

THE QUARRY

Jamie Derkenne

Angel

Lots of people had theories on how to catch those silver perch swimming in the water holes where the Nambucca snaked round Bowraville, but not many people ever seen any theory work.

Ray Glossip freely gave advice to any passing tourist or local, whether asked to or not. He'd swear a small hook with a tiny pinch of mullet was the only way. The time of day was crucial, had to be just before dawn, or just after sunset, and cool but not frosty. Neglected to mention been fishing for years, no luck. Percy Callinan, who caught one about thirty years previous, but had to throw it back because it was too small, reckoned silver perch were slippery bastards related to eels. His head cocked to one side, he'd show you a small, faded photo showing nothing, and opine you had to use a swivelled hook, and you needed a net. Andy Murray from the South Arm reckoned he caught them all the time, no big deal. 'Just need the right 'quipment,' he'd say, but never said what he had in mind. Also reckoned they weren't good eating unless made into fish cakes.

Kev Shillingsworth, who was as close as most in town ever got to talking to someone traditional, often got asked questions like, 'What you fellas do to catch perch in them olden days?' To which he would reply, mysteriously tapping his nose with his forefinger, 'We had our ways.' But if Kev had ever known of the ways, he'd long had

most of them whipped out of him, and suspected the ones he did know weren't so traditional anyway. Once lifting up some lino with Percy, he'd come across some old yellow pages from the *Bowraville Guardian*, including a small story concerning the court appearance of two long-gone great uncles from the 1930s. The paper said they'd been caught fishing for silver perch near Lane's Bridge, which wasn't so much a crime even for them, although there would've been people who would have liked to make it one. The crime – fined five pounds each – was they were fishing with dynamite. Which explained why Andy Murray, who was into blowing things up, thought they were an easy catch.

Kev could understand this, because with dynamite, you could catch a lot of fish, and fish was good. 'He was a fisher of men,' old Father Finbarr Ewels would say from the pulpit of St Mary's, pointing his bony finger to those up the back. He would growl about the heathens, because that's what they were, their faces dark with sin. Women were the worst, sometimes wearing those white Jesus dresses like old mish girls, so poor, Finbarr would get confused about what decade he was in. Some of them probably started thinking that if they ate a lot of fish then maybe they wouldn't have to stand in the stalls any more at that Bowraville Theatre. Kev had been a Kinchela boy, so would eat anything so long as it wasn't hay. He'd have fish on Fridays, and many other days besides.

Kev had taken his son Saucepan, river fishing a couple of times, but on each occasion they had soon given up, preferring to eat the *cobra* worms hiding in the sunken logs. Tastier, and a lot less hassle than if they had caught a fish, which would have meant building a fire, and scaling and gutting the catch.

Not that Saucepan ever gave up on the idea on catching some of the perch. You could see them glide just below the surface. Mostly small fish, but occasionally one of the big ones would rise up from the depths of the water hole. You could make a proper meal out of one of those, if only you knew how.

Which is how Saucepan stumbled on a secret. It's not like he invented anything or the like, being Saucepan, it's just that once, by the river, with his Marley music and earplugs, he built himself a small fire out of some wattle twigs, in the hope of making just the right amount of smoke to keep mozzies away. The wood burnt keenly, so to make a bit more smoke, he grabbed some smartweed and making a small tight bundle, put that on the fire as well. Sat watching the river, nodding his head to the music, not hearing or seeing the pale pink Martins on the other side of the bridge yelling at him.

After a while, he put the fire out by throwing the burning sticks and bundle of weed, one by one, into the water. Watched them fizzle as the water soaked up the small yellow flames, got up and started walking back home. Was almost halfway back over the paddock to the road before realising he'd left a *Burnin'* cover on the bank. So he walked all the way back, and as he was picking up the cassette cover, looked over the water and saw about twelve small fish on the surface, gulping air, which was doing them no good at all.

Saucepan stood staring for a minute or two, trying to work out what was going on. The fish hadn't been dying when he'd left the first time. Had someone come along and poisoned them? He waded in and without any difficulty picked up the biggest. It rested limply in his hands. He smelt it; but he couldn't smell any chemical. He tossed it back into the water. He scooped up some water in his palm and tasted it. River water has its own particular taste, and this didn't taste any different, just faintly of the ashes from his fire. Shrugging, he picked up his belongings and went home.

It took Saucepan, being Saucepan, nearly a month to work it out. One day Kev was showing him old photos, including one of his Grandma, called Aunty Rose by everyone, the one who was Grandpa Jacko's wife. The photo was a bit bigger than the small four-by-two jobs, so you could see some of the details of her face. An old woman when the photo was taken, but shy of the camera. Was giggling, and had her left hand over her face to hide a smile. Most of her little finger was missing.

'How come she got no finger?'

'In them olden days if you were a girl who wanted some lucky fishing you'd get most of your little finger chopped off. Women's business. Tradition. Dunno why.'

'Any good at fishing?'

Kev laughed. 'Was she any good at fishing? My mum said she was the best. She knew some lingo she'd call out to the fish. She'd call them softly so they would come to the surface just hoping she'd pick them up, and when they floated up within reach, she'd just wade out there and pick up them grateful fish.' Kev made it sound like his history, but being Kinchela, most of it was history he scraped together long afterwards.

Saucepan got to thinking. Maybe it was the wattle, maybe the smartweed. Maybe he'd accidentally poisoned the fish. One way of finding out.

He got himself back down to Lane's Bridge early one morning, cool but not frosty, plucked up some smart weed, chucked it in the water, sat down, lit a bong, and

waited. Waited a long time, staring at the water, sometimes thinking he could see ripples, though on the kind of Ganja Saucepan was toking, you could end up seeing anything. Saucepan had bought it at the mish, but like almost everyone else, believed it had been grown by those Thumb Creek boys, who, legend had it, would rather shoot than let you stumble across one of the crops. Sat and toked for twenty minutes, waiting, then gave up.

Saucepan was halfway up the bank thinking nothing ever worked, when he heard a loud smack on the water. He paused, thinking should he check it out or not? Finally figured he had nothing to lose, and carefully, being toked up, went back to the river bank.

In the middle of the pond weren't any silver perch. They had probably figured someone was messing big time with their pond and had gone away. Nope, no silver perch, but the biggest freshwater bass he'd ever seen. A granddaddy of a beast, more than two foot long, lying on its side, and sucking air the same way Angus Noble sucked schooners at the Royal.

Saucepan waded out and picked it up. As soon as it was out of the water, the silvery rainbows of its scales became dull grey. The fish looked at him, its mouth opening and shutting like someone trying to get you to understand what they are saying in a mosh pit.

'Bless you, bless you,' the fish seemed to say, over and over, carefully, yet silently articulating each word.

'Fuck that,' Saucepan thought, and taking it to the bank, gutted it on the spot.

Now you might think that Saucepan's dad, Kev, being the closest most in town got to talking to someone traditional, lived down the mish, but he and Saucepan lived on the Macksville Road, several miles past the races. Kev owned a hundred long there, and even had a job working as a lollipop for the Shire road crew. How he scored that caused a lot of scalp scratching. Someone reckoned it was because he had a degree in sociology which some people, Andy Murray included, said just proved learning wasn't worth a rat's arse these days if they were learning the likes of Kev Shillingsworth.

So this Saucepan, with a bong hidden in his red, yellow, and green beanie in one hand, and a great big dead bass in the other, found himself walking the long walk back to his house. Was daydreaming as he walked along, a dopey sort of dream, that his dad might be mazed with him catching a whopper with bare hands and all.

Saucepan had an uneasy time with his dad. Saucepan thought Kev was maybe coconut like most of the mish said. Hundred acres, job and all, maybe he was in with the Thumb Creek boys. It did Saucepan's head in trying to work out his dad. Kev thought Saucepan was growing up to be a waste of space.

So lost was he in his little dream about him and his dad sharing a fish meal, that he jerked in fright when he heard Billy Wells' voice softly in his ear. Billy Wells was in the habit of unintentionally sneaking up on people along the roadside, so much so that come dusk, or dawn, most drivers kept a sharp look out for roos, stray cattle, and that Billy Wells.

'You shouldna oughta done that,' Billy song sang, walking beside him, his hessian bag slung casually over one shoulder. Saucepan exhaled slowly, relaxing himself, and muttering something bout the weeping Christ.

'Shouldna oughta done what?'

Billy nodded towards the fish tucked under Saucepan's arm. Saucepan swapped the fish and the beanie. The fish was getting to be a bit of a burden. It had stiffened up quite a bit in the sun, but seemed like it was made of lead. Was a big fish, after all.

'That there is an old man fish. Probably thirty years to grow like that. And you come long and caught it. Shouldna oughta.' As he walked, Billy shifted the sack from shoulder to shoulder. There was something solid in it, like a rock.

Saucepan opened his mouth to say something, that if Mrs Ringland heard, would have had him expelled from school, again, but instead said, 'Me and my dad we're gonna eat this fish. This is good eating, this fish, so don't you go telling me what I can and can't eat. Free country innit.'

Billy held up his palm in apology, and the two walked some distance in silence. A few bush flies also joined the procession.

'Jesus this fish. I swear he's getting heavier,' Saucepan said. 'I gotta stop a minute, give the arms a rest.' Saucepan sat down, and placed the fish carefully on a tussock of grass. Saucepan sat down, rubbing his arms. Billy sat beside him.

Billy looked at the fish thoughtfully. It had quite a few flies on it now, and its river water smell was getting just a little bit stronger.

'Fish like that, you should eat it right away. You live next door to Jesus and Mary right? That's a long long way to walk a dead fish.'

Saucepan knew, rightly, Billy wasn't talking about Father Finbarr's Jesus, but Mexican Jesus, who was a neighbour to his dad and him, who would never eat fish if there was some muck called *frijoles* in the offing.

Saucepan looked at the fish and thought. Few banana leaves, a small fire, he could have nice steamed fish in next to no time. And he was hungry. Tokin all the morning does that. But what about having a nice meal with his dad? He could tell his dad all about how he sussed out how Aunty Rose had done it. Would make his dad proud, that.

'Yeah, okay. Let's cook the fish. You go get some leaves,' Saucepan said, standing up, and looking around for some sticks.

Billy grinned so his whole face crinkled, and pushed a lank strand of hair out of his eyes. 'You're boss.'

Saucepan built a small fire, scaled the fish, and carefully wrapped it in several layers of leaves. He put the parcel to one side, waiting for the fire to go down to hot embers.

Saucepan watched Billy as he squatted on the ground, observing the fish on the embers. The old man was still agile, and had no trouble sitting on his haunches. Billy brushed a strand of hair from his face again, and using a stick, poked the embers. Saucepan reasoned maybe the hair was long that way to hide a patch of thinness in the middle of the scalp. As Saucepan watched, he couldn't help but feel he'd seen a younger, more curly-haired version of Billy, something from an old painting. Not that he'd ever seen an old painting, only the small black and white prints of heavenly consorts, saints and philosophers in Miss Ringland's well-thumbed History of Art. Well-thumbed not because of any artistic appreciation amongst the class, but because Jesse Owen, who had an eye for such things, found several pictures by some bro called Corbet that were real interesting.

Billy kept staring at the fire and as he was staring idly, reached under his coat and gave his back a good scratch. He half-closed his eyes as he was scratching, like a dog does when scratched behind the ears. Although his hand was hidden under the threadbare coat, it seemed he was concentrating on scratching the space between the shoulder blades. He scratched delicately in the one spot, the sort of scratch that is needed to remove a pimple or small wart. Eventually, his black-nailed hand came out again, holding a small white feather that was decidedly worse for wear, its vanes tangled with grit, and the shaft bent at an odd angle. Billy adjusted his haunches and

stared intently at the feather in his hand for a few seconds, before holding it over the embers and dropping it. But instead of falling, the feather soared upward from the heat, see-sawing ever higher. Both Saucepan and Billy watched it disappear gently into the sky, becoming one with the blue.

‘I’ll be damned,’ Billy said.

Soon Saucepan had the fish steaming in the embers. It takes just two or three minutes for a fish to cook that way, and using banana leaves as plates, the two of them made a good meal out of the bass. Saucepan ate in silence, listening to Billy prattle on. Billy was good at prattling on, especially when he had scored a free meal or a free drink. He called it philosophising.

‘Have always liked fish. A noble meal. The kind of meal even Jesus would approve of,’ Billy said, while delicately sucking on the bones. He licked his fingers and wiped them carefully on his jeans. He burped, and lay down on his back, looking at the scuttling clouds.

‘A blessed meal, a blessed meal,’ he said, letting out a fart and started softly humming to himself. After only half a minute, he started snoring.

Saucepan thought for a while that this might be a good time to see what was in Billy’s hessian bag. A lot of people had theories, but no-one had ever gotten to the truth. The sack was in a heap in front of Billy, and definitely had something small in it. He started to stretch his arm over to grab it, but he checked Billy first and stopped, because Billy was sleeping, there was no doubt about that, but sleeping with one eye open, looking at Saucepan. Saucepan raised a hand and waved it in front of the half closed eye. The pupil sluggishly followed the hand.

Saucepan sighed, grabbed a stick, and sat on his haunches, flicking dirt onto what was left of the fire to put it out. He felt cheated. Having just caught the biggest fish he’d ever seen from the upriver Nambucca, he had nought to show but old Billy Wells’ farting and snoring on the side of the road. Saucepan always thought his luck turned bad in the end. It was like everyone else was living under the Grace of God, but all he had for a guardian angel was the likes of Billy Wells. What was he going to say to the old man about the fish now? ‘I caught a big fish, but Billy ate it.’ He had been so close to making an impression, and now all he had was a story. Two stories, because he had also accidentally discovered Auntie Rose’s secret method of fishing. Maybe he could tell that to Kev, being traditional stuff and all.

Glossary

Frijoles

a traditional Mexican dish of cooked and mashed beans