

ANDREA DAVIS PINKNEY

WITH THE MIGHTY



OF ANGELS

A Dear America novel

Scholastic Inc.

This book is dedicated to the legacies of
Thurgood Marshall and George E. Bragg.

This book was originally published by Scholastic Inc. in 2011 as part of the
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ISBN 978-1-338-53095-7

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 19 20 21 22 23

Printed in the U.S.A. 40
This edition first printing 2019

Book design by Kevin Callahan

Tuesday, May 18, 1954

Diary Book,

It's early, before the sun even knows she's got sleep in her eyes. With the way the heat is already rising, Mama will no doubt say this morning is as hot as the day I was born.

Folks in Lee County still talk about me coming into this world. "Someday you'll put it in a book," Daddy likes to say.

Well, thanks to Goober, I now have a book to write in.

The best way to tell about something is from the beginning. Even in a diary book that's private, and for my eyes only, it's good for me to write about myself from the start – to claim this book as really, truly mine. In case anyone ever finds my diary, they'll know about me.

Mama said I was born right as the new day was dawning. Came into this world during the "in-between," when night is changing to day, when morning starts to roll out like a pie crust. That's why Mama and Daddy named me Dawn, after the in-between.

When Mama cradled me for the first time, she put my name to a song. "*Dawnie, Dawnie, sweet potato pie.*"

The nickname stuck — Dawnie.

My middle name, Rae, is the name Mama had before she married Daddy. She was Loretta Rae then. She's Loretta Johnson now, the name of Daddy's people, and my name, too. Dawnie Rae Johnson.

When I was born, I came on strong like the sun, and, Mama says, "Loudest baby to ever cry in Hadley Hospital."

"You were shouting good news," says Daddy. "You've been blessed with the gift of gab ever since."

One thing about being born when the sun's about to rise — and being named after that time of day — is that I always beat the morning. When my eyes are wide open, the sun is still deciding to sleep for five minutes more.

This morning when I woke, I was hard-pressed to wait even five minutes for anything. The first chorus of bullfinches were welcoming May with their song. Seems those happy birds knew it was my birthday. And thanks to Goober, my celebrating had already started.

As soon as I felt this hard, flat square pressing up through my pillow, I knew Goober had done something special. Goober is *some* little brother.

He can sure rattle me plenty, but he knows how to make me happy, too. Only eight years old, and full of surprises. During the morning's in-between, I yanked this diary book out from under my half-sleep head.

When I got to the kitchen, I was all smiles. Goober was there with Mama and Daddy. He'd lined up his peanut shells along the edge of our kitchen table, nose-to-tail, in a parade.

Most likely it was Goober who'd propped my pogo stick on one side of my chair, and my baseball bat on the other.

Goober spotted the book in my hand right off.

"Dawnie," he said, "I made it for you special. It's a diary for your birthday."

Special is sure right. This diary is small and square, and put together like two slices of dark toast pressed into a sandwich. Its spine has been sewn with thick twine. The pages are rough at the edges, but there are plenty of them for writing. I named my birthday gift as soon as I held it—Diary Book. Thick as a brick, and sure hefty. Lots of gristle on this book's bones. Just like me.

At breakfast, I ran my fingers along my diary's bumpy spine.

"You *made* this?" I said to Goober.

“Mama helped me,” Goober said.

“We know how much you like to write.” Mama looked as proud as Goober.

Goober rocked in his chair, set the chair’s back legs up to tilting. Then he handed me another gift: a new red pencil, with a plump eraser.

“For the bestest sister,” Goober said.

“*You’re* the bestest, Goober,” I said, then hugged him. “Thank you.”

I sure don’t know why people say Goober is slow. I think he’s as regular as anybody, only different in certain ways. Mama’s tried to explain it to me, but I have a hard time understanding. “Your brother’s one of God’s beautiful creatures. *You* came here with the gift of talk. Goober’s gift is that he sees the world in his own way.”

There’s nothing wrong with Goober’s eyesight. Sometimes he won’t look at you when he speaks. But my brother can no doubt see fine.

Some kids say Goober’s addle-brained. Others say he’s touched in the head, or a simpleton. To me, Goober’s just special.

My little brother’s given name is Gunther Johnson. But the boy loves peanuts, so we’ve been forever calling him Goober. Most days his pockets

bulge with peanuts and their shells. His skin is the same brown as a peanut, too. “And he’s just as pudgy.” My daddy always winks when he says this.

Daddy works nights mostly, hauling and loading milk casks and cheese crates from the backs of trucks at Sutter’s Dairy, the biggest dairy supply in all of Lee County.

Daddy leaves for work after supper, returns right before morning, eats breakfast with us, then reads his stack of newspapers before he sleeps. This morning, like always, Daddy was deep in his reading. Didn’t look up once. That’s Daddy. He reads like words on a page are the tastiest plate of grits ever.

“You get that from him, Dawnie,” Mama says. “The two of you read faster than drinking root beer through a straw. And you, child, take in book learning just as quickly.”

Mama’s right. At school I’m quicker than most kids.

Daddy can’t get enough of his newspapers and magazines. He stacks them all next to his coffee cup — *Look*, an NAACP journal called *The Crisis*, and our local paper, the *Hadley Register*. Daddy even somehow gets his hands on that

Northerner newspaper the *New York Times*.

This morning when I sat down, Daddy took a break from his breakfast reading. The little smile playing in his eyes told me a surprise was brewing. He studied me for a long moment. “Happy birthday, Dawnie.”

Then he pushed that New York paper under my nose. “Here, child.”

He was eager to show me the front-page headline. “Clip this for your new diary.”

I looked carefully.

Daddy told me to read what I saw. He said, “Speak loud enough to scare some pigeons.”

I read slowly, pressing each word into the warm morning air.

Seems Mama already knew the news.

Didn’t take her but a minute to hand me a pair of scissors from her sewing basket and a tin of paste from her craft bin.

“Make your birthday book look pretty,” Goober said.

Nobody even had to tell me what to do. I knew right off why those scissors and paste brush were suddenly in my hands.

I’ve carefully glued the headline right here as a memory of the day I turned twelve.