

'Gabrielle Carey patiently and  
dispassionately picks the bones  
of pure feeling'

AUSTRALIAN BOOK REVIEW

'Both voyeuristically thrilling and  
morally uplifting – great gossip and  
an insight into the cult of celebrity'

DAVID DALE

'Carey leaves us with an expanded  
sense of what it's like to pass  
through this world armed only with  
a longing to connect, to transcend,  
and to seek to know'

JUDITH BEVERIDGE

GABRIELLE CAREY  
So Many Selves



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Gabrielle  
Carey

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*'And out of what one sees and hears and out  
Of what one feels, who could have thought to make  
So many selves, so many sensuous worlds,  
As if the air, the mid-day air, was swarming  
With the metaphysical changes that occur,  
Merely in living as and where we live.'*

Esthétique Du Mal  
WALLACE STEVENS

## PROLOGUE

A few years ago, while moving house, I found my entire life suddenly reduced to an untidy assortment of cardboard boxes. There was one box in particular about which I felt deeply ambivalent. It was a box that had lain untouched for more than twenty years, that I'd been too scared to go near, and yet too sentimental to throw out. In that box, there was my sky-blue, silk-covered diary of 1975 (a gift from my mother on her return from China); a 1976 school diary stolen from my big sister (if it was hers, it had to be cool), and the slightly larger 1977 denim-coloured hardback, bulging with old letters attached with rusting paperclips. There were also the far more serious foolscap size diaries of '78, '79 and '80, every one of them teeming with anecdotes and bursting with confessions; every entry the result of a daily release from a far-too-intense teenager; a young woman who falls in love too easily and too often; who is full of passions and prejudices, whose theories and thoughts about the world around her seem so portentous that she feels compelled to write them down in detail every night before bed.

I had carried these teenage diaries with me from house to house, from country to country, like a Pandora's box, like a chalice or a trophy that might turn to dust, or even salt, if I ever tried looking back, if I ever dared to remember. I was terrified of this treasure because of the pain and loss that was enshrined inside, and mortified at the mere thought of re-living it by reading over that adolescent handwriting of decades ago. When I finally found the courage to open those mildewed pages (within which I had hidden love letters as well as old, typewritten scraps of manuscripts) I discovered something that I hadn't expected. On reading my daily reflections of those

tumultuous years, I was surprised and delighted to find that my long-locked past wasn't all pain and angst after all; it was actually a treasury of wild tales about two extraordinary young women, and an even more extraordinary friendship. What I had believed to be a dead weight of loss and misery was actually leaping with energy and absurdity, with laughter and affection. My wasted youth hadn't been wasted after all. And the friendship that had left such a sour taste had, in fact, for many years, been full of sweetness. And so *Confessions of a Teenage Celebrity*, the first essay in this collection, came to be.

If *Confessions* was one of the most difficult things I've ever written, the second essay, *A Reluctant Novice*, was the most difficult.

'It's not what writers *usually* write about,' my poet friend commented.

No, it's not. In fact, it's not even much of a story. And yet I promised myself one very rainy afternoon while looking out the window of my monastery cell in Limerick that I *would* write about these things. Indeed, I realised that it was slightly ridiculous for me to spend my life as a writer and *not* write about these things. These things (I anticipate your cringe) include questions about mysticism, God, meaning and, dare I admit it, religion.

There. I've said it.

The third essay, *Mexican Masks*, contains a secret that for many years I felt unable to tell. In a way, this story belongs in a book I wrote more than ten years ago, *In My Father's House*, but at the time I didn't have the strength to confess a tale that was so humiliating and that demonstrated, so clearly, my naivety and ignorance. There is only one reason why I finally came to write this secret and that's because my daughter asked me:

'What happened, Mum? Why did you come back from Mexico?'

I had been asked this question many times and many times I had lied. But this time I knew I had to tell the truth.

Some readers may wonder about the missing bits, the gaps between the stories, or those parts of the journey that remain off the edges of the map. How, for example, did I go from being a Salami Sister in Sydney to hanging out in a Benedictine monastery in County Limerick? Why did I go from a wet, war-torn town in Northern Ireland to a semi-tropical village in Veracruz? None of it seems a straightforward sort of trajectory; surely there were more direct routes I might have travelled, and at far less cost, emotionally and spiritually.

There is a story in Ireland, centuries old, about the manner in which the monks decided where to establish their monasteries. They would simply get into a *curragh*, an Irish-style canoe, and let the wind blow them in whatever direction it chose. The belief was, of course, that the Holy Spirit would steer their course. This was how many of the great Irish centres of learning and spiritual reflection, such as Clonmacnoise, came to be. Their method of navigation and decision-making was very much like the ancient Aztecs. When looking for a location to establish the great city of Tenochtitlan, they waited for a sign from the god Huitzilopochtli, and when they finally spied the symbol foretold — an eagle perched on a cactus with a snake in its mouth — despite the fact that it was situated on a swamp, the Aztecs set to establishing their empire.

In my meanderings as a young pilgrim, I was seeking out the traces (the remains of something perhaps) that I couldn't define and didn't even know the name of. Which is what made identifying my destination so difficult. What I was looking for

simply wasn't marked on any map. So like the Aztecs I wandered for years, searching for a sign, hoping, like those homeless monks, that the spirit was in my sails — guiding, shaping and directing. My instinctive, if somewhat naive faith in the belief that my journeys would make sense in the end is similar to the faith I try to maintain in the writing process. While I'm writing, I usually have no idea where I'm heading (E.L. Doctorow once said that 'Writing is like driving a car at night. You can see only as far as your headlights') and yet, when I finally arrive, after all those hours, days, months and years in the darkness, I suddenly recognise the landscape. There's that mountain, there's that lamppost, there's that intersection. Ah yes, now I remember.

The title of this collection, borrowed from the wonderful Wallace Stevens, only came to me late in the process. I am indebted to him for encapsulating, in those few lines, what I am trying to say, however clumsily, in this triptych of essays. Throughout one lifetime a person can find that he or she is composed, not of one singular fixed self, but of many selves, so many in fact that the very air around them is 'swarming with ... metaphysical changes'. It is the haphazard mapping of this constant metamorphosis that I have attempted to chart in the following pages. At times the geography gets blurry, the perspective is askew, and my surveying is less than precise. Indeed, every time I look at this map I see something that needs correcting or re-drafting, mountain ranges that need moving, rivers that require broadening, deserts that need emphasising and oases that, let's face it, never existed. The idea that we can ever see things truly as they are is clearly a mirage. Even in the clarity of the mid-day air, those objects under our focus will refuse to stand still, forever swarming against definition, as they go on spinning their many sensuous worlds.



## Confessions of a teenage celebrity

*Dedicated to my friends,  
and to friendship*

O

*tell me all about*

*Anna Livia! I want to hear all  
about Anna Livia. Well, you know Anna Livia? Yes,  
of course, we all know Anna Livia. Tell me all. Tell  
me now. You'll die when you hear. Well, you know,  
when the old cheb went futt and did what you know.  
Yes, I know, go on. Wash quit and don't be dabbling.  
Tuck up your sleeves and loosen your talktapes.*

Finnegans Wake

JAMES JOYCE

About ten years ago there was a small trivia quiz in the *Sydney Morning Herald* offering a prize to anyone who could remember the 'other author' of *Puberty Blues*. At first I laughed. Then I was irritated. Finally, I admitted to myself that I wasn't really sure how I felt. Was I annoyed at being so forgettable? Did I miss the brief period when people recognised me in the street? Or should I just write in to the *Herald* and claim the prize money?

I was twenty when the public eye turned on me after the publication of *Puberty Blues*. It didn't take long before I realised that being a celebrity wasn't for me. Being at the centre of a media storm can be fun, just as a child enjoys being the centre of attention, but there's also a part of it that isn't so much fun. Or at least that's how I found it during my fifteen minutes of fame.

As *Puberty Blues* was co-authored, there was trouble when one author shrank from the attention and the other lapped it

up. While I saw our sudden fame as a loss — a loss of privacy, of individuality — my co-writer saw it as a gain, as an opportunity to network, to further a career, to establish the kind of status in the world that had thus far eluded us. She was right of course. There is something churlish about turning your nose up at career opportunities, a kind of inverted snobbery. But at the time I couldn't comprehend the advantages we might gain from celebrity because I was too consumed by what we were losing. What we were losing was what had got us to that point in the first place: our friendship.

My friendship with Kathy Lette was one of those friendships that can only happen, I suspect, between teenage girls. Intense, obsessive — we barely saw ourselves as individuals, but rather, as two halves of a whole that had been destined to meet. We regularly swapped our identities and were expert at forging each other's signatures. We described ourselves as spiritual Siamese twins and were known for finishing each other's sentences. Perhaps this was why co-writing came so naturally. Kathy would begin a sentence, then I would finish it, or vice versa. There was no question about whose sentence it was, or who the idea belonged to, or who owned particular words or phrases. We saw no boundaries between us: there was no place where I stopped and she started. We were one.

Kathy and I met in our last year of primary school, when we were twelve. It was one of those rare meetings in which I immediately knew that we were going to be friends, very special friends.

I had been invited to Kathy's house in Sylvania by Kerry, a mutual friend, and I remember being impressed by the swimming pool, the laundry chute, the rumpus room, the

downstairs bar and the cleaning lady. It all seemed so sumptuous and spacious, so neat and tidy compared to my place. Even Kathy's room was spotless, with matching frilly curtains and bedspread. But there was something unnerving about the neatness too. It was just a bit too tidy. I told her how uncomfortable it made me feel, being somewhere so perfect.

'It makes me want to take an odd shoe or an old sock and put it in the middle of the room, just to mess it up a bit,' I said. Kathy laughed and her eyes lit up. There was a messing-up instinct inside her too — just waiting to come out — and we bonded immediately in a way only pre-pubescent girls can.

I liked her because she was funny, but not in that stand-up-comic kind of way; her humour was offbeat and kinky. And she liked me because I was a good audience; I had and still have, a loud, hyena-like laugh. 'Oh Gabrielle!' my mother used to say in dismay, 'Do you have to be so *raucous*?'

From that moment early in 1971, until half way through 1980, a day rarely passed when we didn't see each other. Every afternoon after school we met, every weekend was a sleepover. We also went on holidays together — to Kathy's parents' house on the south coast of New South Wales or to our family retreat on Pittwater in Sydney. It was on Currawong Beach that we composed our first song, based on a Robert Johnson number, called 'Green Hair' (long before anybody started dyeing their hair odd colours).

*When I woke up this morning  
I had green hair on my mind  
(repeat three times, as per traditional blues melody)  
My baby just left me  
She treated me so unkind ...*



At the time we had no notion of singing publicly; it was simply our way of amusing ourselves on boring family holidays. Our collaborations came completely naturally, born from a desire to make each other laugh. We would have balked at the idea of being called 'creative' or 'talented', let alone potential 'personalities'. We were just mucking around.

Our first year of friendship went by joyfully. We played together, sang together, laughed and had lots of fun. But then I decided to become a rebel. My father had been a rebel, my sister had been a rebel; I had a reputation to live up to. Besides, I was bored — bored with school, bored with the blandness of Sylvania — and mucking up seemed to be an easy way to amuse myself. Suddenly my school reports went from 'a pleasure to teach' and 'a model student' to 'Gabrielle once showed great potential but now has a decidedly bad attitude'. And of course Kathy's family soon realised just how much of a messer-upperer of conventional family and school life I really was. They went cold on me gradually, but in the end, unreservedly. (Quite rightly, too. I wouldn't want my own daughter hanging around with a rebel like me either.)

Kathy was eventually banned from coming to my house or even speaking to me on the phone. But I rang anyway. The Lettes obviously hadn't realised that prohibiting the friendship only made it more exciting and desirable. Sometimes I would hang up if Mrs Lette answered the phone. Other times I'd just lie.

'Hello, is Kathy there?' I'd ask, trying to disguise my voice.

'Who's that?' her mother would ask suspiciously.

'Vicki.'

'Vicki who?'

In order to maintain our friendship — which for both of us, at that stage, was nothing less than life-sustaining — we were forced to start inventing a code, a secret language. If we

were on the phone and her mother walked in, Kathy would signal me by saying 'ham sandwich'. I'd then know that I had to hang up. 'Ham sandwich' represented how she felt — squashed between the pressures of her parents and her best friend. The extent to which she felt this pressure was represented by the number of sandwiches.

'Hi Kath, how's things?' I might ask.

'Eight ham sandwiches,' she would hiss in reply.

That would mean that things were pretty bad. But when things were bad we clung even more intensely to our clandestine intimacy, an intimacy we were convinced was unique and destined. The fact that grown-ups didn't understand it only proved beyond a doubt how special our friendship was. We had both read *The Little Prince* and were well aware that grown-ups couldn't tell the difference between a hat and a boa constrictor. What chance then did they have of recognising a true spiritual bond based not on the usual 'common interests', such as netball and girl guides, but rather on a passion for poetry? For a while our secret code became our only means of communication. Later, the memory of it was so meaningful that when we came to write our first book together (there was a load of writing before *Puberty Blues*), we named it *Eight Ham Sandwiches*. Although I have retained quite a bit from those days — diaries jam-packed with minute writing — unfortunately I didn't keep *Eight Ham Sandwiches*. I've got a terrible feeling I might have thrown it out in a rage when Kathy and I eventually split up. I can't remember. But that was later. Much later.

My rebellious behaviour at school gradually got worse until one afternoon late in 1974, after an argument with Miss Fox the sports mistress, about wearing regulation beige bloomers, I simply walked out. I was fifteen. Then somewhere

during 1975 Kathy followed. Her parents were not pleased. Each day she pretended to look for work while we composed songs and wrote poetry. Although we hadn't fitted into the conventional school system, we still took education seriously. Indeed, we set up our own school (with a student population of two) called the Sylvania Heights School of Pianoforte, Soprano Singing, Novel Writing and Goon Appreciation. I wrote the hours and timetable carefully into my diary:

*Monday to Friday 9am-3pm.*

*Syllabus:*

*Piano Technique and Practice; Alfred Brendel listening. Two hours minimum practice per day. Lessons: Monday, Wednesday, Friday.*

*Soprano Training: one hour of exercises per day. Practise duets and solos. Lesson: Monday.*

*Novel Writing: Read and study and discuss authors such as H.E. Bates, Somerset Maugham, J.D. Salinger.*

*Poetry readings. Practise writing short stories and reviews in journalistic style. Writing letters and keeping records. ie: diaries.*

*Goon Appreciation: Half an hour weekly. Absolute hysteria. Take notes with discussions to follow.*

*Other discussions include Tabias Maté, Mozart's letters, Errol Flynn and World War II.*

The teaching staff of our school were mostly dead (or almost): Dorothy Parker, Dylan Thomas, J.D. Salinger, Thackeray, H.G. Wells, Truman Capote, Milton, Oscar Wilde. We had no idea in those days of the delineation between the literary canon and popular writing. We read everything from Spike Milligan's silly verse to Shakespeare's sonnets.

The only living teachers we had were our music teachers: Mr John Elliott — Elly — for piano and Mr Hector Tinkler (no, I'm not making that up) for voice. Elly was our most important mentor. A brilliant musician and educator, he came from an interesting family; his sister, Margie Fink, became a film producer (*My Brilliant Career, Candy*), his other sister, Elizabeth, an academic, married the controversial once-left-wing-now-far-right historian, Keith Windshuttle.

Elly lived in a dilapidated fibro house in Caringbah, a far southern suburb of Sydney. An expert at infusing his great love of Bach and Beethoven into his students, he felt oppressed by the suburbs and continually complained about living in a cultural desert of Wasps and Philistines. 'It's hopeless,' Elly constantly moaned, 'all hopeless.' I later learned that he hadn't always been so despondent. It was the fall of the Whitlam government that had destroyed his faith, not just in the political system, but in the Australian people. Whereas many other like-minded people devoted to the arts and a more equitable, tolerant society had simply decided to leave the country after the sacking of Gough Whitlam, Elly was poverty-bound to Caringbah. He had no choice but to stay and witness the gradual demise of all the promise that the Labor government had once embodied.

Kathy and I soon realised that the Sutherland Shire, the most anglicized, homogeneous and insular of suburban sprawls, wasn't the place for developing artists. In the Shire, people liked things neat and predictable: their lawns mown, their hedges trimmed. They were suspicious of anything a little messy or rough around the edges. One afternoon, during one of our impassioned crazes — this time for Johnny Rotten — we went into a Caringbah music shop and asked for the punk rock section.