was hard to listen to, but at least it was over in a jiffy.”

The groom was an analytical chap, most likely a banker or an insurance executive, and he seemed to be holding his liquor fairly well.

“I thought lobsters were non-verbal,” he said. “What happened next?”

Urchin noticed a Capital One debit card resting squarely on the bar in front of his drink.

“Call for another pint, mate. When the officers busted down Darwin’s door, they found a heaping pile of cracked shells on the kitchen table. ‘Lobster? What lobster?’ Drawn butter had soaked through our shirts. And let me tell you, it was the best goldarn meal ever!”

Right then the group that was still watching the footy game jumped up all at once, yelling madly. For a moment, Urchin thought they had been following his story and were applauding the ending. But Port Adelaide had finally broken the level and won the match. The wedding party put their arms around each other and staggered out the door, laughing and singing club songs as they moved on to the next pub.

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The Christening of the Fleet Parade was held the following Saturday. Portable bleachers were set up at the historic Perth bandshell. Mayor Blakeney and his wife sat front and center. They jotted notes as the finalists for Queen of the Fleet passed by. The contestants waved and smiled, showing off colorful costumes. Some of the young ladies had flowers woven into their hair. The competition was all a sham though as the mayor had already cast his deciding vote for Anemone.

The Krill family brought up the rear of the parade. They rolled along in the meticulously handcrafted ark which was pulled by a perspiring Slug. Urchin teetered in the crow’s nest high above while his epic poem blared from a loudspeaker. Maritime Krill sat inside an enormous paper mâché oyster shell, draped in a purple silk robe. He held a three-pronged pitchfork in one hand and threw cardboard lightning bolts into the crowd. A heavy glass tank flanked the shell and housed a giant lobster.

As the Krill float advanced toward the judges the crowd got jumpy. Several of the women who were watching turned away. Their faces registered a mix of disdain and embarrassment. The men stood on top of each other to get a better look. Catcalls and shrill whistles replaced Sousa music and Mayor Blakeney craned his neck until something popped. The crowd was solely focused on Anemone.

She stood at the front of the float, shrouded in fog (seltzer water poured over dry ice, Urchin's idea), and released pink cockatiels from a gilded cage. Anemone portrayed a young mermaid. Seashells were fixed to her braided hair and her neoprene tail was painted green and covered with scales. Naturally, she was naked from the waist up. Anemone stared directly at Mayor Blakeney as she passed the judging stand, mouthing the words, 'I love you'. When the lecherous mayor saw her perky breasts, he stopped breathing.

Blakeney's wife hyperventilated. She was breathing for both of them now and fell off the bleachers in a full swoon. It took a few bottles of cold water doused on her face to revive the poor woman. She stood up quickly, twisted her ankle, and fell again. This time she stayed down and covered her head with an enormous handbag.

The float rolled along, picking up speed as it careened toward the wharf. Slug had just enough time to unhook himself from the towing cable and jump to the side as the ark passed him by. The float reached the end of the main dock and did a Red Bull Flugtag into the bay. Then the ark split in half and sank in a matter of seconds.

The Perth volunteer fire department pulled everyone from the drink, with the exception of Urchin. This was surprising as Urchin was an accomplished swimmer. They dragged the bay and flew drones equipped with thermal imaging back and forth, but there was no sign of the lad.

There was plenty of speculation though. Urchin's precarious perch was a good seven meters above water and the mast splintered badly upon impact, so it was quite possible that he got knocked silly. The incident happened at high tide in a part of the bay known for a wicked undertow. And rogue sharks were known to pass through those waters.

Rescuers did find the tank that held Señor Langoustine. The metal frame was twisted and the heavy glass plates shattered. Those folks who remained interested agreed that it was righteous to release the captive back to the sea. A full week passed and all searches were called off. The Krill family planned a celebration of Urchin's life, to be held at the Lucky Shag.

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Geronimo finally published his first book which he titled, *Old Days, Good Times I Remember*. That was from a song he listened to on WLS clear channel radio, which he's been able to pick up all the way from Chicago on clear nights. A weight lifted and he transformed into a social owl, holding court every night from Urchin's old bar stool. It's possible that he just liked to drink.

One night a bachelorette party crashed the Shag. The young ladies were jagged from drinking their way across town and they settled into comfy chairs in front of the big screen. The bride-to-be was a cheeky little tart and she called Darwin over.

"Lose the damn footy game, barback. Read the room and change the channel to Puberty Blues. That's the best show on television."

Geronimo had little interest in a rom.com, so he started toward his apartment. One of the girls noticed a framed photo of Urchin Krill that hung over the bar.

"Isn't he that poor bloke who drowned during the parade last summer? Did they ever find his body?"

Geronimo did an about-face and sidled over to the trashed tipplers.

“Urchin was a dear friend. We suspect he’s swimming with sea serpents now and we all grieve as if it happened yesterday. Thoreau once said so eloquently, ‘Who hears the fishes when they cry?’ I imagine they sound something like this.”

And he replicated a series of gargling sounds. Darwin changed the channel upon request, but the group only wanted to talk about Urchin.

“I heard his lungs turned into gills,” said a pretty young lass.

Geronimo spied a Chase Sapphire Preferred card clutched in her hot little hand. Darwin was lining up a row of frosty mugs in front of the tap. The two old friends made eye contact and smiled.

“Urchin hangs out in octopus gardens now with Señor Langoustine and some of his friends. Rumor has it that his little sister joined them recently. Apparently, the old fish taught the entire Krill family how to breathe underwater. Anemone put on that mermaid suit one last time. She did a backflip off the wharf and hasn’t been seen since. Bottoms up, everyone, and I’ll tell you all about it.”