

Makoona

By John Morano

Excerpt

Norton, a stargazer, sat with his compact, muscular body buried deep in the sand. His eyes, which were mounted at the very top of his head, could see above the sand and had almost 360 degrees of visibility when unobstructed on the flats. He could spot whatever approached or left the reef. And the odds were good that it wouldn't notice him. He was called a stargazer because his eyes always gazed up to the stars. Just under Norton's high set eyes was a huge mouth. With a body shaped like a funnel, the wide end being a massive oral cavity. Norton could burst up from the sand, jaws agape, and swallow his meal. Although he didn't look it, Norton was extremely quick. He also carried an impressive electrical charge, should something drop down on him. Norton was a short, squat swallowing pot.

Another virtue this fish possessed grew out of necessity. Since he wasn't really fast enough to chase his meals down, he needed to be patient, and he was. Stargazers understood that when a meal wandered by they would usually only get one shot at it, so they waited and waited until the prey was literally on top of them.

Although it was a slow feeding day, even by Norton's standards, he was pleased with his placement, so he dug in deeper...and waited. If Norton was anything, he was a professional. Then he saw movement, a flash and a sandy cloud rising.

"Come to Norton," he said silently to himself.

Some type of wounded fish or coral worm was struggling against a gentle tide. The stargazer liked that. It meant that the prey might be tired when it reached him, enabling Norton to make the end happen quickly; less unpleasantness for all involved.

It was almost impossible to be a stargazer and not feel the spirit. Spending days gazing at the clouds above the sea and nights gazing at the stars, Norton had developed a solid understanding of the 'way of the spirit-fish.' Although he was relieved and satisfied when he ate, Norton took no joy in causing another's demise. He believed that there was no room in the ocean for cruelty or malice. His pride of predation was always tempered by the fact that a life was taken. And every time he thanked the spirit-fish for nourishment, he also asked for forgiveness.

Norton could see a long white strip waving and struggling. It inched closer. Only something injured or ill would draw so much attention to itself, he thought. The only other creatures to be so bold were the ones who didn't care if they were noticed, because nothing would dare eat them, like the nudibranch. This, however, was obviously no nudibranch.

In the back of his mind, Norton was concerned that some other fish might see his meal and envelop it before him. He thought about emerging from the sand and trying to chase it down, since the prey didn't look like it could outrun even him, but in the end, Norton stayed where he was. The gazer remembered a saying his father recited when he was teaching his son to hunt, "Always dance with the fish that brung ya." Norton would do just that. He knew how to play to his strengths.

The white worm-like creature drew nearer. It approached in short hops, would rest a few seconds, allow the silt to settle, hop a little further and rest a little more...all the while, heading directly at Norton.

When the sand surrounding his hiding spot began to move, Norton struck. He burst from below, mouth wide open, and swallowed the meal in a millisecond. Before a barracuda could blink, the white strip of meal was buried inside the belly of the beast. Initially, there was no struggle. This please Norton. "No strain, no pain," he mumbled to himself. Then the pain arrived.

Norton felt a sharp rip, a searing slash below his ribs. Some kind of dorsal spine, he thought, had been thrust into the lining of his stomach. The stargazer instinctively tried to eject his meal, regurgitating as forcefully as he could. A second later, Norton saw the thin white strip float past his face, but the pain inside only got worse. A lone Bonita raced by, swallowed the strip and continued on its way, smooth silver scales flashing in the sun. Norton felt an excruciating tug, and then he was being dragged across the sand, pulled from the sea, ripped from his home.

Ignoring the pain, the fish tried to swim in the opposite direction. Norton was fighting for his life. Struggling and rolling across the sand, he saw it...a long thin tentacle. It stretched as as as he could see. He felt it against his body. It slid under his scales, got tangled in his fins. Norton bit at the line, but could not sever it. The stargazer knew what waited at the other end, at the end of the line. It was the man-tide. It was his death. Norton needed a new strategy.

On the surface of the sea, Kemar felt the pull on his line. He raised the tip of his pole, hopefully setting his hook deep within some fish. As the pole bent towards the water, the boy kept the tip up and reeled to keep the line straight.

"Nice work!" Al called to him. "Keep reeling...no slack, Jack."

"Don't worry," Kemar responded. "This one isn't getting away." But the boy's line began to strip off the spool as fast as he could crank the reel. He looked back to Al for advice.

"Tighten the drag a little," Al yelled. He climbed to the bow of the boat. "Just a touch," Al said softly as he adjusted the drag. "Looks like you got a fighter. Stay on it."

Kemar did just that.

When Norton felt the line give, he thought he could escape. But the hook held. Once again the stargazer was dragged back to the boat. He could see the man-tide's floating island perched on the water. Since he felt that he could not out-tug the line, he would try another move. Norton shot directly at the humans as fast as he could swim. When he felt the line slacken, he tried to shake it free, but the hook was deep in his belly. The shaking did nothing. As a final attempt to save his life, the stargazer continued his charge at the humans. He hoped to pass under the floating island, taking refuge in the dense hammer coral just beyond. With luck, the razor sharp coral would cut the line or tangle it, so that he could not be pulled.

Norton threw everything he had into the dash. Exhausted, but undaunted, he passed directly under the blue bottom of the tiny floating island. He could see the coral clearly now and prepared to dive into it, twisting and tangling the line as much as possible.

Kemar panicked when he felt the line fall limp. The tip of his rod popped up and the bend disappeared. Again the boy looked to Al.

"Keep reeling!" Al screamed. "He's heading for the reef. If he's hooked pretty good, you might not lose him...just keep that fish off the coral."

Kemar cranked like crazy. This was one battle he was determined to win.

Norton had a little more on the line, literally, than Kemar. And he too was determined to win. When his coral oasis was just a few fins away, he felt as if he had triumphed. The stargazer found more strength and struggled harder. He felt the first sharp scrape of the stone coral against his ventral fins. A coral cut never felt so good. Norton prayed to the spirit-fish that he's have the opportunity to visit the cleaning station and have the cuts looked after.

Although his prayers were undoubtedly heard, the answer was not encouraging. Norton was suddenly bumped up from below. Something tore at his anal fin. Another attack came from above. The pack of jacks cruising the inner banks of the reef found the weary gazer hanging on a hook too appetizing. Four or five youngsters began their attack. Had they been a little larger, a little hungrier, they would have made fast work of Norton. Feeling no urgency, they raced in randomly to gnaw at the tangled fish, who tried his best to dodge their rushes while he was being dragged away from the coral, back to the floating island.

Norton knew it was over. The vibrant colors of life that decorated his scales faded to a dull grey. Feeling barely alive, as though he had already begun to leave his body, Norton wondered where he would die; in the sea with the jacks, or out of the water with the man-tide. If he had to die, the time was now. Norton decided to die like a fish, to feed the balance that he was a part of his entire life. The stargazer fought the line, not so he could escape the hook, but so that he could escape the horrible end that came to fish who left the sea. The longer he stayed in the water, the longer the jacks had to end his life with dignity. And so, Norton fought with whatever he had left for the right to return his life to the sea that had always nourished him.

Back in the boat, Kemar's stinging muscles cramped and swelled. This fight was a good initiation into fishing with a rod and reel.

"Stay on it!" Al shouted. "Get 'em out of the water, something's hitting that fish."

Reeling and tugging, Kemar brought Norton up to the starboard side of the boat where Al slipped a net under the catch. The boy smiled proudly as he lifted the large gazer out of the water and turned to show his companion the fish. Al rested his hand on the boy's bony shoulder and squeezed gently, saying, "Nice work. Let's see what you got here."

Kemar looked puzzled. "I've seen many kinds of fish, but never one of these. What is it?"

"A gazer...a stargazer...a pretty big one, too."

"Can you eat these?"

"Oh yes...you have to fillet it fresh and keep it on ice. There's not a lot of them out here. You musta passed over him while he was buried in the sand." Al took the line and studied Norton. "Looks pretty beat up. Something else was trying to steal your catch."

Kemar raised his pole, rubbed his arms and stretched his fingers, trying to regain some circulation. His palm pulsed where earlier, the hook had been lodged. "Fishing with a rod takes a lot out of you. And," noting the battered catch, "doesn't return so much."

"My friend, you couldn't be more wrong." The American dropped Norton into a bucket filled with fresh sea water. The fish rolled on his side involuntarily and bellowed his gills.

Al continued, "Fishing like this will teach you things. It'll bring you closer to the sea, closer to the reef."

"I've already learned what I need to know. Fishing like this gives you small meals and small profits...I have lived with less long enough. I think I want more."

"Do you want more, or do you want to be more?"

"...Both."

"It's difficult to have both, bro."

"How do you know?" the boy asked, suggesting that perhaps his ambitions were well beyond Al's.

"What do I know?...But it seems to me, if you first become more as a person, then you might survive getting more. If you get more first,

it's very difficult to then become more. Getting more and being more are two very different things...Take fishing for example. All you have in front of you right now is this gazer. Your arms hurt, you're hungry and you're tired. That's what you have. But what have you become?"

"Nothing worth mentioning. That's why this fishing makes no sense."

"So you've become nothing?"

"Yes."

"That's because you see this fish, you see this ocean and it doesn't touch you. It is nothing to you, and so you get nothing from it. When you see beneath the surface and feel the reef, you will become the ocean. And that, my friend, is surely something."

Kemar was getting confused, but somehow Al's rambling caused him to recall that moment when he dropped his scare line and the fish escaped from the nets of the boat people. He wondered if that was an example of becoming the reef.

The boy's thought was interrupted when Al reached into the bucket, slid his pliers behind one of Norton's gills and removed the fish. The stargazer had already regained a little color and life. Al said, "This is all you have. And to you, it is next to nothing?" He dropped Norton back into the bucket.

"I guess I do have something. I have a victory. I conquered the fish. It is my fish."

"A lot of people would agree with you. But I don't."

"Why not? How am I wrong?" the boy asked.

"The way I see it...It's never your fish. It belongs to the reef, now and forever. And you should never be 'pleased' that you have killed someone."

"Someone?"

"I mean a fish...something."

"But I am pleased that I will now eat. I will grow stronger."

"True...but don't forget the price. It's not just about you. Every time you take a fish you diminish this. One less life...even with a fish, a lost life is no small thing."

"I know about the loss of life."

"I know you do. Can you extend that understanding to the loss of this life?"

"I understand what you say...but I don't understand you."

"Me?"

"If you truly feel the death of this creature, how can you be a fisherman?"

Al paused. He stared the boy in the eyes and said, "Who better? ...Rather than abuse or defeat the balance, I try to be one with it. I kill to eat. I'm proud of my skill and take my pleasure perfecting my place as a fisherman. But I am never happy to see a creature from those sacred waters die."

"That is talk. You sell fish for money. You prepare them for tourists."

"So you see me as a hypocrite...Luckily, I live my life based on how I see me. I'm not worried about pleasing you...I'll tell you what I do know, bro. I know I'm not bigger than this." Al gestured to include the vast ocean that surrounded them. "Are you?"

Kemar shook his head thoughtfully. "No, I am not."

Al reached into his tackle box. He wrote something on a frayed pad, removed a red wire, noted a number and snapped it onto one of Norton's fins. He picked the fish up once more, saying, "I'll tell ya what, bro. I learned in the jungle that there's two ways to take life. One is from a somewhat safe distance. The other is up close and personal."

"Why do you speak to me as if I know nothing of this? I already know more about this subject than I ever want to."

"You're right. My bad...let me put it another way. If you can hold this fish in your bare hands, then his life is yours, not the ocean's. But if you can't, then he belongs to the ocean and must be given back. Want to play?"

"You think I can't hold my fish? Pound for pound I have caught more fish in my life than you."

"But I'll bet I learned more from my experience...As a matter of fact, I'll sweeten the deal. You hold this half dead fish for five seconds and I'll let you pick any piece of equipment on this boat to keep."

Kemar instantly forgot the fish. He looked around the boat with the eye of a practiced scrounger. There were riches to be had. He noted the fillet knife hanging from Al's belt. He noted the belt...He saw the shiny black pole Al fished with and wondered how much it could be worth. He admired the tackle box stuffed with lines, hooks and other treasures. And then he saw what he wanted. Now it was Kemar's turn to test Al's courage.

"Anything on this boat?" Kemar teased.

"Any...ting."

"The motor."

Al looked back at his outboard and grimaced. It was like someone asking for your dog, but after a moment's consideration, Al bobbed his head and said, "Sure." Then he dropped Norton into the bucket one last time. Al wanted him slippery and energetic. He turned towards the boy and instructed Kemar to stretch his hands out over the water. Smiling broadly, almost giddy at the thought of having his own outboard, the boy did as he was instructed. Kemar could not remember the last time he had had fun like this.

"Ready?" Al asked.

Kemar smiled, rubbed his hands on his kremo until they were bone dry, spread his fingers and nodded. Al presented Norton to the boy. "Five seconds for the fish and the motor," he reminded his young friend. Then he placed Norton onto Kemar's hands which were held out over the sea.

Norton didn't know what was going on. He had blanked out for a while and wasn't even sure whether he was alive or dead. However, when he saw nothing but water underneath him and felt those human fingers around him, well, even a conch could see the opportunity. The gazer wriggled like his life depended on it, which it

did, hoping that he could scrape a stinging dorsal spine or a sharp gill slit across those soft hands.

And then it happened. The fish couldn't believe his luck. The silly human slipped a finger on top of Norton's head, just behind his eyes. It was the stargazer's last chance, and he was now in a position to use his secret weapon.

Al began to sweat as he counted, "three-one-thousand, four-one-thousand, fi..."

"AHHH!" Kemar screamed as the fish fell into the sea. The boy squeezed his injured hand and tried to shake the pain from his arm.

"Oh, soooo close," Al taunted.

"What was that? You knew he'd do that. My hand feels like it's on fire."

"Don't worry, it's not...once again, you see the difference between having more and being more. Gain insight, not objects. Instead of asking me for an outboard, you should have asked me to teach you about this creature. You might've held on for that extra half second and won the motor if you knew more about the fish. Knowledge is power."

"My hand is burning," the boy bellowed. He slammed his hand on the boat's rail hoping to swat the pain from his fingers, but only ignited a new level of agony. A rouge hook had found its way back into Kemar's hand. Luckily, it was one of Al's and the barb had been clipped. The boy removed it himself this time. Al couldn't have helped even if he wanted to. He was bent over the outboard, laughing hysterically.

"What did the fish do to me?"

"Don't worry, you'll be fine, bro. He just gave you a little shock...If you touch a gazer behind the eyes, near the top of its head, it can give you a decent jolt. And the one you caught was pretty big...musta been quite a blast." Al paused, looked at the boy, and started laughing all over again.

Kemar sat down and began chuckling as well. "You must think you're pretty funny."

"Not half as funny as you...I'll bet that fish is laughing up a storm right now."

They untied the boat from the jug line, fired up the motor and headed back to Makoona.

"I'll tell ya," Al said, "you almost didn't get zapped. You had me sweating."

"Would I have won the motor?"

"We had a deal, but there's really only one way to find out for sure..." After a brief silence, Al added, "Sorry I talked so much today, but I'm not used to having company. I thought I liked fishing alone, but I gotta admit, you're OK...Can I tell you one last thing?"

"Yes...please."

"That fish deserved to go home."

"You confuse me like the priests and the monks when I was young...why would *you* release a fish *I* worked so hard to catch?"

"Two reasons...One, I don't see many gazers. If something's scarce, why kill it? That only brings it one step closer to being gone. And then how many will we catch?"

"That's a good reason, but you said you had two."

"The other one's a little more personal, but, at least to me, it's just as valid."

"Yes?"

"Well, that fish is a real fighter."

"I know. My arms still sting."

"Just stop for a second and think how hard that fish fought for its life...I've fought that hard. I'll bet you have too. And when I've fought like that, against impossible odds, all I wanted was a break."

"A break?"

"A little help, a little good luck...As far as I'm concerned, this fish earned his freedom. I'm a little nuts anyway, but it's actually an honor for me to put him back in the sea."

"You are a crazy American."

"No argument there...but we're in my boat, so I'm entitled. Besides, there's nothing that says once you go fishing you can't have honor or mercy. For me, there's something incredible about anything that's alive, like the spirit that lives in it isn't all that different from the spirit that lives in me...so, if you fish the right way, you wind up feeding your own karma."

"I'd rather feed my family."

"One doesn't exclude the other."

After they motored on a few more minutes, Kemar asked Al, "What was that red wire you attached to the fish. Was it something to help it shock me? If it was, I believe the motor might be mine."

"Nice try, Kemar, but all I did was tag the fish."

"What is, 'Tag the fish?' "

"Well, there's a professor from Toowoomba, Australia I met in Vietnam. Name's Dawson...an ichthyologist..."

"A what?"

"It's a fancy way of saying the person studies fish...My pal asked me to tag and record some of the special fish I stumble upon."

"Actually, I stumbled upon this fish..."

"Let it go, bro...A couple of times a year Dawson pops up here to work on some kind of study."

"A fish study?"

"Yeah...it's part of the job."

"A fish professor?"

Al nodded.

"Is your friend trying to help the fish?"

"I guess so...The study certainly helped that gazer...I think Dawson's trying to do something for the reef."

They motored on a few more minutes with Kemar lost in thought. He considered several things; his father, how fishing with AI was different and he was also reminded of the octopus; the one that had escaped him several times. Kemar blurted, "I would like to meet Professor Dawson." And then he returned to his rumination as the small boat sputtered and chugged its way back to Makoona, fleeing the sinking sun behind them.