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Visiting Aunty Vera

While everyone else in Australia went to the beach at the weekend, our family had to go inland to visit Aunty Vera and Uncle Bill and our three cousins.

Uncle Bill was the policeman in the town of Esk up in the bush where the Brisbane River started. So we got to stay at the police station which had its own jail and courthouse in the big backyard.

Uncle Bill - who rode a black motorbike with a sidecar - was pretty tough, so there were often a couple of jailbirds in his little two-room prison. But we could play in the courthouse or in the car accident wrecks that were kept in his yard. There was always at least one Holden, and when you got inside you could see where the head of the front seat passenger had dented the steel dashboard.

Olive loved going to Esk to see Aunty Vera because she was her sister. But Fred didn't seem to like it very much. "Now duck," he would say, "it's only a tin-pot one-pub town. "

Whenever Olive decided we should drive the 63 miles to Uncle Bill's, Fred would say: "I've got to saddle up. The Missus wants to play the Duchess in Esk." He hated leaving his shop, even for one day.

Before he could go he would have to clean up and put out the three crates of milk bottle empties. All the money out of the till went into his white Commonwealth Bank canvas bag - the one with the Australian coat of arms stamped on the side. Fred would put this bag into his blue basket along with the unsold pies and some rainbow cake saying: "We can't go empty-handed."

Even though we were invited for lunch it was always three o'clock in the afternoon by the time our Zephyr Six crossed the railway line which separated the Police Station from the rest of town.

Everything at Uncle Bill's was different from Annerley Junction. The house, the police station, the courthouse, the jail, and the three dunnies out the back - were all painted the same cacky yellow colour from the black wooden stumps up. And every building, except of course the dunnies, had a couple of corrugated-iron rainwater tanks up on tank stands outside. This was the only water and we all hated it because it didn't taste like Brisbane water. Plus it was hard to get because you had to find the special steel handle before you could turn the taps on.

Aunty Vera would usually greet us by saying: "It's the last minute Lunns. I'll boil the billy and get out the pumpkin pie."

Our three cousins had lived at our place years before when Uncle Bill was a policeman in Brisbane, so the seven of us quickly ganged up on the grown-ups when Olive announced: "Children should be seen and not heard" and locked us out of the kitchen.

While the grown-ups sat in the police station kitchen and yabbered away, we kids took some crib and went exploring. There was only one main street in Esk but it was so wide that someone had planted trees right down the middle. They didn't have any trams or buses or Safety Zones, and only one picture theatre.

Esk was supposed to be at the bottom of an old volcano and, according to Uncle Bill, the mountains around were once the sides of the volcano. We climbed these mountains and looked down and counted the number of roofs - Jackie reached three hundred and eighty-six once. We would wave to the grown-ups from the top, and when we got back Fred would say: "By the look of you animals, you've covered more ground than the early explorers."

When the grown-ups finally emerged from the kitchen it was usually to get another bottle of Uncle Bill's special home brew that he kept in one of the three dunnies. This was a dangerous job because the brown beer bottles kept exploding all the time. You could hear one go off every now and then.

Uncle Bill and Fred would arm themselves with a chaff bag each. Then, with the chaff bag held out in front for protection and Fred in his white pith helmet carrying a saucepan - they would creep up to the dunny door from the side as we watched from a safe distance with Olive and Aunty Vera cackling themselves laughing.

Every now and then a bottle would explode just as they reached the dunny door - and Fred and Uncle Bill would both leap backwards.

"It's like war," Fred would say.

Because the bottles were like bombs, as soon as he got one out Uncle Bill would rip the top off and Fred would try to catch the brew in the aluminium saucepan as it frothed out. Then it was back to the kitchen where the adults got stuck into the ginger beer, while we played judges and convicts in the courthouse.

Esk only had pictures on a Saturday night so the whole town would be there - except Uncle Bill who had to watch out for criminals and bikies.

It was after the pictures that Esk started to get a bit scary.

Aunty Vera would make up beds for us in the lounge room on ambulance stretchers with poles sticking out each end. When the lights went out all I could hear was the home brew exploding and Uncle Bill's grandfather clock bonging every quarter of an hour. And when I went outside to go to the lavatory I would suddenly remember that our only next door neighbours were the cemetery, the hospital, the jail, and the morgue.

Sometimes as I crept past the jail house in the moonlight I could see red noses looking out from between the bars.

As if that wasn't bad enough, I also had to brave Uncle Bill's meat ants. These meat-eating ants were an inch long and black and gave a hell of a bite. They lived in the backyard in large mounds of dirt which glowed at night.

That's why every day we would attack these nests and try to wipe them out. They had just about taken over Uncle Bill's police station and had worn deep tracks across the yard from one nest to the other. Gay, who was the lightest tap-dancer in the family, used to run up on the mounds and stamp, shuffle, hop until all the ants came running out. But she had to clear off before they bit her. When she crushed them they gave off a funny smell.

Jackie even tipped petrol on their mounds and lit it with the box of safety matches that Aunty Vera kept to light her kerosene fridge. But nothing could ever get rid of those ants.

Once Jackie and me filled a peanut paste jar with them to take some home to Annerley to start our own ant colony. But halfway down the road Fred stopped the car and said we should let them free.

We refused, until Fred explained that if we took them any further they would never find their way home.

"The poor little blighters," Fred said as Jackie let them out of the jar by the side of the road. "They'll be as lonely as mopokes without their kinfolk."