

The Second Notebook

On the occasion of my tenth birthday I was presented, as Veronica had been before me, with a five-year diary. It was a fat little book with a red leatherette cover and a clasp lock. It was only that night, as I sat on the edge of my bed, weighing it in my hands, that I realised the significance of the lock: it was an acknowledgement that I had reached the age when I was permitted to have secrets; that I was now old enough to have thoughts I would not wish to share with my family. Of course, this was humbug. I had been having nasty, malicious thoughts for as long as I could remember, but that little lock granted me licence. Here was a book in which I could record and confine them.

It is a curious thing that, as far as I know, boys are not presented with such diaries. Boys are uncomplicated creatures. They swarm around shouting, fighting or chasing balls—noisily *being*—while we girls sit demurely on the sidelines nursing our resentment. Boys have no need for secrets. Everything just pours out of them. Girls are required to keep themselves to themselves. My ten-year-old self was vaguely aware of all this as she opened her new diary on her lap. The pages were divided into four sections on the verso side and three on the recto. The space allotted for each day of my life was the width of two fingers. If I was now granted licence to have secrets, evidently I wasn't expected to have too many. It was clear, however, that my handsome new diary was a trap. It had been presented to me so that I would reveal myself to its pages. Naturally, I assumed my mother would read it, just as I read Veronica's (picking the lock required no more than the brisk twist of a kirby grip).

The contents of my sister's diary were unremittingly wholesome. She documented her marks at school (always

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outstanding); her thoughts on the books she was reading (always positive); and her feelings about her family (always affectionate). It never occurred to me that Veronica might not be telling the whole truth, that she might be withholding some darker, more malevolent thoughts. Veronica, you see, was good. I did not even take any great care to conceal that I had been reading her diary. In her innocence, she would never suspect that someone might be so devious as to violate her trust in this way. I did not share her naïvety. My appetite to fill the pages of my diary dissipated, but I realised that to write nothing would be taken as evidence that my thoughts were so wicked they could not be committed to paper. So, having completed the personal details on the title page, I set to work. The first entry was as follows:

Saturday 10th June 1951

Today is my 10th birthday and I have been given this diary in which I shall endeavour to faithfully record my thoughts and feelings for the next five years. I also got a new dress that I will wear tomorrow. This afternoon we went to Richmond Park and daddy bought me an ice-cream. The weather was fine but later on it clouded over and there were a few spots of rain and we had to shelter under the trees. Mum said we should have brought an umbrella.

For the next two years it continues in a similar vein. Each entry begins with a note of the day's weather. There then follows a series of earnest remarks about my day at school, what we ate for supper and, on Sundays, where Veronica and I were taken for a walk. For a few months I developed an ornithological bent and recorded the species of birds I observed. One would be perfectly justified, reading this insipid drivel, in concluding that I

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was quite the dullest little girl in the world. My diary, however, was a work of fiction. I constructed a character, much as any novelist would do, and all for the benefit of a single reader. It is not that what I wrote was untrue. At least as far as I can recall, these things did actually happen. It's just that, taken together, they create a false impression. The real truth lay not in what I wrote, but in what I omitted.