

THE CLASS MENAGERIE: MEET BRITAIN'S ANIMAL-MAD ARISTOCRATS

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THE ART OF LIVING

Vanessa Branson revisits her roots in an intimate new memoir that details the personal histories of her enterprising family – and her own adventures in life and love.

By Gavandra Hodge

PHOTOGRAPHS BY PHILIP SINDEN

STYLED BY ROSIE ARKELL-PALMER



Vanessa Branson in the kitchen of her London home, wearing: silk dress, £1,895, Stella McCartney Jumper, £730, Bottega Veneta at Matchesfashion.com. Gold necklace, £695, Monica Vinader. Medal, her own (awarded when she was 'knighted' in Morocco)



Cotton jacket, £420, Egg. Trousers, her own



V

anessa Branson – the hotelier, art curator, author and sister of Richard – is lying on her bed at home in West Sussex, the bedstead embroidered with a poem that

Tracey Emin once wrote for her after a long night in the Colony Room Club in Soho. Vanessa is impish and make-up-free, her unbrushed blonde hair trailing over the pillows. But I am not on the bed with her. This is week two of the Covid-19 lockdown, so we are communicating remotely, Vanessa holding her phone to her face, not always steadily, as she fidgets and lounges. ‘There are nine of us here: me, my four children, their partners and my grandchild. We all shipped down last weekend,’ she explains. ‘We’ve been so busy this week, getting the businesses stabilised. It’s a trauma for everybody. We’re just coming to terms with what we are up against. But we know we are very fortunate.’

The businesses in question are the Moroccan hotel El Fenn, where in 2018 Madonna held her 60th birthday party (as did Vanessa, hosting an early celebration last year – ‘if it’s good enough for Madonna!’) and the Scottish island retreat of Eilean Shona. ‘It’s so sad. We’ve mothballed everything. We can pay our staff until July and then I don’t know what will happen.’ Her brother, currently on his Caribbean-island home Necker, is facing even bigger challenges, not least with his new luxury cruise company Virgin Voyages, launched in February, and the Virgin Atlantic airline. There has been controversy over Richard Branson’s decision to force his airline staff to take eight weeks’ unpaid leave, and his request for what is believed to be a sum of £500 million from the British government for an aviation-industry bail-out. ‘[He’s] trying to save his company,’ responds Vanessa. ‘If you have a people-facing business at the moment, it is horrendous.’

At times like this, she says, the Branson resilience comes to the fore, a family trait that provides the overarching theme of her new memoir, *One Hundred Summers*. The book combines genealogy, social history and personal memories, bringing into focus exhilarating moments such as the founding of Virgin Records and examining in devastating detail the emotional fallout from Vanessa’s divorce – while always emphasising that innate ability to bounce back from

hardship. ‘I started writing because I wanted to honour my parents,’ she explains. ‘They were part of such an extraordinary generation. I didn’t want their essence to be forgotten, all that positivity.’

Edward ‘Ted’ Branson, Vanessa’s father, was born in 1918. He enjoyed a grand, country-house childhood in Suffolk, fought in World War II and, on his return, trained as a barrister. Eve Huntley Flindt was six years younger than Ted; she worked as a performer on the West End stage, served in the Women’s Royal Naval Service and was a dancer with the Ballet Rambert before meeting him at a party. Ted’s family didn’t approve of Eve, of her ‘spontaneity and classlessness’, but they married nonetheless, moved to a workers’ cottage in the village of Shamley Green and had their first two children, Richard and Lindy, in swift succession, even though rationing was still in place and money was tight. In 1959, nine years after Richard was born, Vanessa arrived.

‘My parents were tough, there was no room for sentimentality,’ she says, trying to locate the source of her strength. ‘The children were expected to be ‘radiators, not drains’. If they cried when hurt, they would not be comforted, medicines were deployed only for mortal situations, baths were once a week, toothbrushes were shared. They were not allowed to complain about being too tired or too cold to do the chores expected of them at Tanyard Farm, where the family moved in 1964; being a sulk was not acceptable, nor was being a coward. During the war, Eve had trained cadets to fly gliders, and part of her job was to cajole young men into the sky, brimming with courage-building enthusiasm and confidence as she strapped them in to the flimsy machines. ‘If you can turn fear into excitement, it makes life so much more fun,’ says Vanessa. ‘That was embedded and rooted into everything we did as kids.’ Eve – who is now 95 and enlivening the retirement home where she moved in November – was never the sort of mother to hover over her children, telling them not to climb trees or go too fast on their bikes; rather, she would encourage them to climb higher, to go faster, to push themselves to the edges of their emotional and physical capabilities. If it ended in disaster, that could be turned into something positive too, a family tale to be laughed about. When Vanessa fell off her bike, blood pouring from her forehead, her mother didn’t rush to get a plaster, she ran to fetch the cine camera, so the moment could be documented for future family fun.

This robust approach continued inside the house. At mealtimes, the children were expected to partake in adult discussions about politics, current affairs and ethics. Ted (who died in 2011) had an inquiring intellect that spurred debate and encouraged his children, particularly Richard, to question the status quo in a way that would serve him well in business, if not as a pupil at Stowe. ‘Richard was always wanting to disrupt,’ observes Vanessa. Fuelled by a seemingly limitless anarchic energy, he would constantly play pranks on his sisters, as well as spending school holidays coming up with entrepreneurial projects such as breeding budgerigars or growing Christmas trees – schemes that would ultimately morph into launching a nationwide



Left: cotton wrap dress, £475, Three Graces London at [Matchesfashion.com](https://www.matchesfashion.com). Top: a Grayson Perry pot titled *Monument to the Midlife Crisis*. Below: Vanessa with her siblings Richard and Lindy and their mother Eve on the island of Eilean Shona in 2014. Right: *Untitled* (1994) by Anya Gallaccio



PHOTOGRAPH: JACK BRUCKWAY

In front of Bridget
Riley's *Daphne*
(1988), wearing
cotton dress, £470,
Egg. Necklace,
her own





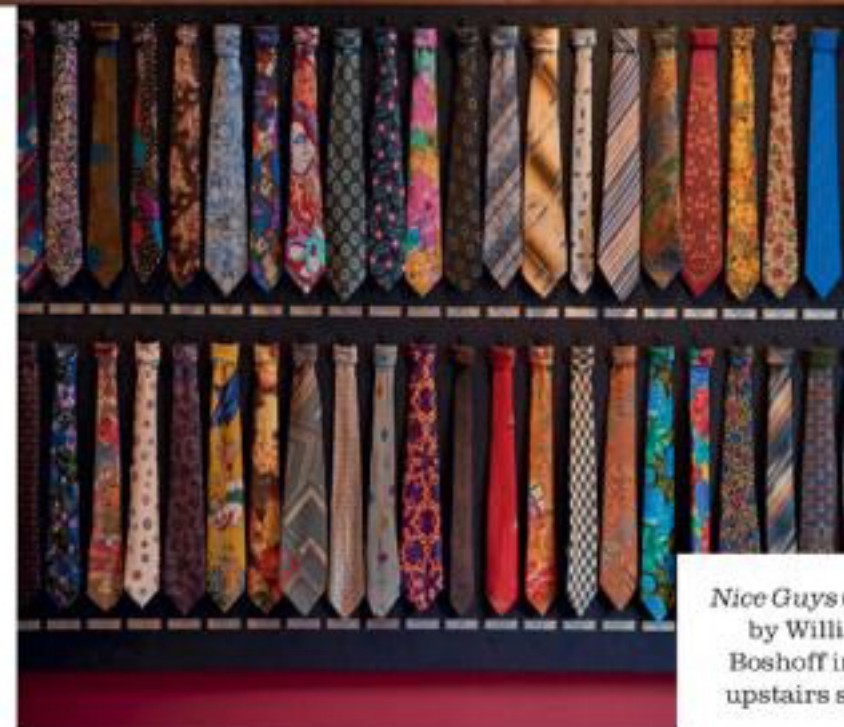
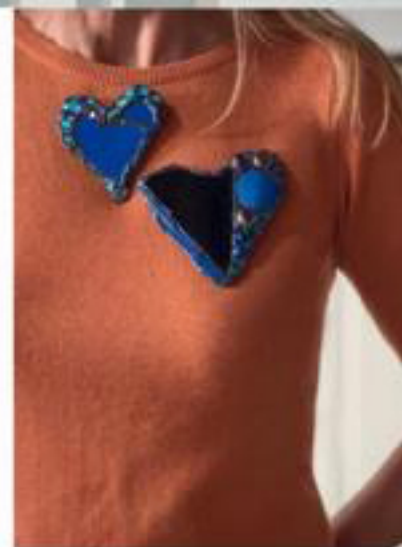
Left: cotton jumpsuit, £1,795, Roksanda. Bracelet, her own. Below: *Untitled* (1999) by William Kentridge. Below right: cashmere T-shirt, £325, William & Son. Brooches by Andrew Logan, her own. Opposite: Vanessa (left) with Richard and Lindy in 1966



student magazine, a chain of record shops, a music label, a recording studio, a transatlantic airline, health clubs and a media company, among other ventures. 'He really is an extraordinary person,' says Vanessa. 'But there was such a big age gap there was no way I could compete with him. I never felt jealous or anything. He was just really fun to have as a brother. He took me to my first X-rated film when I was 11. *Borsalino*, I think.'

Another defining Branson characteristic is dyslexia. 'In many ways, this gene has been the making of our family,' Vanessa writes in the book, suggesting that the impossibility of a conventional career motivated their entrepreneurial drive. 'If you're dyslexic, you can't have a goal-oriented life,' she says. 'So I have always thought of my life as a game of pinball rather than a game of football.'

Vanessa left Box Hill boarding-school at 16 and trained as a chef, an interior designer and an art historian, all the while gaining a different sort of education as a bystander to her brother's whirlwind career: she attended his parties, watched bands such as Queen record their music at Branson's studio and, aged 17, lived in New York for a month, helping to decorate



Nice Guys (2007) by William Boshoff in the upstairs study

the new Virgin HQ in Greenwich Village. Back in the UK, she was spending her weekends visiting her boyfriend, Robert Devereux, a student at Cambridge University, and weekdays doing an apprenticeship at a West End picture framer. In 1983, she married Devereux and moved to Ladbroke Grove, before opening a gallery selling contemporary art three years later. 'It was catching that amazing creative wave, being part of the YBA generation,' she reflects. 'With artists like William Kentridge, I saw how art could be politically significant.' The gallery was influential and Vanessa continued to run it while having her children, first Noah in 1987 and then Florence in 1989. But after Louis was born in 1991, she realised she was unable to parent both children and artists, so closed the gallery. Ivo was born four years afterwards, and this coincided with Vanessa's husband Robert approaching the crisis age of 40. He decided that they should buy Eilean Shona, a rugged 2,000-acre wilderness, buffeted by sea and wind, inspired in part by his brother-in-law's purchase of Necker 17 years earlier. 'I think there was definitely a bit of competition,' says Vanessa. 'And our island is bigger!'

But not even a beautiful family hideaway could save the couple's marriage. A year after they bought the island, Robert told Vanessa that he had fallen in love with another woman, who was 26 years old and a fellow employee at the Virgin Vision office. Vanessa's accounts of this period of her life are among the most raw and compelling passages in her memoir. 'To describe the pain as torture is no exaggeration, for this is a pain inflicted knowingly on you by a person you love deeply, whose steely cruelty is incomprehensible,' she writes. It was, she says, a challenge to write about Robert's betrayal, to relive those emotions; equally difficult was ensuring that the children didn't find the book too distressing. 'I read the two key chapters out loud to them, all of us together, so they weren't sitting alone in their rooms reading. It was a shared experience. We all cried. It was really nice.'

Meanwhile, Richard and Eve read the book on Necker. 'I wrote the last part up in Scotland and went straight from there to Necker. Richard said, "Go on, print it out." It really matters to me to get his approval still, he's like another dad in a way. So I gave it to him and he started reading it to mum out loud. I watched them sitting on the sofa, laughing away, and I thought, maybe it will be all right. He read it in two days and he was so encouraging. Once I had his approval, I thought, this is going to be fine.'

One of Eve's mottos is that the Bransons do not remember the sad times, but this is not quite the case with Vanessa's book, where adversity is detailed in all its agonising complexity. Nonetheless, she does not linger on the rough patches, and there is always alleviating humour, such as the night Vanessa stayed up until four in the morning getting drunk with Tracey Emin. Apparently, the artist told

her that she had to get rid of the bed she had shared with Robert, and subsequently wrote a couple of poems to help her move on – the very lines I now see embroidered on Vanessa's bed on the screen in front of me. 'They must have worked, because soon afterwards she had an affair with a rock star known in the book only as 'H', with whom she indulged in alfresco sex against the gates of the Globe Theatre. 'Oh, I wanted to share that with the world!' she says, her laughter morphing into a sort of joyful cackle.

Another balm for Vanessa (who is now single) was her friendship with Howell James, a PR man, formerly John Major's private secretary and the head of communications at the BBC. In 2002, the pair decided to buy an elegantly ruined riad in Marrakesh, which they would spend the next two years transforming into a six-bedroom hotel, El Fenn. 'It was a wonderful experience, we made magic happen in that place. It was like we were dancing.' But Vanessa's investment in Morocco went beyond the hotel. In 2004, she launched a national art festival that would become the Marrakesh Biennale – 'it kick-started a whole creative movement' – and in 2014 she was awarded the King's Medal for Services to the Arts by Mohammed VI, the equivalent of being knighted in the UK. 'They are very respectful, the Moroccans, and very grateful. When I'm there, I feel very proud; when I'm here, I'm just being teased by my children.'

Vanessa admits that her own parenting style owes a lot to her childhood. If the family are staying at Eilean Shona (she bought Robert out of his share of the island after selling some shares in El Fenn), everyone is expected to join in the morning swim in the freezing waters. 'Back when the children were teenagers, they were really reluctant,' she says. 'But now they are grown up, when their mates come to stay, they are the ones making everyone do it.'



And just as Vanessa and her siblings were required to help out on the farm as children, today, while the family are in lockdown, they are all doing four hours of 'hard labour' every morning in the orchards and

kitchen garden. Vanessa is hoping that by June, they will be self-sufficient. They also have an art studio for creative projects, and Vanessa is thinking about writing a novel. But what is most important to her is spending this time with her family, enjoying healthy lunches and lively, wine-fuelled dinners, as well as the odd online party with Lindy in London and Richard on Necker.

'Having a period when we are not moving around, when we can concentrate on finishing conversations and seeing ideas through... I hope it will be a very enriching experience,' she says. It's a classic Branson response, turning adversity into adventure. □

'One Hundred Summers' by Vanessa Branson (£20, Mensch Publishing) is out on 21 May.

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