

The Museum

by Adam Byatt

Flicking through the sheets on her clipboard, Evelyn double checked the address with the mismatched numbers on the letterbox. Its mouth was a rusty, gaping grin like it had lost its dentures. Her stomach tightened and her mouth became dry as she glanced over the house and yard. Gathering courage she grabbed her handbag, clipboard and stepped out into the afternoon sun.

There was a row of four houses squashed between new developments of high rise apartments. In her job on the city planning committee, she approved the condemnation and construction of the future skyline of the city. She stepped up to the letterbox with mismatched numbers and patted it affectionately, remembering the years she had spent as a child within this yard and within the walls of the house.

The house squatted on its haunches, simpering like an old dog, hiding behind curtains of grass and weeds. The roses that lined the front verandah had been her mother's surrogate children, taking their place at the centre of the dining room table in vibrant array. Now they were merely skeletal sticks.

Evelyn remembered with fondness sitting on the top step of the verandah with her brother, seeing who could spit the watermelon seeds the furthest. As she walked up the path Evelyn chuckled at the scratched marker in the concrete, a family record of the furthest watermelon seed ever spat. And she was the champion.

Everything about the house indicated its abandonment and decrepitude. The paint was peeling like sunburn while the windows looked with a pale desperation through grey, tired eyes. But it had lived. Senility and dementia might have taken up residence in the rafters, but at least it had character. Evelyn thought the encroaching apartment blocks looked like Styrofoam cutouts. She doubted their longevity but supposed an architectural shot of Botox would be required to keep them from developing wrinkles.

Evelyn smirked at the irony of her job in condemning buildings when she looked with fondness at her old home. She turned down the right side of the house towards the magnolia tree and stopped in its shade looking back at the window that used to be her room. She remembered the dollar coin she planted at the base of the house in the childish hope that her grandmother would get well again. While her naivety cracked with the news of her grandmother's death, she resisted the urge to take back her coin, preferring to leave it to the earth from which it came. Even now, after burying her own mother two years' before Evelyn glanced around for a spade wanting to recapture a piece of her childhood.

In her mind she cycled through the phases of her growing maturity, remembering the posters that wallpapered her room from the childhood television song and dance groups in brightly covered skivvies to the teenage version in varying degrees of black, carrying guitars and wearing bad poodle perms.

Moving to the back of the house she spied the back verandah, an addition tacked onto the house as the family grew to accommodate expanding gatherings and birthday parties. She pictured the second hand table that used to dominate the area, a bargain that was originally designed to fit inside, but a miscalculation meant it was parked outside and stayed put. Eight mismatched chairs identified the various comers and goers, a kind of visual name tag. The family always joked that they had enough material to write a soap opera based on their conversations and arguments from around the table.

A child's argument from up above, followed by the staccato interruption by their mother focused Evelyn on where she was. Looking up to where the sound came from, she visualised the apartment block as one big filing cabinet, with each unit a file of memories, some continuous, others changing faces. Walking back around to the front of the house she pulled out the laminated notice of condemnation and attached it to the front door before continuing on her rounds for the council, delivering death notices to other family museums.

