

My Secret Diary

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Extract

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The STORY SO FAR...

AS TOLD IN JACKY DAYDREAM



Hello horsey!

*Neigh!
Come and ride
on my back.*

I played pretend games, even as a baby.



*We just have to flap
our wings and fly!*

Wheee!

I invented imaginary
games with my dolls
when I was little.



And when I was big.

I hate our stepmother!

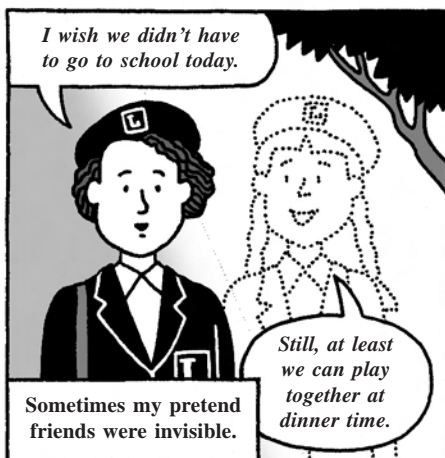
Let's run away!



I played with paper dolls.

*I love your
evening gown!*

*Oh darling, wait till I tell
you about the party!*



*I wish we didn't have
to go to school today.*

*Still, at least
we can play
together at
dinner time.*

Sometimes my pretend
friends were invisible.

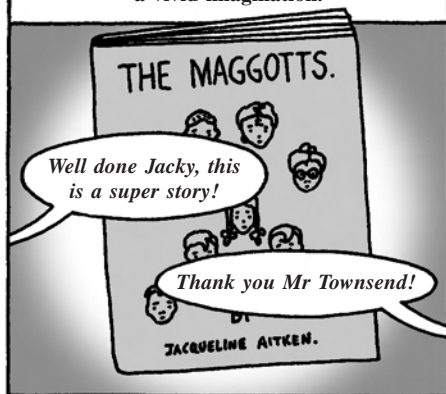


*Might I have the honour of a dance,
fair lady Christina?*

Certainly, my Lord Jack.

I had real friends, too – and sometimes
we all played pretend games.

Some of my teachers liked me having a vivid imagination.



Some of my teachers found it tiresome.



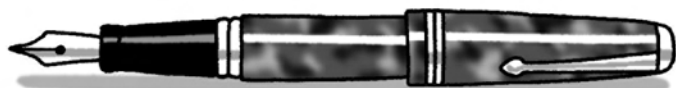
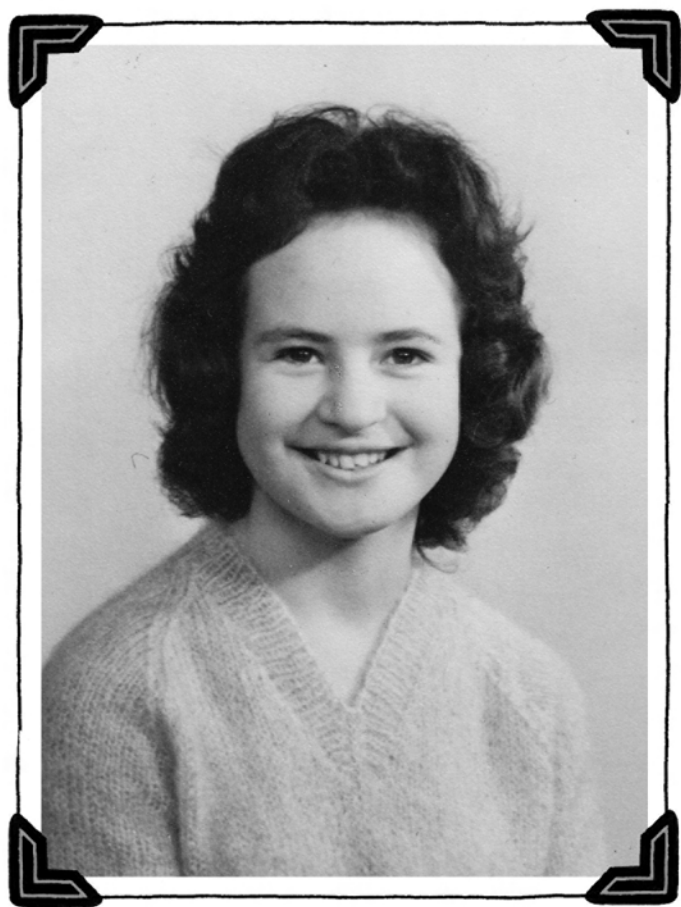
My family weren't too thrilled, either.



I longed to write my own books. I wrote short stories and poems and plays and I started many, many 'novels'.



Then in 1960, the year I was fourteen, I started keeping a diary.



1

My Diary

I've kept a diary on and off all my life. When I was a little girl I had small Letts schoolgirl diaries. I kept them in my sock drawer, madly thinking this was an amazingly inventive hiding place. I didn't really record any riveting secrets in my blotchy biro: 'Mummy bought me a *Girl* comic. I think Joan of Arc is wonderful. Daddy and I went for a walk and I pretended to be a pony.'

I didn't write at length in a proper journal until I was in my teens. I read *The Diary of Anne Frank* and then re-read it so many times I could quote whole passages by heart. I especially loved the parts where Anne says she wants to be a writer when she grows up. I identified so strongly with that longing. I ached for Anne because she never had the chance to fulfil her huge potential. However, she also wrote that she wanted to be remembered after her death, and of course millions around the world read her wonderful diary. I knew this perfectly well but I still somehow felt she was writing her diary just for

me, confiding all her secret fears and hopes and dreams. I slept with my pink Pan paperback copy of Anne's diary under my pillow and I kept a picture of her on my bedside table. I'd sometimes whisper to her at night.

I'd seen a photo of the actual red and white checked notebook that was Anne's first diary. I longed to own a similar notebook. Stationery was pretty dire back in the late fifties and early sixties. There was no such thing as Paperchase. I walked round and round the stationery counter in Woolworths and spent most of my pocket money on notebooks, but they weren't strong on variety. You could have shiny red sixpenny notebooks, lined inside, with strange maths details about rods and poles and perches on the back. (I never found out what they were!) Then you could have shiny *blue* sixpenny notebooks, etc. That was your lot.

I was enchanted to read in Dodie Smith's novel *I Capture the Castle* that the heroine, Cassandra, was writing her diary in a similar sixpenny notebook. She eventually progressed to a shilling notebook. My Woolworths rarely stocked such expensive luxuries. Then, two thirds of the way through the book, Cassandra is given a two-guinea red leather manuscript book. I lusted after that fictional notebook for years.

I told my mother, Biddy. She rolled her eyes. It could have cost two *hundred* guineas – both were way out of our league.

‘Could I maybe have a special journal for my Christmas present?’ I begged.

‘Can’t you use one of the notepads Harry brings home from work?’ she asked.

My dad, Harry, was a civil servant. One of the few perks of his job was that he had an unlimited illegal supply of notepads watermarked SO – Stationery Office. I’d drawn on these pads for years, I’d scribbled stories, I’d written letters. They were serviceable but unexciting: thin cream paper unreliably bound at the top with glue. You couldn’t write a journal in one of these notepads; it would fall apart in days.

‘I need proper covers for my secret journal. I want it to be completely private,’ I said.

Biddy scoffed at me. She didn’t believe in privacy, especially where I was concerned. But she was always inventive with my Christmas presents even though we had very little money. She rose to the journal challenge.

On Christmas Day 1959, when I was just fourteen, she gave me a book, *The Devil and Mary Ann* by Catherine Cookson (I’d read the first two books about this tough little Tyneside girl and loved them); a *Filmgoers’ Annual* with a special

feature on Dirk Bogarde; a pair of American tan nylons and my first white lace suspender belt; a Yardley pressed powder compact in a gilt case – *and a proper journal.*

It wasn't quite a red-leather two-guinea job. It was grey plastic and it didn't cost a penny. Biddy worked as a book-keeper for Prince Machines. They supplied some of these machine tools to Thailand. Their customers sent them a diary as a seasonal token. The lettering was all Thai and therefore meaningless to me, but it was easy enough to work out which page was 1 January.

I was thrilled with my diary. It was the size of a book so I had quite a lot of room to write in. Here's that first entry:

Ever since I was little I have loved writing stories and poems. I would get an idea, buy a new exercise book, and start writing industriously, thinking myself the creator of a masterpiece. But by the end of the week I would think of another better idea and repeat the rigmarole. But now I have the better idea of writing a diary, as I hope I will never get sick of my own life. Besides, think of all the people who have been made famous by their diaries. Samuel Pepys, Fanny Burney, Marjorie Fleming, Anne Frank, etc., etc., so why shouldn't I? I'm only very

ordinary, admittedly, but interesting things do sometimes happen to me. But perhaps the real reason for me starting this diary is because I find it 'irresistible, the pleasure of popping down my thoughts from time to time on paper'.

I was quoting Anne Frank of course. I said '*etc., etc.,*' one of my weird little writing tics, though I didn't know any other diarists, so I shouldn't have put even one *etc.*, let alone two.

I wrote with a lovely old-fashioned mottled fountain pen. My handwriting was much neater then than it is nowadays. My spelling wasn't always too hot. It still isn't. Thank goodness for the spellcheck on my computer!

I had a list of new year's resolutions too. They didn't vary from year to year. Two out of three of them are pretty embarrassing.

Number one: Grow my hair.

When I was a baby I'd had fine, dark, straight hair. Biddy wound the top wisp round her finger so it stuck up in a fetching little wave. Sadly, my hair stayed thin and straight and wispy. Biddy continued to wave the top, forcing me to sleep with wicked curling grips seemingly stuck directly into my scalp. She had the rest cut very short to try to keep it tidy. I hated my hairstyle,

though I liked going to Bentalls children's hairdresser's because you got to crouch on a special seat with a horse's head sticking out between your knees. You could stroke the horse's mane and tickle his ears while having your hair clipped. If you were very good and didn't make a fuss, the hairdresser (Pam or Maureen or Marilyn) would spin you round and round when she'd finished snipping.

Biddy was still dissatisfied with my wispy waif appearance. She wished I had Shirley Temple ringlets so she dragged me to her own hairdresser's and had them perm my hair. I had one perm after another throughout my childhood. I hated hated hated perms. I looked as if I'd been plugged into a light socket. I still had violent perms the first couple of years of secondary school and got royally teased about my frizzy hair. Girls on the bus would snigger at my precariously balanced school beret.

'Does your mother have to put your beret on with a battering ram?'

Oh, very funny. As I got older I argued more and utterly refused to have any more perms.

'I'm going to grow my hair long,' I said firmly.

'But it won't suit you, Jac. And it's too fine. It'll go all straggly.'

'I don't care,' I said.

It *did* go straggly in that awful in-between stage. It took such a long time to grow. I'd take hold of it a lock at a time and pull it sharply, or I'd sit hunched up with my neck tucked in just so that I could kid myself my hair was nearly shoulder-length.

It started to get horribly greasy too, much to my horror. In those long-ago days you only washed your hair once a week with Drene shampoo. *Anyone's* hair would look greasy. I'd attack my head with dry shampoo, a ghastly white powdery substance like chalk. It *looked* as if I'd been rubbing chalk through my hair after I'd applied it. I can't understand why I didn't wash my hair properly each day. There was some mumbo-jumbo that it made you lose your strength!

I'd wince every time I looked in the mirror and suddenly weaken. I'd have my hair cut and permed, instantly hate my new middle-aged hairstyle and vow to grow my hair all over again.

I didn't just want long hair. I wanted *fair* hair too, though I didn't dare contemplate peroxide. Biddy said Peroxide Blondes were as Common as Muck. I longed ludicrously for natural long blonde hair. There was a girl called Susan Wooldridge in my year at school. She had shiny straight fair hair, neatly plaited in two long braids tied with green satin ribbon to match our green and grey school

uniform. I'd stand behind Susan in assembly and stare enviously at her beautiful hair. Susan was a pretty pink-and-white complexioned girl with a perky personality. I didn't know her very well because we weren't in the same class but I longed to *be* her.

When I woke up in the morning I'd keep my eyes shut, clench my fists and *will* myself to change places with Susan. Sometimes I'd kid myself it was actually working. I'd feel as if I was wafting way above the clouds, diving down over the rooftops of New Malden and slipping into Susan's open window. But when I dared open my eyes I always found myself under my own ugly brown eiderdown, and the mirror in my bedroom reflected my own artificial curls.

My second resolution was equally embarrassing: Get a boyfriend.

I'd had boyfriends at my primary school – David and then Alan – but of course they weren't *real* boyfriends, though we held hands and occasionally gave each other film-star kisses. We didn't keep in touch when we all went on to secondary school. I went to Coombe, an all-girls school, so I obviously wasn't going to find a new boyfriend there.

I didn't truthfully *want* a boyfriend, but it was such a status symbol, especially at school. When we all gathered together in the first year (Year

Seven) it was the first question everyone asked.
Have you got a boyfriend?

Very few of us had boyfriends the first and second years so we could relax and not bother about it too much, but by the third year (Year Nine) it was starting to become imperative.

I still didn't know *how* to get a boyfriend. There were lots of boys who lived in our flats – in fact I lived right next door to two teenage boys, Jeremy and Anthony, but I didn't *know* them. I just mumbled hello if I bumped into them on the balcony.

I was painfully aware that Biddy thought me very backward when it came to boys. I knew she'd had heaps of boyfriends when she was fourteen.

'Don't worry, you'll get a boyfriend soon, Jac,' she'd say. 'Just smile at the first boy you fancy and start chatting to him.'

'What should I *say*?'

'I don't know. The first thing that comes into your head.'

I had a head full of daydreams. I couldn't imagine telling any boy about my private imaginary games, all my made-up characters and stories-in-progress. I didn't even talk about them to my best friends, Chris and Carol. I certainly didn't talk about them to Biddy, who thought me weird enough already.

‘I don’t know how to talk to boys,’ I said despairingly.

‘If only you weren’t so *shy*,’ said Biddy. ‘Still, you can’t help that, you take after your father.’

I didn’t ask Harry how to talk to boys. I didn’t know how to talk to *him*. We could spend a whole day together in the flat without saying a word to each other. It was hard remembering that Harry had once been Biddy’s boyfriend. They weren’t boy and girl now – and they certainly weren’t friends either.

My third and final new year resolution was more heartfelt and personal:

Write a book!

I’d *written* so-called books, heaps of them, but they were twenty-page hand-written efforts in my Woolworths notebooks. Most petered out halfway through. Some only progressed for a page or two. I didn’t restrict myself to novels. I wrote a fifteen-page biography of the child actress Mandy Miller, embellished with photos and drawings. It was pretty similar to all the Jacqueline Wilson projects children show me nowadays.

I wrote the odd play too – odd being the operative word. I once wrote about the story of Moses from his sister Miriam’s point of view. I tried poetry too, most of it abysmal. I tried to be versatile as a writer but at heart I’ve always been a novelist. I tried so

hard with my stories but I knew that none of them were good enough to get published. I just hoped that *one* day I'd write something worth while.

I kept that 1960 diary all the way through to the summer, writing very detailed entries day after day. I'll be quoting from almost every page – and blushing frequently!