

CRAZY MAVIS

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"HANG ON, KIDS," DAD SAID. "At least give me time to unpack the car before you turn this place into a disaster area!"

Lachie emptied his bag all over the bunk bed. He pulled out his boardies and whipped them on. Then he rummaged for his flippers, snorkel and diving mask.

"Lachie, help!" His little sister, Caitie, was struggling with the zip on her bag.

At last they'd arrived at *Lingalonga* for the Christmas holidays. Lachie loved staying in Gran's caravan beside the beach. Gran was away, visiting her other grandkids in the city, but would be back in time for Christmas.

"Well, I'm ready! Anyone coming down to the beach?" Lachie stood on the deck in front of the caravan with his bodyboard under his arm.

"You're not going anywhere until you put sunscreen on," Mum said. "And where's your hat? You know the rules!" Mum squeezed a blob of cream onto her hand and rubbed it into Caitie's arms and legs.

"OK ... pass it over." Lachie quickly smeared some greasy cream over his face and chest. "Now can we go?"

"I guess we're all ready," Dad said as he collected the towels. Mum carried a folding beach chair and her magazine. Caitie carried her bucket full of plastic sandcastle shapes.

As they walked down the dirt track past the other caravans, Lachie's parents commented on changes since last holidays.

"Look, Ben," Lachie's mum pointed to a flash blue campervan. "The Bennetts have got a new van."

"And the Andrettis are already here."

"Oh no ..." said Lachie, as they reached the last van before the beach. "Crazy Mavis is here. Do we have to stop and talk? Can't we pretend that we don't see her?"

"Shush," said Mum. "She's not crazy—just friendly—and yes, we have to say hello. We can't be rude."

Crazy Mavis talked to everyone who walked past her van. The name *Doodropinn* was tacked to the front of her van. Every year she'd have a collection of motley animals in baskets and cages on her deck. They weren't the cute or cuddly sort that you wanted to pat. Instead, they all looked ugly and bald and half-blind. Lachie could never understand why anyone would keep animals like those.

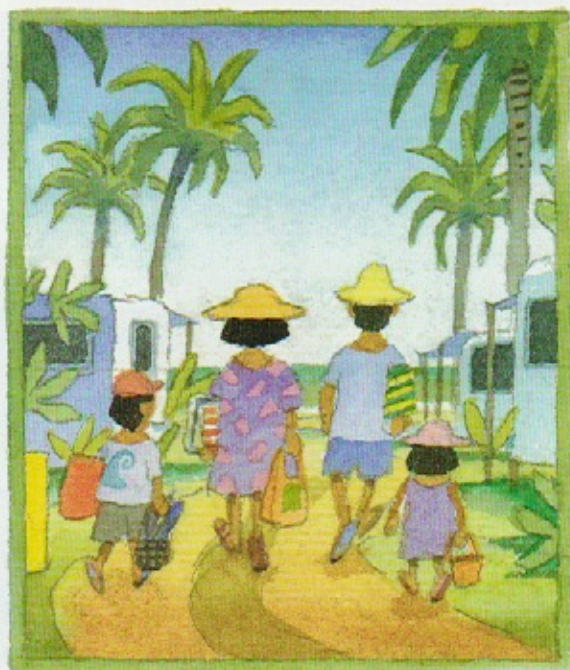
"Haven't seen you lot for a while," Mavis called from her seat on the deck. Lachie pretended not to hear. He kept walking, but Mum grabbed his bodyboard and pulled him back.

"No, Mavis. We haven't been down for a while. How've you been?"

The adults chatted while Lachie and Caitie looked at the weird animals on Mavis's deck. After a few minutes they were off through the gate and down the steps to the beach.

"Crazy Mavis has two dogs and a bird," said Caitie.

"No," said Lachie. "Crazy Mavis has a



scungy, skinny rat-type dog, a snub-faced mutt with googly white eyes and a bird with one leg that looks like a plucked chicken!”

“Actually,” said Dad. “Mavis has a Jack Russell that’s got diabetes, a Chihuahua that’s nearly blind and a cockatoo that’s recovering from an accident. Don’t you kids know that Mavis is an animal rescue nanna? She looks after animals that nobody wants.”

All talk stopped when they reached the wooden steps leading down to the beach. The breeze curled around their faces, bringing sounds of the waves dumping on shore and kids yelling in excitement. Lachie ran towards the flags, chucked his diving mask, flippers and snorkel onto the sand and headed for the water. He slid onto his bodyboard, shivered when his skin hit the cold water and paddled out over the small waves.

He looked back and saw Caitie building

a sandcastle in the wet sand. Mum had settled into her beach chair and was reading her magazine. Dad was setting up the beach umbrella. Lachie turned away from the shore and began paddling out.

Back on the sand, a lifesaver blew a whistle. He ran to the edge of the water, waving his arms.

“Everybody out!” he called. “The beach is closed. Bluebottles heading this way!”

Disappointed swimmers waded out of the water. The wind whipped along from the east. Small, navy blue bubbles floated across the top of the water, trailing poisonous sticky threads beneath them.

Lachie was still paddling out. He had water in his ears and couldn’t hear anything but a hollow booming sound as the waves broke against the sand. He was concentrating on getting out to where the next wave was breaking. It was peaceful out here, with no-one around. He stopped and dangled his legs in the water as he watched a wave rise into a curl.

“I’m going to ride that one in,” Lachie decided.

A blue bubble floated past.

Lachie kicked his legs below him in the water—and screamed.

The scream brought his mum and dad running into the water.

“It’s a shark!” yelled Mum. “Omigosh! Don’t just stand there, Ben. Do something!” She pushed Lachie’s dad into the water.

But the lifesaver had already reached Lachie and was pulling him on his board into shore. Lachie’s whole leg throbbed and felt burning hot. He tried to be brave, but he couldn’t stop crying.

"There's not much you can do," the lifesaver said to his parents as they all examined the red welt on Lachie's ankle, where the stinger had lassoed him. "Don't put vinegar or cold water on it. If you live close by, take the lad home. Warm water's best."

Dad wrapped Lachie in his towel and carried him over the hot sand, while Mum hurriedly gathered up their beach gear and called to Caitie to follow.

"It's really hurting, Dad," cried Lachie as they went through the gate to the caravan park.

"Watcha do to yerself?" It was Mavis, having a cuppa on her deck.

"Oh no," Lachie whispered into his dad's ear. "Don't stop, Dad. Don't stop at Crazy Mavis's."

But Dad trod on a patch of bindies. "Ouch!" he yelled, hopping from one foot to the other. He put Lachie down on Mavis's deck.

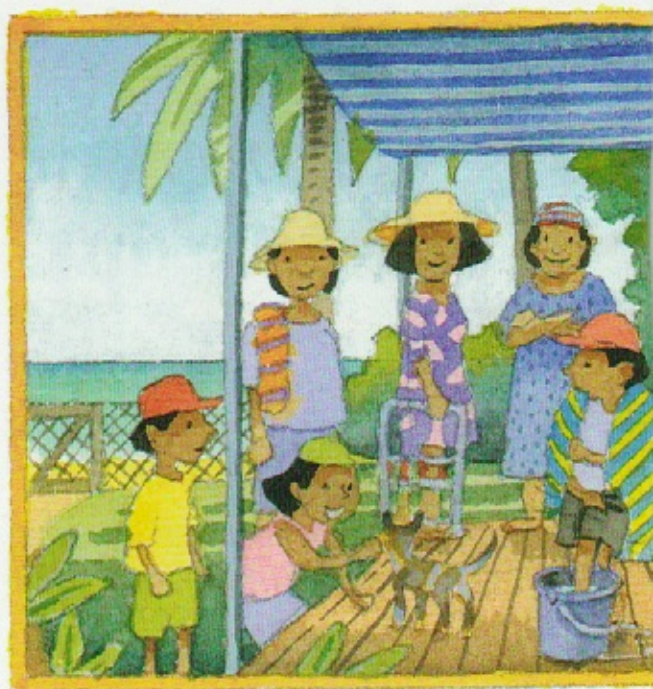
"Lot of bindies round here," Mavis nodded. "Pull 'em out, you'll be fine. But what's wrong with the young 'un?"

"Bluebottles," his dad explained, picking bindies out of his heels. "Lachie got stung."

"Hurts like crazy, eh?" Mavis was peering down at Lachie, a sympathetic frown on her face. "Got just the thing." She put down her mug, disappeared into her caravan and came out with a bucket of water.

"Here, stick your foot in there. Hot water's the best thing to take the sting away. Lucky I just boiled the kettle. But don't worry—I added a bit of cold water."

Lachie slid his foot into the bucket. Almost immediately the sting began to ease.



"Hello. Hello ... who's a stinker?"

Lachie swivelled around in surprise.

The voice came from the cocky's cage on the red, plastic kiddie's table near the door to Mavis's caravan. The cocky was pulling himself around the wire cage with his beak and his one claw. "Hel-lo," he said to Lachie. "Who's a stinker ... Whassup?"

Caitie and his mum reached Mavis's place and sat down on the deck. Caitie got the giggles.

"Just behave yourself, Stumpy," said Mavis sternly. "That's quite enough from you."

Stumpy nodded his head and coughed, as if he had asthma.

"That's right," she said. "You want all the attention. Well, you'll just have to shush, Stumpy, because Lachie needs the attention this time. *He's* the one who's hurt."

"Hi, Mavis!" A girl and boy about Lachie's age came scootering down the dirt track. They dumped their scooters beside



Mavis's caravan and walked onto the deck.

"How's Blind Freddy?" asked the girl.

"Still bumping into things," said Mavis.

"He's not getting any younger."

"What about Salty Sea Dog?" asked the boy.

"See for yerself." Mavis turned towards a basket near the front door. "Come here, Salty. You've got visitors."

The little Jack Russell terrier, with a furiously wagging tail, jumped out of his basket and sniffed each of them in turn, before snuggling up next to Lachie.

Mavis went back inside the caravan and came out a couple of minutes later with a jug of orange cordial, a plate of biscuits and a syringe.

"Why's your foot in a bucket?" asked the girl as she scratched Salty Sea Dog behind the ears.

"Whatsamatta ... Whatsamatta ..." shrieked Stumpy from his cage behind them. "Who's a silly sausage? *Scraaark!*"

"Aw, it's nothing really," laughed Lachie. "Just got attacked by a bluebottle, but Mavis knew how to take away the sting."

"Yeah, she knows all about animals," the boy said.

"You know she's the animal rescue nanna?" the girl said. "These animals would be dead if Mavis hadn't taken them in."

Lachie stroked the little terrier's warm body.

"Mavis, it's my turn to give Salty his insulin, isn't it?" The old woman nodded and the girl carefully took the syringe that Mavis was holding out and turned to Lachie. "Here, you pat his head while I give him his needle." She grabbed a fold of skin from the scruff of Salty's neck and, just like a nurse, injected the insulin. "Good boy, you're such a good boy," she said as she rubbed the little dog's coat. "I'm Nicky, by the way," the girl said.

"And I'm Tony," said the boy as he fed Stumpy a bit of biscuit. "What's your name?"

"Lachlan. This is my sister, Caitlin, and my mum and dad."

"If you weren't wearing a bucket on your foot," said Tony, "you could help us take Salty and Blind Freddy for their walk."

Lachie flashed a big 'please' smile at his parents.

"Off you go," said Mum. "But put your thongs on—we don't want you treading on any glass or bull ants. You've had enough injuries for one day."

"OK," grinned Lachie. "But I reckon Mavis could fix me up, whatever I did anyway!"

"Silly sausage!" squawked Stumpy, and everyone burst out laughing. ■