

UNHEARD VOICES

Finding language and belonging
in the Deaf and hearing worlds

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PROLOGUE

There are multiple voices and perspectives of beginnings, middles and half-finished endings. The gathering and rediscovering of family stories has influenced my own experiences and interpretations of people, places and language.

I was once called a ‘connoisseur of people’, but at the time the phrase was not meant as a compliment. Today, however, when I reflect upon the influence of my childhood experiences, I understand that people and stories have always been my passion, process and purpose. My curiosity about those around me has encouraged me to ask questions around language and culture, and how they can offer us a sense of belonging while at the same time exclude us from larger narratives.

For much of my life, my world consisted of two parents, two languages, two cultures and two places of belonging – an aural world and a visual world – existing side by side. There was much that I did not and could not know – what it was like to be born different, or to have a child who was born different. But I did learn what it was like to have parents who were considered different in the world in which we all lived together. There came a time when I needed answers

for myself, if only to give others a reason for this difference in my life. But I never thought to ask other children like me how they interpreted their two worlds.

Some stories leave a mark on history, with particular experiences interpreted by others. In telling my mother's story, I have the opportunity to celebrate the forgotten – those who made sacrifices to find another language and culture for a child who could not fully participate in theirs. Believers who were challenged and compromised by circumstances deserve their rightful place in history. They also deserve to be forgiven, even if they found it hard to forgive themselves.

My mother, Evelyn, was born a child of difference who left her gentle imprint on each one of her landscapes of belonging. Voices that have been unheard are now gathered together to tell her story from one particular point of view – mine.

1. FATHER AND DAUGHTER

There are many stories waiting to be told, but the one for me has always been my mother's. Her family were farm people who never wanted water turned to wine, or loaves and fishes for a crowd. Instead, they made something from nothing every day. They were God's people who spread the word, led by example and shared what they had with due diligence and good grace. Inscribed in the old Lloyd family Bible were the words, 'In faith, not in hope.' Challenges descended upon this family of believers, faith and hope were tried and tested, and it was only belief that found a soft place to rest. The family was united in sharing the burden of their treasured cross, although the carrying of that cross was further for some than for others.

There was God, Nature, History and a little girl called Evelyn. Her father – my grandfather – was Arthur Leslie Lloyd. He loved words, he loved his family and most of the time he loved God, but it was actions more than words that belonged to this country farmer, especially when Evelyn came his way.

At that time, belief came and went with the weather, wars, births and deaths. Arthur understood the challenges of country life and had his own experience of war. In 1900,

before he married, he had lived in South Africa where he became a member of the South African Light Horse regiment. Throughout that time, he wrote letters home. Those letters and his detailed diary captured another side to the man.

A few of the Victorians are camped near the town. I took a walk across to see if I could hear anything of Sam Cliver. Poor fellow, I was shocked when they told me he had been shot. He was a great favourite with the regiment and everybody spoke of him as 'poor old Sam'. He was the best fellow in the regiment. They all told me that he would share his last shilling with anybody and was always giving others a hand if they were a bit behind with their saddling up in the morning. I also saw Jack Lloyd of Greta, and others I knew.

In 1917, the year my mother Evelyn was born, family and community were about praying, singing, lending a helping hand and working hard. She was the fifth and second-last child born to Arthur and Josephine 'Joey' Lloyd. Her siblings were, from oldest to youngest, Clifton, Gwenllian, Leighton and Adeline, with Evan coming along later. Together, they were one offshoot of the local Lloyd family, proud personalities living in Bobinawarra, part of Victoria's Oxley Shire, and attending St Paul's Church of England (now St Paul's Anglican Church) at Milawa each Sunday. Their community of people were pioneers of routine, religion and responsibility.

For the Lloyd family, it was the unexplainable that required a closer understanding and some sort of acceptance.

Evelyn, at four years old, had not yet uttered one recognisable word.

Inside the family's busy farm kitchen, she observed her world. She seemed to be a perfect child, with a feathery frown, a halo of downy blonde hair and staring blue-grey eyes. Yet her tiny, silent presence provoked many questions.

Why doesn't she say any words?

Is she shy?

What is wrong with Evelyn?

Amid busy lives, some thought she simply needed more time and the family's patience to help her grow into her own voice. But Arthur and others guessed early what my grandmother Joey always struggled to accept: for Evelyn, the world was defined only by sight, touch, taste and smell.

A resolution to find a language for his daughter became Arthur's new sense of faith, hope and belief. My grandmother Joey often told me that in the early days Arthur carried Evelyn everywhere and never let her feet touch the ground. He had a sixth sense about her destiny; she was his priority and securing her future was his sole purpose.

The Lloyd family were Christian soldiers marching onwards. Opinions were best kept to yourself; family, God and community were how things must be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Arthur had his own opinion about Evelyn – nothing much wrong apart from her not sharing the language of others. He kept his thoughts to himself while he worked out what needed to be done. One

thing he knew, though, was not to rush Joey. She seemed overwhelmed by Evelyn and her difference.

Farm life remained constant, but whenever Arthur could he would take Evelyn to the bend in the river. There they would spend time together, just the two of them, learning. Arthur made sure he was always clean-shaven, as instinct told him that a whisker-free face made it easier for Evelyn to see the shapes of words. He would hold her face in his hands, make sure she could see him, then say the words he believed.

‘We’re here by the river, Evelyn, to find you a voice. Everyone deserves that.’

In those days, platypus families still swam in the local rivers. The waterways whispered sounds of peace and harmony, but the mingled voices of the rivers and creeks also flowed over rocks, swept around logs, flooded muddy banks, crept into homes, destroyed roads and bridges, watered cattle, provided household water and, during drought, slowed to a trickle. It was also the gathering place for swimming, family picnics and storytelling. Joey once mentioned to me that Arthur’s favourite hymn had always been ‘Shall We Gather at the River’.

The river became the place where father and daughter discovered their language. Arthur could not explain his understanding of Evelyn. To him, her curiosity and intellect were not so different from those of his other children. Alongside her shy sense of fun and delight, she had her own way of making sense of farm and family life.

While Evelyn’s gentle charm captivated Arthur, Joey tried to suppress her unease about her child. She felt as

though Evelyn's difference was something personal against her. Joey wanted it to be someone else's fault, but in all the time that I knew my grandmother, there was never any doubt in my mind that she felt she was to blame.

Arthur would often announce, 'Joey, I'm taking Evelyn to the river. She loves watching everything around her there. It'll give you a break.'

The air in the kitchen would shift and shuffle. Arms folded around her waist, Joey would snap, 'I'd like time to wander by the river with a child to spoil.' She was always left out of the visits to the sanctuary where Arthur and Evelyn shared a language.

'Joey, I need to spend as much time with her as I can.'

'Don't be too long,' she'd say aloud, then mutter to herself, 'The river, for goodness sake. When there's so much to do here ... He's always wandering away from what must be done.'

Evelyn's first language was touch. Gentle taps on her head, face, arms, shoulder or back would make her turn to a familiar hand, like another child would turn to the sound of a familiar voice. Although her family learned not to startle her, it was easy for people to become one big blur for Evelyn.

'One at a time,' Arthur would say. 'Evelyn gets confused if you all come at her at once.' Everyone tried too hard; that was the sort of people they were.

Peace for Evelyn was wandering by the river and reading one person only: her father. His tap was gentle, he would

wait for her to look up at him before pointing and saying, 'Look, Evelyn.'

Her head would turn as quick as a roving robin. Arthur would observe her behaviours. She would look at birds perched on branches and then look down at their reflections in the sun-filled water. When he had her attention, he would take his index finger and thumb to make the movement of a bird's beak, experimenting. The soundless shape of his moving mouth was a visual match to the words, 'Bird, Evelyn.'

There were many more birds. Evelyn would giggle when her father showed her a bold, black-faced bird with wiry feet and a feathery coat of black-and-white threads embroidered with yellow and grey, and suspended upside down from a branch. A needle-sharp beak sipped nectar from spiky, apple-perfumed flowers. Arthur shaped the words, 'Evelyn, the acacias bloom after spring rains.'

My grandfather never questioned his unexplainable faith in Evelyn. It was much later that she would learn to spell bird and flower names, such as H-O-N-E-Y-E-A-T-E-R and A-C-A-C-I-A, with her hands. Yet well before then, he believed she would find the words for her own voice.

'Nothing much wrong with Evelyn that language can't fix,' Arthur would say over and over.

'How do we know which language she'll find?' asked Joey. She sensed that her daughter's words were somewhere in a faraway place.

'Optimism is what we need.' Arthur convinced himself, but perhaps not others.

Evelyn found many ways to interpret her world. A week

prior, her eldest sister Gwen had held up a hand mirror; the reflection of the two sisters had bounced back just like the birds in the water.

Moments on her own were rare for Evelyn. Even when she thought she was by herself, someone was always checking where she was and what she was doing.

‘Watch her, Joey.’

Her parents stood together at the kitchen window, observing. Evelyn had taken that same mirror outside into the garden. She twisted and turned the circle of reflective glass to look at herself, the trees, the sky and the dog.

‘Whatever is that child doing?’ Joey asked, always on the lookout for signs of strange behaviour in her youngest daughter.

‘Look, Joey, she’s worked out that there are reflections to be found in the mirror.’

‘Arthur, you’re always trying to see the best in the child.’

‘But it’s clever to understand how the mirror works; she’s finding ways to test its purpose.’

‘And this is testing for me.’

‘Joey, she’s not a test, she’s our daughter.’

‘No-one knows that better than me. That’s what you all forget.’

One afternoon at the river, when the time had come to leave and Arthur was gathering the horse, for once Evelyn’s eyes did not follow him. He stopped and watched her. She was spellbound by the ripples on the river’s surface. Arthur walked over to her side. Something quick had caught her eye and, not turning away, she tapped Arthur’s leg.

‘What is it, Evelyn? Mother will worry if we don’t get home soon.’

Evelyn’s index finger pointed to the flat shape of tobacco-brown velvet as it gracefully slipped through the watery shadows. There was a calm contrast she could see: the silvery swiftness of the darting fish between the waving reeds to that of a mammal with four feet used like fins to glide through the water. It was not a fish and not a bird, but a miracle in any language.

‘A platypus! Oh, Evelyn, you saw it first! A platypus. Clever girl.’

Pride and pleasure were clear to her from the way her father’s face moved and his gentle touch upon her head.

‘My clever girl.’ He knew that was not a word Joey used for Evelyn, but he thought she was a clever child in her own way.

Clouds crept across the Ovens River, sunlight withdrew into quiet spaces and the platypus vanished beneath the sound of Arthur’s soft voice. ‘Ready, Evelyn? Everyone will be looking for us.’ Astride the horse, Arthur held the reins in one hand, and tucked Evelyn into his chest with the other as they headed for home.

2. FARM LIFE

On the horse ride back home to farm and family, father and daughter passed through the area where trees had been pushed out to make way for oats, hops, tobacco, wheat, sheep and cattle – the reshaped dreams of gold seekers and tin miners, the men and their families who had sailed from old worlds to settle land in this new-old world.

Those dreams were buried under yellow grass scorched by savage heat, cattle that needed protection from the flooding rivers and summer droughts, and farm life that depended on charitable weather and stubborn hope. There were never enough dreams to go around; compensation was land, community and working from dawn to dusk. Futures were restructured, the history of the land was retold, and people buried loved ones as they struggled to believe in the many points of difference in God's plan.

Farm language was the dairy cows gazing with brown-eyed longing over fences of rough wooden posts and stretched steel wire; the orchard of well-tended trees producing pears, figs, plums, lemons, oranges, mandarins and apples; and the grapevines providing shade for the walk to the outside washhouse and lavatory. Evelyn's playground included the entwined perfumes of creamy

honeysuckle, pink roses, lilac petals, bold snapdragons, wild winter jonquils, apple blossom and delicate violets.

The four seasons dictated the fruits of the farm's labour, and Evelyn witnessed how the planting, pruning, picking, pickling, bottling, jam making, egg collecting, baking, milking, butter churning, and killing of animals for food was always punctuated with church, trips to town, picnics, family visits and celebrations like Christmas and Easter.

Food flavours and smells defined her days. Sunday was roast lamb with apple pie, Monday was shepherd's pie made from leftovers followed by vanilla custard and crisp bottled pears. Evelyn linked the dry smell of wheat country to her breakfast porridge, and to whenever her big sisters gave her wheat seeds to scatter for the chickens, ducks, turkeys and geese.

Evelyn's world was her family, food and the farm, as familiar to her as her own breathing. And she liked to be involved in small chores, like carrying the freshly picked vegetables inside and putting them on the table.

Seven-year-old Adeline said, 'See, Gwennie, she can do things.'

'Of course she can. But we still have to watch her.'

'Why? She won't go away.'

'Oh, Adeline. Wait until you're older, then you'll understand.' Gwen spoke with all the wisdom of an eleven-year-old and as an eldest sister.

'I can't wait!' Adeline would often get fed up with the constant chores. She was an innovative child who wanted to play and create things instead.

The old rooster, one bird Evelyn would never go near,

roused the rest of the household every day, but for Evelyn it was the sense of her family moving around the kitchen that woke her. In the first part of morning light, her brother Leighton would take her hand and shape the words, 'Evie, let's go outside.'

Eyes, nose, mouth and hands each had their own purpose, and so did ears in some way. Out in the yard, he'd place his hands over his ears and screw up his face, and she would laugh at what would come next. As he shook his finger at the bossy brown rooster, she'd watch the shape of his mouth.

'Evie, you hate that old rooster. So do I!'

Sometimes her attention travelled to the sheepdog resting at the back gate.

'Good dog, waiting to round up sheep. Patient and clever – just like you, Evie.'

'Time for breakfast,' someone would call. Leighton would point inside his mouth and Evelyn would follow him indoors to join the rest of their family. The day always started and finished around the sturdy kitchen table.

As the day stretched on, the chatter was about chores and meals, and as lunchtime neared someone would ask, 'Where's Evelyn?'

'I'll get her ... Leighton, where is she?' Gwen always knew who to ask or where to look.

'She'll be outside watching the animals,' said Adeline.

'I don't know how she does it, but she knows not to wander away. She won't be far,' Leighton said.

'Oh, it's nearly lunchtime. She'll be at the gate waiting for Father,' Gwen realised.

Each day around noon, Evelyn waited at the back gate.

She'd first see the dog running towards the house, and then came Arthur. Light of step when he climbed down from the horse, she'd watch and wait while he led the animal to drink and graze. Then he would kneel down so she could see him say, 'Little one, up you come.'

'Here she is.' And through the back door they would come, with Arthur, smelling of cows and sheep, carrying Evelyn in his arms. Along with the smell of warm wool and damp cotton lining the wooden rail in front of the red brick fireplace, these scents would always remind Evelyn of her people, place and belonging.

Suspended safe in her father's arms, Evelyn was distracted by Leighton, who waved his hands to catch her attention and sang, 'Evie, you're king of the castle.'

'I think that's the *queen* of the castle, Leighton,' Arthur said, playing along. Evelyn's face would squeeze into the shape of joy, entrancing her father, sisters and brothers. But Joey was too preoccupied to be entertained.

Happy to be the centre of attention, Evelyn would smile and wave at her siblings. However, Leighton was quick enough to notice how Evelyn's face changed when Joey walked away.

'You can't put anything past Evie,' he'd say to Adeline.

'I'd like to see someone try.'

When Gwen and Cliff returned from early morning milking, Joey asked Gwen to dress Evelyn. Leighton had noticed that Evelyn preferred her sister dressing her, rather than their mother.

‘In a minute,’ Gwen replied.

‘Now, Gwen,’ Joey snapped.

‘Joey, let Gwen have her breakfast first. Evelyn’s alright for now,’ interjected Arthur.

Although he understood that responsibility needed to be shared, it was hard to explain that to Gwen. A united parental front was imperative to keep them and the farm going.

‘Mother, Gwennie has been up earlier than any of us this morning.’

‘So have I, Leighton.’

‘Gwennie, you take such good care of Evie,’ Leighton said, acknowledging his sister’s contribution.

‘I wish we knew what to do about her,’ whispered Gwen.

Leighton replied, ‘Evie’s smart, she watches everything. And she only has to see you to understand you.’

‘That won’t always be enough, Leighton.’

‘It is for now.’

And that’s where it rested. No-one, not even Leighton, was brave enough to be the one to name Evelyn’s difference – at least, not within earshot of Joey.