JOAN DIDION

LET ME TELL YOU WHAT I MEAN

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A shortened version of "Pretty Nancy" later appeared in *The White Album* (1979). "Why I Write" later appeared in the anthology *The Writer on Her Work*, edited by Janet Sternberg and first published in 1980.

The following essays first appeared in the *Saturday Evening Post*: "Alicia and the Underground Press," "Getting Serenity," "A Trip to Xanadu," "On Being Unchosen by the College of One's Choice," "Pretty Nancy," "Fathers, Sons, Screaming Eagles." "Why I Write" first appeared in *The New York Times Magazine;* "Telling Stories" first appeared in *New West;* "Last Words" and "Everywoman.com" first appeared in *The New Yorker.*

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FOREWORD

A peculiar aspect of Joan Didion's nonfiction is that a significant portion of it reads like fiction. Or, more specifically, has the metaphorical power of great fiction. While younger generations may read the master as a kind of window into the mythical 1960s, or 9/11, say, it's impossible not to see, too, how Didion's examination of racial bias and the Central Park Five, Reagan-era El Salvador, or the smug, violent, white male carelessness that characterized the infamous Spur Posse in Lakewood, California, in the early 1990s, anticipated the deeply troubling politics of today. And while the farsighted Didion is certainly in evidence in a few of her early essays collected in this book of twelve previously uncollected pieces—essays ranging from a 1968 report on Gamblers Anony-

mous to an appreciation of Martha Stewart, published thirty-two years later—what makes the early work particularly interesting is how Didion's now famous cool and shifting perspective takes a backseat to Didion the Opiner. From 1968's "Alicia and the Underground Press":

> The only American newspapers that do not leave me in the grip of a profound physical conviction that the oxygen has been cut off from my brain tissue, very probably by an Associated Press wire, are *The Wall Street Journal,* the Los Angeles *Free Press,* the Los Angeles *Open City,* and the *East Village Other.* I tell you that not to make myself out an amusing eccentric, perverse and eclectic and, well, groovy in all her tastes; I am talking here about something deadening and peculiar, the inability of all of us to speak to one another in any direct way, the failure of American newspapers to "get through."

This piece is exceptional for a number of reasons, the primary one being, aside from its decid-

edly emphatic, cranky tone and the long-ago days that titles like the *East Village Other* evoke, is Didion laying out a kind of writerly ethos a little further along in the piece.
She says:

> The *Free Press,* the *EVO,* the *Berkeley Barb,* all the other tabloid-sized papers that reflect the special interests of the young and the disaffiliated: their particular virtue is to be devoid of conventional press postures, so many of which rest on a quite factitious "objectivity." Do not misread me: I admire objectivity very much indeed, but I fail to see how it can be achieved if the reader does not understand the writer's particular bias. For the writer to pretend that he has none lends the entire venture a mendacity that has never infected *The Wall Street Journal* and does not infect yet the underground press. When a writer for an underground paper approves or disapproves of something, he says so, quite often in lieu of who, what, where, when, how.

Of course, part of the remarkable character of Didion's work has to do with her refusal to pretend that she doesn't exist. From the time she began writing for *The Saturday Evening Post* specifically—she and her husband, John Gregory Dunne, shared a column called "Points West" for the magazine from 1964 to 1969—through masterly late novels such as 1984's *Democracy,* Didion has wrestled with the "I" character, which is to say with truth and perspective as it applied to, or appealed to, herself. That she rejected the notion that the world can be filtered through the precepts of journalism and come out on the other side as "true" radicalized Joan Didion's nonfiction from the first. Her narrative nonfiction is a question about the truth. And if her nonfiction is synonymous with anything, says Didion in work after work, it is with the idea that the truth is provisional, and the only thing backing it up is who you are at the time you wrote this or that, and that your joys and biases and prejudices are part of writing, too. And while a few of these pieces were written around the time Didion published some of her justly famous reporting as well—her land-

mark collection, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem,* came out in 1968—it was Didion's fiction that taught her, I think, how to articulate what bugged her by tempering it with humor and a dry little sigh of exasperation. In novels like 1970's *Play It as It Lays,* and her early masterpiece, 1977's *A Book of Common Prayer,* the intensities of youth were replaced with the rueful forbearance of the experienced woman who could create protagonists and narrators who had seen their share of stuff go down, or not happen, or whatever. Didion the novelist taught Didion the nonfiction writer.

When you read a writer in a popular magazine or newspaper, you are getting two writers, really. There's the person who has something to say, and the person who has to make that something fit. The "Points West" columns were, for the most part, limited by space. Didion had roughly two thousand words for the column, and she had to use them to tell the story of what she saw, felt, thought, which means that sometimes she used didacticism as a tool. And yet even then Didion could right an ideological wrong in her own thinking by not turning away from mystery.

While "Getting Serenity" is ostensibly about some folks who are wrestling with gambling addictions, the piece is filled with Didion's implicit disdain for anything that smacks of "self-help," combined with her (again implicit) up-by-your-bootstraps-don't-complain-and-don't-look-back California ethos. "There was nothing particularly wrong" about the meetings, she writes, "and yet there was something not quite right, something troubling. At first I thought that it was simply the predilection of many of the members to dwell on how 'powerless' they were." In the end, though, Didion finally recognizes what she finds troubling. Frank L., one of the gamblers Didion writes about, is celebrating a year of sobriety with his family and friends. There's a cake. "It hasn't been easy," he says to the assembled. "But in the last three, four weeks we've gotten a . . . a *serenity* at home." Then:

> Well, there it was. I got out fast then, before anyone could say "serenity" again, for it is a word I associate with death, and for several days after that meeting I wanted only to be

in places where the lights were bright and no one counted days.

That an author could be undone by the story she was telling wasn't especially new in 1968; Norman Mailer, a Didion favorite, had, that very year, published *The Armies of the Night,* his report on antiwar activism in and around Washington. But Mailer had narrated his book as "Mailer," a third-person character who, despite his extravagant personality, was a few steps removed from his material. In the early essays collected here, Didion is saying that a woman's "I"—her eye and I—didn't need any such devices to tell the story; what Didion needed was a situation that provoked a reaction and gave her her story, in all senses of the word. The existential crisis she experiences at the end of "Getting Serenity" is a great example of that, and a great example of how language affects the writer who loves words but knows how they can undo us, too. When I first started reading Didion in the late 1970s, it became clear to me after a while that one of her big subjects was the craft of writing itself. Why it mat-

tered to her, mattered to anyone, and it's writing as subject, writing as a way of life, that is part of this book. She has a great deal to say about the craft in her 1998 essay about Ernest Hemingway, parts of which feel like a self-portrait of Joan Didion herself.

> The very grammar of a Hemingway sentence dictated, or was dictated by, a certain way of looking at the world, a way of looking but not joining, a way of moving through but not attaching, a kind of romantic individualism distinctly adapted to its time and source.

A way of looking but not joining, a way of moving through but not attaching—certainly these are the qualities I found so striking in Didion's nonfiction, but what further set her writing apart from Hemingway's now very dated "romantic individualism" was the physics or energy in Didion's writing, what she might call its "shimmer." And it's that energy or shimmer that sheds a sort of awful and beautiful light on a world we half see but don't want to see, one where potential harm is a given,

the bogeyman may be your father, and hope is a flimsy defense against dread. Indeed, what Didion alone brings to contemporary nonfiction is a feeling for the uncanny. In his 1919 essay about the phenomenon, Freud writes that the uncanny is synonymous with and expressive of "all that arouses dread and creeping horror." But the good doctor observes in the same paper that "the word itself is not always used in a clearly definable sense, so that it tends to coincide with whatever excites dread." Part of Didion's brilliance is not so much to define menace or the uncanny as to show it. Take, for instance, a scene that has stayed with me since I first read *Slouching Towards Bethlehem,* Didion's 1967 report on San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury youth culture and drug scene. One afternoon the author finds herself sitting with some of her subjects in the city's Panhandle.

> Janis Joplin is singing with Big Brother . . . and almost everybody is high and it is a pretty nice Sunday afternoon . . . and who turns up but Peter Berg. He is with his wife and six or seven other people . . . and the first peculiar thing is, they're in blackface.

I mention to Max and Sharon that some members of the Mime Troupe seem to be in blackface.

"It's street theater," Sharon assures me. "It's supposed to be really groovy."

The Mime Troupers get a little closer, and there are some other peculiar things about them. For one thing they are tapping people on the head with dime-store plastic nightsticks, and for another they are wearing signs on their backs. "HOW MANY TIMES HAVE YOU BEEN RAPED, YOU LOVE FREAKS?" and "WHO STOLE CHUCK BERRY'S MUSIC?," things like that. Then they are distributing communication company fliers which say:

> & this summer thousands of un-white un-suburban boppers are going to want to know why you've given up what they can't get & how you get away with it . . .

Max reads the flier and stands up. "I'm getting bad vibes," he says, and he and Sharon leave.

I have to stay around because I'm looking

for Otto so I walk over to where the Mime Troupers have formed a circle around a Negro. Peter Berg is saying if anybody asks that this is street theater, and I figure the curtain is up because what they are doing right now is jabbing the Negro with the nightsticks. They jab, and they bare their teeth, and they rock on the balls of their feet and they wait.

"I'm beginning to get annoyed here," the Negro says. "I'm gonna get mad."

By now there are several Negroes around, reading the signs and watching.

"Just beginning to get annoyed, are you?" one of the Mime Troupers says. "Don't you think it's about time?" . . .

"Listen," the Negro says, his voice rising. "You're gonna start something here, this isn't right—"

"You tell us what's right, black boy," the girl says.

For the black man at the center of this particular drama, the horror that is visited upon him and his good time in the park is further proof of the

"dread and creeping horror" that his skin color generates in the white world. For her part, Didion is not herself during this exchange—a dominant "I." Unlike other nonfiction writers she admires, Graham Greene among them, Didion doesn't insert her personality in the scene; she can't editorialize, or won't, because, to her, nightmares carry their own weight, and it's the writer's job to be awake when the nightmare or uncanny happens. Because it will. Didion's ethos is not much related to a school but a way of seeing that's particular to who she is, to the world that made her, a way of seeing that, ultimately, reveals the writer to herself.

We are all from somewhere. And it's the artist's job to question the values that went into the making of that somewhere. What you'll notice in Didion's nonfiction as well is how her famous clarity becomes even sharper when disquiet rattles the cage of the quotidian, or she's in the presence of indefensible bodies, which is to say that man in the Panhandle. Who will protect him? "Society"? Didion shows us how much society cares by recording the self-protective, which is

to say the ultimately self-interested language of the Haight—"I'm getting bad vibes"—as a way of showing how little responsibility the children are willing to take on. (It was only a year after the book's publication that Meredith Hunter, another black man, was killed by Hells Angel Alan Passaro during the Rolling Stones' free concert at Altamont.) Why was Joan Didion there in the first place? "I'm not interested in the middle road—maybe because everyone's on it," Didion said in a 1979 interview with the critic Michiko Kakutani. "Rationality, reasonableness bewilder me. . . . A lot of the stories I was brought up on had to do with extreme actions—leaving everything behind, crossing the trackless wastes . . ."

In the America that the now eighty-six-year-old Joan Didion, a fifth-generation Californian, grew up in—middle class, Protestant, Republican Sacramento—the social mores were fixed, intractable. You didn't make a show of yourself, and what you said was probably less complicated than what you thought. Postwar prosperity was a given. But how it was acquired was another story altogether. Sacramento—Spanish for "sacrament"—

was built on a swamp; the valley depended on federal handouts in order to expand, and some private citizens and corporations who got in on those transactions profited. In short, Sacramento wasn't so much "discovered" as manufactured.

Didion didn't know any of that when she was a kid growing up in that hot-and-dry-in-the-summer or rainy-in-the-winter-and-early-spring Eden, complete with snakes. As a kid she was fed a steady diet of myths—the rugged individual myth, the Western arrival myth. Didion's mother, Eduene Jerrett, had worked as a librarian before marrying Frank Didion, who supported his family, variously, as an Army Corps officer, by selling insurance, gambling, and as a real estate developer. Eduene was the more verbal of the two, and it was she who told Joan stories that fed her daughter's imagination. One story concerned Nancy Hardin Cornwall and Josephus Adamson Cornwall, pioneer ancestors who, along with their progeny, split off from the Donner-Reed Party at the Humboldt Sink in Nevada to cut north through Oregon, thus escaping the death and cannibalism the surviving party suffered. And it was Eduene who gave

five-year-old Joan a Big Tablet pad so she'd stop complaining and write down what was troubling her. (Didion's younger brother, Jim, was born in 1939.) As a member of a reasonably successful and connected clan with roots that ran deep on both sides in clannish Sacramento—Frank's great-great-grandfather, for instance, had immigrated to Sacramento from Ohio in 1855—Didion learned early on how cut off its valley citizens were from the larger world. But was it a problem? "My mother made the trip from Sacramento to Los Angeles in 1932, to see the Olympics, and did not find reason to make it again for thirty years," reports Didion in her 2003 book, *Where I Was From.* And as a young woman, the author recalls visiting a rancher's widow with her mother. The woman was, Didion writes in her 1965 essay "Notes from a Native Daughter"—which appeared in Didion's first collection, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*—"reminiscing (the favored conversational mode in Sacramento) about the son of some contemporaries of hers. 'That Johnson boy never did amount to much,' she said. Desultorily, my mother protested: Alva Johnson, she said, had won the