

# *A Fishy Story*

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(an exercise in dialogue)



The crowd on the pier ebbed and flowed like the tide below. Their questions and answers lobbing like tennis balls.

‘What is it?’

‘A dead fish.’

‘So what?’

‘’s that all!’

‘Look at its eye?’

‘Who said that?’

‘The bloke that spotted it.’

‘Spot is right.’

‘What’s that bubble?’

‘Looks like a swollen contact lens.’

‘Naw, it’s a growth.’

A diver pushed his way through the throng while fastening his wet suit and attaching oxygen tanks, forcing the crowd apart as if opening a zipper.

‘Oi, look out - what ’ya doing?’

Two Wildlife and Fisheries officers appeared behind the diver. They urged the crowd to listen, ‘... don’t be scared.’

‘What’s he on about — scared of what?’

‘The dead fish mate. Contaminated they say.’

‘Dead, I say.’

‘Not the fish, the water dumbbo.’

‘Water — contaminated?’

‘Are ya listening to what he’s saying...?’

Yellow and black tape fluttered in the southerly sea breeze as the Wildlife and Fisheries officials roped off the pier, forcing the crowd away from the water. The diver eased into the sea clutching a large plastic container.

‘He’s brave touching that fish and if it’s contaminated, fancy going into the water.’

‘How do they know it wasn’t just hit by a boat.’

‘Yeah, reckon that’s a fishy version of a black eye.’

‘Mate, if you aren’t gonna say anything sensible clam up.’

‘Funny you should mention clams — I ate some mussels from here the other day and was as sick as a dog.’

‘Listen up, the boffins are speaking.’

‘I could write their speech mate! *Don’t worry... under control... no danger to the public... will look into it...* blah blah blah!’

‘Bureaucrats should all be called mirrors, always bloody looking into things.’

‘Yeah, I’d rather listen to Baldy’s story about vomiting up the mussels.’

‘Sh...sh...sh..’

‘... and so we believe there has been a chemical leak from a passing tanker or perhaps an illegal dumping of toxic waste. We can contain the damage and will be pumping a neutralising solution into the bay.’

‘How or what if they don’t even know what the toxin is?’

‘Shut it, I can’t hear ...’

The official pressed on, ‘Obviously, the pier will be closed until such time we know it is safe to resume normal activities.’

A voice yelled from the crowd, ‘Safe for us or the fish mate?’

An avalanche of others started calling out.

‘How far’s the poison spread— fishing’s me livelihood?’

‘What are you lot hiding?’

‘Who’s going to compensate the locals, eh?’

‘I’ve got a bloody overdraft already.’

‘Yeah, well you can’t blame the poisoned fish for that — you should work more and spend less time at the pub.’

‘What would you know about work.’

‘How do they know it’s this water contaminated – it could have floated in on the tide.’

‘Listen up – the bloke’s still talking...’

‘There will be an investigation and if the culprit is caught the government will recoup expenses.’

‘An investigation over one dead fish? The cops didn’t investigate when three dogs died in my street...’

‘Yeah, and what about our expenses chum.’

A loud splash nearby made everyone turn to see an old man empty the contents of his Esky into the water. The old timer, a well-known fixture on the pier. His action creates panic. Everyone began tipping their catch into the sea or rushing to get away from the pier.

‘Stop stop!’ The Fisheries Officer’s high-pitched voice drowned out by the noisy crowd hurrying away, fishing rods swaying, runners squelching, voices muttering.

‘I’m getting outa here, what if it’s in the air.’

‘Yeah, I’m heading home for a shower.’

‘Too right – and I’m cleaning out the freezer.’

‘Yeah, who knows when the spill was - and if it was accidental.’

‘The authorities know what it is – when have you ever seen that lot down here? They must think we’re dumb.’

‘Yeah, you’re right!’

‘And did you see the eye on that fish? Like a bloody balloon.’ The speaker felt his face as if expecting ugly growths to sprout.

‘I’m outa here.’

‘Yeah, hamburgers for tea from now on.’