

Jackie Gillies



SHINE IT UP

THE INSPIRATIONAL TRUE STORY

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To the love of my life, Ben

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Introduction

If you've seen me on television, you know I like to encourage people to 'shine, shine, shine' or 'shine it up'. When I was in my late teens I started saying 'shine it up' as a way of blessing other people. It made sense. If we can all wish each other the best – and mean it – the world is a nicer place to live in. And wouldn't you want someone to do that for you? I know I do!

But I know things aren't always shiny, or easy. Life can be hard and throw up many challenges. I lost my way and sense of self and I stopped saying 'shine it up' for a while. For years. There were reasons, and they were hard to get past. But I kept trying to work it out, to figure out what my path in life was. I had to admit I'd been struggling and do something about it. That's when I started saying 'shine' again. Wherever I was working

at the time, if people walked in, I'd say, 'You've got to shine it up. You've got to shine, shine, shine.' I was giving them a message but also reminding myself that what you put out into the universe comes back.

All the time, it was almost like my guardian angels and the universe were saying to me, 'Bless other people with shine and it will come back to you.' I listened to what I was being told. My angels have been with me always. I believe everyone has them. And I believe everyone can shine it up. It takes courage to follow the path the universe shows you to take – especially when it is outside the norm. But I can tell you, when I did, my life changed for the better.

I'm getting ahead of myself, though, because you don't know why I had all those years of not being able to tell anyone to shine it up – especially myself – yet. You also don't know how I came to have a life where I feel so blessed and grateful to be surrounded by love. That's all ahead of us, in this book. This is my story, but it can also empower yours. We all have difficulties in life and sometimes it feels impossible to get past them. But we can – and the good news is that you're not on your own. There's more support in this world and in the universe than you can imagine. Strength of spirit and resilience can be developed and you can rewrite your own story.

SHINE IT UP

So, if you're at a point in your life where there's no shine, come along with me and find out how you can get that back. And if your life has plenty of shine, you're welcome too – there's plenty of moments in this book that I hope will make you laugh or connect to, and maybe you'll see a bit of yourself in them.

It all comes down to one thing:

Are you ready to shine it up?

An Aussie childhood – with angels

I grew up in Australia but I'm from a European family – a Croatian family. I grew up with my mum, Svetlana, and dad, Ivan, two brothers, Bobby and Milan, and a sister, Angela, in the city of Newcastle in New South Wales.

Because we're European we'd go to other people's houses for dinners and lunches on a Friday night or a Saturday. The strongest memory from my childhood is of something that took place at one of these big gatherings, when I was about five years old.

I remember sitting outside with some of the kids when all of a sudden I saw something I'd never seen before: three little coloured ponies – a bit like My Little Ponies, if you know what those are – flying in front of me. And I saw

stars around these ponies. It didn't feel strange, it just felt comfortable. It felt like a loving presence. In hindsight, angels are the only things I can imagine them being. They weren't bad – I knew that. I knew they were good, so what else but angels? I thought the other kids saw them too but when I asked I found out it was just me.

I remember looking through the window where my parents and the other adults were sitting, eating and drinking. And there was I, looking at ponies with stars around them, listening to them talking to me. I wasn't frightened. I had the strongest feeling that there was magic in the world and they were part of that magic. It wasn't somebody telling me – I felt it: *This is real, this is not made up*. I knew I had to remember the moment. *This is magic. This is something more*. As I got older I would think about that day, wondering, *Was that even real?* But I know that it was real and they were angels. Showing me ponies instead of some big person standing in front of me – giving me something my five-year-old mind could relate to – was their way of making me feel safe rather than scared. I don't understand how that works, by the way – I just know it's true. I'm sure there are things you don't completely understand that you know are true too. That you *feel*. We talk ourselves out of a lot of these gut feelings, but we shouldn't.

The timing of seeing these angels was significant: I was about to start going to school, and while I had just been made aware of magic, it's almost as if I stopped allowing it in because I knew I was about to encounter people who didn't see the world the same way. The other kids I was with hadn't seen them – so already I felt different. Difference isn't easy when you're young. I believe the angels knew that was going to happen so they were giving me advice: *We're going to show you this and we're going to make you remember this when it's the right time because we know you're going to follow a path. You're going to forget about the angels for a minute because you're going to start living your everyday life with other kids and forgetting the magic of angels and intuition.* But they were also telling me that even if I forgot about them, they would be there waiting – they would *always* be there.

When I look back, I realise that I often used to play with spirits and I thought that was normal, but I cut it off, like most human beings do. You probably did this too. I bet when you were a child you played with imaginary friends and you knew – fundamentally knew – that the world was so much more than what you could see. Who do you think those imaginary friends were if they weren't spirits or your angels? Those who have passed over are with us all the time, whether we can see them or not.

When we start going to school, though, we're growing up and coming into responsibilities – and life is becoming more regimented: you have to go to school and do homework and listen to your parents and teachers, so you put that other less demanding part of your existence to the side.

Spirits are always there, though. They never leave. We human beings wonder why we go through all this turmoil in our lives; I think it's because we forget about spirits, and about the power of the spirit within us. The power of our intuition. It is so important to *listen* to your intuition. People stop listening around the time they start going to school – and that's what happened to me.

* * *

My mother once told me, 'When you were born, your father wasn't allowed to see you for three days.' This was in Yugoslavia, as it was then, and the rule was that fathers couldn't visit newborns for three days. I was born in the part of Yugoslavia that is now Croatia. My father is Croatian and my mother is Serbian, but they met in Australia. I'll tell you more about that later on.

When I was born, my dad had a bottle of scotch – to celebrate – and he was sitting at the hospital saying,

‘My daughter’s been born, I’ve got my bottle of scotch, I want to go in and see my daughter.’

They said, ‘You can’t go in yet.’

He said, ‘I don’t want to wait any more!’ My father is not shy about saying what he wants.

So they let him in.

Mum described the moment to me: ‘When your father held you, I saw a golden light shoot through and around your dad, and around you. I know this sounds crazy, but I saw it.’ She said she had never seen anything like it in her life, except for one day when she had a dream, before my older brother, Bobby, was born. She dreamt that she was saying, ‘If there’s a God, you need to keep my faith in my children,’ and she saw a golden light and a face, and she believed it was the face of God. God said to her, ‘Two more days and you’ll get your results.’ Two days after that she found out she was having my brother, and everything she’d prayed for came to fruition.

Of my birth, Mum said, ‘When your dad held you, that was an experience that nobody would believe unless they were there.’ The light that connected me and Dad has bound us together always. He always was, and still is, a very strong, confident protector.

My early years were spent running around after my brother and eventually becoming a big sister when

Angela was born. She was in the pram Mum was pushing the first day I went to school in Speers Point. I remember holding onto the pram as we walked into the school yard for me to begin Kindergarten. I looked at the other kids and thought, *I don't want to be here.*

I remember my mum's hands and her fingernails and the polish on them as she held onto the pram. There was a girl who lived behind us who went to the same school; she came over and said, 'It's okay.' I put my hand out to take hers, but I really didn't want to be there. I did not want to go into that classroom, I did not want to be going to school.

It's not that I was a nervous kid; I was always quite confident. When I was four we lived in New Lambton – a different part of Newcastle – and there was a school behind us. Mum said I used to slip out the back of our house with my pyjamas on, run in to the school and sit in the classroom and say, 'I'm here.' I'd talk to the kids and the teachers would allow me to stay. Not that I remember doing that.

By the time we moved to Speers Point, though, and I was facing Kindergarten, I didn't want to go to school anymore.

I soon found out why: I was made to feel like an outsider because I wasn't born in Australia. The teacher said, 'You'll

all sit in rows of where you were born,' and everybody would be in their Newcastle Hospital row and I'd be in a row by myself with everybody looking at me. It didn't happen just the once, either, so it was almost as if I was being singled out. 'Jackie, you're from *Yu-go-slaav-ia*,' she said. I used to get embarrassed by that.

I was always getting into trouble for talking – except I wasn't talking to other kids, because I was sitting on my own. That didn't stop the teacher blaming me for other kids talking. 'Jackie, you talk too much,' she said. 'Jackie, stop talking.'

It's probably no surprise that some of the other kids thought I'd make a good target for bullying, and there was a fair bit of it – but I knew how to stand up and give it back. I didn't punch anyone or anything like that. It was more that my confidence hadn't left me; it was almost as if I knew I was going to be bullied so I was prepared to stand up for myself. I accepted I was from a different country and my last name was weird. I was Jakica Ivancevic, not Jackie Smith or Jackie Jones, and I was in a very Anglo-Saxon school. Being bullied was horrible.

Being in that class was the start of realising I was different. I wasn't Australian but I *was* Australian: I left Yugoslavia when I was one month old. I spoke perfect

English, my mum spoke English, my dad spoke English. My parents never segregated our family. We had Australian friends because my dad worked in the mines and made friends there.

When I think about it now, I realise I had some racist teachers and I wish I could go back now and tell them so. Or maybe tell them off for being racist. Their behaviour and attitudes told the other kids what was acceptable, so the kids treated me differently too. Even the parents of the other children could be racist; they'd say things like, 'She's got the last name Ivancevic, that doesn't sound normal. You don't need to play with her.'

My older brother's name is Božo, pronounced *Bor-sho*. The English version of his name is Bobby. But that didn't stop some teachers getting on the school loudspeaker system and calling 'Bozo' – pronounced as it was spelled – to the office, even though 'Bobby' was written beside it. Or they couldn't say our last name. One day when I was in high school I said, 'Can you pronounce Smith? Then you can pronounce my last name. Thanks.'

Bobby was awfully bullied, to the extent that he had his head flushed in a toilet at school. He used to run home every day after high school to get away from the kids who were doing that to him. Kids can be cruel,

but something inside me gave me strength. No matter what the kids or the teachers did to me, I wasn't going to play the victim. Rocks used to be thrown at me when I walked across the quadrangle and they'd yell out things to me. They'd say, 'You wog, go back to your own country!' and 'Get back to yer boat.'

Some people say, 'I was so bullied at school and now I'm depressed.' I understand how a person's spirit can be beaten down and how those scars can come to define a person and their thoughts of themselves. I managed to turn it around. I told myself sometimes that's just life – as tough as that might sound, it's the truth. You have to deal with that stuff and not allow it to diminish your spirit. I was really quite severely bullied but I didn't allow that to make me into a person who is aggressive towards other people. I didn't allow it to define me. What defines me is being inspired by my past and what I've overcome. To know my strength and to embrace my resilience.

Life can be hard, I'm not going to say it's not. We're all going to have trials and tribulations, we're going to have ebbs and flows. Some people have huge trauma to deal with. The thing to remember is, the more you worry about a problem, the bigger it will become and the harder it is to make it go away. But there will always be a day when it will be resolved. I still worry about

things, but I talk myself through it and ask myself why would I worry about a situation I can't control? In our society, it's human nature to fear the things we can't control but we should never forget we can control how much we worry about them.

Here's the thing I've learnt: you can buckle under the bullying or you can realise that you've just got to get on with things. My dad was always very good at telling us to stand up for ourselves and what we believed in: 'Don't let anybody put it over you.' Dad came to Australia at a young age and at that time all the Europeans would stick together. Not Dad: he learnt the English language because he loves Australia. He was the only one out of all the Europeans he knew who mixed with Australians and immersed himself in the Australian culture. He not only learnt to speak English but to read and write it, even though he left school when he was still in primary school.

Not that he left all of his European traditional ways behind. My dad was very strict; my mother less so. When I was a kid, Dad did not want us going on sleepovers to our friends' houses. He didn't trust people he didn't know. I didn't go to parties until I was sixteen or so. Ours was a very strict, very European household where my friends had to come to my house – I wasn't allowed to go to theirs. If I had a party they could come to my

house but I was rarely allowed to have sleepovers or allowed to go and visit my friends' houses. And all the members of my family had to sit around the table and eat dinner together, which would be a pain sometimes but it meant we were all communicating with each other.

My dad very much wanted his daughters cooking and cleaning – not that I would be at home cooking all the time, but he would say, 'You will clean the house this Saturday,' and I couldn't disobey. I couldn't go out and play until the house was cleaned or I'd done my chores in his vegetable garden. So I didn't always invite my friends over, but when I did they loved coming because there'd be all this food! My dad would say, 'Come on, kids, eat some food, eat up, that's not enough!'

While my father was very strict, he also had (and still has) the biggest heart of gold – he would give you the shirt off his back. He used to invite homeless people to our house on Sunday, and Mum would cook them roast dinners. He was generous with his time and his home, and still is.

When we arrived from Yugoslavia, Dad went to work for Comsteel, then he worked in Sydney, for a mining company, and my mum had to look after us. She didn't have a car, and understandably she didn't want to get on a bus for two hours to go somewhere with three kids under

the age of five. So my childhood world was very much school and home and our immediate neighbourhood; I didn't have much of a sense of the rest of Newcastle. I wasn't out in parts of Newie with my friends. Though I did have my next-door neighbours, who were Australian. We always hung out and would go bike riding and climb trees, all the usual childhood stuff, but we never ventured far from home.

However, the part of Newcastle that was mine felt safe – if I walked down to the shops, everybody was always very nice, and the shopkeepers would say hello. I remember going to the shops by myself, or with my brother and sister, and we'd be selling vegetables from my dad's garden out of a little basket – cucumbers for 20 cents and tomatoes – to the neighbours. We used to do really well and we were allowed to keep that money. We certainly didn't lack for activities.

* * *

When I was about four, my cheeky brother Bobby woke me, grabbed my hand and off we went for a walk. He was about five and a half or six years of age. It was something like four o'clock in the morning, but we went over to the park – because we wanted to play. My mother woke

up and found we weren't in the house. She freaked out, understandably, and woke up Dad, who also freaked out.

While we were in the park I remember wanting to go down the slippery dip, so my brother was helping me up the rungs of the ladder. I honestly believe my angels were protecting Bobby and me that night because I remember people walking around the park at that time – and they weren't out for a jog. I was too young to know what they were really up to but it was probably not legal.

The next thing I remember is thinking, *This is amazing*, because I was in a cop car and I put the cop's hat on my head. I was such a cute young kid, let me tell you – I had chubby cheeks, curly hair. When we got home there was Dad in his undies and his singlet, screaming, and all I said was, 'Hi, Daddy.' My brother got smacked so hard in front of the coppers, and I remember my dad saying, 'I'll give you "Hi, Daddy".'

I don't think my brother was allowed out of his room for the whole next day, because he scared our parents so much. But Bobby used to do things like that all the time. He even jumped out of a high window, landed on his bum and winded himself. He used to do dumb things because he thought they looked fun.

* * *

When my parents moved to Speers Point, our house was the oldest in the street. It was very modest. It was a classic weatherboard worker's cottage with a tin roof and it needed a lot of work. It looked like a shack. It was always clean and tidy but it was really small.

My parents were so proud of their home but I was embarrassed because some kids from school weren't that keen on it. 'Look at your house,' they'd say, 'it's so old, it's so disgusting.' It's amazing how early in life people start being judgemental, and it's not fun being on the receiving end of that judgement. I wasn't used to it because neither of my parents are judgemental; the first time I encountered it was when I went to school.

I'd like to say that in response to the bullying about the house I was always like my mum, who is very calm and collected, but sometimes I took after my dad instead and I would give back as good as I got to those kids. If someone said, 'You're just a wog,' I'd answer: 'What did you say?' By the end of primary school I'd become really great at standing up for myself. I remember being in Year Seven and someone saying to me, 'Get back on your boat.' I turned around and said, 'Take your shackles off, you convict.' He just looked at me. And he never said anything like that to me again. I went home and cried about it, but I didn't let him keep me down. I dusted

myself off. I really do thank my parents for instilling a sense of confidence in me that helped build resilience.

I loved my family childhood experiences, even if other kids would try and make me feel ashamed of it.

There were a lot of trees and greenery at that house – our garden was full of flowers and vegetables. Dad wanted his kids to learn how to do the garden and do all the house duties, like washing dishes and vacuuming the floors and cleaning the bathroom, before we could go out and play. I had to get out in the garden and dig up weeds and my sister and I would clean that house with music playing to keep us company. Meanwhile, we knew that the three kids who lived next door would be waiting for us to finish so we could all hang out. We spent time with them every day. Between our house and theirs was an empty block, and each time Angela and I finished the cleaning we would yell out ‘cooe’ across the block so the neighbours would know we were ready.

The neighbour kids actually loved helping out when we worked in the garden, but I just thought, *Who else does this in Australia? Is there anybody else who has to do the garden?* And, yes, there were: most of the Europeans I knew had parents making them do the same thing. From a young age I knew how to tell the parsley from the carrots from the tomatoes, so, as Dad said,

‘When you grow up you know what it looks like to plant a tomato – this is really good for you.’ Food was a big thing in our home. And it was cooked in our kitchen and heavily influenced by my mother and father’s heritage. I didn’t know what a meat pie looked like until I went to a birthday party because we’d never eaten one. I was seventeen and a half when I tried McDonald’s for the first time. The only junk food we were allowed was if, say, a visitor came over – and in our culture they would bring a case of beer for the adults and a bag of lollies for all the kids. So as soon as we’d get those we’d scoff, scoff, scoff. We weren’t allowed soft drinks either, only cordial on rare occasions.

Sometimes our visitors were our non-Croatian neighbours, who would come over and eat the Croatian food that my mum would make. Mum and Dad would say, ‘Stay for dinner,’ or for lunch, whatever it was. There were always big pots of food, and for me that was normal – although some might say it was overeating! But if you came to my house there’d be a big bowl of salad, a big bowl of potatoes and pumpkin, another bowl of vegetables and a jug of gravy, then you’d have a soup before you ate the main meal. And every Sunday we had a roast dinner with soup – and that was after bacon and eggs in the morning. Then there were the

cakes my mum would make – amazing Croatian cakes that our neighbours, in particular, loved.

As I look back, I believe that my dad wanted us to learn how to grow plants in the event something ever happened to this world. He would say, ‘If there is a bomb –’ because there have been many wars in Europe, ‘– I’m going to tell you now, a lot of your friends wouldn’t even know how to grow food. You need to be prepared in the event of everything, anything that happens, any event that means food becomes scarce.’ He knew what that felt like. He grew up in an environment where food was scarce and he needed to work for it; later, after he moved to Australia, there was a war going on in his homeland. He’d tell us that we didn’t know when a war was going to happen, and if it happened in Australia he wanted us to be able to fend for ourselves.

We often don’t realise how good we’ve got it, and I didn’t. So many of my friends have said to me since then that they used to love coming to our house, ‘because your parents would be there and you’d all have to eat together. You could tell your parents loved each other. It was so connected, and our families didn’t have that.’ Although sometimes I’d get embarrassed when my friends were there because, when it was hot, my dad would walk around in his singlet, shorts and thongs, and Mum would

cook and we'd eat outside – it was just like Dad was still in the village in Croatia. We'd sit under a gum tree, where Dad had set up this 44-gallon drum with a hotplate on top of it. There was a swing we'd all go on and people would walk past. From the street you could see what we were doing: sitting under the tree with five pots on the table, eating, and Dad would have the Rakija out – that's a traditional homemade Croatian spirit – and he'd invite the neighbours over and people would just sit around eating and drinking. I think because my dad grew up with very little food, any person who comes to our house will find food on the table. Even as an adult, if I didn't get up within five minutes of someone arriving to organise coffees and prosciutto and cheese and salamis and breads and olives and gherkins, I'd get a look from Dad.

I saw a difference when I'd go to my friends' homes, though, where my food would be plated up for me. I never understood that – in fact, I didn't like it. I liked the community that comes with sitting and serving as a group. I still do.

* * *

My parents were godparents to a young girl (whose mother has since passed on, God bless her soul) who

lived in New Lambton, and my sister and I often stayed at her house, which was next to our own when we still lived there. The girl was my sister's age, so we would always play together; I'm three and a half years older than Angela, but I didn't ever mind playing with the younger kids.

From the age of six, when we visited, my sister and I would stay in a certain room. It was always very, very cold, and I never liked to go into that room. *Ever*. I knew there was a spirit in there. I used to say, 'Uncle Barry and Aunt Rita, can I sleep on the lounge please?' And I was told, 'There's not enough room, just go up into bed.'

One night when I was thirteen, Angela and I woke up to the sound of a dog barking. I didn't want to look out from under the covers, so we hid under the covers, crying, when we heard someone singing, 'Ring a ring a rosy, a pocket full of posy.' We looked out and there were kids' spirits in front of my sister and me, singing and holding hands, and a dog right there in front of the bed, barking.

Angela and I were bawling our eyes out. We flew back under the covers and in my head I began telling the spirits to get out of there. But they wouldn't go, and we kept crying until finally Uncle Barry turned the lights on, and I told him what had happened. He said, 'I know there are spirits in here because it's always cold.'

I told my mum the next day and said that I'd never stay in that house again. After that, when we did visit it would be during the day and I would run past that room.

There's an epilogue to that story, as told to me by my mum long after we stopped having sleepovers at Auntie Rita's. One day Mum was peeling potatoes while Dad was outside working. Through the window she could see the side of Rita and Barry's house; there were three windows. Rita and Barry and their kids were away on a holiday, but as Mum looked out she saw a woman with long black hair inside the house, walking past the windows. Mum looked again, thinking it was just her eyes playing up. She kept peeling the potatoes. She saw the woman walk past again but the woman didn't look at her.

Mum called out to Dad and said, 'There's somebody in Rita and Barry's house.' Dad said, 'Don't be so stupid.' But Dad heard somebody in the house and saw them walk past the windows too. My parents rang the police, who turned up a bit later with torches and they went looking through the windows of the house because there should not have been anybody there.

There *was* something in that house, all right – and it never left. I know this because I have always seen spirits, even if I used to think they were in my imagination. It

was *never* my imagination. *I have seen them.* So it makes sense that my mum saw the spirit there. She still made us sleep in that house after knowing it was haunted! I have said to my mum, ‘You tortured me by letting me stay in that house.’

After that experience with the spirits, Barry did some research into the history of the house and found that the land had been lived on by convicts when they first came to Australia. I believe the spirits knew that I could see them. And after that one incident of ‘Ring a ring a rosie’, I never saw them again.

* * *

Dad used to study martial arts when he lived in Melbourne and he made it right up to just about getting his black tip, but that’s when he moved to Newcastle. Which was why, one day, he said to Bobby and me, ‘All right, you two are going to karate.’

‘I don’t want to go to karate!’ I said. I was doing dance lessons and I loved those.

But Dad said, ‘You’re going to karate, both of you. Off you go.’

Bobby didn’t like karate so he’d say he was going and then he’d just sit under the house. I think he was being

bullied at karate by the kids, because of his name – they'd call him Bozo the Clown. But I said, 'Come on, Bobby we're going,' and he'd occasionally join me.

There was a tree on the way to karate that we used to climb up. I was never afraid – I was a tomboy, I used to climb up very high trees and swing from one branch to another. I wasn't afraid of heights. One day we climbed the tree and before I started swinging I heard a warning in my head: *Do not swing onto the next branch.* I thought it was my own voice, so I swung over anyway, and fell and landed on my arm. When I stood up, the bone was sticking up a bit, so I was fairly sure I'd done something serious to it. It also hurt quite a bit, so that was another clue.

We went home and I said, 'Mum, my arm is so sore,' and she didn't realise how bad it was, because she had three kids to worry about. Dad was away working, so she probably wondered what she should do: *Should I take her to hospital now, do I pack up all the kids, do you think this will keep just another couple of hours until I can get somebody over here?* But I was so glad when she just wrapped me up and put us all in the car and off we went to the hospital.

She was told I had a greenstick fracture and needed to have an operation. Mum cried because this had never

happened to anyone in the family and, of course, the doctors had to say there was a risk I could die because of the general anaesthetic. She couldn't talk to Dad about it, because he was away. Meanwhile, I was wondering what all the fuss was about.

I remember the mask coming down and I was talking to a spirit, saying, 'I am not going to go under with this mask,' even as I'm looking down at the needle that's in my sore hand. So the doctor was saying, 'Count back from five,' and I'm thinking, *I'm not going anywhere.*

Four.

I was still fighting it.

Then, *bang*, it all went black, and the next minute they're wheeling me out and I was okay. But the point of the story is that I remember something in my head saying, *Do not jump, do not go to that next branch*, and I ignored it and broke my arm. It was a very early, very painful lesson in trusting my intuition.

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