

The Biggest Cray in the World



The Pelican Hotel, just twelve kilometres down the coast road from Montvale, had never really been considered as a district pub. Other than to sip a beer or two after a day's fishing on the coast, the locals rarely bothered to do any serious drinking there. It was a dilapidated old place built from weather boards and corrugated iron sheets. Other than a couple of electric fans there was no air conditioning of any kind. In the summer the three bars were often comparable to a Turkish bath and in mid-winter to an ice-box. But the pub's location at the mouth of an excellent fishing river and its access to magnificent beaches, all at a cost most families could afford, ensured there were always plenty of city visitors during the summer season.

Cliff Randall, proprietor and owner, used to capitalise on these advantages in two ways. The first was to employ an excellent sea-food cook to keep his clientele happy and the second was to make sure of a steady supply of fresh fish. The fact that just about all of the pub's fish supplies came from the river insured their freshness, and the further fact that just about all of those fish were caught by Cliff's two adult sons, insured that they were as cheap as you could get. The manner in which Cliff's two sons caught the fish, though, was a constant bone of contention to the other serious fishermen in the vicinity. The rumour was the Randall boys got most of their catch early in the morning with illegal river nets. But because nobody had ever actually caught them red-handed there seemed very little anyone could do about it.

A policeman was stationed on the coast but he was never around at the crack of dawn. It was said, by those who knew him, that he was

more of an afternoon sort of person. He performed best in the afternoons. Speeding tourists were his main victims, or the occasional rowdy visitor who got a bit boisterous during one of Cliff's special cray-bake beach barbecues.

According to some of the local fishermen there was also the rumour that Cliff's boys had several unregistered cray pots set at various points along the coast, but because nobody had actually caught them at that either, there was little they could do about it. Occasionally, at the request of the fishermen, a fisheries officer would turn up and poke about a bit, but he never found out anything - except perhaps to be aware that whenever he did turn up, fish dishes at Cliff's pub were virtually nonexistent.



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Donny Conolly, the owner of the only other pub in the near vicinity, especially disliked Cliff. Whenever Cliff's name was mentioned Donny was likely to blow a fuse. "That bludger!" he'd say with considerable venom. "He's a bloody disgrace to all decent publicans. It's my hope that one day he'll get caught out and get his just deserts."

But even that vague hope seemed unlikely because there was no doubt that Cliff was as shrewd as a gran'daddy cormorant and as slippery as a river eel. He always managed to keep himself one step in front of the law, no matter what. Those who had known Cliff for any length of time could recount many tales about his flexible attitude towards honesty, especially when it came to making the odd dollar. But one particular tale that was told about Cliff's shrewdness had become almost legendary throughout the district.

It all began when a fisherman caught what was said to be the biggest crayfish anyone had ever seen. Having viewed the cray himself at the nearby wharf Cliff, being the man he was, immediately saw a way to make a few extra dollars for himself. He offered the fisherman a price he couldn't refuse and took the cray back to his hotel. The following day a large notice written in red crayon appeared in a very prominent position on his pub verandah. The notice read:

THE BIGGEST CRAY IN THE WORLD
TO BE RAFFLED SAT. NIGHT NEXT -
WIN ENOUGH CRAY TO LAST
THE AVERAGE FAMILY A WEEK!

Sure enough, on the following Saturday night, the pub was packed out with both tourists and locals who had come to take a dekho at the monster cray and, if lady luck was with them, to win it. At nine o'clock, the time when suspense was at its height, Cliff gave the signal for one of his sons to take the cray out of the freezer and wheel it in a barrow around the bars. From feelers to tail it covered the whole bottom of the barrow. The crowd literally gasped at its size. No-one was disappointed. It was truly a monster. Even Ossie Nichols, who was never known for giving praise lightly, was suitably impressed. "Strewth, it's got more body than a suckling pig," he said to his wife.

"Nearly twelve pounds, an' he'll stretch two foot eight," Cliff told everyone proudly. He held up a couple of books of tickets. "Now folks," he shouted, "down to business - who wants to own him?"

There was no shortage of takers and even at the relatively high price of a dollar a ticket Cliff went through the two books in less than fifteen

fifteen minutes. The local cop, who had just come out of the dining room where he'd been enjoying one of Cliff's complimentary seafood specialities, expressed some doubt about the legality of such a raffle. He didn't want it to get around that he was extending any special favours to Cliff just because Cliff offered him a meal on the house now and again.

"Ar, fair go mate," Cliff said. "What's the harm? After expenses, all proceeds will go to the poor little crippled kiddies, an' they need all the help they can get, don't they."

To convince the cop that the ends did justify the means, Cliff pulled off a few tickets and pressed them into his hand. And later, just to continue to keep things honest and above board, Cliff chose a complete stranger, a respectable-looking blue-rinsed old lady, to draw the winning ticket from her own beach hat.

A tourist, dressed in blue shorts, floral shirt and thongs, waved the lucky winning ticket above his head and his sunburnt face glowed even more redly than the crayfish as he stepped forward excitedly to claim his prize. Cliff shook the tourist's hand warmly and then led him off to the kitchen to arrange transfer of the monster cray.

Meanwhile, in the ladies' lounge and the two bars, all those who didn't win compensated themselves with more drinks and gradually came round to the conclusion that even if they had missed out on a lifetime's chance of getting their hands on the biggest cray in the world it was, after all, in a good cause...

It was, therefore, quite a surprise to all when only a few days after Cliff's successful raffle there appeared a second notice on Cliff's pub verandah declaring a second monster raffle. This time the notice read:

THE BIGGEST CRAY IN THE WORLD
TO BE RAFFLED HERE SAT. NIGHT
(* THE SECOND BIGGEST WAS WON LAST WEEK)

The following Saturday night Cliff's hotel was again packed to the verandahs. If there was a cray bigger than the one that had been raffled the previous week then everyone, it seemed, wanted to clap their eyes on it. Especially, of course, the locals. They were all well aware of Cliff's dubious reputation and were, to say the least, dead

curious to find out how Cliff could come up with two freak crayfish in such a short time.

Nevertheless, as it turned out, nobody was disappointed with Cliff's second offering. Perhaps it was bigger than the previous week's offering, perhaps it wasn't. Whatever, it certainly was another monster and all those present were very pleased to get another chance to have a go at picking the winning ticket.

Unfortunately for the locals it was another of Cliff's in-house guests who won the cray and she too went off to the kitchen with Cliff to arrange the transfer of the giant cray, leaving the many losers to wash down their disappointment with a few more beers and console themselves, as they had the week previous, with the now time-worn phrase that win or lose, it was, after all, for a good cause.

By the end of the night when the revellers had finally dispersed to their various accommodations it seemed like it was all over. But once again this wasn't to be the case because, by some sleight of hand that could have only been matched by Houdini, on the following Friday Cliff revealed that he had a third monster cray to be raffled.

By now, the locals, especially the fishermen who hadn't had a particularly good year with their own pots, were beside themselves to find out the source of those crays. What amazing hole could possibly harbour such a heap of gigantic crustaceans? A group of them even got together the following day to try to organise some sort of surveillance on Cliff and his sons; but all to no avail. If the crays were being poached illegally it wasn't being done in any ordinary way. In fact, the information was that Cliff himself rarely left the pub. Neither was any transaction with any person who looked like a possible supplier ever noted. Yet over the following summer period Cliff managed to get his hands on three more of those crayfish that, give or take a pound or two, were of equal startling proportions to the original "world's biggest cray".

The effects of his success with those raffle nights reached far and wide. Certainly it was a strong talking point in the district. Especially with Cliff's rival Donny Conolly who noted a distinct dropping off of his bar trade during that period. It seemed as if many of his regulars had become obsessed with trying to figure out just what Cliff was up to and were willing to travel the extra distance to the coast in the hope of

doing so. Besides, there was always the outside chance they could get lucky and win one of those much prized crays themselves.

But, as they say, all good things do come to an end and end it did. A further notice appeared on Cliff's pub verandah several weeks later that stated very succinctly there would be no more cray raffles. When questioned about it Cliff remained tight-lipped. In fact, in contrast to his jovial manner throughout the summer period, he was now downright rude and unapproachable. One would have thought all his beer stocks had suddenly gone flat, or that Russ Chalmers the Health Inspector had threatened him with closure.

It seemed as if the mystery of those crayfish was never going to be solved. Until, that was, Cliff and his seafood cook fell out and she quit her job. The lady got a bit tiddly one night in Connolly's pub and confided the true story to Phylis Barnes, the baker's wife, who spread it around the whole town by ten o'clock the following morning.

It turned out that the crayfish Cliff had been raffling all summer was, in fact, the very same one every time. A freak monster that might only be expected to turn up once in a lifetime. Cliff's little ploy had been to take the winners out to the kitchen where he confessed to each one that the cray had "gone off". One good sniff had been enough to convince them that this was the truth.

According to the seafood cook, Cliff would then further confess that he had realised the cray had been bad when his son was wheeling it around earlier that night, but had kept on because he'd had in the back of his mind how it would be the poor little kiddies who would have dipped out if he had called the raffle off. Cliff then told the winner how he was willing to chuck in half a dozen small crayfish to compensate. "Enough," he would say expansively and with as much charm as he could muster, "to last your family a week."

How could any tourist refuse such a generous offer, especially in the face of his previous heart-rending appeal on behalf of "the poor little crippled kiddies"? To a person, each had succumbed to Cliff's guile, taken their bundle of fresh crayfish, and for the sake of propriety kept their mouths closed. Then, after each one had departed, Cliff, the cunning old sod, would rinse the coating of high-smelling anchovy

paste off the giant cray and pop it back into the freezer for the following Saturday.

"To cap off the outrage," the cook told Phylis, "I never heard of any of the money goin' to any deserving cause, other than Cliff himself."

"But how did Cliff know a local wouldn't win the prize?" Phylis wanted to know. "A local would surely have woken up to Cliff's little con."

The seafood cook then revealed the true extent of Cliff's craftiness. She told Phylis that Cliff had used two sets of raffle tickets, one lot for the locals and the other for his hotel guests and casual tourists. The locals' ticket butts had gone into Cliff's pockets rather than the hat.

So why had the whole thing collapsed? Natural justice, that was how. During a wild summer storm the wind dropped a tree fair smack across the power lines along the coast road and in the six hours it took to fix it, most of the food in Cliff's pub freezer had spoiled. Including, of course, the giant cray Cliff had been wheeling around his hot smoky old pub for half the summer season.

