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THE HERO OF LOST CAUSES

2016 by Phillip Frey

Robert Emmet was born in Ireland in 1778. Upon his twenty-third year he became angry over British rule. It then took him two years to recruit an army of farmers, shepherds and friends. When the moment of rebellion finally came, there was a miscue and a lot of confusion. As a result the British captured Robert Emmet and executed him in 1803.

Robert Emmet quickly became a romantic figure to the Irish people; to this day referred to as "The Hero of Lost Causes."

Riverhead is at the far end of Long Island with a bay to the Atlantic. On Memorial Day, the town begins to fill with vacationers who have come to take advantage of the fishing season. When Labor Day arrives, the townspeople return to their quiet, homespun lives.

A number of decades ago, in this predominately Irish township, the locals would gather twice a month during the off-season and listen to tales of Irish history and folklore. Stories of struggle and courage, and of sprites and leprechauns, told by retired fireman Kevin Michael Emmett.

There was only one thing about Kevin that troubled the locals: Kevin's insistent belief in his kinship to the 18th-century Irish patriot Robert Emmet.

The Riverhead locals doubted that Kevin Michael Emmett was a direct descendant, especially since Kevin's surname had a second T at the end.

Kevin had answered this many times: "When me and the folks come over, Immigration added the extra T, they did, and that's that."

Kevin had named his son Robert after the Irish hero, feeling in his bones that someday the lad would become a hero and give credence to the lineage.

After retiring from the fire department, old Kevin bought a 40-foot fishing vessel and opened a fishing charter business, summers only.

The office was in a trailer just off the marina parking lot. Labor Day had come and gone. It was on a Saturday morning that Kevin was at his desk with a glass of Irish whiskey. His son, Robert, sat on the sofa, flipping through a fishing tackle magazine.

“Hey, Pop,” he said, “I’m going to be thirty next month.”

“Your dear departed mother’d be proud ya, she would.”

“For what?”

Old Kevin looked into his drink. “Makin’ it t’thirty, safe and sound.”

His son stretched out on the sofa and thought about the hero Robert Emmet, a hero at twenty-five. He sat up then. “Pop, you’ve proven the lineage. You’re a hero of a lost cause—me.”

“You’re no lost cause and I’m no hero. Robert Emmet’s in your blood, he is, and one day we’ll be sure t’know it.”

The phone rang. “Don’t answer, Pop, might be a charter.”

“Ehh, nobody here to fish off-season.”

Kevin picked it up. “Emmett’s Charter,” he answered. “Poseidon? Musta got the wrong...oh...oh...yep, uh-huh. Stay put a minute.”

Kevin covered the mouthpiece. “It’s the Poseidon Cremation Society of West Hampton,” he told his son in a whisper. “Got a cracked hull and a service in three hours. Says give us three hundred for a half-hour anchor time.”

Robert set his magazine down. “Not bad for throwing ashes to the wind.”

“Saturday—got folks comin’ t’listen to the Big Fella story.”

“No problem. I’ll take her out, I can handle it,” Robert said with quiet authority.

Kevin gave his son a nod of approval. Robert's quiet authority is what gave Kevin all the more reason to hang on to his dream. His son sounded like a hero.

Kevin uncovered the phone and was transferred to a Mr. Evans.

Two hours later the funeral procession rolled in. Kevin and his son came out of the trailer as fourteen mourners got out of four cars, somber men and women in drab clothing.

Kevin eyed the hearse, thinking it a mighty respectful way to carry a jar of ashes.

Mr. Evans slid out of the hearse. He was on the short side and had a stern hatchet face, neatly barbered white hair, and wore a suit as black as the hearse.

Old Kevin introduced himself to Mr. Evans. That was when Mr. Evans smelled whiskey. "Mr. Emmett," he said, "are you the one who'll be taking us out?"

Kevin heard the accusation in his voice. "It'll be my son here, Robert. Sober as British Parliament."

Robert and Mr. Evans shook hands, Robert giving him a smile; the smile actually meant for Kevin. Robert knew his father thought British Parliament was a house of drunks.

Mr. Evans gave Robert the once-over. Robert's tall, strong-looking figure and steady dark eyes reassured him.

The mourners stayed in a bunch alongside the hearse. Kevin and his son led Mr. Evans into the trailer. After Robert showed Mr. Evans the course he had charted, Mr. Evans joined old Kevin at his desk and wrote out a check.

Robert's eyes shifted to an office window. He gazed at the mourners, struck suddenly by the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. She looked up and caught his stare.

He turned from the window, a bit embarrassed, her green eyes stamped in memory as he heard Mr. Evans: "I'll ready the pallbearers and you can walk us aboard."

“Ehh, pallbearers did you say?” old Kevin asked.

“Oh, didn’t I—this isn’t a cremation,” Mr. Evans explained. “Burials at sea are unusual but the deceased had requested it in his will. We’ll strap the casket and lower it from the gin pole.”

“Ehh, yep, I see,” Kevin muttered. Then said, “Don’t matter much, long as it’s legal.”

“Oh, it’s legal all right,” Mr. Evans told him. “Beyond the three-mile limit.”

Kevin nodded and his son asked, “Half-hour anchor time?”

“Yes, Robert, same as cremations.”

A few minutes later Mr. Evans stood with Kevin and Robert at the starboard side of the docked 40-footer, christened Robert Emmet. Mr. Evans eyed the forward hull and said to Kevin, “I see you named your boat after your son, but why is there only one T at the end of the name?”

“Ah,” Kevin responded brightly. “Me *ship* is named after the Irish patriot Robert Emmet. Do you know of him?”

“No,” Mr. Evans said with little interest, “can’t say that I do.”

“A grand bit of history that goes back to the early days of the struggle. A time when—”

“Pop,” Robert interrupted, “we have to step aside.”

Six men bore the casket by them, then up the railed ramp to the deck. Robert saying, “Okay, Pop, we’ve got to get aboard.” Then to Mr. Evans, “Follow me and hold the rail.”

Once aboard Robert spread a tarp behind the stern’s 3 fighting chairs. The pallbearers gently set the casket down on it. Robert folded the electronic ramp against the hull, and then threw the spring lines down to his father. On his way to the helm he exchanged a glance with the green-eyed mournful beauty and felt as though he had been zapped.

Kevin called out from dockside: “Good sailin’, me boy!” He watched the Robert Emmet glide across the bay and out to sea, and then returned to the trailer where his whiskey awaited him.

An hour or so later a portion of the marina parking lot was filled with families, seated in the folding chairs that Kevin had supplied. They were listening to the beginning of Kevin's Big Fella story, the story of the Irish patriot Michael Collins.

From the side of the trailer a ship-to-shore speaker squawked, followed by, "Hey, Pop, are you there?"

"Ehh, me apologies," Kevin said to the crowd. "Be back in a minute."

"No worry," Mrs. McGinty called out, "we'll be settin' up the food table."

Kevin went into the trailer. On the ship-to-shore he answered his son and heard him say, "Got an emergency. Said the prayers, winched the casket down, released it and it won't sink."

"She's afloat!"

"No," Robert told him, "I gaffed it. Tore it up a bit, but got it back aboard. Everyone's pretty upset, especially Mr. Evans, about not having weighed it down enough. So we need a favor."

"Ehh, sure—sure."

"Mr. Evans says bricks. We'd have to come in for them and go out again. So I thought you could go to McGinn's, get a big load of them. Then borrow one of Fred's speedboats and meet us out here. The Cigarette's the fastest."

"Jesus-Mary, I'm in no condition to go speedin' about."

"C'mon, Pop, set your mind to it, you can do it. There's a copy of the chart on your desk."

"Ehh, yep, so there is, so there is... well now, no sense turnin' a half-hour anchor time into a whole day."

"Thanks, Pop. See you soon."
