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Van Luyn, Ariella (2010) *Evelyn on the Verandah*. [Creative Work]

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## **Ariella Van Luyn**

### **Evelyn on the Verandah**

*I come home from school and find Dad knocking down one of the walls in the back bedroom.*

*I say, Dad what are you doing?*

*And he says, I can't work in there (downstairs, he means, in his office), I need more space.*

*I say — because we have this really bad relationship at the moment, I don't agree with a lot of the things he's doing, I'm being mean to him — I say, can't you just get rid of all that shit?*

*And he says no.*

Every room in this house is dedicated to something he's researched. He fills them with books and photos and other things he's found or been given. It's a filing system of sorts. Drawers within drawers. He kept extending and building until the house is this crazy mix of rooms and hidey holes.

I've lived here all my life. Dad told me that when he and Mum first went to look at the house, there were syringes in the garden. It was this crazy share house. All of downstairs was padded 'cause there were musicians upstairs and junkies downstairs.

When we moved in, Dad ripped out the padding to make his office. He's a workaholic. Ever since I was little he's been writing History. And he's incapable of throwing

anything out. His office is always overflowing with papers and pictures and all this other weird stuff.

Our house once sailed up the Brisbane River. I forget the last name of the people who built it; they must have been rich because one of them scratched her name into the glass of a window with her diamond ring. I was named after her: Evelyn. The house used to be in South Brisbane. They decided for some reason that they wanted to live in New Farm. I guess at the time the roads weren't very good, it was easier to have the whole thing pulled by barge through the water.

I guess I've always been interested in these obscure things. The prostitutes on Kent Street always intrigued me as well. We'd be on our way to school and they'd be on their way home. One had these legs, they reminded me of a snake pickled in a jar I'd seen in the biology lab at school, kind of contained and preserved but bloated and exposed at the same time. Her legs fascinated me. Dad would always be like, don't look, don't look. And the women'd be waving at us.

A few years ago I almost got picked up. This guy thought I was a prostitute. I was walking towards my house – it must have been after work – and a car slowed down in front of me and then stopped at the end of the street. The driver was like, what's your price? For a while after that – you know what you're like when you're that age – I was worried that my legs were like the prostitute's.

*I leave Dad alone, walk out to the back verandah and watch an afternoon storm crawl towards us.*

*When the storm hits there is the scent of the paw-paw tree. The rain lashing on the tin roof.*

*Dad comes out and says, I finished part of the history today. Do you want to read it?*

*I'll read it when you're finished. I don't want it to be spoiled.*

*This is a pretty safe answer, one I've used often over the years – I know he won't ever be finished. At least not the part I want to read.*

*Dad goes back inside.*

The part he's talking about is a corporate history, which was commissioned; these are the only ones he seems to finish. He is surrounded by boxes and boxes of things he will never write about because no one pays him to. Or someone pays him not to, which I hate. He gave me a vision, the first time I found him knocking down the walls of our house: he showed me that almost everything is connected to everything else, that everything needs to be told, at the same time, if that's possible.

I know I have this problem with wanting to say everything at once. I get convoluted, breathless. And anyway, how can I tell a story that isn't really a story at all, but tiny moments strung across the years? But I don't see that in these corporate histories he writes. The one I read, anyway.

Dad is very, what I'd call, ambitious. Or maybe not. He has high expectations. Of me, at least. That's ok. It was just that I started school at New Farm State School, which I loved. Dad wanted me to go there. It was a very multicultural sort of mix. Lots of Chinese and Indigenous kids.

In high school I went to a private girls school. I have this independent streak and I didn't like the structure. And there was a lot of money there as well. The opposite to my primary school. So I kind of went off the tracks. I guess what I'm saying is, when I don't like something I tend to do the opposite of what people want me to do.

I learnt Chinese from a very early age. At school and because of Min. I'll talk about Min in a minute. I went on exchange to Hong Kong in Year Eleven. Before I left I was hating living here, sort of a small town thing — boring. New Farm is just a big village, stuck out on a peninsula. I know all our neighbours. Some have chickens.

Min (her family are the chicken neighbours) told me about this girl I went to primary school with. Samantha — that's the name of the girl — was like this little perfect thing in school. Our school was crazy though. Once this guy, I can't remember his name, pretended to have a seizure. After convulsing for a bit he just lay there on the ground. He wouldn't move. The teacher had to carry him down the stairs.

Min and my other friends, we were all terrible, boisterous girls, loud and independent. Samantha wasn't like that. She was a bit of a dobber. Like once when I was carving my name into the window at school with a compass she threatened to get a teacher unless I stopped, and when I didn't she pinched me. Not just once either, but continually, until my arm was covered in welts. It mustn't have stopped me though because I remember my name being there for ages, until someone broke the window when they threw a chair through it.

Outside of school, it was like she was a different person. Across the road from our house, there're no houses on that side, just bushes. They've cleaned it all up now but it used to be wild and fun. Although when I think about it that's where the prostitutes used to go. But only at night. We never played there at night. This one time Min and I were building a dam in

front of the gutter. I think we were waiting for it to rain: we had plans to flood the street. Our parents probably thought we were doing something lovely; I think they forget how much you want to destroy the world when you're little. Not deliberately, but because you think you can. You lose the belief in your own power when you get older.

Samantha came up to us. We weren't looking so she was able to sneak up. She didn't ask to play or anything, just sat down and starting making things with us. She pulled this long stick off the ground and was hitting, hitting the leaves and all the bushes. She hit a branch, which broke off. We all saw this wasps' nest hanging from a branch down the slope a bit. Min and Samantha thought it would be fun to go in and throw some rocks at it. I guess I must have followed them in. There were all these stinging nettles around the base of the tree. I remember being really itchy, grumpy because of it. Then I smelt something really bad, like a dead or dying thing, and I said, I think there's something dead in here.

Samantha said, No. Look.

We looked where she was pointing. We'd found a man lying in the bushes.

We watched him for a while. There were black flies crawling over his coat and across the blue and red Hong Kong shopper next to him. Min circled around, keeping a safe distance. I pulled my T-shirt up over my face. Samantha pinched her nose with her thumb and forefinger, the rest of her fingers splayed out around her mouth. She still had the stick in her hand. She held it above his body and waved it across him like a wand. Gingerly, she gave him a poke. Min squatted down about half a metre away, picked up two green gum leaves off the ground, crushed them into balls and inserted one in each of her nostrils. Samantha slipped the stick under his jacket and lifted it up. Underneath, another knitted jumper and an elaborate pink, black, green and purple crocheted vest.

He must be hot, I said.

Samantha inched her hand along the stick, pulling herself closer. She turned her head to the side, studying his face and clothes. I crept in too. There was a piece of wool from his jumper dangling on the ground, and I could see Samantha looking at it. She let go of her nose, dived in, grabbed the wool, and ran backwards, keeping an eye on him at all times, the thread unravelling.

We all watched the man but he didn't move. Samantha looped the wool around the branch of a tree next to her, and stood on her toes to tie the knot.

The man made a sound, a sort of hum that vibrated across his thick lips. Min screamed; I ran back up the bank; Samantha dropped to the ground. I watched them from the road. The man hadn't woken up.

We left.

The next day from the verandah I saw Samantha standing at the edge of the bush.

I yelled through the railings, What're you doing?

Samantha didn't turn around, just plunged through into the bush. I swung down through the gap in the railings and ran after her. The man was gone but the wool was still there, wound around the tree and leading out of the bushes onto the other side of the road. Samantha reached up and untied the knot. She wrapped the thread around her hand and followed the trail, with me behind her.

The thread led down some wooden stairs to the boardwalk. We picked our way through the syringes (now I walk my fat dog along there and get overtaken by joggers).

About two hundred metres down we found him again, passed out under a tree. Samantha re-tied her knot in another tree a little way away. We sat on the boardwalk and watched him for a while, but he wasn't doing anything so we left.

We followed him for days afterwards. Samantha had given up on the third day, but I followed him for almost a week. I followed this guy pretty far down the river before the string broke; maybe the vest unravelled completely. Anyway I lost him.

After that, Samantha sort of dropped off the radar. We went to different high schools and I didn't see her around. I didn't hear anything about her until a few years ago when Min told me that she'd killed herself; she'd jumped off the Story Bridge. Min and I went to her funeral. I met Jimmie at the wake. We went out for a while; he was in a band. His knuckles were hairy and at night his skin was clammy to touch. So I guess it wasn't really going anywhere but that was ok.

I think Jimmie came over to our house like once. Dad didn't offer Jimmie anything so I knew he hated him straight away. After that, Jimmie became this big like 'fuck you' to my dad.

Jimmie had a habit of arranging everything into lists. You could sort of hear it in his conversations; when he spoke it was as though he was ticking things off in his head. Once he wrote me a love letter. Each point started with a number and it was written on a piece of paper advertising a drug company. (His mum worked as a receptionist at a doctor's surgery.) It said:

1. I didn't know I could play the harmonica but after I met you I picked one up and I could.



2. I'm sorry about that picture of me with the other girl.
3. Thank you for understanding.

In retrospect, I can see that this was not so much a love letter as a reason to leave.

I used to organise guerrilla gigs for his band. Everyone would meet at the Jubilee Hotel and then I'd lead them to the location. We used to go to empty parking lots. By the time the cops came there'd be one guy left standing in the middle of the park. I never told Dad.

Jimmie refused to talk to me during his performances. It wasn't an obvious refusal; I don't mean it like that. It was just that he always had something in his mouth when I came up to him: chips, lollies, drink, once a screwdriver. I didn't even notice for a long time. He spoke to me before and after. He was playing, so it wasn't as though I was expecting to have a D and M. It wasn't until someone asked me how he was going and the only response I could think of was 'silent' that I realised something was wrong.

He played at the Village Twin when the roof was starting to cave in. They took a generator in, which was incredibly unsafe. I didn't go because we had broken up by that time — I'd found that the last time, the thing he had in his mouth was another girl's tongue.

*Dad comes back out to the verandah again. He's very vague. Sometimes, not very often, he seems to forget like really simple little things. In the process of making more space for his histories, he fell two metres off the verandah and hit his head. He spilt his head open. I didn't see it. I was in my room. I just heard a lot of swearing. I came out and Dad was sitting up on*

*the cement of our driveway. I could see his skull. It was disgusting. He had to get thirty stitches in his head. Since then things have taken a backtrack.*

I'm going back to Hong Kong in a month, when I finish Year Twelve. I'm going to get a job there. New Farm is no different from a village with goats and island roads.

'Evelyn on the Verandah' is based on an interview I conducted with a twenty-one-year-old woman who grew up in New Farm and spoke of her childhood memories of the place. I wanted the piece to sound as though someone was speaking it out loud, and to draw on the storytelling techniques used in the interview. However, I imagined and invented many scenes; it is a work of fiction. All names are changed.