

A sphincter-clenching mishap

"I'm over on the Island. Are you able to get over here and finish our bishness?" The telephone line goes dead: George assumes I will come over to his island shack.

His assumption is why I am in this bloody predicament: a rushing, outgoing tide, our boat stuck on an ever-widening sandbar, and a monster, my nemesis, nearby!

I charter Steve and his seventeen-foot Seamaster for the run down the Kulumburru River and across to Lewis Island. George, a senior Pela man, has an island shack and forever finds reasons to be out 'on-country', fishing. Shire Council duties can always be relegated down the priority listing when the Threadfin salmon are running! He wants to discuss ideas for opening a fishing camp on the island.

The incoming tide is no match for Steve's forty-five horsepower motor. We glide down the waterway, the wake splitting the river gently, patches of last night's dewy mist battling a new day. The trip is uneventful. There are a few saltwater crocodiles on the banks, recharging their batteries in the warming sun. A few others are cruising gently in the water. The Barramundi are jumping at low-flying insects.

Steve has a hand line and lure at the ready, and suggests we ease back the throttle and troll for a bit. I scotch the idea, reminding him Lewis Island is our focus.

George and I are on the beach, he's casting a line, me posing questions about his ideas for the fishing camp. He 'hooks up, a brief battle, and he lands a beauty, maybe fifteen kilos of silvery, slivering salmon.

Our discussions finish. I wander off to look for Steve and eventually find him further along the beach. He has eight salmon already filleted and cooling in his esky! As we depart, Steve offers knowledge of a shortcut around the bottom of the island. "It will save us thirty minutes on the run back up the river, to town, but."

"OK. You're the skipper, Steve."

The ebb tide is gathering momentum as we head towards the channel adjacent to the island. We enter the river's estuary where high muddy banks are crusting in the midday sun. A few mud crabs are feeding, one or two crocs in evidence, and a colony of flying foxes noisily acknowledge our passage. Golden, sandy shallows appear beneath the boat, and there are a couple of scrapes with the outboard. But Steve is finding the deeper channels. We are making headway: that is, until we run aground. We get out of the boat and desperately drag and push, trying to beat the outgoing tide.

Ten minutes of this and the tide finally has us. The little remaining water drains away. The sandbar grows inexorably, and we sit, stranded, about a metre above the river, on a bare islet, two hundred metres long, fifty metres wide and growing. The water on either side of the sandbar is provocatively rushing off towards the Timor Sea.

“Bloody great shortcut, Steve”, I proffer! It is about one o'clock, the temperature has got to be 40 degrees in the shade, but we're in the full sun and stuck until the tide turns, in about six hours! Bloody hell. “Maybe we can get some shade by turning the boat over, but,” he suggests, “and prop it, using the oars.” We grunt and strain, eventually overturning the craft with the two oars deputising as verandah posts.

As I settle in the shade, I am mentally writing up my report, listing the qualities that will ensure I and/or my colleagues never engage Steve's services again. I don't think things can get any worse. Then the sandflies arrive, clouds of them, delivering bites to every exposed bit of skin.

My eyes register a movement. As I turn, my blood runs cold, my sphincter contracts tightly, and I confront my worst imaginable fear.

I know we are now in deep poo! Its snout, those teeth, connected to a gently swaying tail. The yellow eyes are unblinking, emotionless, calculating. Gesu mio!

I nudge Steve's foot and point. I hear his sharp intake of breath and he leans in and whispers “This could be tricky, but!” An understatement, as I wonder if I can outstare those piercing, yellow orbs. What does it see – are we a welcome snack, a diversion in an otherwise humdrum day, a threat, an intruder in its watery world?

I think about what I know of *Crocodylus porosus*. It's not a lot: limited to salacious newspaper reports of human interactions. I do remember that several people had disentangled themselves from those enormous jaws by poking fingers into the croc's eyes!

Steve whispers again. He is wondering about the efficacy of kicking the oars out from under, with us underneath the boat! Mmm, I consider the weight, the difficulty we had in turning the bloody thing over, and I visualise an alternative to the croc's attack: us pinned underneath, while the tide returns and drowns us!

The croc is motionless, unblinking, continuing to concentrate on the unusual something on the sandbar in front of it. We quietly discuss our options. Are the fish fillets a temptation? I wonder if their smell makes us more of a target and whether or not we might use them as a distraction.

Steve heaves six of the fillets in a low arc, dropping them at the water's edge downriver from us. The animal's attention finally shifts. With surprising speed, it is up on all fours, moving down the sand away from us. We're up, adrenaline pumping and flip the boat back upright. It jiggles a bit, from side to side along the keel, as we clamber over the gunwale, but we immediately draw comfort from our metre-high defence.

"Did you see that bastard move? It must be four or five metres long. So bloody fast, but!" Steve whispers.

Only five hours or so until the tide returns – I reckon about sunset. It's going to be a long, anxious day, and I am already sunburnt, thirsty and hungry.

From the tumble of things still held under the bow, Steve starts to untangle our survival gear. There is an old blue plastic sheet, a length of rope, with an anchor attached, a couple of old plastic buckets, a boat hook, a half-full, two-litre water bottle, and finally, a bottle of brown liquid.

"That's brown vinegar, in case of sea-wasp stings, but," he explains. I look over towards the water's edge and realise our two oars are still out on the sand, croc-side of the boat. The beastie is still snacking as I jump overboard and retrieve them.

We settle and start to consider things. We jury-rig the blue tarp. It flaps a bit, but we have shade, and we both take a slug at the water bottle.

My belly starts to direct its attention to the remaining fish fillets – raw fish, a Japanese delicacy. The vinegar will pickle the fish! Namas, it will be basic, no limes, oranges or onions to sweeten the brew, but yep, it will work. Steve is keen. I pick up the smaller of the two buckets. "Not that one, but" Steve insists, "that's me piss bucket!"

'Gordon bloody Bennett!' I drop it back onto the deck. I rip up four of the remaining fillets into bite-size chunks and drop them into the other bucket, having been assured it was just used for sluicing water. I pour a goodly measure of the rather rank vinegar over the fish. "Dinner in an hour," I declare.

A sudden, substantial bump on the hull brings us instantly back to the here and now. The bloody croc has wandered over and is investigating the boat. We tense and wait. It is a monster ... and it smells of rotting grunge. It must be almost the length of the boat.

A couple more nudges around the hull, and the animal decides the metal is inedible. It lumbers awkwardly, but meaningfully, back towards the water. It slides in and disappears. We look at each other. Both register relief, but our thirst and hunger return with a vengeance.

We settle in for a wait. It is only another four and a half hours!

The pickled fish was edible and appreciated. Our last water went with four hours still to wait. Steve nods off, along the bottom of the boat. I maintain a watchful presence, but eventually, I too nod off.

The sun is low in the west, and the sandflies are making way for the mosquitoes. There is a glow through the eastern trees, as the forecast full moon starts its climb up into the quiet evening sky. There is a noticeable reduction in the size of our sandbar, and as we watch, the water continues to edge up our beach at a surprising rate.

But there are now two crocs at the water's edge, watching the boat, unblinking, focused. They are keeping pace with the tide, moving closer as the water advances.

The water is only twenty metres from the boat: the crocs are fifteen! Water: ten metres; crocs: five. We feel and hear the wavelets licking the boat's keel. Ten minutes later, and the boat starts to swing with the tide, the crocs maintain their watchful presence, albeit not coming any closer.

Another ten minutes and we are definitely floating and being pushed upstream with the flow. Steve tentatively lowers the motor back into the water. The last of the sun's rays competes with the advancing moonlight, the motor roars into life, and we have an hour of very careful motoring up to the landing, just below town.

We have the boat secured on the trailer and drive up to the pub. Steve's brother Joel greets us. He looks like he is midway through a session. "Where ya been, Bro?"

"We've just been down to the Island. Jeess, the salmon was biting sumpin fierce, but!"