

Author's note:

This short story is based on true events and is set in the Brisbane suburb of The Gap in January 1974. Events are modified, invented and certainly experiences of many wet summers are brought together into one eventful day. All these years later, with maturity and a better appreciation of danger, it is a little shocking to recollect some of the things we did on those rainy days.

Fortunately, I survived, as did my childhood friends, and certainly there was some luck involved, but we did have a lot of experience in that stretch of water, and with our twelve-year-old minds were capable of some risk assessment.

Mind you I wouldn't let my kids near that water.

Luke van Wyk

RAPIDS

By Luke van Wyk

I

Mike put the phone down. Everything was set for tomorrow. In the morning, he would ride over to Fitzy's place where they would meet up with Bass and then off to fight the rapids. The boys always called it "fighting the rapids" when the local creek was swollen with rain. It seemed to happen pretty regularly in Enoggera Creek, which provided considerable entertainment for the boys, particularly during this summer. The popular theory was that the Enoggera reservoir was near capacity, so the authorities were always looking to release water into the creek. The level of the creek seemed to rise and fall significantly with short periods of rain, but this time it was different. It rained and rained for days on end and Brisbane was looking at its worst flooding in generations.

Mike smiled to himself. This was the only good thing about all this rain. It was really good fun when the creek was up. Last time he and Bass got hold of some old inner tubes from the local service station and spent hours going up and down the stretch of creek running down near Riaween Street. You could get a fast ride on the tube for about four hundred yards and finish up slowing down through Proctor's Channel. That was always a good spot for a change of activity, with the obligatory rope hanging down from a sturdy tree on the creek edge.

"Michael, please come and set the table," called his mother. Mike grumbled to himself and thought of reminding his mother that Julie had missed her turn last night because of that boring old dance concert, but he restrained himself deciding that antagonizing his mother would only land him with extra chores. He really didn't want to risk his free time tomorrow. Mike walked into the dining room,

where Julie greeted him with a cheeky grin, "I tried wiggling my nose like Samantha, but it just wouldn't work; so sorry, Mike." "Ha Ha, you're a big help Jules," muttered Mike as he reached for the plates.

"Looks like Waterworks Road will be cut-off at St John's Wood if the water gets much higher," said Mike's Dad as he scraped the last bit of gravy from his plate.

"How will you get to work, Dad?" asked Julie.

"Well, I can still go via Settlement Road. It's a safe bet that way won't get flooded, but I am concerned about the city itself," explained Peter to them all. "Did you know that those buildings down toward the gardens are all likely to get flooded, at least to the ground floor?"

"But you're okay, aren't you Dad? Is it the seventeenth floor, you are on?" asked Mike. "Yes, mate I'm okay, but a lot of people and businesses are going to suffer, and not just in the city. Those suburbs like out at Jindalee, and over at Fairfield and Yeronga have already been inundated. Some people have nothing left, but the clothes they are standing in."

"Maybe you shouldn't go in tomorrow, Peter. They said on the Weather the rain is expected to continue. It is only going to get worse," said Chris as she reached for the plates and gathered the cutlery.

Mike groaned to himself, thinking – Oh No! If Dad stays home tomorrow, there is no way I'm going to be able to get over to Fitzys'.

"No, Chris," Peter replied, "I'm meeting some clients who are coming down from Hervey Bay, so no choice really."

"Hervey Bay!" Chris sighed, "We had some lovely holidays there. Do you remember? We should go there again."

"No!" Mike and Julie cried out in unison, "There's no waves, Mum!"

Peter and Chris looked at each other and smiled. Without words they both remembered it was when Michael was eight and Julie was nearly six, they had been there last. That was nearly five years ago. Now Michael was just about to start high school with the summer holidays coming to an end, a very wet end.

The next morning Mike woke to a thoroughly miserable sky. There had been more heavy rain overnight, but now it was just threatening. He got himself dressed and headed into the kitchen for some breakfast.

"Good morning, handsome," said Chris, "Would you like some toast?"

"Okay, thanks that would be great, Mum," answered Mike with a wry smile.

Mike was slightly built and considered himself to be of average height and looks, but hardly handsome. As Mike drained a tall glass of milk, he pondered over the only real obstacle to the day's adventure and decided it was time to broach the subject.

"Mum," he hesitated, "ah...Mum."

His mother did not appear to notice his dilemma, which was probably just as well for Mike, as she would not be happy if she knew what he had planned this day.

“Mum, this morning, I promised Fitzy I’d come over and help him fix his bike. Would it be okay if I head off soon?”

“Yes, I guess so, but I don’t know why you would want to go out on a day like this.”

Chris looked at him with a disapproving scowl.

“Just be careful on that bike. Will you wear your raincoat?”

“No, Mum it’s okay. Look if I get wet, Fitzy will lend me some of his clothes. Okay, I’m off then.”

“Hold on; just go and clean up first and comb your hair please. If you must wear it that long, try and keep it tidy,” scoffed Chris.

“I’ll probably see you over there anyway. I’m taking Julie over to Anne Taylor’s place and will stop for some coffee with her Mum. The Taylors are just next door to the Fitzgeralds aren’t they?”

“Oh! ... um ... yes, that’s right. Okay then, see you later, Mum,” Mike said with alarm bells ringing in his head.

Brad Fitzgerald lived down on Riaween Street, which runs pretty much parallel to the course of Enoggera Creek. This is a couple of miles downstream from the reservoir and is on the stretch of creek after the bridge on School Road and following the big hairpin on Illowra Street.

Brad and Mike had been through primary school together and were to start high school in only a few days' time. They had been firm friends and had countless adventures around The Gap, even riding out to Cedar Creek Falls out past Samford, but that is another story. Brad was on his bike circling in the driveway waiting for Mike. This was going to be awesome today. The creek was raging. After last night, when it really bucketed down, the water had come right up into the street. No-one had ever seen that happen here before.

The level had dropped down from overnight, which was just as well. Brad thought it might have been a bit too dangerous if the water was still up that high and Mike would probably agree, but maybe not Bass, he was a bit crazy sometimes. Brad looked up the street for Mike, but he still wasn't in sight. Next minute he heard a noise, looked around and there was Mike riding up.

"Hey, did you come by School Road?" asked Brad.

"Yeah, I wanted to check out the creek at the bridge, and I came around the back way. I stopped at Proctor's Channel and had a look too," explained Mike.

"I've been down there too; it looks challenging, doesn't it?" Brad offered with a big grin.

"How close is the water to the bridge?"

"It is right up just under it, and it was definitely way over it last night. The side of it is all covered with debris," said Mike with awe.

"Okay, let's get going. Bass wants us to come up to his place first."

Mike hesitated and said, "Small problem; my Mum is bringing Julie over to the Taylor's place and she's expecting me to be here helping you fix your bike."

"Good one, Mike," Brad remarked sarcastically, "Can't you just tell her that we had to go to Bass' place for parts or something."

"Yeah, okay," Mike replied, thinking he was heading for some trouble here.

The boys rode onto Bass' front yard to be confronted with the biggest inner tube they had ever seen. It was about five feet in diameter and lying flat, stood at least eighteen inches high. Bass stood by it triumphantly, "What do ya think, fellas?" he exclaimed.

Phillip Bassingthwaite was no ordinary boy. His family had moved here two years earlier from some place out in Western Queensland, so it was a huge cultural challenge for young Phillip to find his feet. First thing he did was make it clear to

all, that he preferred to be called Bass and never Phillip, unless you were an oldie or looking for a fat lip.

Mike Rowell was one of the first to come up to him at school, and together with Brad Fitzgerald, the three of them formed a bonding friendship. In a lot of ways, Mike and Brad looked up to their country friend. He was the oldest and tallest of the three of them and he always seemed to know useful things. Like when the boys were hiking up to Mt Coo-tha a few months ago and came across that huge snake. It was Bass who took charge and expertly led the boys around it. He knew what type of snake it was and told them how big they grew, what they ate and that it was poisonous. Yikes! He was a good friend to have. A friend you could use on a day like this.

“Where did you get that?” the boys cried in unison.

Bass smiled smugly at them. “My brother brought it back after his last trip to Augathella. I reckon the three of us will fit on this; no worries.”

The three boys rolled the big old tube along the road. They had decided that the School Road bridge was a good place to start. You usually couldn’t swim there because it was just a trickle but today was different. Bass tossed the tube in the creek just after the bridge where there was a little backwash near some partly submerged blade grass. The boys jumped on and the tube sat up nice and high above the water. There were grins all round as they thrust the hands in the water and paddled out into the current.

The boys, especially Brad who had lived on Riaweenya Street beside the creek all of his life, knew this creek very well. They knew the normally shallow bits, the deep bits, where the bottom was stony, where it was sandy, where there were sunken logs, when there was a bend coming up and what parts would be rough. They set off with confidence that their experience would serve them well. Not one of them had any reservations about this; there was no sense of real danger, just a challenge.

The current picked them up easily and set them off down the creek at a rapid pace. They tended to spin round and round a bit, but a bit of paddling kept that under control. They approached the first bend in the creek at the hairpin next to Illowra Street. Mike looked up in wonder at the evidence of the height the water had reached the previous night. “Look guys, look how high it was!” exclaimed Mike.

“Jeez, it would have been travellin’!” remarked Bass and then yelled, “Whoa! Watch out, we’re headed into those branches … paddle!”

Brad and Mike leaned down and paddled furiously with their hands, as Bass reached out and pushed them away from a collision.

“Phew! That was close, fellas. Last thing we want is a hole in this thing,” said Bass, “Make sure we keep an eye out. We’re really moving … this is great!”

The water picked up pace in this part of the creek and the boys, and their tube careered along at breathtaking speed. They rounded the next bend and began

the stretch down to Proctor's Channel. Mike looked ahead and noticed a fallen tree as the tube spun around again and put his back to it. "Watch out! There is a tree up ahead." In that brief instant, Mike watched as both Fitzy and Bass fixed their eyes ahead. He saw their eyes widen in alarm.

The next few moments were like slow motion. The tube turned further so that Mike was now facing sideways to the flow of the creek. The boys were obviously sitting in a triangular formation, with Fitzy now with back nearly to the upcoming tree and Bass looking nearly straight at it.

Bass cried out, "jump guys, you need to jump onto the tree!"

Now this tree was lying right across the creek, and this tree was not lying there the last time any of these boys had ventured down this creek. It was a solid size, at least two feet in diameter, and it was sitting half in the water and half above.

Without hesitation, Bass braced himself and leapt up off the tube and onto the tree. Mike wasn't thinking that quickly and hadn't reasoned that was the best option. He was thinking that the tube would just bounce into the tree and then he could just climb off. Fitzy was in an awkward position. He was trying to turn himself, so he could get into a position to jump, but it all happened too quickly for him to act. He heard the bellowed warning from Bass and started to move as Bass moved past him lunging onto the tree.

The tube bounced into the tree trunk as Mike expected, but then it did something he didn't count on at all. The tube started sliding up onto the tree and with the weight of him and Fitzy on the lower side of the tube, it stood on its side, and they simply fell off into the rushing water. Mike was amazed at the power of the water. He was only in the water for a moment before he was literally sucked down under the tree trunk with violent force. Mike's immediate thought was that this was not a good position and that he would be a lot better off if he were on the upper side of this log. He reached and clutched the trunk as he was sucked under and did manage to get a firm grip on a short branch in the underside of the water. "Okay, so all I need to do now," Mike thought to himself, "... is just pull myself back up and onto that tree. Here goes..."

Mike heaved with all of his might and soon realized he wasn't going to move an inch. Mike held the branch and thought quickly. The reason he didn't let go was because there was quite possibly a heap of debris in which to get tangled. Mike imagined a mess of branches and getting jammed in the middle of it. "Oh well," Mike thought to himself, "... can't stay here any longer. No choice." He let go.

After what probably had been only thirty seconds, Mike's head broke the surface, and he rasped in a deep lungful of air with relief. The surprising thing was that at the same moment he did that, Fitzy also broke the surface. Mike looked at his friend and immediately noticed his face was very red and thought how his own face probably looked exactly the same.

"Fellas, hey grab this," Bass yelled as he held out an old branch. However, the current was too strong; the boys were swept along but quickly swam over to the

bank further downstream. Bass walked across the tree trunk, carrying the tube awkwardly under his arm, and hurried down to his friends.

“Sorry fellas, are you okay?” said Bass.

“Don’t be sorry; I should have jumped too. I just didn’t think it would tip like that,” said Mike.

“Yeah, we’re okay, Bass,” agreed Fitzy.

“I waited forever for you guys to come up. Were you stuck or something?” asked Bass.

Mike explained what was going through his mind. Fitzy laughed and shook his head.

“You know that is exactly what I was thinking too.”

“We were probably really lucky just now,” said Mike.

The boys all silently agreed.

Fitzy stood up and began rolling the tube back into the water.

“We just got to be more careful. Next time, if we see trouble, jump and swim.”

“Yeah!” agreed Mike and Bass enthusiastically as they joined Fitzy on the edge of the creek. The boys clambered back on the tube and set off again.

III

It was a relatively smooth run down to Proctor's Channel. Here the creek widened considerably, more so than normal, flowing well over the banks on both sides.

"Michael!" shrilled Julie, "Mum is going to kill you!"

Mike groaned as he turned and saw his sister standing by the rope tree with her friend Anne Taylor. They were both pointing and laughing as the boys brought the tube over to the edge of the water.

"Bradley Fitzgerald," Anne pronounced as she wagged her finger at him.

"Aw, c'mon girls, give us a break," said Fitzy, "Does your mother know you are down here, Anne?"

"Well, no, we umm... we said we were going over to Michelle's place."

"Did my Mum ask where I was?" asked Mike.

"Yes, Mike," said Anne, "But I think I covered for you. I said that you had both gone over to see Philip."

"Oh, no, she's going to check on us. I just know it."

"She'll be right, mate," joked Bass as he jabbed Mike in the ribs, "C'mon let's get going. You girls better get off home, eh."

"Philip," Julie taunted, knowing how he hated that, "I think you'd better let us have a go on the tube."

"What!" the boys all cried. Anne looked at her like she was crazy.

"I don't think so," Bass said pointedly.

"Well, if you don't....," threatened Julie with menace.

"Jules, it's not safe," said Mike.

"Safe enough for you, Michael," Julie said raising one eyebrow, just like he had seen her practising in the mirror.

"Okay, look," compromised Bass, "How about just down this stretch here, but you've got to keep it close on this side."

"Anne?" asked Julie.

"No way!" Anne replied, "Julie, you shouldn't do this, it's running too quick."

"Well, I'm going. It will be fun," shouted Julie defiantly.

"I'm going with you," said Mike.

Julie went to take the tube from Bass but found it heavy and awkward.

Mike grabbed the tube and began walking back upstream. They all turned and followed him and after a few hundred yards, Mike dumped it on the edge of the

water at a suitable spot. Julie clambered onto the tube and Mike waded in and climbed on with her. The current soon took hold of them and they swept downstream. The others ran alongside the flooded creek and barely kept pace with them. Bass looked ahead and saw there were some other kids up at the rope tree. As they got closer, he saw it was Robby Stott and his cronies.

“Great!” Bass thought to himself, “just what we need. This is going to be trouble.”

Robby Stott was just climbing out of the creek, one of his mates was floating downstream and now swimming for the bank and another was up in the rope tree about to jump. Stott spied the tube coming and yelled, “Hey look fellas, here comes Rowell and his sister! Let’s bomb ‘em.”

Stott immediately ran to the tree and began to climb it. Bass, Fitzy, and Anne arrived at that moment. Bass yelled to Stott and the others, “Leave ‘em alone, you morons!”

Stott turned and looked down at Bass with a sneer, “Sure, Phil-eeep, whatever you reckon.”

Bass made a guttural roar and began to scale the tree. Stott had been riding Bass for a while now, but so far had refrained from antagonising him with the well-known issue of his name.

Stott looked back and saw Bass coming. At this moment, the tube with Mike and Julie on board was just about passing below the tree. Stott yelled to his stupid mate, Dave Fuller, “Go on Full, bombs away.... now!”

Dave, being of little mind and dim loyalty, leapt from the tree. He managed to plant both feet firmly on the tube when he landed. Direct hit! Naturally, the sudden impact drove it deep into the water and flipped it over as it re-surfaced.

The next moments were a flurry of activity. Anne screamed from the edge of the creek. Fitzy ran to the water’s edge and dived in. Stott and his mates roared with laughter. Bass reached the branch on which Stott was still standing. Dave Fuller was laughing and sneering as he swam toward the edge. Mike broke the surface.

Mike looked wildly around and screamed abuse, but then yelled, “Julie, where’s Julie?”

Everyone was silent for a moment. The only noise was the constant roar of the water up ahead where a patch of rapids ran down a grade toward the Illowra Street bridge.

“Julie,” Mike screamed again.

Bass yelled from the tree, “Down there, she’s near the tube.”

The tube had been propelled over the surface of the water to the other side of the creek and was now headed toward the left fork of the rapids up ahead.

Julie had been flung up in the air with the upturning of the tube and, on landing, had sunk deep in the fast-running water. However, all those early mornings at swimming training had paid off and she was able to reach the surface with

confidence fuelled by anger. When she did surface, she was surprised to see the tube was within reach. She took a hold and hauled herself up. She heard Mike and then the others yelling out to her. Julie tried to get herself in a position to turn and wave to them but was having difficulty turning over and getting into an upright position. This had taken more out of her than she thought. The tube continued on toward the left fork rapids.

Bass was relieved to see she was okay but instantly alarmed to realize she was headed down the left fork. He rapidly summed up the situation. Mike was already swimming toward her. He wouldn't catch up with the tube, and he would have to swim for the bank before he got much further or else he was going to get hurt. Fitzy was now in a wrestle with Dave Fuller, which was dangerous in itself. Bass looked to Stott and said, "You'll pay for this, Stott," and with that, he jumped into the creek and swam to the edge.

Bass climbed out and yelled to Fitzy, "C'mon mate, we have to help Julie."

Fitzy broke free from his grapple with Dave Fuller and swam and staggered through the water and back on land. He left Fuller nursing a bloody nose as he too made his way back. Anne ran up to Fitzy, and they raced after Bass down along the water's edge.

IV

Mike swam as hard as he could to try and catch up to Julie, but if anything, she was getting further away, not closer. This was not a good position for him. At least Julie was up out of the water, but he was in it, it was moving fast and he knew there were various logs, branches, and boulders along this way. He decided to make for the small island between the two forks, figuring that he may be able to get out and run to catch up to her.

Julie was still lying on her stomach spreadeagled over the tube as it entered the first part of the rapids. There was a short steep decline where the water poured down over a sunken log. The log was normally above the surface and used to cross the creek at this normally low point. She sailed over it spinning around as the tube lurched around a tree in her path. Julie let out a scream and clutched the tube as it bounded on.

Bass had run down as fast as he could to just before the end of the fork where the creek came back together. He charged into the water and was swept down with current but just managed to reach the end of the small island. This was a quiet spot in the turbulent creek. Bass climbed out and moved up through the debris alongside the left fork. He heard Julie scream but couldn't see her yet. That was odd he thought to himself. She should have come through by now.

Mike too had heard Julie's scream over the roar of the water, just losing sight of her as she went down over the crossing log. He was having trouble moving quickly as he had to climb over all manner of things that were deposited here. He climbed up on a small fallen tree, which was a mass of branches and barely held his weight. He could see Julie now, but the tube wasn't moving.

Julie's ride on the tube had come to a halt. She had moved past that tree and had ploughed straight into a rocky wall, bounced back, and was now temporarily marooned by her own hand on a submerged rocky outcrop. She had grabbed hold of it with one hand as it just broke the surface in the centre space of the tube. The water buffeted the tube and dragged against the rock. Julie put her other hand onto the rock as the tube moved and pressed Julie's hands against the rock. Julie had her forehead pressed into the top of the tube looking down at her hands clutching onto the rock with the tube bouncing up and down with the force of the water. She began to cry. She thought, "What am I going to do now? Where is Mike?" She sobbed and cried out for help.

Mike heard her cry and yelled as loud as he could that he was coming. He noticed the branches extended out into the fast-flowing water. Maybe he could use them to get to the other side. He lowered himself into the water holding tightly onto a branch and moved himself out into the current. The force of the water was incredible and immediately swept his body into a horizontal position, but he continued on reaching further along the branches and out into the middle of the stream. He went as far as he could and plunged off swimming hard to the opposite bank. It swept him down dragging his legs over some rocks, but he

managed to reach the bank. It was thick with lantana here, normally covered with all those bright colourful flowers that Julie used to collect when she was little. No flowers today, just masses of debris amongst it all. He crouched low and pushed his way through. There was enough room, but, ouch, he was getting scratched. He persevered and broke through it, coming out adjacent to the rock wall and looking down on Julie.

“Julie,” he yelled.

She turned her head sideways calling up to him, “Help me please, Mike.”

Mike could hear her sobbing and without a thought, he leapt from the rock wall and into the creek. He surfaced quickly and was thrust along violently. He reached out and took hold of the tube. The impact forced Julie’s aching hands off the rock and the tube began its journey again.

Mike pulled himself onto the tube lying alongside Julie.

“Jules, are you okay?” Mike asked. “Are you hurt?”

“I’m not hurt,” Julie sobbed. “Mike, I’m scared.”

Mike looked up to see what was coming next. The part of the creek up ahead was normally a trickle through several large boulders. Today, it was an undulating sea of waves with froth and all. There was no way out of this.

“Julie, just hold on as tight as you can. We’ll be out of this soon.”

Bass saw them coming now. He was helpless. He wasn’t close enough to reach them and to jump in himself would likely see him drown or thrashed against the rocks. Their best chance was to stay on the tube. As long as it didn’t flip, they should be okay.

The tube approached the first water-covered boulder. Mike and Julie were spread out over the tube as it moved up the face of the water. They reached its peak and plunged down the other side. Immediately they were onto another, rising up and plunging down again. Julie screamed as she slid sideways toward the edge of the tube, but Mike held her fast. They were nearly through it, just one more rise. This time the tube sailed up the face and became airborne before it plunged down again. The impact flung both Mike and Julie off the tube and into the water, but the worst was over. They both surfaced, but they needed to get to land.

Bass dived in and swam to Julie. He grabbed her by one arm; Mike had her other arm and together they all continued downstream slowly making their way over to the water’s edge. Fitzy and Anne ran along beside the creek and, as the sodden trio clambered out, went over, and lent a hand. They climbed the hill a little and Julie collapsed onto the grass in exhaustion. Anne sat down with her and offered her what support she could. The others were quiet. There was only the sound of rushing water and of traffic from the nearby bridge.

“Hey, where’s the tube,” muttered Fitzy.

"On its' way to Ashgrove," offered Bass with resignation, "I saw it sail by after you guys went under."

"Well, that was fun," Mike said to no-one in particular.

The boys laughed. Julie struggled into an upright position, leaned over, and punched him in the shoulder.

"Ow, what was that for?" said Mike.

Bass leaned over and punched him too and Fitzy slapped him with a friendly pat on the top of his head.

"Hey!" Mike complained.

They all laughed this time.

Anne asked how Julie was feeling, to which she replied that she felt really tired and then went very quiet and began to cry quietly.

"C'mon, Jules, let's go up to Anne's place and we'll call Mum," said Mike.

"No, Mike, I'll be okay in a minute, really," said Julie. "What are we going to tell Mum?"

"It might be better if she doesn't know all the details," offered Mike.

V

Mike wheeled his bike along as he and Julie walked together. He couldn't ride it anyway because his leg was really sore from when he scraped it on the rocks, not to mention the multiple scratches across his arms and chest from the lantana. They arrived home reasonably confident that their escapade would not be revealed and that they would enjoy the dual benefits of avoiding getting into trouble, as well as not upsetting their parents. They had all decided that a hose fight at Bass' place would best explain their wet clothes, then a game of cricket near that lantana patch out the back of his place, would explain his injuries pretty well. The scraped leg would have to go down as caused by a prang on his bike.

They walked inside through the kitchen as the phone was ringing. Chris was there with her back to them as she answered the phone. She half-turned to wave to them as they walked through, looking quizzically at their wet bedraggled appearance. She frowned and focused back to the telephone.

Mike and Julie quickly went and changed clothes. Chris called out, "Michael, Julie come down here please ... right now!"

Mike gulped to himself and thought, "She does not sound happy. But how could she know anything. Maybe Anne said something to her Mum?"

He reluctantly headed down to the kitchen. Julie was already there, standing staring at her feet.

"Michael," Chris hesitated, "what have you done to your leg and those scratches ... Look, I've just been speaking with Mary Fuller. Apparently, Bradley has broken Dave's nose, while fighting in the creek, no less. What has been going on?"

"Dave Fuller deserves everything he gets!" blurted Julie.

Chris looked from one to the other.

"You haven't both been in that creek today, I hope," said Chris.

Mike and Julie began their long sorry confession.

So much for subterfuge.

