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Djangulu the Bunyip

Listening to old Ernie the Elder, Uncle the children called him, was usually fun; and it was good as far as learning about Country. That's what Australian Aborigines call their land, which is pretty much the entire Continent. And seeing as their people's ancestors (those were the ones who came before the present day Aborigines) had been there for tens of thousands of years it was likely that they probably knew as much as there was to know about Country. So stories of the Dreamtime and the way things like the stars in the sky had come to be sounded right; at least as far as the children were concerned as they listened to the tales.

At that time, sitting by the cooking fire with Ernie there were four of them – Jacko, his sister Tippi and their cousins Maxine and Sam; and they were there for a particular reason. It had come about when Jacko had asked his Mum if they could go for a dip in the waterhole. That had sparked a look of horror on her face, and both Jacko and Tippi were startled when she exploded with a loud: "NO! Definitely not!" After which they were promptly marched off to see Ernie.

When they arrived, Sam and Maxine were already there waiting for the old man. "What are *you* doing here?" asked Tippi in a low whisper.

"Um," Maxine started, "You know we were talking about going to the waterhole... Well we mentioned it to Mum and she went ballistic."

"So did ours," said Jacko. "I wonder why?" They were soon to find out.

Both of their mothers had spoken to the Elder beforehand and were some distance away watching. Old Ernie came shuffling up and sat near the children. It took him a while to begin speaking as if he wasn't too sure what to say. It wasn't that really; just that he knew what children were like when they were told not to do something; and here's how he began: "I was your age once and if my parents told me not to do something I usually ignored them and went off and did it anyway. That's expected of children, and much of the time it does no harm; but in this case disobeying your parents will prove very dangerous, believe me."

"Why is that, Uncle?" asked Maxine of the Elder. "We can't swim so we weren't going to do that, just have a paddle. And it is only a waterhole."

Ernie sighed, knowing this next bit could frighten the children; and this was actually his intention. "Djangulu is the problem," he said ominously.

"Djangulu?" queried Jacko with a frown. "What's that?"

"Not a what, but a *he*," then the elder began with his explanation: "Djangulu is a Bunyip, a fearsome creature that lives in the swamps and rivers and ponds, especially in waterholes."

Tippi stopped him: "Wait a minute, Uncle. Surely this er, Bunyip can't live in *all* of them at the same time?"

"Maybe not," said Ernie. "But who knows how many Bunyips there are? Although they are rarely seen, they are said to have very sharp pointy teeth with which they can eat people." Ernie

paused to let that bit of information sink in. And it apparently had because the children were sitting with their mouths agape in what he hoped was terror.

Sam recovered from the shock and asked: “What do Bunyips look like, Uncle?”

“They are supposed to have shaggy fur and because they can live on both land and in water they have flippers. Some say they have tusks like a Hippopotamus, or they may have horns...”

“Have you ever seen one, Uncle?” asked Tippi, now quite breathless.

“No, not exactly seen,” the Elder began, “But I have heard one. It made a loud roaring noise, and when I heard that I knew it was time to go; very quickly, I might add. So,” he finished slowly with a warning: “You children stay well away from the waterhole.” It should have been enough, but Ernie noticed something in their eyes – a twinkle of excitement and, he was fairly sure, a definite sign of mischief in-the-making.

The children left the old man and on their way home they were hatching a plan. Ernie suspected as much and got up to shuffle after them. He tried not to make it obvious as he walked through the community, chatting to the odd person on the way while still keeping a wary eye on the youngsters. To begin with they went to their own homes; then a short while later the four of them met up. They had told their mothers they were just going walkabout and to play, to which both parents had warned: “Remember what your Uncle Ernie told you.”

Little else was on their minds as they started into the bush. “The olds mustn’t know about this so we can’t afford to do anything stupid,” said Maxine.

“We’re only going to look,” said Tippi, reminding her cousin of the plan.

“And if Djangulu comes we’ll simply run away,” added Jacko.

“Too right,” finished Sam.

Nearing the waterhole they were growing nervous and slowed down, eyes darting around looking for anything strange lurking in the bush. That’s good, thought Ernie as he watched from a distance. He was, however, having doubts of his own: what if the Bunyip doesn’t come? What if there is no such thing? Then the children would think he was only tricking and they wouldn’t believe anything he said in the future. He brushed the concerns away. “Of course Bunyips exist,” he whispered to himself. “The stories are true, and I really did hear one once.”

The children broke through the trees and paused. There was the waterhole, peaceful and calm mirroring the blue sky above. “There’s no sign of Djangulu,” whispered Maxine.

“Maybe we should call him,” suggested Sam.

Jacko took a few steps towards the pond and stopped again. “Maybe he’s not here,” he said, “Or not anywhere at all...”

He was cut short by a disturbance in the water. Something broke the surface, first two horns on the head, next a pair of yellow eyes that seemed to glow. Raising himself to his full height Djangulu stood waist-deep in water which ran and dripped from his furry body. The children stood wide-eyed just staring. Tippi said aside: “I thought he’d be bigger...”

She too was cut short as Djangulu opened his mouth baring rows of pointed teeth; and he let out a booming roar that startled the children. Water swirled as he began to advance, roaring and snarling as he came. Ernie was watching from his hiding place in the bush and was about to warn the children to run for their lives when the unexpected happened. Djangulu stumbled to a halt and was looking down as he squirmed around. It seemed his feet or perhaps his flippers had become entangled in something below the surface. Unable to free himself, he started to topple before landing on his face with a mighty splash.

The children had been on the verge of running away; now they just stared and waited. “He’s not moving,” said Sam unnecessarily.

“I think he’s hurt,” offered Jacko, and he began rushing towards the motionless Bunyip. “Come on!” he urged. “We’ve got to get him up or else he’ll drown.” He was wading in the water when the others caught up. Jacko was reaching out. “Everyone grab a handful of hair and pull him towards the bank.”

Ernie was totally stunned. Children were reckless, everyone knew that; but this was a reaction he would never have thought of them. He remained undercover, watching as the four children dragged the Bunyip out of the waterhole. It lay face down on the bank, still unmoving. Jacko looked down for a moment; then he was leaning over the creature, placed his hands on Djangulu's back and began to rhythmically pump, up and down, up and down. This must have gone on for a minute or more with no apparent result until... Djangulu coughed and spluttered. Water gushed from his mouth and with a final gasp his eyes sprang open. The children stepped back as the Bunyip rolled over and stared at them. What now? thought Ernie. This might be a good time to... Yet again, he stopped himself from interfering. Something else was happening; something very strange.

The Bunyip was struggling to stand upright, so Sam and Jacko helped him. Djangulu gazed at them and the two girls. His mouth opened, but there was no terrifying roar, just a series of peculiar whistles and clicks that Ernie had never heard before. What did they mean? Nothing like this had ever been told of in the Dreamtime stories.

He continued to watch, could hear the children's voices but not what they said; and the Bunyip kept making the same strange noises. Were they all talking to each other? If so the weird conversation carried on for some minutes. The children were talking and laughing, and maybe Djangulu was too; but not knowing what a Bunyip's laugh sounded like, Ernie could only guess. At least, it seemed, this was a happy meeting of two very different creatures. Eventually, Djangulu made another strange sound and started back into the waterhole while the children called out their goodbyes and waved. Deeper into the water Djangulu the Bunyip went until he sank down and disappeared beneath the surface.

The Elder now had a decision to make – did he sneak away unseen, or reveal himself? Finally, following a sigh of resignation he moved out from his hiding place and approached the children. Apparently they weren't surprised to see him. "We knew you were there, Uncle," said Maxine, "We heard you creeping about in the bush."

So much for bushcraft, thought Ernie - I must be getting old. "Do you mind telling me what just happened here?"

Jacko frowned. "Surely you know – you were watching."

"Watching, yes," replied Ernie, "And what you did was very brave, but weren't you scared?"

"At first we were," said Tippi, "But more of the stories you told us; not of Djangulu. We saw he was hurt and might have died if we didn't get him out of the water, so we knew what had to be done, fear or not. And you said we are all here to care for Country and everything in it."

Ernie was nodding slowly, pleased that these children had not only taken notice of his teachings, but knew how to put them into practice in their everyday lives. "Well, now I can honestly say I have seen a Bunyip. Tell me about the strange noises Djangulu was making."

"He was talking to us," said Jacko, "In his own language of course, but somehow we could understand; and he understood what *we* were saying. Now..." The boy paused, a little unsure whether he should say what the four of them had agreed on. He continued: "We'd like a favour, Uncle Ernie. If we tell you something, can you promise not to tell our folks?"

The Elder frowned at the odd request. "That depends what it is."

"It's about the waterhole," started Sam.

His sister continued: "And Djangulu."

Next it was Maxine's turn: "He is going to give us swimming lessons..."

"But," put in Jacko emphatically, "No-one must know about this, or about Djangulu."

"Otherwise everyone will want to come and see the Bunyip," said Tippi, "And Djangulu wouldn't like that. We have to respect his wishes. Isn't that right, Uncle?"

The old man smiled and thought to himself: these children are wise beyond their years. Eventually he said: "Of course I promise, out of respect for both Djangulu, and the four of you."