

# Diary

Jacki Weaver

I WROTE A COLLECTION of short stories when I was six years old, but it wasn't until I was nine that I wrote my first novel, filling a forty-page exercise book with an HB copperplate pencil in newly learned running writing. My novel was about a little girl who runs away from home in Sydney, stows away on an ocean liner and wakes up in Paris, where she eventually and incredibly finds her long-lost parents and finds out that her *real* name is Françoise, not Vicki. It took me a while to pull all the loose strands of the plot together, but in the end it wasn't a bad read. Sadly, *Françoise, Lost in France* wasn't snapped up by a publisher, but Miss Annie Jones, headmistress of Percival Road Primary, accorded it a public reading and ninety-nine per cent in the Year Three exams. My piece of fiction had also made Miss Jones curious about my home life.

She needn't have worried. I still think my father is the third most handsome and the best man I've ever touched, and my mother the cleverest and most frightening of women. The house we lived in at 55 Union Street, West Kogarah, was a little crowded, though I never noticed at the time. My aunt and I shared one bedroom, my parents and my brother the other, and my grandfather slept on the open verandah. My aunt was a strikingly pretty teenager, besotted with James Dean and Richard Burton. She was also ineffably sad. Her mother had died when she was only ten. I spent a lot of time imagining what that must have felt like.

Recently, on one of those tell-all surprise TV shows, my aunt revealed that when I was seven I used to sit in front of the mirror and practise weeping, a memory that totally eludes me, though I don't doubt my aunt's story. On the same programme, another relative told a tale about me that I know to be utterly false. Time and retelling had made it authentic for the narrator, so I didn't refute it in the cause of grace under pressure. Similarly, an ex-husband often regales me with accounts of entire vivid conversations we've had, and I don't recall a single scrap. Fortunately, that particular spouse didn't appear on *This Is Your Life*. 'Memory, dear Cecily, is the diary we all carry about with us,' said Oscar. Pity that it's full of fibs, half-fibs and stuff that's disappeared into the ether.

The family legend goes that my father taught me to read when I was a toddler and that I could recite passages from

Swift at the age of four. My mother, ever the sceptic, was scornful, her contention being that I'd memorised entire chapters and was merely repeating them, not reading them. She may have been right. All I remember is that I loved *Gulliver's Travels*. I identified with the Lilliputians. (For those who don't know, I'm impossibly small.) Another family story is that one day when I was four I was reading that awful Sydney rag the *Truth* one morning after Sunday School and Daddy said: 'May I have the paper, Jacki?' I replied: 'Please just wait until I've finished reading "Dramas of the Criminal Courts".' Precocious? *Moi?*

A friend purloined one of my personal anecdotes and made himself the central character. My reaction was not that of an indignant plagiarist, but rather of fascination. Another friend not only pinched one of my stories and passes it off as her own, but also tells it to me as though she's forgotten its origin, as I'm sure she has. You have to laugh, as Mrs Haycox used to say.

The trouble with being a voracious reader of quality stuff is that your standards are so high that nothing you write yourself is ever good enough. I spent a frustrating year in the 1980s trying to write a performance piece for myself about Christina Stead. It ended in tears and abandonment. Actors and writers share the umbrella of storytelling. It's possible that everyone can write and everyone can act to a degree, but few people can do either excellently, never mind both. My most recent attempt at a novel was just a few years ago. After months of research and copious notes, I went to a hideout in Kauaii for a while to try and pull it all together. (As Frank Muir said: 'I've just been to Corsica to finish my novel — I'm a very slow reader.') But, alas, despite a cracker of a plot and intriguing characters, I just couldn't make it work, not to my liking anyway. Only three other people saw it. They claimed to enjoy it, but I didn't trust their bias, so the manuscript is now gathering dust in a storage room in Alexandria (Sydney, not Egypt), and there it stays.

I'm not a bad actor though, most of the time. And although I'm not particularly gregarious, I like the fact that acting is a communal and less solitary way of telling stories than writing. I love my solitude, but maybe I need company more.