

# The Bunyip

by

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FADE IN:

EXT. BILLABONG -- AFTERNOON

A billabong that could be a million miles from anywhere. Peaceful, calm. PAN to reveal 11-year-old EMILY. She sits looking over the water. Not happy, not sad - just sitting. Houses are visible behind her. This is the edge of town, where urban living merges with rural, so next-door neighbours are out of shouting distance. The day is fine but storm clouds are gathering in the distance.

CUT TO:

INT. KITCHEN -- AFTERNOON

Emily sits at the kitchen table, doing homework. Her mother, BARBARA, is preparing dinner. A television is on in the next room.

NEWSREADER

...wanted for a string of assaults in the highlands area. The man, who remains at large, is described as in his early twenties with short dark hair and light skin. All of his victims have been robbed following the attacks, but his four female victims have also suffered varying degrees of sexual assault. Police are warning people to be aware of home security...

The newsreader goes on to another story. Barbara has been surreptitiously looking at Emily.

BARBARA

How are you doing?

EMILY

Okay. It isn't as hard as it used to be.

BARBARA

(indicating homework)  
That isn't what I meant.

EMILY

I know.

The conversation breaks down. And clearly not for the first time. There's a communication problem between these two. Barbara goes back to dinner preparations.

CUT TO:

INT. KITCHEN -- LATER

Emily and Barbara are eating dinner. The television is still running, but now we hear the weather.

NEWSREADER

...cloudy with a strong chance of rain. Further north, the low of the last few days has met a high pressure system moving south, resulting in a large storm front threatening heavy rain in a wide band across the highlands. The Bureau of Meteorology has issued...

BARBARA

Have you packed your things?

EMILY

Not yet.

BARBARA

Do you have enough boxes?

EMILY

I guess.

Beat.

BARBARA

It's not the end of the earth, Emily. Not even another town. You keep all your friends, you stay in the same school...

EMILY

Then why move at all?

BARBARA

This place is too big for us now.

EMILY

It used to fit.

Ouch. If Emily weren't so calm, that would sound like an accusation.

BARBARA

Yes. It did.

The conversation breaks down again.

EMILY

Can I go down to the billabong?

BARBARA

No, Emily. It's too late, there's a storm coming and you were down there all afternoon anyway.

EMILY doesn't respond. She's not sullen, just quiet.

BARBARA (CONT'D)

What were you doing down there?

EMILY  
Saying goodbye to the bunyip.

CUT TO:

INT. KITCHEN -- EVENING

Barbara is on the phone. Emily is visible through the doorway into the lounge room, looking out the window as rain comes down outside. She pays no attention to the television, which is the only source of light in the lounge room.

BARBARA  
I don't know. She doesn't act upset. She doesn't get angry or resentful, even though I know she doesn't want to move. She's obedient, polite, neat and tidy, studying hard... she's the perfect child, and it's freaking me out.

INT. LOUNGE ROOM -- CONTINUOUS

Light from a bulb outside falls through the window on to Emily's face, making imitation tears trickle down her cheeks as she traces the path of the raindrops on the glass with her finger.

BARBARA (O.S.)  
No, nothing.

INT. KITCHEN -- CONTINUOUS

BARBARA  
She hasn't been happy or sad in the longest time. Like everything's just been sucked out of her. She cried for a few days and then just dried up. I know, me too. I just want my daughter back the way she used to be.

CUT TO:

EXT. YARD -- DAY -- FLASHBACK

In the back yard, Barbara is watering plants with a hose. Emily is happily doing various gymnastic moves - handstands, cartwheels etc. There is the sound of a lawnmower.

EMILY  
I thought gymnastics would be really good for me, because I'm flexible and I've got lots of energy and I can do lots of spins without getting dizzy. Mr Matthews said I had really good balance and that's important for a gymnast.

BARBARA  
Really.

EMILY

Yes, and I've been watching them on TV, so I know all the moves and how they do it.

BARBARA

I thought you wanted to be a swimmer?

EMILY

That was before I knew about gymnastics. Anyway, everyone wants to be a swimmer. I want to be different from everyone else.

BARBARA

You do?

EMILY

Yes. I don't care if I ever go near the water again.

BARBARA

Oh, really?

She turns the hose on her. Emily shrieks delightedly and the two get involved in a cheerful tussle that sees them land on the ground wrestling for control of the hose. A shadow falls over them.

DAD (O.S.)

Can I play too?

CUT TO:

INT. LOUNGE ROOM -- NIGHT

Barbara sits on the lounge, watching Emily at the window. The rain is really coming down hard now. There are flashes of lightning with appropriate thunder.

BARBARA

What are you looking for out there?

EMILY

Nothing.

BARBARA

It hasn't rained like this for a long time.

EMILY

I know.

BARBARA

Probably longer than you can remember.

Emily does not reply.

BARBARA (CONT'D)

Can you remember rain like this?

EMILY shakes her head. BARBARA tries again.

BARBARA (CONT'D)

The farmers have been saying it used to be wet here all the time, years ago. The creek hasn't flowed since we arrived, just after you were born. Wouldn't it be nice if there was enough rain to make the creek flow?

EMILY

Then the billabong would be gone.

BARBARA

It would still be there. It would just have water flowing through it.

EMILY

It wouldn't be a billabong. A billabong doesn't have water flowing through it.

BARBARA

How do you know that?

Emily turns to look at her mother. Her father told her, of course.

CUT TO:

EXT. BILLABONG -- DAY -- FLASHBACK

Emily and Dad walk along the edge of the billabong. Emily is collecting wild flowers - probably all weeds, but anything pretty she sees she runs a few paces to uproot and add to the already respectable bunch she holds.

DAD

(adjusting his  
spectacles)

It's an Aboriginal word. It means a waterhole in a creek or river that only runs when there's a lot of rain. The rest of the time it's cut off.

EMILY

Does that mean it isn't a billabong when the rain makes a creek?

DAD

(laughing)

I guess so.

EMILY

How long since it rained enough to make the water run?

DAD

Oh, a long time, sweetie. You were just crawling, I think.

EMILY

How long has the bunyip been here?

DAD

I don't know. Maybe he arrived with the water when the creek flowed that time.

EMILY

Maybe he came with his whole family, like we did!

DAD

I don't there's enough room in this little billabong for a whole family of bunyips.

EMILY

We've only got a little house.

DAD

But we don't have to share it with all the ducks and frogs and insects.

EMILY

(crestfallen)

Oh.

(then, brightly)

Maybe he's like in charge and looks after everyone in the billabong to make sure they're all happy and don't fight and like that.

DAD

Like a caretaker?

EMILY

Yes!

DAD

That sounds like a very good job for a bunyip. Now, let's have a look at that.

He crouches and picks a green reed from the water's edge and winds it a couple of times around Emily's flowers, tying it off into a knot and holding the bunch together.

DAD (CONT'D)

There we go. A perfect billabong bouquet. I think your mother is going to like that. She likes pretty things.

EMILY

Like me?

DAD  
Yes, princess. Just like you.

They embrace. Then, when Emily is a safe pace away...

EMILY  
Then why does she like you?

DAD  
Why you...!

He gives chase in mock anger as Emily runs giggling for the house.

CUT TO:

INT. KITCHEN -- NIGHT

Emily and Barbara are playing dominoes on the kitchen table. Emily is in her pajamas.

BARBARA  
Mr Matthews said you haven't been going to gymnastics.

EMILY  
I don't want to any more.

BARBARA  
Why not, sweetie?

EMILY  
(shrugging)  
I just don't.

BARBARA  
I thought you liked gymnastics.

Emily doesn't respond, except to lay another tile on the table.

BARBARA (CONT'D)  
I'm worried about you, Emily.

EMILY  
I'm okay.

BARBARA  
Are you? You don't talk with your friends any more. You don't talk to me anymore. I haven't heard you laugh for weeks. You're a zombie and it frightens me.

EMILY  
Don't be frightened.

BARBARA  
I can't help it.

EMILY  
Neither can I.

BARBARA

Emily, I know this has been hard for you. It's been hard for all of us. But he's not coming back.

There is a sudden frozen moment. Then Emily gets up to leave.

BARBARA (CONT'D)

Emily, stop.

Emily stops.

BARBARA (CONT'D)

We need to talk about this.

EMILY

I don't want to talk about it.

BARBARA

Emily...

EMILY

(shouting)

I don't want to talk about it!

BARBARA

Well, we're going to talk about it!

EMILY

No!

BARBARA

Yes! Emily, bad things happen. Some we can change and some we can't. We can't change this. I wish we could but we can't. You've got to understand that.

EMILY

(beginning to cry)

No, I won't! I don't want it to be like this! I want things the way they were!

BARBARA

(also crying)

Me too, baby. I want you to smile again and be happy.

EMILY

I can't!

BARBARA

I know it's hard, sweetie, but you've got to try.

EMILY

No! It's not supposed to be this way. Everything's wrong and it's all your fault!

BARBARA  
 (taken aback)  
 It's nobody's fault, baby.

EMILY  
 It is! It's your fault! If you  
 hadn't yelled at him he wouldn't  
 have gone! He went away because  
 you yelled at him and he never  
 said goodbye and it's all your  
 fault!

Barbara moves around the table to hug Emily, but the girl  
 fends her off.

BARBARA  
 Emily, sweetie...

EMILY  
 Don't touch me! I hate you!

Emily runs from the room. Barbara makes a move to follow  
 but stops herself and collapses into a chair, horrified  
 and sobbing. She's at the end of her tether.

CUT TO:

INT. EMILY'S BEDROOM -- LATER

A typical girl's bedroom. Pictures of horses and pop stars  
 adorn the walls. Emily is a neat child, so it's fairly  
 tidy. There is a row of stuffed toys along the bed head.  
 A lamp on the bedside table illuminates Emily curled up in  
 bed. She is holding a stuffed toy - a bunyip. Rain still  
 comes down incessantly and occasional lightning flashes  
 through the window. There are a couple of boxes ready to  
 be packed for the move. There is a gentle knock on the  
 door. It opens slightly.

BARBARA  
 Emily? Can I come in, sweetie?

Emily does not reply, though she's clearly not asleep.  
 Barbara comes in and sits on the bed.

BARBARA (CONT'D)  
 I'm sorry I yelled. I was upset.  
 It's not your fault, okay?

EMILY  
 (muffled)  
 Okay.

BARBARA  
 I love you more than anything in  
 the world. You know that, right?

EMILY  
 Yes.

BARBARA  
 So did your father.

Emily does not respond. If anything, she screws herself up into a tighter ball.

BARBARA (CONT'D)

I miss him too, sweetie. I miss him more than anything. I walk around the house and I can see him everywhere, working on his car in the driveway, watching TV in his chair, peeling vegetables in the kitchen... The house is full of him, every time I turn around and it hurts me so much I don't know how I can stand it.

EMILY

Why did you yell at him?

BARBARA

It was a silly thing, just a stupid little grown up thing. I was angry and I yelled at him and he left and never came back. And now every time I see him shaving in the bathroom or smiling as he comes in the front door, I think of how the last thing I said to him was mean and angry and I'll never get to say sorry or make it right.

Barbara reaches out to Emily, lightly stroking her hair.

BARBARA (CONT'D)

All I have now is you. And I see you drifting through every day not caring about anything. You go to school, you come home, you sleep and you go to school again. You're like a ghost. It makes me sad to see you like that. And I don't know how to help you. Can you tell me how to help you?

EMILY

I don't know.

BARBARA

It's okay. I don't know either. Can I have a hug?

Emily sits up and they share a bone-crushing bear hug.

EMILY

Is that why you want to move away?

BARBARA

(breaking hug)  
What do you mean?

EMILY

Because you see Daddy everywhere.  
(MORE)

EMILY (CONT'D)

Is that why you don't like it here any more?

BARBARA

(big sigh)

That's part of it. I miss him so much and it hurts me to be reminded every day how much he's not there.

EMILY

(very small)

But if we move, we might forget him.

Barbara is surprised. She hasn't heard that one before.

BARBARA

Emily, why?

EMILY

If we move away and we don't have the things to remind us, what if we forget all about him, like he was never there?

BARBARA

Oh, no, sweetie! I'll never forget your daddy, and neither will you. Things are just things, they don't matter at all. It's how you think of someone in your head, that's what makes them real.

Barbara gathers Emily into another hug.

BARBARA (CONT'D)

Is that why you spend so much time at the billabong? Because you and daddy used to go there all the time?

EMILY

No. I go to see the bunyip.

Barbara is not sure if this is a good thing or not.

BARBARA

Why?

EMILY

Because he's all alone, too.

BARBARA

How do you know?

EMILY

I just do.

BARBARA

Did he... tell you this?

EMILY

No. I've never seen him.

BARBARA

Then how do you know he's there?

EMILY

I just know. It's like you said,  
a person is real if you can see  
them in your head.

Barbara isn't sure that's exactly what she said, and she's starting to be alarmed all over again by the turn the conversation has taken.

BARBARA

Tell me about the bunyip.

EMILY

He came a long time ago, when the river had water in it. Then when it all dried up, he was stuck here, because bunyips can't travel where there isn't water. He couldn't get back to his family, so he's been sad and all alone ever since then. He looks after the animals in the billabong and protects them from anything bad.

BARBARA

And he can't leave?

EMILY

No, not until the river has water in it again.

BARBARA

That's very sad.

EMILY

Yes. He left home and never got to go back. And he never said goodbye to his family because he didn't know that he wasn't going to get home.

Unsaid is who else did the same thing. Then Emily says it.

EMILY (CONT'D)

Just like daddy.

CUT TO:

INT. KITCHEN -- DAY -- EMILY'S DREAM

In Emily's dream there's a greenish colour and blurred texture to everything, as if viewed through stagnant water. Voices are distorted and muffled. Emily is at the table, eating a bowl of cereal. Barbara and Dad are visible through the kitchen door as blurs in the lounge room.

BARBARA

We can't afford it! For God's sake, that rust pile is going to ruin us.

DAD

It's not as bad as you make it out...

BARBARA

I'm sick of living from paycheck to paycheck. We're never going to get anything saved if we have to spend every penny on doing up that bloody bomb of yours.

INT. KITCHEN -- CONTINUOUS -- EMILY'S DREAM

Emily turns to look at her parents as they continue fighting. Their words are now indistinct, but clearly Barbara is not a happy girl. Dad is not as vocal, but he is determined. Emily looks upset now. There is a door slam and the sound of a revving engine and a car pulling away.

EXT. BILLABONG -- DAY -- EMILY'S DREAM

Emily is at the billabong, looking into the water from a few paces away. Part of a dented car body juts out of the water.

EXT. BILLABONG -- CONTINUOUS -- EMILY'S DREAM

A view of EMILY from under the water - something is watching her. Whatever-it-is rises and begins to break the surface.

EXT. BILLABONG -- CONTINUOUS -- EMILY'S DREAM

Emily is frightened. She doesn't know what's going to come out of the water. She wants to run, but this is one of those dreams where you can't move. She watches as...

EXT. BILLABONG -- CONTINUOUS -- EMILY'S DREAM

...an indistinct figure rises in front of Emily, who opens her mouth to scream.

CUT TO:

INT. KITCHEN -- NIGHT

Rain is coming down hard, and thunder and lightning play outside. Barbara is sitting at the kitchen table with a mug of tea, thinking about what Emily told her earlier. Emily, still holding the stuffed bunyip, arrives quietly at the door to the lounge room.

EMILY

Mummy? I had a bad dream.

BARBARA

Come here, sweetie.

They hug.

BARBARA (CONT'D)

Was it the storm?

EMILY

No. I saw Daddy's car accident.

Barbara has mixed feelings about this. She's solicitous of a frightened girl, but this is the first independent mention of the accident and it's a kind of breakthrough, too.

BARBARA

It's okay. I'm here, sweetie.

EMILY

Why did daddy die?

BARBARA

It was just an accident, sweetie. The other driver didn't stop at the stop sign.

They stay in the hug a while. When they break...

BARBARA (CONT'D)

You know, Emily, I have dreams about your daddy, too.

EMILY

Really?

BARBARA

Some of them are bad, like yours, but a lot of them are good dreams. I dream about the things we used to do and places we all went together and how much I loved him.

There is a particularly loud crash of thunder.

BARBARA (CONT'D)

What's happening inside us now is like a big storm. All the memories are crashing into each other because they don't know where they belong. And that's okay, because after a while they realise they're hurting each other and they stop rushing around and start looking for a place to live. When they figure that out, we can visit them one at a time to remember him. And they won't keep crashing into our dreams all the time.

EMILY

I don't want to have the bad dreams any more, mummy.

BARBARA

I know. And they will stop one day. But right now they're still crashing around inside us.

There is the sound of breaking glass and a rattling window from the lounge room. Barbara and Emily react.

BARBARA (CONT'D)

Oh, dear! That was a bit of a scare, wasn't it? It sounds like the wind blew something through the window.

Barbara gets up from the table.

BARBARA (CONT'D)

We'd better go and put something over the hole to stop the rain coming in.

INT. LOUNGE ROOM -- CONTINUOUS

Barbara moves across the lounge room towards the window. Halfway across, she abruptly stops.

INT. LOUNGE ROOM -- CONTINUOUS

Illuminated from the light outside, rain blows in the open window. The glass has been broken and the window unlatched.

INT. LOUNGE ROOM -- CONTINUOUS

As Barbara absorbs this information, a MAN moves out of the shadows behind her. The man grabs her in a bear hug and she screams. Emily, in the kitchen doorway, screams as well. Barbara flings herself and her captor around frantically, managing in her panic to throw both of them over the back of the couch. They roll and bounce from the seat to the floor, where she gets a lucky break by landing on top of him. He releases her with a grunt. She scrambles to her feet and races for the kitchen. He follows close behind.

INT. KITCHEN -- CONTINUOUS

Barbara hustles Emily into the kitchen and towards the back door. But the Man is so close behind she knows she doesn't have time to unlock, open and escape. She manages instead to get the table between them.

INT. KITCHEN -- CONTINUOUS

The Man, early 20s with short dark hair and light skin, drips water as he grins evilly over the table at them. He is the subject of the earlier news story.

INT. KITCHEN -- CONTINUOUS

Barbara and Emily, terrified, look back over the table at the Man. After a beat, Barbara goes for the mug of tea still sitting on the table and throws it in his face.

The mug isn't thrown hard enough to hurt much, but the Man is burned by the hot tea. Barbara and Emily run for the lounge room again. Barbara isn't quite fast enough. The Man dives for her and brings her to the floor.

INT. LOUNGE ROOM -- CONTINUOUS

Sprawled on the floor, Barbara looks up at Emily.

BARBARA

Run, Emily! Run to Mr Jenkins'  
place!

INT. LOUNGE ROOM -- CONTINUOUS

Emily, terrified, turns and runs for the front door.

INT. LOUNGE ROOM -- CONTINUOUS

The Man moves to give chase, but Barbara grabs him and he hits the floor. He turns and belts her - a full-force fist to the head. Barbara is not unconscious but she's pretty much out of the fight. The Man goes for Emily.

INT. LOUNGE ROOM -- CONTINUOUS

Emily is at the front door. She gets it unlocked and is opening it when the Man catches her and spins her around so he's between her and escape. Emily screams.

INT. LOUNGE ROOM -- CONTINUOUS

Barbara raises herself groggily onto her elbows.

INT. LOUNGE ROOM -- CONTINUOUS

Barbara's POV - a shaky, blurred look at Emily and the Man framed by the now-open front door.

INT. LOUNGE ROOM -- CONTINUOUS

The Man grins down at Emily. But his grin slides off as he realises she isn't looking at him but over his shoulder.

INT. LOUNGE ROOM -- CONTINUOUS

POV over the Man's shoulder to Emily as he turns to see what she sees. The last of his grin disappears and he is suddenly frightened as a something comes between the outside lamp and him, throwing a shadow over his face.

INT. LOUNGE ROOM -- CONTINUOUS

Barbara, still groggy, squints at the front door.

INT. LOUNGE ROOM -- CONTINUOUS

Barbara's POV - still shaky and blurred. She sees a large shadowy figure at the front door. It grabs the Man and hauls him away into the rain and darkness. Camera tilts down and fades as Barbara loses consciousness. But before it goes black...

INT. LOUNGE ROOM -- CONTINUOUS

Emily turns from the door and runs to her mother.

EMILY

Mummy!

PAN down to Emily's stuffed bunyip, dropped in the doorway in the pool of light from the exterior bulb. Lightning flashes.

FADE TO:

EXT. BILLABONG -- DAY

Fine weather a few days later. We can see the house in the background as Emily and Barbara walk down to the billabong. Next to their house is a removalist truck. Emily and Barbara are much more comfortable with each other now - the tension is gone.

EMILY

See? The water's all gone away again.

BARBARA

You'd never know it was flowing a few days ago.

EXT. BILLABONG -- DAY

As Barbara and Emily come down to the shore we see that the billabong is, indeed, exactly as it was.

EMILY

Even the ducks are back.

BARBARA

Well, everybody needs a place to live.

EMILY

I thought they might move away. Like us.

(wistful, sad)

Like the bunyip.

BARBARA

(uncomfortably)

Are you sure he's gone?

EMILY

Yes. When the rain came down, he was able to get back to his family. He knew we were moving away and we wouldn't need him any more. Wouldn't you do anything to get back to your family?

BARBARA

Yes. I guess you would.

Barbara puts her arm around Emily's shoulder and gives her a squeeze. They share a moment. Then Emily spies something.

EMILY

Look!

She moves to a nearby rock and picks up a billabong bouquet, tied with a reed just the way Dad used to do it. Barbara comes over and Emily offers it up.

BARBARA

(smiling)

Thank you. You didn't need to do this.

EMILY

I didn't.

BARBARA

A billabong bouquet just like your father used to make them? Come on, Emily.

EMILY

(serious)

Mum. I didn't.

Barbara weighs Emily's words, trying to decide whether or not to believe her. She kneels.

BARBARA

Emily, in the rain that night, anything could have...

EMILY

If it had been Mr Jenkins or anyone else, they wouldn't have taken him away. They would have called the police from our phone.

BARBARA

There might have been two of them.

EMILY

Then why wouldn't the other man have rescued him when he fell in the water?

Barbara doesn't know what to say.

BARBARA

(indicating bouquet)

So we have the bunyip to thank for this, as well?

EMILY

Who else is there?

Barbara sighs and nods, not having a better answer.

BARBARA  
(straightening)  
Come on, sweetie. We'd better get  
going if we're going to be there  
before the movers.

EMILY  
Moving house isn't so bad.

Barbara and Emily walk away.

BARBARA (O.S.)  
You're only saying that because  
you're missing a day of school.

EMILY (O.S.)  
You could take me to gymnastics  
class, if you like.

BARBARA  
(laughing)  
We'll see.

On Barbara's last line, reveal Dad's broken spectacles  
lying on the ground just on the other side of the rock  
where the bouquet was found.

FADE OUT: