

Juliet Sandison

IS THAT YOU, VERNA

Is that you, Verna? Am I ringing too early? Hope I didn't catch you in the shower. What? You've already hung out the washing? Well, you're really ahead of it to-day!

Pardon? How was the holiday — did I have a good time? You may well ask! It really wasn't a holiday at all. I mean, Patrick had this Geological Conference at the Hilton in Brisbane. He's made me his field assistant, you know. I do a bit of typing, and — well, we all have these little tax things. But he did set up the caravan beautifully. Patrick is so efficient at anything he really wants to do. What's that? If he wants to — oh, well —

What's that, Verna? Did we go to Surfers? No. Not this time. We had to get back before the kids started school. They stayed at my mother's place. Yes, Verna, she is good —

Now, where was I? Oh, yes. Patrick enjoyed all the dinners. I mean, we eat simple foods with the children and I'm big on the mineral water these days. But then it's Patrick's scene and he likes me to be there. Would you believe, he introduces me to everyone as his field assistant. I get well looked over by the blokes, I can tell you. But I usually chip in and say we've been married fifteen years. After all, there are the kids.

When we left Brissy we decided to come across New South Wales via Broken Hill to Adelaide. As soon as we got past Cunningham's Gap and all that lovely scenery along the Newell Highway, I got Patrick to stop and I hopped in the van. I know it's illegal, but I slipped into a flimsy nightie, creamed my face and put a couple of rollers in the front of my hair. Then I lay down — I had the windows open and it was just heaven after all the heat.

What's that, Verna? How was Patrick?

Oh well, he's different. He came out of it all still beady-eyed and bushy-tailed, so to speak. Fronting up for more. Never seems to get tired. But anyway, we were well along towards Moree when the vehicle pulled up. I thought he'd just stopped to stretch the legs and get a breather, but he knocked on the window of the van and said we had a flat and he'd have to change to the spare tyre. Said he didn't want any help — he never does, but I always offer. I just thought it was a good time for me to pop into the bushes for the call of nature. It was just

beautiful in the scrub — I just stood still and did some deep breathing. Quiet as the grave.

Imagine how I felt when I heard the car start. I thought, "That can't be Patrick — not so soon." But I'd forgotten how quickly he works. Experience, you know.

I watched the back of the van disappear into the distance, and there was I, in a transparent nightie, nothing on my feet and curlers in my hair, stranded in the middle of nowhere.

Yes, Verna, it really was a situation.

Two cars whizzed by, but I hid in the bushes. Then came a motor bike. It might sound mad to you, but I just ran onto the road and hailed this big fellow, all geared up in leathers and helmet. "Now I'll be raped," I thought.

What's that, Verna? Was I raped? Now, I think your mind's running in dark channels.

He was the biggest, kindest Texan you ever met. Out here for our bi-centennial. He heard my story and just pushed his chewing gum from one side to the other.

"Hop on, lady!" Hhe said. "You wrap yourself around me and hang in there!"

We roared off on the bike. The nightie came up where no decent lady's nightie should ever be. I cuddled into that great leathery back and wondered what would happen next.

Pardon, Verna? What did happen?

To tell the truth, I loved every minute of it. It was just like the films. Where else can I ride pillion half-naked hanging onto a beautiful Texan?

Well, I hadn't started to worry. I'd never had a time like this before. I know you think I'm awful — but there —

Anyway, we came alongside Patrick about ten kilometres from Moree and we pulled in so hard he had to drive off the road.

I turned my head around to see his face. You know, Verna, I didn't think I could ever surprise Patrick. He just always knows it all, but he nearly ran into the mallee.

He got out and came alongside. He was furious. His face was red and his hands clenched with the knuckles all white. When he spoke his voice was cold as ice.

"You've got my field assistant!" He said.

The Yank got off his bike and helped me down, then he looked at both of us and laughed and laughed.

"Man, you sure could have fooled me!" Hhe said.

You asked me if I had a good time.

Well, yes, Verna, I did. In parts.