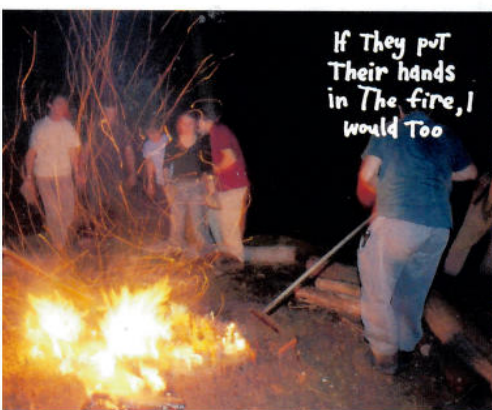


us to a stand of saplings, shows us where to chop so we can make the head, foot and sides of the bed, and away we go.

We hack brutally at thin trees for a while, and it slowly becomes clear I have a skills gap. Within two hours, Katrina's father is already about ready to varnish up his bed and go for smoko. Mine is a pathetic pile of twigs on the floor.

It's ridiculous. This guy's some kind of architect; he's submitted plans. Every time McBride comes over, he shows me something a two-year-old could have figured out.

By the end of the afternoon, the stand of saplings looks as though migrating elephants have been through. Danna is in a rage because we've been using his firewood to build beds. The area is scattered with coffin-size piles of leaves, topped with curling bedrolls and covered by squares of tarpaulin. Mine leans at a strange angle, and I don't



If They put Their hands in The fire, I would Too

think my base has enough sticks across it. My only consolation is that Mick the photographer's is even worse.

Afternoon is wearing on, and I still haven't come up with a bed worth the name, when McBride announces we're going to find water.

I've seen at least one tap since my arrival, but it seems petty to mention it.

We spend some time whittling digging sticks then head down a hill through the woods to a dry creek-bed.

"Each time the level of the bed changes, the water is slowed down a bit, and sinks in," explains McBride. "These drop-offs are the best places to find water."

We split into groups and assault the creek bed with our digging sticks. Rain the night before has made the task one-million-per-cent easier. A few centimetres through the soft mud, water wells into the ragged hole. "You can lie down and suck it straight up, or filter it through a sock, or something," says McBride. We weigh up our options and do neither.

"If you're nowhere near a creek, dry or otherwise, you can always tie a bag over the branches of a

## "I forgot to bring any booze out here. Get me some beer. I need beer"

tree," says McBride, waving a large plastic bag in the air. "The leaves will transpire into the bag and I will probably give you about a cupful of water by morning."

I'm face-deep in a clump of branches, readying my bag and string, when I have a sudden, terrible thought. "Listen," I say to Mick the photographer. "I forgot to bring any booze out here. I meant to get some at the airport but I forgot. Sorry." Mick doesn't look bothered at all. "Don't worry," he says. "I've smuggled in a bottle of vodka."

I let go of the tree and clutch at his shoulder a bit, overcome with emotion. "Thank God," I whisper.

At that moment, the brothers, Lee and Johnno, announce their intention to go and fetch a slab of cider from their truck. McBride looks uncertain.

"We don't



normally have alcohol out here..."

he starts, but Danna is already talking about a reunion with "his friend Bundy". A queue forms in front of him. I am at the head. "Get me some beer," I tell him. "I need beer."

The good news is that, although we have to cook our own dinner, we don't have to hunt it down and kill it. If my car ever breaks down out back of Bourke, I'd better hope the area's littered freely with dead, plucked chickens.

We dig holes, line them with paperbark, then put in heated stones from the fire, the chickens and a bit of veg, and cover it all up with more bark. Danna arrives from the bottle-o and is greeted like a relative home from the war. We all stand around inhaling beer while Johnno tells shit jokes. Lee cracks on to Mandy, who's not having any of it. Everyone starts calling me "Ralph".

By the time dinner is ready over an hour and a half later, we are almost too pissed to care. McBride tries to coordinate us while we stumble around with digging sticks and shovels, trying to dig up our

food. When it's uncovered it looks like a mess in a hole, but smells great.

Mick tells me he can still take pictures even though he's drunk. "It's not a problem," he says, seriously. "It really isn't."

Danna weaves around, hugging any woman who'll let him. Katrina's father has a box of wine by his feet and a large cigar in his face. He looks as though he's in his easy chair at home, not on a log in the bush. McBride sits near the fire with a slightly pensive expression on his face, as though the vision he has for this course is taking a bit of a beating. The fact that Lee is taking him through Eddie Murphy's entire stand-up routine can't be helping.

By the time I get to my sagging pile of debris and branches, it could be a queen-size at The Sheraton. I take off my boots and place them upside down. "That'll stop snakes and spiders," I say to myself wisely, proud of my bush savvy.



I ate out a hole in The bush

### DAY TWO

Breakfast is a rather civilised fry-up, with a cereal option. I continue to have doubts about whether we are "surviving" or just "camping". There's going to be a trade-off for this luxury, though; there always is. Sooner or later, I'm going to have to eat a witchetty grub. I can feel it.

One of the students sits on a log, steadily and silently sharpening his knife. Suddenly his watch alarm goes off. "What's that?" I ask him, cheerfully. "Time to kill everyone?" He just draws the blade slowly along the whetstone.

Mick is absent. We find him unconscious on his badly built bed. He later confides he slid off the huge pile of branches in the night and landed on his vodka bottle. "My ribs are hurting like f-k," he complains. He's still doing better than Danna, who put himself outside an entire bottle of Bundy and



#### BRACKEN FERN

THE curled-up young ferns are known as fiddle-heads. They can be roasted and eaten, and have a nutty taste. Allegedly.



#### WOMBAT BERRY

THIS is a common low-climbing vine with a slightly sweet, crisp taste, almost completely unlike a nice white wine.



#### GRASS TREE

DISTINCTIVE looks designed to draw the attention away from the bland-as-cotton-wool taste. The leaf bases are edible, nectar can be licked from the spike, and edible grubs can be found in the trunk.



#### BULRUSH

THE familiar brown, sausage-like flowering spike is the signpost to a groaning table-full of bland emergency nutrition, including yellow pollen, edible leaf bases, roots and new shoots.