

The Interior Decorator

by Julie Twohig

Today is the day Evelyn will tackle the final window. The interior will then be complete.

She's hurrying to be ready in time to catch the 7.45 to the posh part of town. She stuffs four slices of bread and jam down the hatch, roughs the flannel over her face, gargles, kicks the cat out of the house and then slams the front door behind her.

Tucked inside her canvas shoulder bag is the compact expanding file, a packet of Savoury Shapes and a discreet pair of gleaming surgical scissors: the mandatory tools of her trade.

Her arms flail madly as she commands the bus driver to stop. He watches as she heaves her body up the few stairs, breathless and sweaty.

'All day concession,' she pants. Folk who already have tickets can barely squeeze past.

Evelyn would prefer not to travel in peak hour: the bus will soon be crammed and the school kids will laugh. She finds a spot and flops herself down, easing her bulk across the two seats. Sniggers can be heard from the back of the bus - it's already started. She stares straight ahead.

The thirty minute commute allows time to plot the day: she'll head straight for Collins Street to the sleek waiting rooms of the doctors, dentists, lawyers and accountants - the list, she discovered early on, limited only by one's fortitude. And Evelyn has plenty of that.

She traces her fingers along the scissors' cold edges, and slides her thumb into the top circle; her three middle fingers slip through the other. She makes

tiny cutting actions inside her bag, her legs drum wildly beneath her floral cotton dress.

In her mind she's already pasting the first of the pictures in the top right hand corner of the remaining window, already applying the last coat of lacquer. She wipes tiny beads of moisture from her upper lip.

The bus draws closer to her target; the sooner she procures fresh supplies, the sooner she will head home. It's a month since she's worked this route: the latest publications will have arrived. Each consulting room has their favourites: The Orthopaedic Rooms stock *The World of Interiors*; the Gynaecologists at Suite 5 favour *Homes & Antiques* and *belle*; the Marriage Counselling practice prefer *House & Garden* and *Vogue*, and so on.

Today, Evelyn is on the hunt for wedding pictures: the exotic and colourful being the most coveted, followed by soft pretty pastels - not that's she opposed to a lovely offering in sepia.

At the door of each Suite she pauses, checking to see who's on Reception; there are a few hoity-toity types she has learnt to avoid. Usually, if a Suite with a Difficult Receptionist has a magazine she can't live without, she may have to return two, three or perhaps four times that day before the magazine sentinel has finally left her post. At which point Evelyn will have no choice but to remove the entire publication before the officious woman returns.

Today there is no real cause for concern. The receptionists are too busy to notice.

'Can I help you?' an immaculate receptionist might enquire as she enters The Rooms.

'Just waiting for my husband.' A husband is not something Evelyn has, but the idea of one seems to silence: the receptionist continues doing what receptionists do, whilst Evelyn bee-lines for the magazine display.

She makes her selection, then squishes her voluminosity into one of the many plush chairs. She turns the pages of the new editions; examining them

methodically. The end result relies on the quality of materials every time - the skill of pasting and lacquering been perfected long ago.

When she discovers a picture that pleases, she runs her finger across its surface, lingering on the face, tracing the veil. Out come the scissors and with a swift snip or two the picture is expertly removed and secured inside the compact expanding file. Sticky-nose patients waiting to be seen by their Lord Muck specialist toss her their dagger looks. Evelyn continues her business: scorn is part of the course.

By the end of the day her booty is lavish - well worth the swollen aching feet.

Once home, the pictures are immediately catalogued. Usually, there is no rest until all the Kittens are filed into the pink plastic folder with the transparent sheaves, the Beribboned Babies into the white; and the Beautiful Ladies Who Await Something Special are tucked safely inside the folder dedicated solely to them. Today it is just the Beautiful Brides that find their way into the lilac plastic folder.

She sighs with relief. She can feel by the bulk of the folder that she finally has enough to complete the window. Evelyn rewards her grand effort with a pot of steaming tea. She sips her tea and dunks and munches the three jam donuts bought from the Donut King.

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In the beginning, Evelyn discovered the thrill of decoupage during a class at a Neighbourhood House. It inspired her to scrounge the op-shops to procure tatty tired vessels and used magazines so she could continue the work at home.

Having chosen a theme - Flowers in Spring for example - she'd create a scene by pasting picture after picture until the tray or the vase were entirely concealed. Only the silhouette remained as a reminder of what the object had been. Then numerous layers of clear lacquer were applied until Evelyn had created a fortress of beauty: an ugly duckling no more.

After a few years had passed, the house choked with her works of art - there wasn't a surface that could take another piece. Completed items were stuffed inside cupboards and when the cupboards were full, gathered dust in corners of each room.

Evelyn tired of transforming small objects. She craved something bigger. As she gazed around, her focus fixated on the household chattels - why hadn't she seen them before?

The bedside table was first, followed by her desk, the wardrobes, the fridge and eventually the kitchen table with the four wooden chairs. All painstakingly reincarnated - bejewelled and resplendent.

Still her desire increased. It reached a crescendo. She barely slept. Instead, she tackled the doors, the skirting and the window sills.

When she began on the walls she was forced to broaden her search for magazine outlets. For the past two years she has travelled daily by bus, train and tram across Melbourne, spiralling in every direction from her council home in Box Hill; every minute away from her house a constant distress; her one desire is to paste, paste everything, and lacquer, and lacquer again.

With the final wall finished, the ceilings were next.

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Evelyn presses specks of donut and cinnamon sugar onto her finger and washes them down with the now cold tea.

She lingers at the threshold of her bedroom, then approaches the last naked window with the respectful gravity suited to the occasion. She dabs paste on the back of the first ethereal bride, applies her tenderly to the window and then smooths her down with a damp cloth.

It takes six hours to finish. At midnight she stands back to admire the vista of brides that grace her boudoir. Then slowly she walks through the house; a torch in one hand and a miner's light strapped to her head. The interior is finally complete - not a drawer handle, light bulb or window remains unadorned.

Evelyn returns to her room and sits. For a day and a night she sits, in quiet contemplation.

The following morning, breakfasted and bathed and wrapped in a towel, she places her left foot on a rejuvenated kitchen chair, and pastes the first of a thousand Beautiful Ladies. She starts at the smallest toe.