



PHOTOGRAPH BY TINA BARNEY

AMERICAN SPIRIT

After writing a book about her ancestors' struggles

on the frontier (extracted overleaf), Joan Didion saw her own life grow unbearably hard. First her daughter fell into a coma; then came the sudden death of her beloved husband. But the pioneering author is stronger than she looks, finds Helena de Bertodano

Joan Didion may have a reputation for being one of the most coolly observant writers in America today, but she is, by her own admission, a lousy conversationalist. She once described herself as 'neurotically inarticulate' and when we meet at her New York apartment, I realise she isn't exaggerating. For one thing, her voice is so soft and whispery that I can hardly hear her. For another, she has a tendency to answer questions with a simple 'Mm-hmm', offering no elaboration. When she does attempt an answer, the sentence will often trail off tantalisingly, the last few words left hanging.

'I don't actually finish sentences, as you will notice,' she says apologetically. 'Even when writing, it takes me a long time to get a sentence to say exactly what I want it to say.'

Yet this is the woman who, along with Tom Wolfe and Norman Mailer, invented the 'New Journalism' in the 1960s, blending politics, social commentary and autobiography, often to devastating effect. 'She helped define a generation,' her brother-in-law, the writer Dominick Dunne, told me simply. Didion has written seven works of non-fiction: her most famous, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, first published in 1968, is a collection of scalpel-like essays in which she details the Californian counter-culture of the time. She is also the author of five novels, and co-wrote several screenplays with her late husband John Gregory Dunne.

Her inability – or perhaps reluctance – to converse is not helped by the extraordinary trauma of the past few weeks. On 30 December her husband suddenly died. 'We would have been married 40 years this January,' she says. A few days before his death their only daughter Quintana slipped into a coma after suffering septic shock following pneumonia. Dunne, who was 71, died after returning home with Didion from their nightly visit to their daughter in hospital. He had a recent history of heart problems but his death was unexpected. Their daughter, meanwhile, is slowly getting better.

'She's OK but it will be a long recovery,' says Didion haltingly. 'She got out of hospital in late January and was only home a few days when she had to go back because she had emboli [blood clots] from being immobilised in hospital.'

One of the hardest parts in the aftermath of her husband's death was telling Quintana, 38, what had happened to her father when she came out of her coma. 'I didn't want to lie to her so I was not going to go into the room when she was being woken up. But the nurse told her that I was there in the hallway and so I had to go in.'

Although Didion never loses her composure while I am with her, her eyes are sometimes brimming and she becomes unable to speak. 'I'm still in shock,' she says, with a nervous half-laugh. According to Dominick Dunne, it is impossible to describe how close she and John were. 'They became one person; you know how that happens in some marriages,' he told me. 'They had the most incredible marriage, in which my brother took care of a lot of the practicalities of everyday life, and suddenly that prop is pulled out. Joan is this fragile little creature and yet she is a strong, strong human being. She has not collapsed under the weight of what she's been going through. I think the time of mourning has started now that Quintana – we feel – is going to be OK again.'

Together, Didion and John Gregory Dunne – or the Didion-Dunnes as they were known to their friends – became, by the 1980s, America's most famous literary couple. One or other of them always seemed to be on the *New York Times* bestseller lists (Dunne's most successful book is *True Confessions*, made into a Hollywood film). They flitted between Los Angeles, where they had a house off Sunset Boulevard and many famous friends, and Manhattan, where they had an apartment and more famous friends. In recent years they lived solely in Manhattan. Didion was seen as the better writer, a fact her husband graciously acknowledged. I ask her if there

Opposite: Joan Didion at home in New York last month

was any sense of competition between them. 'No. Everybody thought there was but I don't think we ever felt that.'

Didion is almost as famous for her aura of chic glamour as she is for her writing. But she refuses to acknowledge that she ever makes any effort with how she presents herself: 'I haven't thought about it.' Today she is dressed in a black polo-neck, black trousers and black trainers with bright pink laces. A tortoiseshell clip jauntily holds back her hair on one side. She is not wearing her habitual dark glasses, which have become almost as much of a trademark with her as they have with Anna Wintour, the English editor of *American Vogue*.

Didion herself is a product of *Vogue*, where she worked for eight years after winning a writing contest nearly half a century ago. She started as a caption writer but was soon writing articles. 'Everything I learnt, I learnt at *Vogue*,' she once said. I ask if it was a glamorous place to work in the 1950s. 'I came here from California so I thought it was very glamorous. People dressed like Audrey Hepburn in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, they really did, and they wore hats in the office. I didn't and the nurse kept telling me that I was losing 90 per cent of my body heat.' The nurse? 'We had a nurse at Condé Nast. It was considered so peculiar [not wearing a hat], that she would stop me in the hall. I didn't give in. It was a wonderful place to work because it was so much a family.'

Didion has unusually strong emotional ties to her own family. In an essay she once wrote, 'I was almost 30 years old before I could talk to my family without crying after I hung up.' I ask her what she meant by this. 'I did not emotionally separate from my mother and my father; I just moved away. We were very close, mainly because of the circumstances –

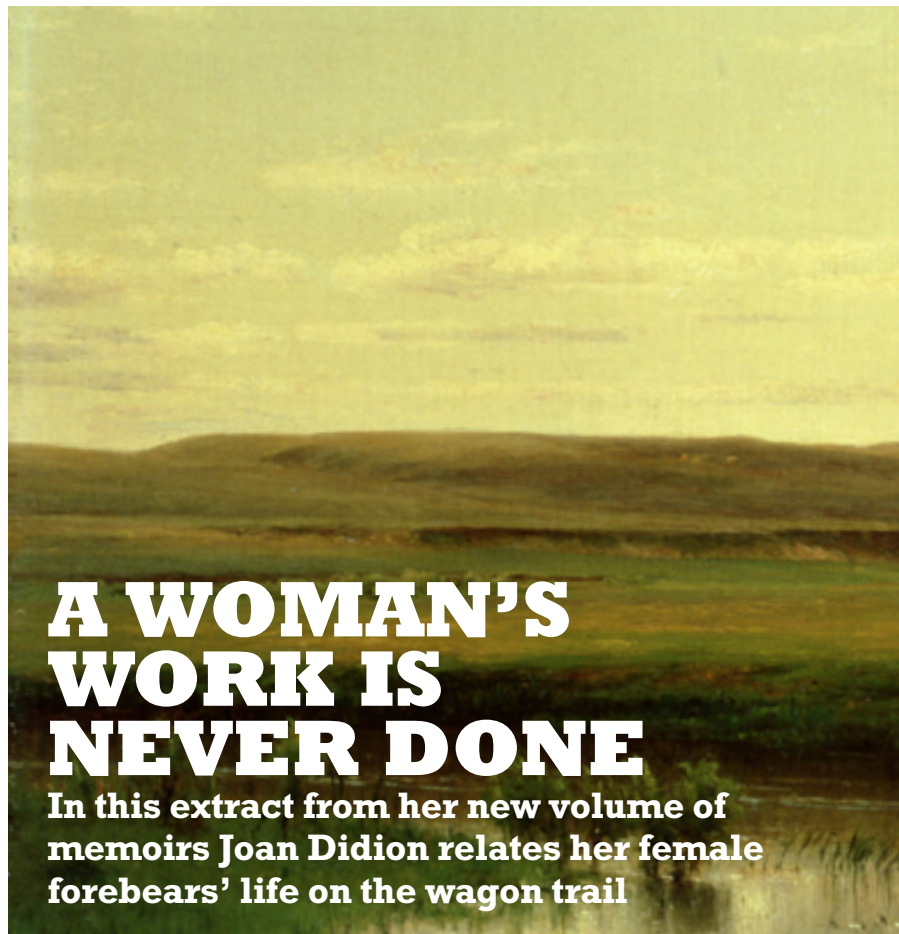
'People at *Vogue* in the 1950s dressed like Audrey Hepburn in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. They wore hats in the office'

the Second World War [her father was called into service], travelling – always just the four of us [she has a brother] in places where we didn't know anyone.'

Although Didion is a famous figure in America, she is not universally loved; some critics find her writing too solipsistic. 'I always thought it was important to let the reader know who was talking,' argues Didion. In her latest book, *Where I Was From*, she uses the story of her family to highlight the contradictions of her native California, the self-deluding myths by which the state defines itself, in particular the idea that noble 19th-century pioneers undertook the crossing of the Sierras to carve out a golden promised land. In fact, says Didion, the journey was often 'a mean scabbling for survival, a blind flight' and the people who undertook it were opportunists whose descendants have proved themselves happy, again and again, to 'sell the future of the place we lived to the highest bidder'.

I ask if she feels she has been harsh on California. 'I thought it was pretty loving, actually. But I came to see California as much more emblematic of America than I used to; a lot of its delusions about itself are America's delusions about itself.'

Why, I wonder, did she call the book *Where I Was From*; why not *Where I Am From*? She struggles to express herself: 'It just seemed right because it ended up being from a hallucination in a certain way, or an "enchantment" I believe I call it in the book. It was about being from some place I am no longer from. And I don't mean California. It's about being from what



A WOMAN'S WORK IS NEVER DONE

In this extract from her new volume of memoirs Joan Didion relates her female forebears' life on the wagon trail

My great-great-great-great-great-grandmother Elizabeth Scott was born in 1766, grew up on the Virginia and Carolina frontiers, at the age of 16 married an 18-year-old veteran of the Revolution and the Cherokee expeditions named Benjamin Hardin IV, moved with him into Tennessee and Kentucky and died on another frontier, on the south bank of the White River in what is now Arkansas. Elizabeth Scott Hardin was remembered to have hidden in a cave with her children (there were said to have been 11, only eight of whom got recorded) during Indian fighting, and to have been so strong a swimmer that she could ford a river in flood with an infant in her arms. Either in her defence or for reasons of his own, her husband was said to have killed, not counting English soldiers or Cherokees, ten men.

Elizabeth Scott Hardin had bright blue eyes and sick headaches. I know nothing else about her, but I have her recipe for corn bread, and also for India relish; her granddaughter brought these recipes west in 1846. Because that granddaughter, Nancy Hardin Cornwall, was my great-great-great-grandmother, I have, besides her recipes, a piece of appliqué she made on the crossing – green and red calico on a muslin field. I also have a photograph of the stone marker placed on the site of the cabin in which Nancy Hardin Cornwall and her family spent the winter of 1846-47. 'Dedicated to the memory of Rev JA Cornwall and family,' the engraving on the marker reads. 'They built the first immigrant cabin in Douglas County near this site, hence the name Cabin Creek. The family were saved from extreme want by Israel Stoley, a nephew who was a good hunter. The Indians were friendly...' Here is a typescript of certain memories, elicited from one of Nancy Hardin Cornwall's 12 children, Narcissa, of those months on what would later be called Cabin Creek:

'We were about ten miles from the Umpqua River and the Indians living there would come and spend the greater part of the day. There was one who spoke English, and he told Mother the Rogue River Indians were coming to kill us. Mother told them if they troubled us, in the spring the Bostons (the Indian name for the white people) would come out and kill them all off. One day Father was busy reading and did not notice the house was filling with strange Indians until Mother spoke about it... As soon as Father noticed



A Wagon Trail on the Plains by Thomas Worthington Whittredge/Bridgeman

them he got up and got his pistols and asked the Indians to go out and see him shoot. They followed him out, but kept at a distance. The pistols were a great curiosity to them. I doubt if they had ever seen any before. As soon as they were all out of the cabin Mother barred the door and would not let them in any more. Father entertained them outside until evening, when they got on their ponies and rode away. They never returned to trouble us any more.'

I have a quilt from another crossing, a quilt made by my great-great-grandmother Elizabeth Anthony Reese on a wagon journey during which she buried one child, gave birth to another, twice contracted mountain fever, and took turns driving a yoke of oxen, a span of mules and 22 head of loose stock. In this quilt of Elizabeth Reese's were more stitches than I had ever seen in a quilt, a blinding and pointless compaction of stitches, and it occurred to me as I hung it that she must have finished it one day in the middle of the crossing, somewhere in the wilderness of her own grief and illness, and just kept on stitching.

'Father didn't notice the house filling up with strange Indians until mother spoke about it'

From her daughter's account:

'Tom was sick with fever the first day of the crossing, no chance for a doctor. He was only sick a day or two when he died. He had to be buried right away, as the train of wagons was going right on. He was two years old, and we were glad to get a trunk to bury him in. A friend gave a trunk. My aunt, the following year, when her baby died, carried it for a long time in her arms without letting anyone know for fear they would bury the baby before coming to a station.'

These women in my family would seem to have been pragmatic and in their deepest instincts clinically radical, given to breaking clean with everyone and everything they knew. They could shoot and they could handle stock and when their children outgrew their shoes they could learn from the Indians how to make moccasins. 'An old lady in our wagon train taught my sister to make blood pudding,' Narcissa Cornwall recalled. 'After killing a deer or steer you cut its throat and catch the blood. You add suet to this and a little salt; and meal or flour if you have it, and bake it. If you haven't anything else to eat, it's pretty

good.' They tended to accommodate any means in pursuit of an uncertain end. When they could not think what else to do they moved another thousand miles, set out another garden: beans and squash and sweet peas from seeds carried from the last place. The past could be jettisoned, children buried and parents left behind, but seeds got carried. They were women without much time for second thoughts, without much inclination toward equivocation.

'Mother viewed character as being the mainspring of life and, therefore, as regulating our lives here and indicating our destiny in the life to come. She had fixed and settled principles, aims and motives in life. Her general health was excellent and in middle life she appeared almost incapable of fatigue. Winter and summer, at all seasons and every day, except Sunday, her life was one ceaseless round of activity: the care of her family, to provide for hired help, to entertain visitors, and to entertain preachers and others during meetings which were frequent.'

That was the view of Nancy Hardin Cornwall taken by her son Joseph, who was 13 years old during the crossing. Nancy Hardin Cornwall's daughter Laura, two years old during the crossing, took a not dissimilar view: 'Being a daughter of the American Revolution, she was naturally a brave woman, never seeming afraid of Indians or shrinking from hardships.'

A photograph. A woman standing on a rock in the Sierra Nevada in perhaps 1905. Edna Magee Jerrett. She is Nancy Hardin Cornwall's great-granddaughter; she will in time be my grandmother. She is Black Irish, English, Welsh, possibly (this is uncertain) a fraction Jewish through her grandfather, who liked to claim as an ancestor a German rabbi; possibly (this is still more uncertain) a lesser fraction Indian. She is quite beautiful. She is also quite indulged, clearly given – although she knows enough about mountains to shake out her boots for snakes every morning – to more amenities than could have been offered in this mining camp in the Sierra Nevada. In this photograph she is wearing a long suede skirt and jacket made for her by the most expensive tailor in San Francisco. 'You couldn't pay for her hats,' her father, a ship's captain, had told her suitors by way of discouragement.



Didion's grandmother Edna Magee Jerrett in the Sierra Nevada circa 1905

'You couldn't pay for her hats,' Edna's father told her suitors by way of discouragement

It was an extravagance of spirit that would persist through her life. When I was six and had the mumps she brought me, as solace, not a colouring book, not ice-cream, not bubble bath, but an ounce of expensive perfume, Elizabeth Arden's On Dit, in a crystal bottle sealed with gold thread. When I was 11 and declined to go any longer to church she gave me, as inducement, not the fear of God but a hat; not any hat, not a child's well-mannered cloche or beret, but a hat; gossamer Italian straw and French silk cornflowers and a heavy satin label that read LILLY DACHE.

During the Second World War my grandmother volunteered to help salvage the tomato crop by working the line at the Del Monte cannery in Sacramento, took one look at the moving conveyer belt, got one of those sick headaches her great-grandmother brought west with the seeds, and spent that first and only day on the line with tears running down her face. As atonement, she spent the rest of the war knitting socks for the Red Cross to send to the front. The yarn she bought to knit these socks was cashmere, in regulation colours.

She died when I was 23 and I have of hers a petit-point evening bag, two watercolours she painted as a young girl, 12 butter knives, and 50 shares of Transamerica stock. I was instructed in her will to sell the stock for something I wanted and could not afford.

Another photograph, another grandmother. Ethel Reese Didion, whom I never knew. She caught fever during the waning days of the 1918 influenza epidemic and died, leaving a husband and two small boys, one of them my father, on the morning of the false armistice. My grandmother smiles tentatively. Her eyes are shut against the sun, or against the camera. This is the memory of her aunt, Catherine Reese, a child during the Reese family's 1852 crossing, of the last stage and aftermath of the journey during which her mother made the quilt with the blinding compaction of stitches:

'Came by Carson City climbing mountains all the time, to Lake Tahoe and on down. Lived in the mountains as Father was sick with chills and fever. Had to give up our stock-driver and Mother looked after the stock. Found two or three families of old country folk and lived with them until we got located in a sheep-herder's house and lived the winter with him until Father got a house built on the hill ranch near Florin. Father paid cash for 360 acres.'

That first Reese ranch in Florin was into my adult life still owned by my family. My mother had no interest in keeping the ranch, or in fact any California land. California, she said, was now too regulated, too taxed, too expensive. She spoke enthusiastically about moving to the Australian outback. 'Eduene!' my father would say, a remonstrance. 'I would,' she would insist, reckless. 'Just leave California? Give it all up?' 'In a *minute*,' she would say, the pure strain talking, Elizabeth Scott's great-great-great-granddaughter. 'Just forget it.' ●

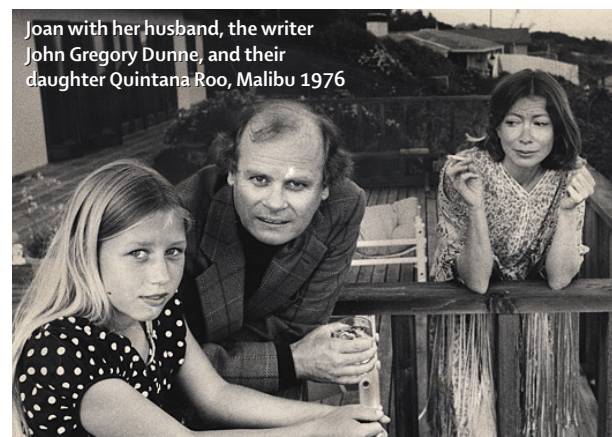
'Where I Was From' (Flamingo, £14.99) by Joan Didion, published tomorrow, is available from Telegraph Books Direct (0870 155 7222) at £12.99 plus £2.25 p&p

'It is impossible to describe how close Joan and John were. They became one person,' said Dominick Dunne

you believe in.' If this sounds mildly baffling, it is probably meant to. As Didion says of herself: 'My whole personality is about approaching things obliquely.' It can be an irksome trait. 'Part of it, I suppose, is being small,' says Didion. 'Indirectly always seems to me to be the way to go. It's just the way I have been since childhood. I was a very shy child.'

Her diminutive stature – she stands at little over 5ft – is intrinsic to her personality. In the preface to *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, she wrote, 'My only advantage as a reporter is that I am so physically small, so temperamentally unobtrusive, and so neurotically inarticulate that people tend to forget that my presence runs counter to their best interests. And it always does.'

'You make an asset out of what you're stuck with,' she says today. 'But I was amazed once when I was waiting to be picked up outside a supermarket... [she slips into the present tense] John is driving around the parking lot and I'm trying to see where he is, so I stand on the edge of a flower bed and I'm amazed how much six inches does for my personality. I feel as if I'm really in charge.' She may be small in height but her features are large – big blue-ish eyes, big mouth, strikingly



Joan with her husband, the writer John Gregory Dunne, and their daughter Quintana Roo, Malibu 1976

large hands. And, as her friend the screenwriter Nora Ephron pointed out, 'Joan is a very tiny person with a huge brain.'

Throughout her writing, however much she reveals of herself, one senses a certain distance. In person, too, Didion can seem remote, a trait she acknowledges. 'I don't cultivate it. It's an overdeveloped ability to compartmentalise, so that I remain a little distant from what's going on, because I have put it already in a box so it won't hurt me.' She thinks the characteristic comes from her female forebears. 'It was a survival technique on the frontier, but I don't really need it that much. It would be useful in a Darwinian sense for this to have been bred out.' She chuckles drily.

One of the happiest periods of her life, says Didion, was a couple of years ago, when she and her husband started writing books at the same time. 'We were both equally focused and not really interested in seeing other people. We went out for dinner a lot. Once in a while he would give me a chunk to read and once in a while I would give him a chunk to read.' She tails off. 'I can't imagine not being...' – she pauses to correct the tense – 'not having been married to a writer.' I ask her how she will adapt to life without him.

'I can't answer that,' she replies sadly. ●