



DEAR AMERICA

*The Diary of  
Patsy, a Freed Girl*



*I Thought My Soul  
Would Rise and Fly*

JOYCE HANSEN

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*For my dear nieces, Lisa, Tracy,  
Coughangela, April, and Megan.  
And my favorite nephew, Austin, III.*



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

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*Mars Bluff,  
South Carolina*



1865

*Friday, April 21, 1865*

I am so frightened my heart is dancing a reel in my chest. I've never written in a book before. If Mistress Davis catch me she'll whip me and take you away, little book. She'll also take the pen and ink and say that I stole them. But I have not. Her own niece, Annie, gave you to me this morning as a joke. Annie and her brother Charles enjoy making fun of me. And it was Annie who taught me how to read as a joke as well, until Mistress made her stop.

“We are only playing school, Aunt,” Annie would say. “Patsy isn't learning anything. She is the dunce, Charles is the smart pupil, and I am the teacher.”

“That's not a proper game. Suppose one of our visitors sees you and misunderstands. It's illegal to teach slaves how to read and write. It spoils them.”

But it was too late, for I had already learned how. Whenever newspapers was thrown away for burning I would take a page and hide it under my pallet, so that when I was alone, I could

practice reading words. And whenever I was by the creek or in the kitchen garden, I would get a small stick that I used as a pen and practice writing letters in the dirt. I never let anyone know. Annie was a willful child, so we never stopped playing the game. And the more I played the dunce, the more I learned.

I've been tending to Annie and Charles from the time their father, Master's brother, brought them to Davis Hall to live after their mother died. They were babies and I was but a little tot myself, maybe about three or four years old. I had to help one of the women, who was too old to work in the fields, take care of them. Serving Annie and Charles has been my task ever since.

This morning when Annie gave you to me, little book, she said, "Now that the War has ended, we are leaving South Carolina, Patsy. Charles and I can't carry all of our belongings so we are giving you this diary, ink, and a pen. You must write all of your beautiful thoughts in this book while we are gone." Annie and Charles laughed until

tears ran down their cheeks. “Imagine a dunce having beautiful thoughts,” Charles said.

I know what a dunce is, but I stared at them as if I didn’t understand what they were saying. Then Charles stuck his book in my face. “Patsy,” he said, “don’t forget to put a date first each time you write your beautiful thoughts. Today is Friday, April 21, 1865. You must tell what happens in your life.”

These are my thoughts. I don’t suppose they are beautiful, but the joke is on Annie and Charles. They thought they were giving me something I couldn’t use. Now I can write as Mistress Davis does in her book. I will keep track of all of my days.

Mostly, my thoughts are about where I’ve always lived here on the Davis Hall Plantation and how everything is changing and remaining the same all at once.

The grown-ups hold secrets, and whispers hang in the air like the strands of moss that dangle from some of the oak trees. All of Master’s hounds was poisoned and the plantation jail

and the whipping post was burned down. No one knows who did it. The grown-ups talk about the people who left Davis Hall last week – the carpenter, the cobbler, and the blacksmith.

Cook says that the Yankees won the War and that we are free. But Master and Mistress have not said a word about us being free. Cook is still cooking and complaining. She is so mean, one of these days she's going to cuss up her ownself. James is still taking care of Master. Does everything for him. When Master catch a cold, James be the one who sneeze. Nancy is still taking care of Mistress and following behind her like a noonday shadow. Ruth is still cleaning and making sure everything in the house is the way Mistress wants it. Miriam is still washing and ironing and gossiping with Cook. The field hands are still plowing and planting. I am still emptying chamber pots.

Little book, I hope you like your new home in my chamber, but it is merely a storeroom inside the kitchen shed. I moved myself in here last

March. I used to sleep in one of the cottages that line the walkway leading to The House. The house slaves, carpenter, cobbler, blacksmith, and their families lived there, too, before we was freed. The field hands still live in cabins on the other side of the plantation, near the cotton fields.

I stayed in the same cottage with Cook, Ruth, her son Luke, and Miriam. Since there was only one room, I was rarely alone to practice my reading, and I was always afraid that Luke would discover the papers I'd hidden in the wheat straw under my pallet. He's only a little boy, about seven, and might tell my secret. If Master and Mistress find out that I can read, I might be whipped for sure.

The storeroom next to the kitchen shed has only a tin tub, some candle forms, a flax wheel, a rickety milking stool, and a box of scraps of cloth that we use for dust rags and patchwork quilts.

When I moved my pallet here, Cook said it was a good idea because I won't be late getting the fire started in the morning. There is a hook where I hang my one other homespun dress and my apron.



And I can put my candle on the milking stool. So, my Friend, this is our chamber that we have all to ourselves. I hope no one finds you and takes you away from me.

I must go now. Cook is calling my name all over the yard.

*Saturday, April 22, 1865*

*Sunrise*

I want to tell you more about my life, but I must write quickly before Cook comes to the kitchen. I started the fire even before the cock crowed, so I wouldn't have to listen to Cook's mouth.

Writing to you is like speaking to a friend, so I shall call you Dear Friend, since I don't have any real friends, except Luke. But I can't speak to him the way I would talk with a girl my own age. He is a nice boy, though, and treats me as if there's nothing wrong with me.

Nancy and I are about the same age, but I don't like her. She try to play the mistress with me. Miriam, James, and Cook hardly know I am around, except to tell me when I've made a mistake

or to shush me when I try to speak. Master and Mistress only speak to me to give me an order.

Ruth, Luke's mother, is almost like a friend. She has always been kind to me. She never yells or tells me to hush up or talks for me.

You see, Friend, I have a problem. When I write to you the words come out easily, not the way I stammer and sputter when I speak, which is why I am so silent most of the time and people think I am dim-witted.

Yesterday Mistress told me that since Annie and Charles are gone I have to help Cook all day. In the past, I was only with Cook in the mornings and evenings. I would light the coals, fetch water for cooking, and sometimes knead dough for biscuits, or make coffee out of sweet potatoes. There has been no real coffee to buy because of the War.

This is how I turn sweet potatoes into coffee: First I cut the potatoes into small chips, then dry them in the sun, and next I parch them on the hot coals and grind them so that they are just like coffee grains. Cook taught me how to do this.

Master hates it and cusses up Yankees every time he drinks it.

In the mornings, when the last patches of dark disappear, James, Ruth, Miriam, Cook, and I sit on the benches in front of the large pine table in the kitchen shed and eat cornbread or biscuits, sometimes grits, and at special times eggs. We wash our food down with a cool glass of milk. Nancy eats later, by herself at the table, because she has to comb Mistress's hair and help her dress. Nancy sleeps in The House at the foot of Mistress's bed. James sleeps in The House, too. Only he has his own servant's room. So James must be higher up than Nancy is. He sleeps in a four-poster bed; Nancy sleeps on a pallet. Are you laughing, Friend? I am.

When we finish breakfast, it's time for all of us to do our tasks. I help Ruth serve Master and Mistress their breakfast, and also help her clean a little.

That is how we lived before freedom. We're still living almost the same way except, Annie and Charles are gone.

I must go now. If there is time, I will talk with you later.

### *Evening*

I found a piece of candle, so I can write to you once again, Friend. Cook is the vilest woman in the world sometimes. Nothing pleases her. This afternoon she said the gingerbread dough I kneaded was too lumpy, and the oak chips and bark I collected for her cooking fire were not dry enough. Maybe she is disturbed over the news that James told her this morning. The Yankee President Lincoln was killed a week ago. James and Cook both seem worried. Cook said, "Maybe we not free then, since the man who free us is dead."

When I helped Ruth serve Master and Mistress their breakfast this morning, Master called the dead President a black Republican and said that he was vulgar and uncouth like all Yankees. What is vulgar and uncouth? I wonder. It don't sound so nice. I've never seen a Yankee; none ever came here during the War. Though I heard James

and Cook say once that sometimes Yankee soldiers tore up homes and plantations. Maybe that be uncouth.

Charles and Annie said that Yankees have horns and tails, but I don't believe that. I think they are human people. Charles and Annie always try to make me believe any fool thing they say.

I've been thinking, if I am free what will my life be like? I wonder. Can I have real school lessons like Annie and Charles?

*Sunday, April 23, 1865*  
*Morning*

Dear Friend,

I wish Annie and Charles had not left because now there are no more lessons. You see, I'd be helping Ruth, and I'd make sure I was dusting in Master's library where Annie and Charles were with their teacher. I'd dust very slowly, so I could hear how they learned to read and write. One of my legs is shorter than the other, so I don't move as fast as most people, but I dragged my bad leg slow

as a turtle crossing a road so I could listen to those lessons.

Then I'd make believe I was too fool to leave the room when I finished dusting and sit on the rug near the door and stare blankly as if I didn't know my own name. When the teacher wrote letters on the slate that hung over the desk, I'd form letters in the dust on the floor and wipe it off before anyone saw me. Most of all I liked to hear the story about Marygold in *A Wonder Book for Girls and Boys*, but my favorite is *The History of Little Goody Two-Shoes* because the girl in the story is like me and has no mother and no father, and taught herself how to read and write. I have shoes though. The cobbler made slippers for all of us who work in The House.

I don't know who my mother or father is. No one has ever told me my history. I wonder if either one had a bad leg like me, or if people called them slow. I wonder sometimes if I ever had a mother or father – maybe God spit me out and I got this bad leg when I fell to the ground. Are

you laughing, Friend? I am. I don't know how old I am, but I think I'm twelve or thirteen, since Annie is ten and Charles is nine.

I must leave now, Friend. I have to put on my other homespun dress that I wear on Sundays. Nancy, me, James, and Miriam always go to church with Master and Mistress. I wish I could take you with me. Father Holmes will surely put me to sleep.

Everyone else goes to the bush arbor near the cabins where the field hands have their own church services outside under the arbor. I have never gone to church down there because Master and Mistress insist I go with them. But I like to hear the singing that comes from the arbor on Sundays. Some Sundays Master and Mistress do not attend church, so Nancy and I don't go either, and if I listen hard, I can faintly hear the field hands singing.

