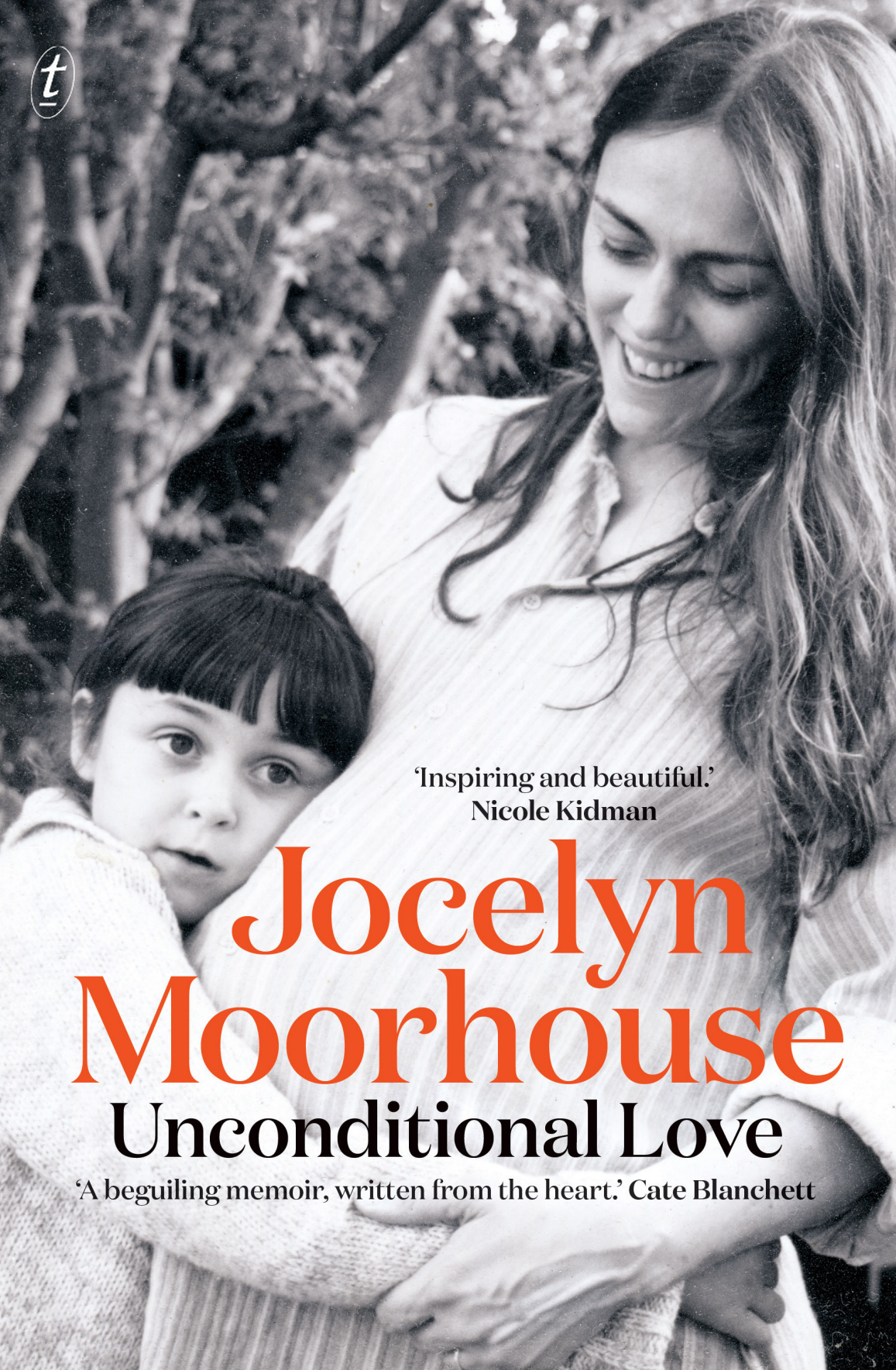

'Inspiring and beautiful.'
Nicole Kidman

Jocelyn Moorhouse

Unconditional Love

'A beguiling memoir, written from the heart.' Cate Blanchett

1

Love involves a peculiar unfathomable combination of understanding and misunderstanding.

DIANE ARBUS

In addition to being a writer, Mum was a shutterbug. She was the daughter of a professional photographer. She always had a camera with her. Her love of images must have been in her blood. And she passed it on to me. She taught me how to use my first still camera. Then she taught me how to use her Super 8 movie camera, and how to edit the footage. It's all her fault I became a film director.

My parents were completely in love for their entire sixty-year marriage. They wrote to each other whenever they were apart. Their letters were love letters, funny and warm. My mother also kept diaries. In all, I have found thousands of pages of her writing.

Jack Moorhouse and Denice Tobin-Wood met on a tennis court in Melbourne in 1950. Dad and his best pal, David, were playing doubles with David's girlfriend Dierdre. She had brought

along a friend from work, Denice, a teller at the Union Bank. Dad loved to tell the story of how, every time Denice hit the tennis ball, the exertion would cause her undies to slip down a little.

'The elastic was loose!' Mum would always shout when he got to this part of the story.

Jack, a handsome young accountant, couldn't help noticing Denice constantly hitching up her undies under her tennis dress. He thought it was undignified and completely adorable. Denice was an outgoing country girl, a bit of a tomboy, with her black curls cut short, and a beautiful smile. Jack was a shy boy from Middle Park who was very smart. They were immediately smitten. They used to go to the St Kilda Town Hall and dance to local bands playing hits by Perry Como and Bing Crosby. When rock-and-roll arrived in the mid 1950s, they embraced it and became mad twisters!

They married in 1951. She was only twenty; he was twenty-six. He used to lovingly refer to her as his 'child bride', even when she was in her seventies. Jack was conservative, straight-laced. Denice was spontaneous, adventurous.

For their honeymoon, Jack and Denice spent one night in the Blue Mountains, then drove, with their best man David, all the way back to Melbourne so Jack could return to his job at the Union Bank. They managed to buy a small weatherboard house in Croydon, then an outer suburb on the edge of the bush, and lived there with hardly any furniture, completely happy. It took them a while to conceive. Eventually, my brother Greg was born in 1957. He had black curls and impossibly long eyelashes. I was born in 1960, and eighteen months later came my baby sister Kathy.

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Denice had been born during the Great Depression. Her father, Archibald Virtue Gilmour Wood (what a name!), was a journalist and photographer, born and raised in Brooklyn, on the Hawkesbury River. Her mother, Mary 'Mid' Tobin, was a seamstress, the daughter of Bathurst sheep farmers. Mid was twenty-nine, working for her dressmaking aunt in Darlinghurst, when she met Archie, ten years younger than her. A fan of fashion, Mid had chopped off her waist-length hair into a sleek bob and embraced the life of a flapper, as had her sisters Lou and Alma. Her other sister, Nellie, was studying music at the Conservatorium in Sydney. Besotted with Mid, Archie married her in 1926, when he was twenty. They decided to merge their last names to create a new surname for them both, Tobin-Wood.

Secure work was hard to come by, and the young couple moved home many times in the 1930s. When no jobs could be found, they stayed at Taberatong, the Tobin family sheep station. Soon they had two children to look after, Denice and her younger brother, Hunter Raleigh Tobin-Wood (another magnificent name). At one time Archie worked on a ship, shovelling coal into the boiler, and would send money home. He was slight of build and the work was exhausting, but times were desperate.

By 1939 the Tobin-Woods were back at Taberatong. Too proud to sleep in the main house, Archie built a bark hut half a mile away, and the little family slept there. He strung up hammocks for the kids, and built a proper bed for Mid and himself out of saplings and bark, three feet off the dirt floor. Mum always laughed when she recollected the two large goannas who would park themselves below the kids' hammocks in the early mornings. I don't know how my Grandma put up with it, but she knew it

was important for Archie to feel like he was providing for his family. Every day he would walk to nearby Sofala, an old gold-rush town, and pan for alluvial gold in the Turon River. Sometimes he would catch rabbits or kangaroos for meat, and sell the skins.

Archie did allow Mid and the children to take their meals with their grandparents. My Uncle Hunter remembers sitting at the large Taberatong dining table for lunch, when Archie entered the room and announced he had joined the army. It was December 1939. Only three months earlier, Australia had joined England in declaring war on Germany. Hunter's mother and aunts burst into hysterical tears. His only thought as a five-year-old was, 'Well, this will delay lunch even longer now!' Desperate for a reliable income, Archie had chosen to become a soldier for the steady wage it ensured.

Archie was away from home for most of World War Two. He served in the Middle East, and one of the many boxes of photographs my mother kept safe all her life contains pictures he took in Egypt. One tiny snapshot shows some Australian soldiers dwarfed by the great pyramids. Archie soon became an officer and by the time he left the army in 1945, he was a major with a handful of medals, which he brought home to Sydney. He also brought back a German bayonet, a jar of desert sand (with a dead scarab beetle in it) and an empty German mortar shell. Grandma Wood used to let me polish the shell with Brasso. I used to stare at the scarab beetle in the jar for hours, imagining I was in the deserts of Egypt. The grains seemed much coarser than Australian sand.

~

Archie arrived home to a daughter and son in their early teens who barely remembered him. Mum always said it was a difficult adjustment for the family. She had grown up at Taberatong. It had been an idyllic six years in the country, with beloved grandparents, all the grandchildren, and their mothers—Mid, Lou, Alma, Pat and Nellie—together, like something out of *Hope and Glory*, the John Boorman movie about life during the London Blitz.

The Tobin-Wood family moved back to Sydney. Archie was now an angry man, who drank and gambled and fought with his wife and daughter. He was obsessed with table manners and would hit the backs of Denice's and Hunter's fingers if they used the wrong cutlery at lunch. He was full of contradictions. He made his daughter a diary for her thirteenth birthday. Every page featured a different watercolour illustration of a wildflower. She loved it and it became her treasured personal diary. One night, when his friends were over, Archie wanted to show the book to the grown-ups, so they could see his handpainted illustrations. Denice was embarrassed to bring it out because it was filled with her personal writing. He insisted she bring the diary to him. When she did, he began to read it aloud to the guests—her secret thoughts. They all laughed. Mum never forgave him for humiliating her.

Archie died in 1969 from mouth cancer. He was sixty-three. He had been a chain-smoker his whole life. I was nine when he died, so I only have a few memories of him. The Archie I remember was a funny man who did magic tricks for his grandkids, and who always hid Cadbury Cherry Ripe chocolate bars up his sleeve for us to find. I remember his box of round poker chips, some red, some white. I remember a set of tiny porcelain elves and the little display case Archie made to present them to me as

a birthday present. Glass walls and a green-velvet floor. The case broke years ago. I still have one elf, missing an arm.

Years after he died, Greg, Kathy and I used to play with Archie's old photographic equipment, which was stored in Grandma's dusty garage. I remember the glass negatives stacked willy-nilly and the old studio camera. It was large with cardboard bellows that slid in and out, open and shut, moving the lens back and forth. We thought it was a mysterious and magical object. We played with it so much we eventually tore holes in the bellows. I feel pangs of guilt at how roughly we played with those irreplaceable items.

Mid was grief-stricken at losing her Archie so young. She had always assumed, because she was ten years older, that she would die before him. They had fought like cat and dog (about politics, religion, money) and she loved him ferociously. I can remember hearing Grandma Wood talking to someone on the phone soon after Archie's death. I was lying on her couch, my usual spot when I was sick, when she said to her friend, 'I've had enough life. I am ready to die now.'

Terrified she was about to die on the spot, I jumped off the couch and ran to her. 'Don't you want to see me grow up?' I cried.

Both of my grandmas became widows in the late 1960s. Each weekend would be devoted to spending time with them. On Saturday, it was Grandma Wood's house in outer-suburban Ringwood, where we were allowed to roam free and explore. Mid would create an extravagant afternoon tea for us every time we came. She would bake an apple pie for Greg, a pavlova for Kathy, and a cheesecake for me. Every Saturday!

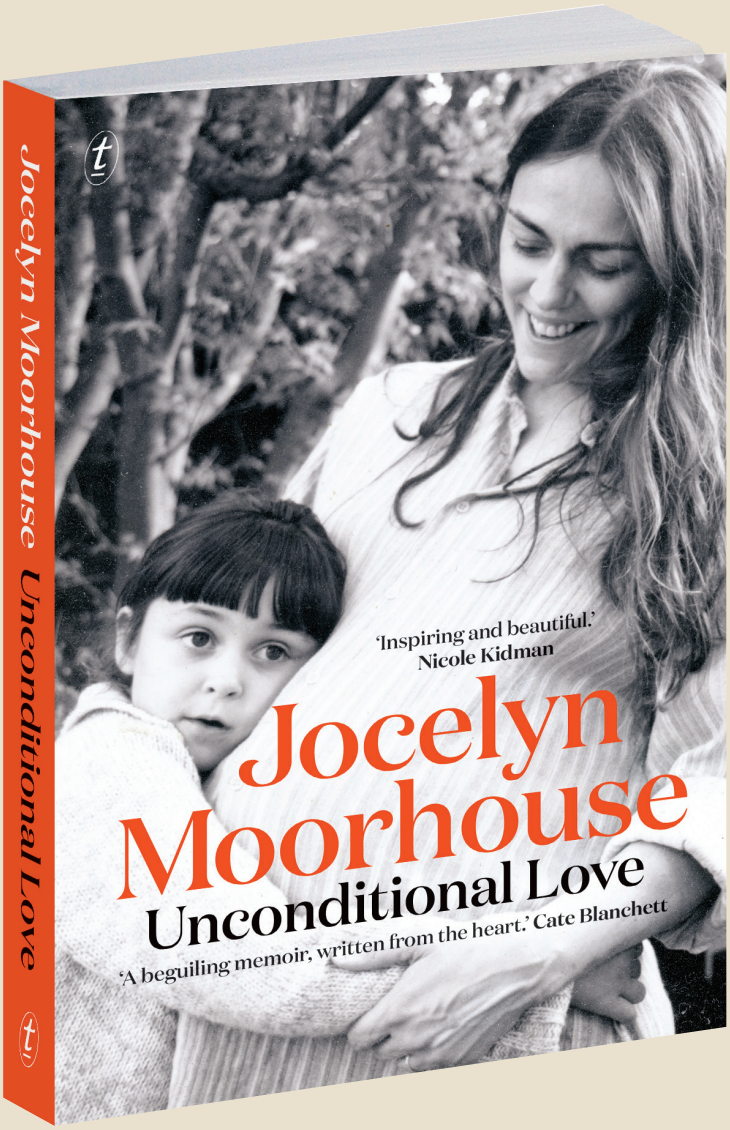
On Sunday, it was Grandma Moorhouse's house in inner-suburban Middle Park. Grandma Moorhouse did not bake. She lived in a small, dark terrace house, the same house where my father and his brother Ted had grown up. Sometimes Peg would play hymns on the piano for us, but mostly she would sit with Mum and Dad. She missed her husband, Joss. (I was named after my grandpa, Joshua Moorhouse.) Grandpa Joss had died unexpectedly at the age of sixty-five. He had gone to fetch some pills from the bedroom for Peg and had never come back. She found him sprawled across their double bed. His heart had stopped. The night it happened, Mum woke Kathy, Greg and me from our beds to tell us our Dad had lost his father. We saw him crying for the first time in our lives and were frightened.

I only have sweet memories of Grandpa Moorhouse, a quiet bear of a man who exuded gentleness. Grandma Moorhouse, however, always seemed so sad and bitter. It was understood that children got on her nerves. Greg, Kathy and I would be herded into the piano room and told not to touch anything. The room was full of small porcelain ornaments, milkmaids and praying angels. There were also teapots shaped like houses. I loved those. I always imagined fairies were living inside them. I also loved her little crystal chandelier, a mantle lustre, which sat on the windowsill to catch the light. Sometimes it would reflect miniature rainbows onto the silent walls.

We three grandkids would listen to the old clock ticking away. When it chimed four o'clock, we knew we would be going home soon. It was always a relief. We never knew what to say to Grandma Moorhouse. We always felt uncomfortable around her. I now realise this was because Mum did not get along with her at all. She blamed her in some way for not loving our Dad enough as a boy. We didn't

know what Mum meant, and Dad never enlightened us.

Peg died in 1973. Two years later, in November 1975, Gough Whitlam was dismissed as Prime Minister of Australia by the Governor-General, Sir John Kerr. Mid, a staunch Labor voter, was so incensed at this outrage that she had a massive stroke. She died a few weeks later on December 7th.



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