

## **Holiday on Grandma's Farm**

My Dad slides the back of our car around the hairpin bend of the gravel road to Grandma's farm, as he always does. My Mum says, "Cliff," in alarm, as she always does. I laugh in excitement with my other siblings in the car, as we always do.

We drive up the gravel road to the intersection and left to Grandma's farm. We pull up at the gate leading to Grandma's house. My big brother jumps out of the car and pulls the wire loop up from the post holding the gate shut. He opens the gate and my Dad edges through. My brother closes the gate behind us and jumps back in the car. We are all excited as we drive the two hundred meters to Grandma's house. We all jump out of the car and through the galvanized iron personal access gate into the back yard of the house.

It is Sunday and our family has come to Grandma's for lunch. Dad opens the boot of the car and gets a suitcase out. I am staying for a one-week holiday. I feel so grown up.

Mum knocks at the back door and walks in. I walk inside reverently as do my brother and sisters. Grandma doesn't like noise. Dad is last. My two aunties greet us. One is busy cooking lunch. She still has her apron on. We all say hello. I always giggle inside when I see my aunties. One is fat like a pear and one is skinny like a pencil. The skinny one cooks all the food and the fat one does most of the manual labor on the farm. I feel it should be the other way around, which is why I am amused. My aunties look after Grandma as Grandpa died before Mum was married and they did not marry to look after Grandma and the farm.

Mum and Dad start talking to our aunties and the rest of us run into the backyard again. Grandma has a fence surrounding the house to keep the cows out. There are flowerpots on the porch at the back of the house with flowering red geraniums and more flowers in the garden as we run down the concrete path to the gate at the back. A building with the laundry and other things to explore is to the right but my focus is on the gate at the rear of the yard that leads into the outer farm. I go through the gate. There is a shed on my right where our aunties' car is housed, but I want to see the cow yard and the others go off to do their own exploring.

I'm in the big outer yard, the uneven dry dirt surface hardened by the sun and occasional rain, vehicle traffic and animal footprints stretches out before me. To my

far left is a makeshift gate to a paddock. The windmill is there that pumps water up from the Murray Basin. The wheel rotates like a giant pinwheel as the blades catch the occasional waft of wind. It provides water for the cows and sheep. In front of me and just to the left is the pigsty, but I'll get to that later. To the right is the cow yard where the cows are milked. There is a pepper tree along the way. I love how the branches overhang so it feels like I'm entering a mysterious cave when I go to the cow yard, its entrance dark and creepy as you enter and full of hidden treasure, waiting for a dragon to steal.

The cow yard is about twenty metres square. It has old rounded wooden railings on three sides. The other side has a lean to enclosure where the cow stalls are. There is a wooden door that provides entry to the front of the stalls. I go through the door and am now where the cows are fed as they are milked. They have individual mangers for the hay they are given as they wait their turn. The yard outside is uneven from the cow hooves making moulds in the dirt. There is also dung everywhere. I can smell the fresh dung. I have to remind myself to be careful I don't step in some.

My sister runs to the cow yard fence. "Lunch is ready," she says. She turns and runs back to the house. I start running too, pushing the cow shed door out of the way and rush across the yard and back into the house.

Grandma is sitting at the kitchen table now - we only use the dining room table for special occasions like Christmas - regally studying me as I plunge through the door like a runner winning the race. I am puffing from the exertion. She has a disapproving look on her face. "Good afternoon, John," she says.

"Good afternoon, Grandma," I reply as I take my seat at the table.

My skinny auntie has placed all the food on the table. We are having roast leg of lamb. It is on the roasting plate with a two tined fork and sharp knife. It is in front of Dad so he can carve it. There are also roast potatoes, cooked carrots, cauliflower with white sauce and beans, all in their individual serving dish. I see my favorite dish as well, grated cucumber floating in a sea of cream. I can smell the food and it is making my mouth salivate.

We are all seated and ready to eat. Grandma asks Dad to say grace which he does, "Heavenly Father bless this food, for life and health and every good. Amen." Dad carves the roast and distributes the meat to all. I'm biting at the bit to get my food, especially the cucumber. I eventually get my plate full and start eating. Everyone is quiet. Eventually Dad starts a conversation with Grandma about how she

is doing on the farm. We finish lunch and I'm allowed to escape with my siblings to explore the farm again like dogs let out of the kennel to chase sheep.

Time moves on and it's time for my family to go back home, leaving me behind to stay at Grandma's for a holiday. I feel scared as I see my family leave. I haven't been away from my family often. They file out of the house and into the car. I watch as they go, worry on my face. They all wave as the car starts down the driveway.

"It'll be all right," my fat auntie says, seeing the consternation on my face.

"We'll look after you."

"Can I go and explore?" I ask.

"Sure. Don't get into any mischief and be back for milking time."

"Great."

I speed out of the house and into the yard. I go behind the cow yard. There are many old and dilapidated contraptions rusting and deteriorating there. There is a couple of old wooden horse drawn drays falling to pieces, the horses long dead, discarded like no longer wanted toys. There are also old tractors rusting away, steel tires finally resting from their long rotation as they circumnavigated the paddocks in times past, ploughing the ground for yet another crop in the cycle of the yearly production schedule.

I continue my exploration of the yard as I walk further around the outside of the cowshed. A wire gate confronts me. It has barbed wire on top like a huge security fence saying 'Keep Out' with its menacing appearance. I am able to wriggle through the gap between two of the lower wires without getting my clothes caught. I walk to the henhouse, once I'm through the gate, and look inside. There is a chicken wire window in the front of the shed. The door is open but it is late afternoon, so all the hens and chickens are back inside the henhouse, settled in their spot on the roost for the night like obedient students in a classroom.

I keep walking and see the hay shed on my left as I continue my circuit. I explore the hay shed - a lean to really - and jump up onto the bails, seeing how high I can go. The hay is stacked to different heights from front to back. I ascend to the highest point and look down. I feel I am on top of the world standing on my throne dais looking down at my subjects below. I am a bit scared I might fall. I climb down again. I am starting to feel tired so I run back to the house for a glass of water and to rest.

“Time to milk the cows,” my skinny auntie says.

I follow my aunties to the cowshed to help them milk the cows that are already standing at the gate to be let in.

“Can you get some hay and put some in the mangers for us?” the fat auntie asks.

“Sure,” I say, racing off to the alcove where a couple of bales of hay are kept. It is replenished from the hay shed every day. There is no unstrung bale tonight so I get the scissors that is located between the corrugated iron and the wooden railing of the wall and cut the strings holding the bale tightly together. The first string pings as it is cut through like a guitar string snapping, as does the second. The ends of the bale collapse to the floor. I return the scissors to its location and pick up some hay. I go to the far end of the stalls and place some hay in the manger there. I look through the stall and see that my fat auntie has opened the gate to the cow yard and the cows are starting to file in one by one, marching in a loping gait, each going to their personal stall. They know which one is theirs. I rush back to the hay bale to get another armful and hasten back again.

My skinny auntie has come with me this time. She starts penning the cows in their stall so they can’t escape before they are milked. My fat auntie is making sure they are properly in their stalls. There are twelve cows to be milked. Most of the cows are of the Friesian breed but one is a Guernsey with its tan and white piebald pattern. That is my aunties’ favourite. It is called Buttercup. It is my pet cow too.

I finally complete giving hay to all the cows, so I leave the manger side and go to the yard side of the stalls. My aunties are milking the cows. They are sitting on stools and squirting the milk from the teats into the small buckets they have placed on the ground under the cows’ udders. My skinny auntie has finished milking her cow. She gives me the bucket and tells me to empty it into the large bucket that is standing in the walkway, out of the way so the cows do not knock it over. I empty the bucket and return it to my auntie. My fat auntie is finished so I do the same for her. My aunties eventually finish milking all the cows and I have half filled two large buckets with fresh white creamy milk.

My skinny auntie releases the cows from the stalls and both chase the cows out of the yard. I help by jumping around and shouting, “Shoo! Shoo!” The cows plod off back to the paddock they came from not really taking any notice of me except one or two looking at me as if thinking, ‘what on earth is he doing.’

My aunties pack up and they take the buckets of milk back to the house. I follow them. They take the milk to the cellar where there is a milk separator. I feel like I am walking down into a dungeon when I follow them, hoping there isn't a large heavy door to trap me inside as I enter the room. The fat auntie pours some of the milk into the bowl on top of the separator and I start rotating the handle. The whirr of spinning disks can be heard as I start turning. The pitch is low at first but increases as I turn the handle faster. I see cream start pouring out of one spout of the separator, viscous off white liquid flowing into a bowl. Watery skimmed milk comes out of the other spout into a bucket. My auntie keeps pouring the milk into the feed bowl, first from one bucket, then the other until it has all been processed. I keep turning the handle until no more fluid comes out. I stop turning, my arms tired from the effort. The separator is silent again.

My skinny auntie takes the cream into the house to place it in the refrigerator. My fat auntie supervises me taking the milk separator apart. I take the feed bowl off the top and then the top spout. I place these in a large bowl filled with warm soapy water. I can see all the disks inside the separator now. I take them out and place them in the water too, separating them so that they are cleaned easily. Lastly I place the bottom spout in the water. I wash them all clean and then I rinse them in pure water. My auntie and I put the separator back together again ready for the next batch.

With the separator cleaning done, I help my fat auntie take the skimmed milk out to the pigsty. It is muddy in places and the pigs have patches of mud on them where they have rolled around in it. We pour the skimmed milk into the trough to feed the pigs. The pigs come waddling as fast as they can, their short legs pumping away, to get the best position at the trough. They all snort and grunt in between slurping the milk into their mouths. I laugh at the commotion. They look up between slurps with big content smiles on their faces. We go back to the house and into the kitchen.

It is starting to get dark now. I have to go to the toilet. The toilet is outside at Grandma's house. I go out the backyard gate. The toilet is just across the driveway and feels creepy in the dusk of the evening, as there are no windows in it. I shut the door and urinate. I go back into the backyard and wash my hands in a bowl of soapy water in the laundry building and dry them on a towel. I then go back into the house.

We have our supper. I am feeling very tired from all the activities of the day. It is time for bed. My bed is in the same room as my aunties as there is no spare bedroom. I have a single bed to myself. My fat auntie shows me the potty under the

bed, for me to go to the toilet if I need to during the night. The toilet is too far away and frightening to go to at night. I go to bed and sleep.

I wake up at sunrise in the morning and partake in the bi-daily ritual of the milking of the cows as I did the night before. We have breakfast after we have milked the cows. I have Cornflakes with fresh milk. My skinny auntie has made bacon and fried eggs for us as well. We all have a cup of tea after that.

My skinny auntie asks, "Can you please feed the hens and collect the eggs like last time."

I knew what I had to do as I had accomplished these chores before. "Yes. I can do that," I say nodding my head. I go to the grain shed and fill a bucket with wheat. There are many mice in the grain shed. They all scurry away in fright when I open the door. I am scared one will run up my leg, but I get out of the shed without any accompanying mice. I walk to the hen house with the bucket. I open the door, go inside and close the door again. A legion of hens - that is what it seems like - immediately surround me, as they cluck and jockey for position. They follow me as I go to the grain trough. I pour the wheat in, spreading it evenly from side to side. The hens forget about me and start feeding on the fresh grain, pecking away with glee. The bucket is empty. The hens are busy so I walk around the hen house looking for eggs in the nests. When I find one I pick it up and carefully place it in the bucket. I do this for all the eggs I find. I count them. There are fourteen eggs today. I bring the eggs back to the house. Grandma sends them off to sell once a week in special cardboard trays that are stacked one on top of the other. I place the eggs I had collected in the trays.

Today my fat auntie asks, "Can you help me empty the toilet bucket?"

I scrunch my nose up, as it doesn't seem like a very good job. "I suppose so."

She tells me, "Dig a hole in the paddock next to the toilet. It needs to be this round and this deep." She indicates with her arms how big it should be. She gets a spade. "Here is a spade for you to dig with." I go to the paddock and start digging. It is not hard as the soil is sandy. Dig-lift-pile, dig-lift-pile, dig-lift-pile my rhythm continues. I look at how large the hollow is after I have been working on it for a while. It looks about the size my auntie described. I rush back to the house and say, "The hole is ready."

“OK. I’ll come and look. If it’s big enough, we’ll empty the bucket and you can fill it in again.” She comes out to the hole, “That is perfect. I will get a pole and we can get the bucket.

I feel proud that I did a good job.

My auntie gets the pole. She lifts the toilet seat assembly off the bucket, places the pole through the handle and adjusts the lever length so she is carrying more of the weight than I am. “OK. Let’s lift and take this to the hole. We’ll have to thread it through the fence first.”

“OK.” I wrinkle my nose, as I can already smell the stench like horrid stew left to decompose.

We lift and the bucket rises off the ground. We walk side by side with the bucket between us until we get to the fence. We rest the bucket on the ground. My auntie threads herself through the fence and grabs the pole again. We lift the bucket and slowly thread it between two of the wires of the fence, careful not to spill any. The bucket is finally through the fence so I go through and we lift the bucket and take it to the hole. We place the bucket by the side of the hole and slowly tilt it over until the contents start flowing out. I start gagging from the reek of human waste but put on a brave face. We finally empty the bucket and lift it up again. We take the bucket back to the toilet and put things back into place again.

“You look a bit pale,” my auntie says.

“I’m OK,” I say bravely.

“OK then. Can you fill in the hole please?”

“Yes,” I say as I move off to do my duty. When I get to the hole I pick up the spade laying where I had left it. I pick up some soil from the pile I made and pour it quickly into the hole, wanting to cover the stench as fast as I can. The effluent splashes from the sudden collision of the soil into it. I yelp and jump back to prevent getting any on me. I am safe but have learnt a lesson. I get the next spade of soil and pour it in slowly this time. There is no splash. I continue at that pace until I can’t see any sewage anymore and pick up the pace. I stop when I have replaced all the soil and pat the spot down with the flat of the spade. It still seems a bit spongy but I suppose it will firm up soon. I go back to the house, where my auntie is. “Finished.”

“Good,” she says, taking the spade and replacing it where she had previously retrieved it.

We have lunch and I have the afternoon to myself. I go exploring a bit but get bored after a while, so I come back to the house and play in the backyard.

When the late afternoon has come it is time to milk the cows again. We complete that task, separate the milk, have supper and go to bed.

On another day I help to make butter. My skinny auntie gets the cream we had been steadily collecting out of the refrigerator. She takes a large steel bowl out of the cupboard and places it on the table. She pours the cream into the bowl and gives me a hand-cranked beater. "Can you beat this cream for me until it gets really thick," she says.

"I think so," I reply not very confidently, as I have never completed the task before, but I don't think that it should be very difficult. I start turning the handle of the beater and the blades rotate like a small helicopter, faster as I increase the rate of rotation of the handle, repositioning the beaters in different spots in the bowl as I do so. I continue this for what seems like an eternity, but it has only been about five minutes. I stop. "Nothing is happening," I say in disappointment to my auntie who is doing other things.

"Be patient. Keep going," my auntie replies.

I start beating again, the blades going round and round and round and round. My arms and hands are getting tired from turning the handle and still nothing seems to be happening. I feel dejected but resolve to keep going until my auntie says to stop. If she said it would thicken, then it will thicken, I think. My resolve continues to waver until the cream starts to thicken very quickly. My mood brightens instantly and I put renewed vigour into the beating. Eventually the cream gets so thick it is almost impossible for me to turn the beaters anymore. It is like cream-colored grease.

My auntie looks over to review my progress and sees that the cream has thickened to the extent required, "Excellent," she says. "Let's see."

I stop beating and hand her the bowl, proud of my achievement. She removes the beaters and stirs the thickened cream with a wooden spoon she has collected from one to the drawers. She folds the cream over and over until it gets so thick the buttermilk separates out of the cream. It has turned into butter. My auntie pours the buttermilk out and scoops the butter out of the bowl. She places it on a small saucer. She pats it into a brick shape and places it into the refrigerator to harden when she is finished.

“Thank you for helping me,” she says. “Do you want a lemon drink? That was hard work.”

“Yes, please,” I say enthusiastically, eager for the refreshment.

My auntie gets the jug of lemon drink out of the refrigerator and pours me a glass. I drink it fast, too fast and cough and splutter from some of it almost going the wrong way. I slow down and finish my drink.

I go outside and play in the garden. I go over to the dog kennel. Sally, the Kelpie dog, is tethered there. She watches me as she lies on the ground, her eyes following my every move, ever watchful for a command to action. Sally is used to round up the sheep when they have to bring them in for shearing or to move them from paddock to paddock when the grass gets too short where they are. I pat Sally. She likes it. She stands and nuzzles up to me pleading for me to pet her some more, her tail wagging profusely. I throw a stick for her to fetch and she brings it back to me in obedient duty.

On a different day I go out and watch the pigs for a while. Most of them are just lying around. One is rolling in the dirt to clean itself. It seems funny to me - rolling in the dirt to get clean.

There is commotion in the afternoon. One of the cows has come into the yard and looks like she is in pain. She goes into the cow yard and lies down. My aunties are tending to her. A rush of watery fluid comes out of her bottom area. A while later a head pops out. Minutes later a whole calf oozes out of the cow. My eyes pop in amazement. The calf bleats and starts thrashing a little. It rests. Ten minutes later it thrashes around again with its legs and rolls onto its stomach, its legs tucked under it. It slowly gets its front legs out and starts to gingerly stand up on them. It gradually does the same with its back legs too. It is finally standing on all four legs. It is very wobbly. It falls a couple of times when it tries to walk. It is finally able to walk without falling. It walks over to its mother's udder and grabs one of the teats with its mouth. It starts to feed on the milk. I cannot believe what I have seen today. I am sure my brother and sisters will not believe me when I tell them.

I am starting to miss my family now and want to go home. It's only a couple of days now before my Mum and Dad come to pick me up.

We slaughter a hen the day before my family return. We are going to have it for lunch on Sunday with them. My fat auntie cuts the head off with an axe and drains the blood. She then pours boiling water all over it so that the feathers will come out

easily. I help her pluck the feathers out of the hen. She guts the hen after that and gives the sloppy and slimy gizzards to the dog to eat. The dog greedily gulps the treat down. My auntie then places the hen in the refrigerator, ready for roasting.

I have a bath on Saturday night. My skinny auntie boils water to put in the bathtub, as they do not have a hot water system. I get in the tub when there is enough water, the grime and dirt dissolving away from me scrubbing with the soap until I am clean. I stand up and rinse myself with clean warm water that has been left in a big jug. I dry myself on a towel and feel fresh again.

We milk the cows on Sunday morning. We all put our best clothes on after that to go to church. We all get into the car that my skinny auntie drives - she is the only one who knows how to drive. Grandma sits in the front next to my skinny auntie. I sit in the back next to my fat auntie.

I sit very still in church, making sure I do not make any noise. Grandma will be very cross if I make a nuisance of myself. She has told me that before church started. Church is over and we go back to the farm.

My skinny auntie starts roasting the hen and cooking the vegetables for lunch. I get changed, so I don't get my good clothes dirty, and pack my bag. I go outside and play to pass the time. I can't wait to see my family again. I finally hear a car coming down the driveway. I rush to the yard gate to see who it is. I peer through the gap between the gate and the post. I must look funny I think, an eye trying to see as far as it can down the driveway as if it is somehow a Cyclops sentinel of the gate. The car finally comes into view and it is my family. I jump up and down with excitement. I rush back inside, "Mum and Dad are here."

"Shh, not so loud," my skinny auntie says with an understanding smile on her face.

"Sorry," I say remorsefully. I run back outside and wait for my family to come through the gate. My brother opens the gate and my siblings rush into the yard. Mum and Dad follow.

"How was your week?" my Mum asks. "Was it interesting?"

"Yes," I say excitedly. "We did lots of things. I even helped empty the shit bucket."

My Mum chuckles out loud. "That must have been an experience. Let's go inside now."

We all go inside. Everyone says hello. We have lunch. Afterwards I go home with my family.

I think about the week at Grandma's. It was very interesting and exciting. I will never forget what I did and the things I saw. But it is so good to be home again.