

One Hell of a Day

Diane Williamson

Mitchell's phone alarm trumpeted from his room. I was already awake. The warm Darwin air was perfect for an early start. A quick shower then breakfast. I needed food but Mitchell, in shorts and an XL sized tee shirt straining across his shoulders, simply skulled his usual iced coffee, saying

'Hurry up, Mum. I want to get going before there's a queue to put the boat in.'

'OK, but you said we'd leave at 3.15 and I'll be ready by then.'

I hated rushing any meal not just breakfast. Tahlia, his girlfriend, who had not eaten, was ready but did not say anything. She smoked a cigarette.

Mitch had warned us to wear skirts so as to protect our legs from the searing sun when in the boat. He had readied the two litres of water per person, mandatory for boaters and had a big Esky for ice and fish. As neither Tahlia nor I had been fishing, he was optimistic. No lunch was packed but I made no comment. Young people often had a different idea about picnics or the cost of bought food than the older generation.

Our destination, the South Alligator River in Kakadu National Park was about 254 kilometres distant. The old Jeep that Mitchell owned was stripped bare inside with only two front seats remaining. The rear section was raw metal—no lining, no mat, blanket or rug. The fishing lines were propped up against one side, the passenger there ensuring the rods and lines did not get tangled.

'Hop in the front, Mum.'

Tahlia, in the cell-like rear, had to balance on the hard floor, clutching at the rods. She braced her thonged feet against the opposite side and smoked.

The going was easy, with few travellers on the road that early. It was still dark and only one or two lights showed in the houses we passed. We went from Tiwi, through the suburbs of Leanyer, Malak and Karama to meet the Stuart Highway, heading south. We drove past Palmerston, an ever-expanding satellite town of Darwin, and slowed through the quirkily named Humpty Doo some 40 kilometres south of the city. I remembered this funny name from school geography in 1957

when rice growing was trialled but failed there. The local pub became notorious as a meeting place for red-necked Aussies from all over the country, boasting their ability to drink the other man under the table or mesmerize a buffalo like Crocodile Dundee. The back blocks of the town were often hideouts for those escaping something outside the law: maintenance payments, the Taxation Department, a drug handover gone wrong, or worse. It was and is still 'a colourful place'. At Humpty we turned off the Stuart Highway east onto the Arnhem Highway towards our destination -- the huge national park, the size of Wales. The sky was lightening with the vivid red streaks of sunrise promising another hot day, predictably 35 degrees, each day being much the same in the 'Dry'. Humidity was estimated to be in the 70s.

About 50 kilometres south of Humpty trouble struck. The boat trailer swayed ominously, fish tailing dangerously into the opposite lane. Mitchell pulled over as far as he could on the side of the highway and jumped out. A flat tyre on the trailer was met with a grimaced 'damn'. This rather gung-ho son of mine had not prepared for such an eventuality and the trailer was minus a spare. Decisively, he said that he would drive back to Humpty to get it mended, leaving us with the boat. It was getting hotter with rising humidity. Sitting on the side of the highway we were exposed and uncomfortable. Monster articulated road trains, not restricted by any speed limit, shook the boat as they thundered past. Grit and dust in stinging pellets spat at us. Diesel fumes invaded eyes and nostrils. Conversation was difficult. Time dragged. I was desperate for a cup of tea.

Drifting into a bored stupor, absently waving our sunhats as fans and fly swats, we were challenged by a stern voice. Squinting into the sun, we saw a Northern Territory police officer, red faced and agitated.

'What are you doing here? This boat is too far on the road. Why wasn't it pulled further over?'

I explained and he looked less grumpy.

'Well I'll put these orange cones at each end of the boat trailer to warn other motorists. And get going as soon as your driver returns.'

Time hung heavily until Mitchell reappeared with a new tyre.

'What took you so long?'

'I couldn't get the tyre mended or even a new one in Humpty so I drove back to Darwin'.

'Did you bring us anything to eat?'

'No.'

I didn't like to complain. He was the one who had just done yet more driving.

'Let's get on with it – I'll replace the tyre, then we can continue to the park and fishing!'

We still had about 160 kilometres to travel. The high temperature and humidity caused rivulets of sweat to run down my back making it itchy. I felt lightheaded and subdued. Only Mitchell's determination and speed ate up the distance. The highway passed through Savannah grasslands – tall, coarse grasses with scattered Eucalypts. 'Black boys' thriving in this dry environment thrust their phallic charcoal spears skywards.

Reaching the turn-off to the South Alligator River, Mitchell groaned as he saw the queue of cars, trucks and trailers all heading for the same place as us. We waited. Finally we entered the car park then lined up for the boat ramp.

'Mum, Tahlia, hop out and hold the boat in the water when I slip it off the trailer.'

The thigh-deep water was welcome after the heat but I felt uneasy. I squinted into the distance and scanned the deeper waters warily. Crocodiles lived and stalked their prey in this river. Silent, cold-blooded, ferocious dinosaurs, they attacked, drowned their quarry in a frenzied underwater thrashing and twisting, then devoured the meat. Tourist boats plied up and down sections of the river encouraging crocodiles to jump out of the water to snap chickens from extended poles. Even this was scary. I willed Mitchell to hurry parking the jeep and trailer.

This 14 foot Tinny sat low in the water so it was easy for Tahlia and me to lumber over the side. Mitchell lowered his new 25 horse power motor into the brown stream and pulled the starting cord. Nothing happened. Using the strength of his brawny arms and strong hands, sweat beading on his red face, he pulled it again and again and again! Still no roar of motor or smell of two-stroke fuel. Then with an heroic effort, a gigantic yank, teeth gritted and muscles tensed, a 'crack' and the cord snapped. I would have been happy to turn around and go home. However, this patient man began to unwind the long reel of cord then exactly, neatly and evenly,

to rewind it – an irksome and time-consuming task. The day was wasting and by the time he had finished, all the boats had left the ramp to chug up river. I had missed morning tea and lunch.

At last we were off! 'It may be dark by the time we return', I thought. Mangroves fronted with shallow beaches lined the river and every part looked much the same.

'How will we recognize where to get out of the water if it's dark, Mitchell?'

'Mum, there's a light up there. See! And there's the bridge over the river,' he replied dismissively. 'Boats will be getting out where we got in'.

We sped up river, slowing to anchor in a likely spot for barramundi fishing. Some lazy crocs with hooded, glinting slit-eyes blinking at the disruption to their serenity, sunbathed in the mud between the mangroves. Occasionally one of these beasts would slip into the murky water silently causing barely a ripple on the surface. I shivered.

Mitchell dropped the anchor. He then showed us how to cast our lines baited with pieces of frozen mackerel. I managed to flick mine on to the plastic grass carpet lining the floor of the boat. Tahlia cast hers further but snagged it in the mangroves. Mitchell painstakingly untangled our mess, but at our fifth or sixth such attempt he left us to cope. Not having caught a fish himself, he said

'I think we'll move further upriver to my favourite barra spot.' By this time many boats were returning down-stream.

I would have liked a lift back with any one of them but still further we skimmed until we reached the preferred place. Mitchell ignored us as we gave up trying to be anglers and sat sombrely under Tahlia's black umbrella anxiously trying to spot any gleaming-eyed floating logs near us. There was such potential danger for one small boat on this broad river. The 'What ifs' filled me with dread. I felt sick in the stomach. After what seemed an interminable time, Mitchell who had caught only one undersized fish, decided he had had enough, so he hoisted the anchor and turned homewards. We probably had gone further up river than he intended, because

suddenly it was quite dim. The banks of the river were obscured in murkiness. Night falls rapidly in the tropics.

We had to slow down on the return trip as the deeper channels of this tidal river alter over the course of a day. Tahlia sat in the prow, instructed to determine the depth of the water ahead.

‘Mum, you can check the draught each side,’ Mitchell directed.

Suddenly, without warning we struck a sandbar. The forward momentum drove the boat right onto this hazard. I gritted my teeth as my heart thumped. Tahlia whimpered. Mitchell swore.

‘Sit firmly and together rock the boat from side to side,’ he uttered. The mud slurped and squelched but our action did nothing to move us.

‘I’m going over the side.’

‘No,’ I screeched, my throat tight. ‘You’re young,’ (knowing the horrible possibilities).

‘You’re not strong enough, Mum. And I need you to start the motor when we are unstuck.’

He lowered himself into the water above the sand bar. The mud, like quicksand immediately sucked him down. None of us spoke, too afraid to express what was understood. A nuggety, muscular 28 year old was pushing and pulling with his entire strength without any effect.

‘Tahls, you’ll have to get in and help me.’

‘No, Mitchell. I can’t. I’m too frightened. There are crocs in there and it’s dark.’ Her face white and drawn, reflected her fear, her voice quivered.

‘Well, we may have to stay here all night until the tide turns. Stuck here we are bait for crocodiles. We are low in the water and they can jump’.

Tahlia reluctantly, tentatively went over the side. She too, was captured by the ooze of mud.

‘Push harder, Tahls. Use all your strength. With me—now!’

Despite their dual effort, still the boat didn’t move.

Then in the gloom, I spotted a light coming closer, a voice calling.

‘Are you in trouble? Do you need a tow?’

This larger boat had cut its engine. One man was measuring the depth of the water with an up-ended oar, edging as close as possible without grounding.

‘Here, we’ll throw you a rope and we’ll see what happens.’

Mitchell and Tahlia continued to manhandle the boat frantically as we were towed. The larger vessel moved ahead slowly, motor barely puttering. Then suddenly with sucking and slurping, our Tinny shot free. Mitchell pulled himself over the side, grim and mud-covered. Tahlia tried but could not get her ample bosom over the rim of the boat.

‘I can’t do it! Help me!’ she cried, tears streaming down her face.

‘Hold on Tahls,’ he said, dragging and hauling her by one arm and shoulder.

‘You just have to get in.’

She fell onto the floor of the boat – a quivering, sobbing, muddy mess.

Our rescuers waited patiently, then gradually moved until we were in deeper water. Mitchell threw back their rope and started the engine as we waved and called our thanks. Tahlia, huddled on the single middle plank seat, wiping mud from her clothes, tearfully announced,

‘I’m never going fucking fishing again!’ a sentiment that was mine too, not voiced.

Back at the boat ramp, Mitchell killed the motor just as we touched the slope of underwater concrete. He left us to hold the boat while he hurried for the Jeep and trailer. The overhead light illuminated only the immediate area with the darkness beyond that deep and impenetrable. My skirt swayed sinuously with the movement of the water, a disturbing feeling like swathes of sea weed around my legs. Peering into the void beyond we knew how little we could do if we were attacked.

‘God, I hate this’, Tahlia moaned through gritted teeth.

Thankfully minus incident, we were set to go. Tahlia drove with the window down and smoked; Mitchell directed; I huddled in the back shaky and weak with relief, worn out and famished. No one said anything until we returned to Humpty Doo. A single bulb shone in the general store. Food? Something tasty and hot? Even an ice cream would be good. The pie warmer displayed the only offering: one shrivelled, burnt edged, gravy encrusted meat pie, hardly worth sharing three ways.

Seeing Darwin’s lights was a relief. Max, Mitchell’s huge Rottweiler greeted us at the gate, baying excitedly. He weighed 80 kilograms, so strong he could push me over. I was afraid of him but couldn’t find any oomph to ward him off. It was 3am.

We'd been gone almost 24 hours. Bed was the only thought. Food would have to wait. As I said goodnight, Mitchell hugged me.

'Thanks for staying calm, Mum. That really helped.'

The following day he went to the boat shop to replace the motor, still under Warranty. We had not discussed the 'ifs and buts' of the desperate predicament we had been in. There was no comfort in reliving such experiences. But perhaps Mitchell was trying to make us confront these fresh memories, himself included, when he asked,

'Anyone want to go fishing on the harbour?'

(The harbour, with crocodiles, sharks and box jellyfish!) Angrily, Tahlia replied.

'You know what I think about fishing.'

Same for me – I'd already had *one hell of a day!*

Diane Williamson is an Australian now living in Victoria after spending many years living in Japan. She is a teacher with various hobbies, the most important being creative writing. She has had several short stories published and others have received awards both here and overseas.