



DEAR AMERICA

*The Diary  
of Pringle Rose*



DOWN THE  
RABBIT HOLE

SUSAN CAMPBELL BARTOLETTI

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In memory of Sal Angello  
(1947—2010),  
an exceptional person in every sense of the word



While the events described and some of the characters in this book may be based on actual historical events and real people, Pringle Rose is a fictional character, created by the author, and her diary and its epilogue are works of fiction.

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Summary: It is 1871 in Scranton, Pennsylvania, and fourteen-year-old Pringle Rose, still grieving from the death of her parents, takes her brother, Gideon, who has Down syndrome, and escapes from her uncle and aunt, on a train to Chicago—but disaster seems to follow her there.

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1871

**MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 4, 1871**

**9:30 A.M.**

At last my hands have stopped shaking and I can write. I must write everything down, as best I can.

If anything happens to me, I entreat the finder of this diary to send these pages to Miss Mary Catherine Fisher at Merrywood School for Girls in Philadelphia.

Merricat is my favorite friend and she wants to be an authoress. In these pages she will find a good, sad story to tell. If the worst comes to me, I authorize Merricat to release my story to the world.

### **A GOOD, SAD STORY**

At 9:00 A.M. sharp this morning, the train whistled and snorted a great puff of smoke. Gideon clapped his hands over his ears and grinned at me. He loves whistles and bells.

I forced a smile. I didn't tell Gideon that my stomach was twisting into one very hard knot. As the great wheels turned beneath us, a sour taste rose in my mouth. I worried that I might need a polite place to vomit.

To settle my stomach, I concentrated on our journey. With each *chuff* of the mighty Lackawanna's engine, Scranton slid farther into the distance and the hard knot loosened. Soon the train's steady rhythm comforted me. I told myself that the train was galloping Gideon and me toward safety and a new life.

I squeezed Gideon's hand and turned my head so that he wouldn't see the hot, salty tears streaming down my face.

Dear, sweet Gideon! He always senses when something is wrong, and because he's a gentleman, he tries to fix it. He took out his white handkerchief and offered it to me.

I dabbed my eyes and cheeks and chin. "It's nothing but a cinder," I told him. "All better now, see?"

He folded the handkerchief four times into a neat square and tucked it into his shirt pocket.

From his vest pocket, Gideon took out his gold pocket watch, a gift from Father when Gideon learned to tell time. He pressed the clasp, springing open the lid.

I settled back against the car's seat and let my thoughts fly forward. "We'll reach Chicago Wednesday morning," I told him.

Gideon moved his fingers and held up three.

"That's right," I told him. "Three days. You count very well."

Gideon leaned against me. He smelled like spice and bergamot and orange blossoms. "Are you wearing Father's cologne?" I asked him.

He nodded.

## I AM A THIEF

Last night, when the last sliver of gaslight dimmed beneath each bedroom door, I rose from bed.

There's an art to walking soundlessly. It's something Merricat and I learned to do exceedingly well on our night escapes from the dormitory. To move soundlessly, you shuffle. You distribute your weight evenly in small flat steps. You move lightly but with great purpose.

With great purpose, I moved down the dark hallway and downstairs. Neither a bump nor stir nor rustle did anyone hear.

I groped my way to Father's library and turned the brass doorknob. The door whispered against the thick rug.

Moonlight spilled through Father's office window. The dark shapes shifted into Father's high-backed chair, his green lamp, and his coat rack. On his rows of books, the gilt lettering glinted.

A hunched form rose from Father's chair, its eyes glowing, its tail flagpole straight. "*Me-owrch*," said Mozie.

He leaped to the floor with a soft thump and rubbed against my legs. "Shhh," I said, picking him up. "You're not supposed to be here. You've been banished, remember? You'll lose all nine lives if you get caught."

With my lap full of cat, I tugged open the middle desk drawer, groped for the false divider, and lifted it out. I patted inside the hidden compartment until I found the drawstring sack of gold and silver coins.

My heart pounded so hard against my chest, I felt it in my ears. There were fifty dollars in all.

Heavy! I swaddled the coins in my nightdress. Then I carried Mozie and the coins upstairs.

On my bed, Mozie kneaded me with his paws, purring. I lay there, staring at the full moon over the trees.

Did I sleep? I must have, for the next thing I heard was the tread of feet passing my bedroom, so heavy they sounded as if they carried the weight of the world.

Nervous! I could hardly breathe! I retraced my steps. Did I remember to close Father's office? Yes.

Return the hidden panel? Yes.

Close the desk drawer? Yes.

Had I left anything out of place? No.

Had anyone heard me? Seen me? Suspected me?

I prayed not.

I counted the morning sounds, ticking each off. Muffled voices. The slam of the back door. The jingle of a horse in its traces. The clatter of a carriage down the alley.

Next, a serving tray rattled up the back stairway. Two sharp raps on a bedroom door. Another



door opened and closed. Then footsteps back to the kitchen.

I slipped from bed and pulled a plain blue dress over my head, and then yanked a black dress over the blue. I carried Mozie across the hall into Gideon's room and plunked the cat on top of him.

"Get dressed," I told him.

Gideon's eyes popped open. He shook his head no and pulled the covers to his chin. He remembered he was being punished.

"We're going on an adventure," I said. "Just like Alice. We mustn't be late."

Excitement flooded his face. He rolled out of bed and dressed quickly.

I packed our carpetbags: two changes of clothing and other necessities, Mother's scarlet cloak and Bible, my worn copy of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, and the letter from Mother's favorite friend, Beatrice Ringwald.

Gideon and I bade good morning to our cook, Mrs. Robson, who trilled back, "Good morrhning" in her Scottish burr.

We ate hotcakes and sausages. We stacked our dishes by the sink. I set a saucer of milk on the kitchen floor for Mozie.

Mozie purred as he lapped up the milk. As soon as Mrs. Robson went outside to tend her kitchen garden, I wrapped a chunk of bread, a wedge of cheese, four sausages, four apples, and the best paring knife in a plain white cloth.

Our housekeeper, Mrs. Goodwin, caught me. She opened the cloth. “A picnic, eh?”

My heart raced.

“That lunch will never do you.” She added six hard-boiled eggs, six boiled potatoes in their jackets, two cucumbers, and the last of the sausages, and wrapped everything back up. “God be with you,” she said.

Did Mrs. Goodwin know? Did I hear a sniffle? I kissed her cheek—it was wet—and thanked her for the picnic.

We left no note.

We let ourselves out the front door.

It was a perfectly lovely morning, the cicadas

already humming, the birds calling to one another, squirrels arguing. In plain sight, we strolled down Olive Street.

Suddenly, wheels clattered around the corner. Hooves struck the brick street. My heart pounded against my ribs. I sucked in my breath. Had we been found out? Should we run?

The driver shouted, "Hallo, Miss Pringle! Hallo, Master Gideon! Where are you off to this fine morning? Would you like a lift?"

It was Mr. York, our huckster. "No, thank you!" I shouted back, and waved him on. The horse snorted and swished her tail. The cart rattled by, loaded with cabbages, turnips, potatoes, and apples. I could breathe again.

## THE STOWAWAY

We passed the streets named after our presidents and made our way downhill to Wyoming Avenue. Busy! Carriages raced up and down the street. Men wearing frock coats and tall hats and watches on gold chains rushed importantly from one building to another. Here and there, women in ruffled

walking dresses wore hats perched jauntily at an angle and carried bright parasols.

I clutched Gideon's hand, so we wouldn't get separated. We followed Lackawanna Avenue to the train station. He stood outside the wash-room. I slipped inside and yanked off my black mourning weeds, exposing the plain blue dress underneath.

In the looking glass, a strange girl stared back at me. Her black hair was loose and wild. She had a delicate face with intense green eyes and a stubborn chin. She was a thief, absconding with a sack of gold and silver coins stolen from her father's desk and food stolen from the family kitchen and a brother stolen from his bed.

I repinned my hair. I didn't want to think about the girl in the looking glass.

Outside, I stuffed the black dress in a barrel. I grabbed Gideon's hand and led him to the ticket counter, where I purchased the tickets. The ticket agent yawned and barely glanced at us as he slid the tickets across the counter.

We found our car and I let Gideon sit by the

window. Before long, the train hissed and snorted its great breath. The conductor called out, “All aboard!”

At the very last moment, a harried-looking woman in a pink dress with two chattering children and a baby in tow climbed aboard and filled the seat behind us.

As the train pulled away from the station, Gideon’s carpetbag swelled and growled.

I gasped. “You didn’t!” I unsnapped his carpetbag, and oh, my paws and whiskers! A white paw shot out and swiped at the air.

Gideon grinned.

“Oh, you! What are we going to do with Mozie?” I pretended to be annoyed, but secretly I was happy that Mozie was safe with us, because he didn’t have many lives left. Besides, Alice’s cat, Dinah, never did get to Wonderland, did she?

Now Mozie sleeps in the carpetbag at our feet and the train puffs north like a great racehorse through the prettiest oaks and maples and pines. The little girl behind me keeps kicking my seat. She makes my teeth rattle.



Ten thirty A.M. We've been underway for over an hour. Gideon stares out the window as if he hopes train robbers will burst out. A few minutes ago, he nudged me and pointed to a large buck with a full rack of antlers standing at the fringe of the woods.

Behind us, a red-haired boy with a freckled face stuck his right arm straight out and pointed his fingers like a rifle at the buck. "Pow," he said. Then he wheeled his arm around and pointed his finger at Gideon. "Powpowpow!"

The boy ducked. He poked his head over the seat. "Got you."

"Adam," said his mother. "You mustn't pester."

Adam's mother looks tired, no doubt from minding three children. Beside her sits a small girl with large brown eyes and a cupid face and feet that use my seat for a drum. On her lap, the mother holds a chubby baby girl who doesn't talk but points and says, "Ah ah ah."

I want Gideon to stick up for himself. I lifted his arm and folded down his thumb and three

fingers and aimed his pointy finger back at the boy. “Pow,” I whispered. “Say it. Pow.”

Gideon wiggled free. But his face glowed with keen interest and wistfulness. He longs to play. He longs for a true friend.

A favorite friend is worth waiting for. I never had one until I found Merricat, or as Merricat says, she found me. Someday, Gideon will find a true friend. It’s just a matter of time. I know it. Just as I know a new life awaits us in Chicago.

## THE NIGHTMARE

It’s hard to write with a dip pen on a train, but I must write everything down. I’ll begin at the beginning and go on from there, just as the King of Hearts tells Alice in Wonderland.

Our nightmare began last April. It was just before afternoon vespers, and Miss Westcott handed me two letters, one from Mother and one from Father.

How glad I felt to see Father’s strong, angular hand and Mother’s crisp, curling strokes. I missed my parents more than words can say.

Miss Westcott handed Merricat a thick envelope from her mother.

“*Godey’s Lady’s Book*,” whispered Merricat, and we grinned.

I stuck the letters in my uniform pocket. Later, Merricat and I would lie across her bed and pore over *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, studying the latest fashions and styles, and longing for them. We would read our letters aloud, as we always did, just as we shared our diaries.

That day – the 13th of April – is the last time I remember feeling truly happy and care-free. Merricat and I linked arms, and since Miss Westcott wasn’t looking, we skipped arm in arm to chapel. We didn’t give one whit what the other girls thought.

We slid into our pew. It was raining, and the rain sounded like pebbles against the chapel roof and windows. I shivered and drew my shawl closer around me.

Two candles burned brightly on the altar. As the Reverend Porter droned on, I fingered the embossed letters on Mother’s envelope. A breeze



brushed against the nape of my neck, turning my skin to gooseflesh. On the altar table, the candles flamed brighter, and the faintest, most delicate scent of jasmine and violet floated in the air. It was Mother's exact perfume, one designed especially for her.

I sniffed, drawing it in, and turned my head. I was shocked to see Mother, her scarlet cloak draped around her shoulders. She smiled lovingly and held out her arms.

"Mother!" I said, popping to my feet. I threw my arms around her.

The Reverend Porter halted mid-sentence. Over half-glasses that reflected orange and yellow and white candlelight, he scolded me with his eyes.

Someone snickered.

Mother disappeared. I had thrown my arms around empty air.

"Miss Rose," said Miss Westcott. "That's enough of your antics. Sit down."

A heavy, dark feeling pulled me down into the pew.



All that day I carried that dark weight. I tried to lose myself in the parsing of sentences and the declension of Latin nouns and Trigonometry and Botany and French and German classes. Not my classmates' chirping nor Merricat's bright gossip nor *Godey's Lady's Book* could lift the heavy cloud.

That night, I comforted myself with the letters from Mother and Father. Father wrote about the coal miners' strike, now entering its fifth month. Father called the Workmen's Benevolent Society "evil" and said that the labor group was hurting the miners. He said it was turning them into criminals who burned breakers and destroyed the personal property of colliery operators. He vowed never to capitulate to the workers' demands for higher wages.

Mother asked about my studies. She hoped I was meeting the right people. She reminded me that whom one meets is important in shaping a girl's future. Mother often included her favorite Bible quotes and wrote little instructions in her letters, asking if I was reading my Bible and reminding me to pray.

The answer was yes and yes. I was reading my Bible and I was praying. That night, while my classmates slumbered around me, I lifted the door latch and escaped into the hallway. As the moonlight spilled through the window, I knelt and clasped my hands together and closed my eyes and prayed as Jabez had prayed in 1 Chronicles 4:10: I prayed for God to bless me and to enlarge my coast and to guide me with His hand and to keep evil from me.

There was so much I wanted. I wanted a larger life. I wanted to travel and to study and to do all sorts of things. Was it wrong? Was it selfish and greedy for a girl to want more than she has?

When I opened my eyes, the hallway brightened for a second. In that glowing second I believed that my prayer was answered, too. Then a cloud passed over the moon, darkening the window.

The next morning, Miss Westcott came to the doorway of our German class. "Come," she said, beckoning me with her finger.

Merricat reached across the aisle, her eyes wide

and worrying. She squeezed my trembling hand and mouthed, “What did you do?”

I mouthed back, “I don’t know.”

I followed Miss Westcott’s swishing crinoline skirts. Oh, the thoughts that tumbled through my head! The last girl summoned to Miss Westcott’s office was dismissed for breaking the school’s honor code.

Did Miss Westcott know I had climbed the bluff overlooking the chapel?

That Merricat and I had hung unladylike from the tree outside the dormitory? Our skirts parasol-like over our faces? Our pantaloons showing?

That we stayed up past curfew, gossiping about our classmates and poring over *Godey’s Lady’s Book* by the light of a candle stub?

That we had perfected the art of walking soundlessly through the dormitory corridors?

Alas, how I wish it were one — or all! — of these things, for there, standing in Miss Westcott’s office, was my father’s only brother, Edward. The two rarely spoke and never agreed on anything.

I didn’t need to read my uncle’s face with my

eyes. I read his face with my insides. Something was terribly, dreadfully wrong.

## THE THINGS I REMEMBER

I remember the rain pelted Miss Westcott's window.

I remember the rivulets of water streamed down the glass, making the trees, the outbuildings, the grass appear wavy.

I remember Uncle Edward's wet shoes squeaked against the wooden floor as he shifted his weight.

I remember his trousers were soaked from the knees down.

I remember he reeked of Hoyt's Cologne, a scent that Mother described as an attempt at a garden or a harvest or pickling. (A gentleman should be seen and not smelled.)

I remember his voice crackled like static air before a storm. "Pringle, I have terrible news."

Yet I plunged ahead, unafraid. I was Alice, chasing the White Rabbit. "It's Gideon," I said.

I have been prepared to lose my brother ever since he was a baby. Doctors say children like Gideon don't live to adulthood.

That's why my first thought was Gideon.

That's why my second thought was, *Please, let it be Gideon.*

Uncle Edward's words crashed like thunder. "It's not Gideon. I'm so sorry, Pringle. It's your parents."

My heart! I gripped the back of an upholstered chair to steady myself. "Are they sick?"

I knew the answer from his stricken look.

He circled my shoulders clumsily with his arm and steered me toward the divan. "There's no delicate way to put this. Come. Sit."

I rooted my feet to the carpet. "Then don't put it delicately."

"My dear niece," said Uncle Edward, taking my hand. "There's been a terrible accident. A carriage accident. Your mother and father are dead."

Dead! The word surged through me like lightning. I yanked my hand from my uncle's lest his hand singe mine.

"When?"

"Yesterday. I came as quickly as I could."

"Impossible!" I laughed as I reached in my

uniform pocket for my parents' letters. The joke was on my uncle. "How can they be dead? See? Here are their letters. They arrived yesterday." I knew the illogic even as I said it. My laugh sounded somewhere outside myself.

"I'm so sorry for your loss, my dear child," said Miss Westcott, drawing near.

How can I explain the feeling? Imagine your mind closing. The blood draining from your head and neck. Your mouth opens, but your throat closes around your words. Your arms, your legs, they go numb.

I was Alice, tumbling headlong down a deep, dark rabbit hole. The walls in Miss Westcott's office with their portraits of dour-faced headmistresses, the leather-bound books with gilt lettering, the tall pendulum clock, the gold-rimmed teacup and saucer, all these things spiraled so slowly it felt as though I could have reached out and sipped a cup of tea, just as Alice did.

Words wound about me, too. Words like *home* and *funeral* and *arrangements* sounded near and then from someplace deep and far away.

“Gideon?” I managed to squeak out.

“A few scrapes and bruises.”

And this was my third thought, which I said out loud: “Why isn’t it Gideon? God took the wrong ones!”

“Priscilla Rose! You don’t mean that,” said Miss Westcott.

Why do adults tell you what you mean and don’t mean? I did mean every word, and I would have said so, except the floor rushed at me with a roar and swallowed me. The next thing I knew, my nostrils felt as though they had exploded. I was lying on the divan, sputtering and snorting and gasping for air.

Miss Westcott capped the smelling salts. “Priscilla, God has a plan. You must believe that.”

I struggled to sit up, and when I did, I looked at my uncle, heaved, and threw up in Miss Westcott’s lap.

