

The Legend of Norroombangadingdongdilly Billabong

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Once upon a set of Sundays a kangarish lived in a billabong near Norroombangadingdongdilly. Foo was an odd fish of sorts, for her dad was a fish and her mum a kangaroo. Foo had a pouch—as all lady marsupials do—and in it she kept a cell phone. She found it when tailing a group of billabong divers looking for gold. One of them must have dropped it and Foo slipped it in her pouch because it had a pink cover and was pretty. Now and then it rang – ring-ring! This made Foo’s tummy tickle and she’d laugh her head off.

“Ring-ring!” went the cell phone.

“Gurgle! Gurgle-gurgle-gurgle!” went Foo, bending over and holding her tummy.

“Ring-ring!” went the cell phone.

“Gurgle! Gurgle-gurgle-gurgle!” went Foo, helplessly falling about and toppling onto her side. Then she slapped her fishy tail on the ground until the phone stopped ringing.

Foo was lonely. She couldn’t make friends with the fish because whenever she hopped underwater she sent clouds of silt flying everywhere and the fish swam away. And the kangaroos wouldn’t make friends because she looked so terribly strange. And besides, although she was just as big as them and could hop just as fast, she couldn’t wander far from the water because she’d start to dry out.

Poor Foo, she felt so alone in the world that sometimes she would cry. Then she stayed in the billabong so her tears wouldn’t be noticed.

One day a man came along. In one hand he had a long, slim pole; in the other, a red and white box. He set the box down, took out wiggling things from a can, put them on the end of a line attached to the pole, cast the wiggling things into the water and closed the box. Then he sat on the box and swatted mosquitoes.

Foo, who was standing behind the man in the brush, watched. She wondered what on earth he could be up to? What a strange set of things to do. Eventually, the man pulled in the line, put more wiggling things onto the end, threw them back into the water and sat swatting mosquitoes again.

Foo was fascinated, but began to dry out. She hopped through the eucalyptus trees and went into the water where she was out of sight. Once she was in the billabong she slowly-slowly crept along the bottom towards the man. Suddenly she heard a splash above her head and a bundle of wiggling things came floating down through the water.

"Strange," she thought, "those look like worms," and she reached up and grabbed them. Instantly the worms bit her hand and pulled hard.

"Ow!" she burred, letting out a massive bubble which rose to the surface and made a great splash. She tried to let go of the worms but the worms wouldn't let go of her. They bit her deeply and pulled and pulled on her hand. Soon she saw blood. She felt the line in the water too. It was taut and attached to the worms. She grabbed it, wrapped it round both hands, dug her heels into the lake bottom and yanked hard. A great splash sounded from the shore and the line went loose. She tried to get the worms off her hand, but one worm, a silver one, was stuck inside her. It wouldn't let go.

She swam towards the splashing sound by the shore. When her head popped up out of the water she saw the man standing up to his waist, wet from head to foot, searching for his rod. He saw Foo and his eyes opened. He screamed in terror. He turned to run but Foo was faster. She grabbed a leg and hauled him down. Then she jumped on top of him. She was angry.

The man blubbered and moaned. He tried to escape, but Foo slapped him with her tail and refused to budge. She held out her hand and showed him the worms—which were mostly all gone—and the silver worm tied to the line still biting her hand. At first the man looked puzzled and didn't know what she wanted. Then he understood. He nodded and pointed to the red and white box.

Foo jumped off him and followed him to the box. The man opened it and took out a thingy with handles. The man's hands were shaking. He kept glancing at her with wild eyes.

'Snip,' went the thingy and the line fell away.

'Snip' went the thingy again and the silver worm fell in half. The man took the last silver bit out of her hand.

Foo licked her wound. It wasn't very big and already she was feeling better. She hopped away along the shore, the man staring at her with his mouth open.

This was the beginning of The Legend of Noroombangadingdongdilly Billabong. The full legend, however, was slow in coming—like a wet fuse smoldering and burning in fits and starts towards a stick of dynamite.

The man came back a week later. He had a bigger rod, very stout, and silvery fish that spun in the water. Foo was too smart. She didn't take his bait. But she did take a branch and snag his nasty silver fish. She pulled on the branch and struggled with him for a bit. Then she let go and floated to the surface. She watched the man being all excited until he found a dead branch at the end of his line. She watched him shout things.

After a while the man caught on. As he reeled in the seventh branch he looked out onto the billabong and saw her. She grinned; then vanished under water.

The next week the man came with a boat. It was a small boat because the road was miles away. He huffed and puffed and dragged the boat through the brush all by himself. He pushed it onto the water, tied it up, and went away. A few of hours later he came back, red and sweaty, hauling a net and floats. He spent the day weighting the net, tying floats, and setting it up across the billabong. Later he camped for the night.

In the morning he moved the net bit by bit down the billabong. First he moved one end down the shore, then he rowed across and moved the other end down the shore. By midday he'd covered half the billabong, and he kept going into the afternoon. Foo watched from the shady brush that lined the edge of the billabong. When the man got close she moved and watched from another part of the shore.

By evening he'd almost completed his sweep. The water on one side of the net boiled with trapped fish. Foo went to the man's red and white box and found the snipping thingy. She quietly hopped into the water, swam to the net and snipped a hole. Soon her brothers and sisters were streaming out.

The man noticed the fish swimming away. He lifted the net and saw the hole neatly cut. He shouted and screamed for a while. Foo kept the snips in her pouch with her cell phone. They were shiny.

When the man left he hid the boat in the reeds. During the week Foo had great fun paddling it around the little lake. She clung to the back and swished her tail in the water and went from shore to shore.

When the man came back a week later he found the boat floating in the middle of the billabong. He had to swim to get it. While he was swimming Foo crept out of the brush and

stole his clothes. She thought they looked smart. She brought them to her marshy nest to sleep on.

When he got back to the shore with the boat the man shouted and screamed loudly. He searched and searched for his clothes, but didn't find them. At last he cut up a blanket and put it over his head. Then he pulled the boat onto dry land, covered it with branches, and went away.

Foo had more fun with the boat. She took off the branches, rolled and pushed and shoved the boat back into the water, and spent the days paddling around the billabong. Unfortunately, she hit a sharp branch jutting out from a tree that had fallen into the water. A hole, a tiny hole, was punched into the bottom. At first Foo didn't notice; then she did. It took three days for the boat to sink in the middle of the billabong.

When the man came back a week later he was hauling a different net, one with a shiny, metal weave. But his boat was nowhere to be found. He searched high and low. He shouted and muttered lots of times but no sign of it did he find. All he saw were the scrape marks the boat had left on its way into the billabong. Finally he stood and stared at the water. Foo was watching him the whole time from the reeds on the further shore.

The man set up a tent and spent the next day wandering around the billabong. He was looking for tracks. He found lots of them—but they all looked like they belonged to small animals or kangaroos. Foo's tracks looked like any other kangaroo ... almost. If you looked closely you'd see that her toes were webbed. If you saw her hand print you'd see it was webbed too and with five clear fingers. It wasn't really a paw at all. Sometimes you'd see the telltale trail of her fishy tail if she didn't lift it high enough. This the man never noticed. Early the next morning he packed his tent, hung it in a tree and left.

Foo easily got the tent down from the tree by cutting the rope with her snips—but she couldn't set it up. She'd watched as the man had put it up, but it wouldn't work for her. Finally she cut a hole with her snips and crawled inside. For a while she tumbled around and played 'man'. Then she got bored and left the tent in the mud.

The man came back a week later. He shouted at his tent when he saw it in the mud. Foo couldn't understand why he shouted at things. Finally the man set it up as best he could and made camp. This time he'd brought a long stick with him. He aimed the stick at a Blue Gum tree and made it go bang. A white dart with a needle and feathers shot out and stuck itself into the tree trunk. He did this a number of times. Then he went hunting.

Foo knew he was hunting because he got down low and went on tiptoe looking this way and that. She followed him for a long time until she got bored. She sank to the bottom of the billabong and waited till evening.

When she came up it was dark and the man was sitting by his fire. Foo liked the fire. It had bright colors. Foo had never been close to fire before. She watched from the water, her eyes just above the surface, until the man went into his tent.

When she heard him snoring she went to the fire pit. Beside it were metal pots and pans and the stick bang thingy that the man hunted with. The flames were out and wisps of smoke rose from the fire. She reached out her hand and put it in the ashes. Something stung a finger and she leaped into the air, knocking the pots and pans over. In an instant the man rushed out of his tent. He carried a light that lit the camp brightly. Foo jumped back in alarm. She tripped on the bang stick, and the bang stick went bang. A dart flew out and hit the man in the bottom. He yelped and pulled it out. Then he slowly sank to the ground and went to sleep.

Foo thought this strange. Going to sleep in the middle of excitement was strange. She went over and poked the man, but he kept on sleeping. She shook him, but he started snoring loudly. Soon he was snoring louder than the frogs were croaking.

‘Snore-snore-snore,’ went the man all night.

‘Croak-croak-croak,’ went the frogs all night.

Foo slept under the water and had a peaceful night.

In the morning the man was still asleep. He was snoring but the frogs were not croaking. Foo watched him for quite a while. The sun came up and began to roast him. She could tell because his skin got redder and redder. She covered him with brush and watched some more. Finally, in the afternoon, the man woke up and staggered around the camp. He fell over now and then and had trouble staying awake. Finally he gathered his stuff and trudged away.

A week later he turned up with ropes and cages and traps. He made three trips to get all the stuff together. He set a baited trap-cage in the brush close to the shore and put food inside. The food smelled good. Foo wondered if there was more food. When the man was setting up the next trap-cage she found the food at his camp. It was wrapped in silvery paper. She ripped the paper open and ate the food. It was yummy! Very tasty. In a while the man came back and she hid away. The man looked about the camp. All the food had been opened and eaten, or opened and spoiled. He shouted for a while. Then he packed up and left.

Foo looked at the two cages the man had set up. The doors were open and the nice smelling food was inside. The cages looked dangerous to her. Animals might wander into them and the door close. She shook one and the door slammed shut. She jumped on it until it was broken and crushed. She did the same to the next one. The traps at the camp she pulled into the water and left at the bottom of the billabong.

A week later the man turned up. He shouted and screamed when he saw his traps and cages missing or broken. He spent the whole day wandering up and down the shore. The next day he went home.

A week later the man arrived with more stuff. One was shiny metal and had sharp teeth. He used it to cut branches or trees. He hammered the trees and branches together. He built a tower on the shore of the billabong. It had a platform and a ladder for climbing up and down. Foo thought it clever.

The next day the man took out his banging stick and brought it up to the platform. He stayed there all day looking out over the billabong and the surrounding scrubland. Foo stayed out of sight, hidden deep in the scrub on the further shore. The man peered through a strange two-eyed thingy, so she came and went carefully. She knew he was looking for her. She could feel it. Finally she got fed up and had a siesta underwater.

The man hiked away early the next day but left the tower standing. Foo climbed the ladder and sat on the platform. It was great! She could see almost the whole billabong. Only the farthest corner was screened from sight. She sat there a long time enjoying the scene. She could see fish swimming in the water, kangaroos hopping down to the shore for a drink, galah's fighting and magpies flapping about and warbling. A kookaburra sat in a gum tree nearby and had hysterics. Finally she climbed down and tried to push the tower over. It was too heavy.

Six days later the man turned up again. He had his banging stick and a new tent. After he set up camp he spent the day on the tower. Foo crept up behind him and sat in the shade underneath the platform. It began to get dark and she heard the man stir above her—he was gathering his stuff. As he started down the ladder Foo hopped away. The man saw her dark shape in the twilight. He muttered and tried to grab his banging stick but lost his balance. Down from the ladder the man fell and hit the ground with a thud. The banging stick landed point first in the ground beside him and blew apart with a loud crack. The man yelled and grabbed his legs. Foo fled.

Foo heard the man groaning in the dark. She knew where he was lying. She could hear he was in pain. He wasn't sleeping like last time.

In the morning light she saw him propped against the tower. He was pale and his eyes were frightened. He sat there for a couple of hours more before he tried to move. He shifted his body and immediately shouted in agony. His legs were broken and one was bloody. He crawled towards his tent but only got half way. He lay on the ground and moaned.

The sun got higher. It was strong and hot and the man began to turn red. He crawled towards the water and drank. Then he pulled his shirt over his head and lay still. Foo hopped over and looked at him. He didn't notice. Suddenly her cell phone rang.

"Ring-ring!" went the cell phone. "Ring-ring!"

The man's head jerked up and Foo leaped backwards.

"Ring-ring!" went the cell phone. "Ring-ring!"

Foo held her tummy-pouch. She was trying not to laugh.

"Ring-ring!" went the cell phone. "Ring-ring!"

Finally Foo couldn't help herself. "Gurgle! Gurgle-gurgle-gurgle!" she went, bending over and laughing as the phone tickled her tummy.

The man stared, unbelieving.

Foo shivered and shook and gurgled. She flopped over onto her side and slapped her fishy tail on the ground until the phone stopped ringing. She lay panting for a while, a smile on her face. Then she sat up and took out the cell phone. It was so pretty. She liked it. It was fun.

The man held out his hand. He wanted it too.

Foo looked at him. His legs were so crooked. He could never run away with her toy. She hopped over and gave it to him. He pushed it with his finger. Then he spoke to it. He lay his head down and rested.

Foo tried to take the phone back but the man held on. His eyes pleaded with her, so she let him keep it.

"Ring-ring!" went the cell phone. "Ring-ring!"

The man spoke to her lovely pink toy. The man didn't laugh like she did. Perhaps it didn't tickle his tummy. Perhaps he was in too much pain.

The man lay down his head and waited some more. Foo went and got leafy branches. She covered his head. Now and then she went into the water with the leafy branches. She sprinkled him with water to keep him wet and cool. She knew what it was like to be out of the water for too long.

Hours passed and the sun was getting low. Again the phone went, “Ring-ring! Ring-ring!”

The man spoke again. His face was hot and flushed. His voice was weak. Finally he held out the phone to Foo and Foo put it in her pouch. The man shooed her away.

“Shoo-shoo,” he said, waving his hand. “Go on—go away!”

Foo backed up. She didn’t understand. Then she heard people coming through the brush and she understood. She hopped into the billabong and watched from a distance as the people came and took the man away.

A week later he did not come back. The billabong returned to its peaceful self. People rarely came. Foo was lonely again. The tower was the only thing that was left of the man. Sometimes she climbed it and looked about. Lightning burnt it down one night. The fire was a lovely sight.

At last the man came back. He set up his tent in the shade of a gum tree. He didn’t have a shooting bang stick.

Foo watched from the brush.

When his camp was set up he took out his own cell phone and dialed a number.

“Ring-ring!” went Foo’s cell phone. “Ring-ring!”

Foo laughed. “Gurgle! Gurgle-gurgle!” she laughed. She fell over and slapped the ground with her tail. It was so funny!

The man found her easily. He stood and grinned at her. He held out his hand. He wanted her pink ringing thingy again. She gave it to him. He opened a little door, took out a slim package and put in a new one. He closed the door and gave it back to Foo. She put it in her pouch.

The man sat and stared at her for a long time. His legs were straight again. At last he went back to camp and Foo followed him. He was nice when he wasn’t chasing her, so she stayed and played.