

# Crossing the Line

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The kookaburras had already begun their mocking dawn chorus and the bities were gathering above his head as he strode past the dunny and down the backyard with shorts flapping about his knees. The khaki was work-stained and he carried a shovel that was half its original length, the cheap metal having been worn down by relentless use.

Buninyong Creek lay at the bottom of the yard. It was a small stream, no wider than a joey's leap, except for the part that ran the width of his and Bluey's property. Bluey owned the plot on the other side of the creek and the bright red soil and gravel banks of both properties had been dug away, creating crude beaches on both sides. The two mates, on the strength of a handshake, had agreed that neither would cross the invisible line that ran down the middle of the slow-running stream.

That particular handshake had taken place la long time ago when Curly, sprawled in a deckchair opposite Bluey, who was similarly stretched out, spotted something glint on the bottom of the creek. He stood up and bent over the edge of the bank to get a closer look. As he stared into the crystal-clear water there was a movement in his peripheral vision and without looking up he caught the tinnie Bluey had tossed over the creek and cracked the tab.

‘Whad’yer see, Curly?’ Bluey asked, his curiosity stirred by his friend’s odd behaviour.

‘Dunno, mate, but I’m gonna take a squizz,’ Curly replied and clambered down the steep bank into the water. He bent over and fumbled in the gravel until, giving a small grunt of satisfaction, he stood up holding what appeared to be a small irregular stone between a thumb and forefinger. It glinted again in the fading light to reveal its true worth.

Both men were instantly excited by the find but not surprised, for Buninyong, a suburb of Ballarat, had been part of the great 1851 gold rush. That was when five men recovered one hundred and thirty six ounces of gold in a single day. This had started a stampede to the aboriginal place called ‘*man lying on his back with his knees raised*’ and within seven months two point four million pounds had been panned and a small town had shot up from nothing but scrubland. However, it was not many years before the gold ran out, the prospectors known as fossickers left and the remaining people adopted more pastoral activities.

Curly and Bluey had learnt of the town’s origin in primary school and so early next morning when the owner of the local hardware store arrived to unlock his business and found the two friends impatiently waiting on his verandah; they had both decided to fossick for gold in their own back yards.

Two shovels and two large sieves, the heavy-duty type used for gardening, were rung up on the till and the pair vanished in a cloud of exhaust fumes.

Six months later neither of the men had found anything that resembled early retirement. The first nugget still lay in the kitchen drawer waiting for the rest that had been optimistically anticipated by Curly; it was for this reason that he gave up his job at the garage. Bluey, noticing the hours his friend was putting into fossicking, decided to do the same. He even showed Curly how to use the hubcaps from his beat-up volksie beetle to pan the finer sediment.

The bank of the creek was slowly dug away and each day the men tramped red soil into their homes to be greeted with unprintable outbursts from their mop-wielding wives.

Nevertheless, despite the slight cooling of marital relations and the shortening of their backyards by ten feet, they never gave up hope that the original quarter-ounce nugget would soon multiply to make them millions. They worked and waited, waited and worked until one particular March morning there was a strange turn of events.

Notwithstanding the early hour, Bluey had been already standing calf-deep in the night-chilled water, oblivious to the dunny budgies, industriously shovelling the riverbed into his sieve when he heard the big guy approaching. ‘G’day, mate, making an early go of it yer self?’

Curly jumped down onto his beach and kicked his boots off. ‘Too right, mate. Gotta shift a lot t’day. There was a corker of a storm up Mount Doran way last night. Coulda brought down a lotta good sediment.’

Bluey agreed as he tossed more gravel into the sieve lying on the water’s edge. As he began sluicing the sieve in the creek he heard Evie, his wife, calling from the house. ‘Sounds like me Sheila is burnin’ me tucker again,’ he grumbled as he tossed the sieve onto the beach.

Curly gave a brief wave and watched his mate disappear into the tall forest of sunflowers that occupied most of Bluey’s property. He soon heard his steel studs stamping on the porch. Evie had never allowed him to walk straight into the house since he began fossicking and Bluey was made to clean his boots to her satisfaction before he was permitted to enter.

Using his shovel Curly bent to scoop up some gravel and out of the corner of his eye he noticed something in Bluey’s sieve. It was partially covered by small stones and fine sediment but the little bit showing was clearly the right colour. He walked to the centre of the creek to get a closer look and was teased by the glint of gold.

Curly looked up at the barricade of flowers closely rivalling the golden colour and for a brief moment he recalled the agreement never to enter each

other's territory. Nevertheless, his eyes were relentlessly drawn back to the sieve and he felt a strong urge to cross the line to see exactly what his mate had found.

Bluey's house was eighty yards away and, knowing the size of his usual breakfast, Curly knew he had time to cross the creek for a quick squizz. After one guilty look in the direction of the house he waded across the forbidden half of the creek followed by a black cloud of dunny budgies and picked up the sieve.

Using a grubby forefinger he poked at the sediment and uncovered the biggest nugget of gold he had ever seen in his life. Curly gasped as he reverently picked it up and estimated the weight to be around six ounces. At the current market price it could fetch ten thousand dollars. With great care Curly laid the sieve on the beach making sure it was in the original position before tucking the nugget into the pocket of his shorts.

The wade back across the creek seemed to take much longer. It was as if a strange force was trying to drag him back, the same dark guilt he had felt when he first crossed the line. The laughing kookaburras seemed no longer to mock but to accuse him of betraying a solemn trust. He put his hand into the pocket and felt the irregular lump that was now weighing heavily on his conscience.

With a deep sigh Curly turned and without a care for his boots he waded into the middle and tossed the nugget back into Bluey's sieve. It bounced and rolled to a stop on top of the sediment where it blatantly flaunted its worth.

Curly had just recrossed the creek and dropped disconsolately into his deckchair when he heard a shout and Bluey rushed out of the sunflowers and ran towards him wide-eyed with shock.

'That shout, mate. It weren't me tucker on the table, it was Evie on the floor,' he shouted. 'She'd 'ad an 'art attack and I've just seen her orf in the ambo.'

'Crikey, Bluey, I heard a siren. Was that for Evie, will your old cook be jake?' Curly called out as he rushed across the creek and put a hand on his mate's shoulder.

‘Strewth, I don’t know, Curly. They said she’ll be right but it’s goin’ ter cost me big bikkies in medical bills.’

‘Well, no worries there, mate,’ Curly said with a mischievous grin as he pointed down at the sieve.

Bluey’s eyes opened wide on seeing the nugget. ‘You beaut, I’m sure that weren’t there when I went up to the house,’ he exclaimed. He knelt to pick it up. ‘Strewth, it’s gotta be about four ounces.’

‘Closer to six, mate, and that’ll definitely take care of the quacks.’

‘Wait a tick, it’s yours innit?’ Bluey shouted accusingly, rounding on Curly. ‘You found it and dropped it there after I’d told yer about me Evie.’

‘Nah, it was in yer sieve all the time, Bluey.’

‘Yer got kangaroos loose in the top paddock, mate.’

‘London to a brick it was there, fair dinkum.’

‘Bloody liar, yer couldn’t see it from your side of the creek. Look, ta very much mate, but I don’t take charity.’ He turned and hurried away. ‘Evie and I’ll get by,’ he shouted and threw the nugget across the creek forcing the big man to catch it before it fell into the water.

‘Look!’ Curly roared in frustration. ‘I crossed the creek to squizz in yer sieve and found it there.’

Bluey stopped and looked back in disbelief. ‘Sorry, mate,’ he shouted. ‘I don’t believe you. In all the time we’ve been mates you’ve never betrayed any of the promises we made to each other.’

‘Sorry, but I did, cobber.’

‘Like hell yer did, yer brown-eyed mullet.’

The two men continued this argument every day for the following three weeks until Evie was fully recovered and came home. There was a week’s truce to allow Curly to care for his cook and then they went back to panning the creek every day. Over the following year they found considerable amounts of gold, more than enough to pay all the medical expenses and to retire full time to their striped canvas deckchairs.

To this day, and every day, the same original six-ounce nugget has been thrown back and forth across Buninyong Creek.

‘I did cross the line, fair dinkum,’ Curly shouts.

‘Nah, yer didn’t, yer bloody drongo,’ comes the reply.

‘Look, I’m about to spit me dummy, yer bastard.’

‘That’s ’cos you’re whacker.’

This verbal duel occurs between tucker time and sundown when the kookaburras are also at their most raucous and if you don’t believe me, take a trip to Forest Street. There you’ll find two oldies lounging in deckchairs, facing each other across a creek. They’ll both be wearing their lucky singlets, khaki shorts and boots covered in red-earth and giving Aussie salutes to the bities hovering above their heads.

A veritable sea of dead tinnies will be surrounding them.

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