



DEAR AMERICA

*The Diary of
Piper Davis*



*The Fences
Between Us*

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Saturday, November 8, 1941

I've never been the diary type, but now I have something to write about.

I didn't think this day would come so soon. The minute he graduated from high school in June, my big brother, Hank, enlisted in the Navy — so he can see the world and that sort of thing. Trixie says she's glad he went Navy because he looks so dreamy in the dark middie and white sailor hat. I think he would've looked just as dreamy in a University of Washington letterman's jacket. That way he could still be home, with us, where he belongs.

Here's what happened when he told us that day. Margie had made some new recipe and we were all picking at it, trying to find the edible bits. I was thinking about calling Trixie to see if she wanted to go for a soda after supper, to celebrate the end of sixth grade. Pop was making notes for a church meeting. Margie was probably daydreaming about her new boyfriend, Stan. All of a sudden, Hank put down his fork.

“So I guess I better tell you guys before I burst.” He was wearing a smile even bigger than the one he wore when Garfield won the state

baseball championships. “You’re looking at Seaman Davis.”

“What are you talking about?” Margie froze in her chair.

Hank saluted. “I enlisted. You-Nited States Navy. I’ll be on my way to boot camp in a week.”

Even though I was almost thirteen I bawled like a baby. I didn’t even feel like dessert, and it was lemon meringue pie. Margie got a funny look on her face, but she didn’t let on what she was feeling. She’s like that. She didn’t even cry when she broke her leg skiing that time.

Pop did what he did best. Talked. It comes naturally for a preacher, I guess. Anyway, first he talked about Hank being so young. Hank said eighteen wasn’t that young. Then Pop asked him about college. Hank said he’d get an education in the Navy and he’d get to see the world. Then Pop brought up the war in Europe.

“These are troubled times, son. Hitler’s on the march in Europe, and heaven only knows what Japan will do after occupying so much of Indochina.”

“Those are not our battles, Pop. We’re not at war,” Hank said.

“But for how long?” Pop shook his head. “For how long?”

That’s when Hank lost his temper. He pushed himself back from the table.

“Pop, you’ve got to let me grow up and make my own decisions. Besides, President Roosevelt promised we weren’t going to get involved. It’s the peacetime Navy for me, all the way. You can worry about me falling overboard or getting a tattoo or getting seasick. But one thing you do not have to worry about is me being in that war.”

Pop didn’t say anything for a minute, just stirred another spoonful of sugar into his coffee. And then he said, “You’re right, son. This is your decision to make. I may wish you’d made a different one, but I would never change one thing about you. You have grown up into a fine young man.”

Well, that got me weepy all over again. Margie said, “I believe we could all use some pie,” and that was the end of that.

Pop didn’t say much afterward, but all summer long whenever he read anything about what the Germans were doing in Europe or the Japanese in China, he made sure to clip the article out and send it to Hank at boot camp. Me, I sent him jokes.

When he finished boot camp and got his orders, Hank called home. Long distance! No one else was here so I got to take the call. “Tell Pop I got the best assignment ever—Hawaii,” he said. “Nothing to worry about there but getting hit in the head by a falling coconut.” I screamed and jumped up and down when Hank said he’d get to come home for a whole week before he shipped out for Pearl Harbor.

I’ve never had a week go by so fast. He spent time with his buddies, sure, but he made time for me, too. We went to the show, went fishing by Ray’s Boathouse, and last Sunday morning before church, we had a pancake-eating contest. Hank won, of course.

The worst day of his visit home was today, the day we had to say good-bye. Mrs. Harada came with us to see Hank off. I was only a baby when she started taking care of us. As we stood there on the dock trying to pick Hank out of all the sailors, Mrs. Harada kept saying, “My little boy, my little boy,” over and over again. Margie didn’t shed a tear, of course, but I cried enough for the both of us put together. I’m not a worrier, like Pop. Besides, Hank can take care of himself. I’m blue

because he's the best big brother in the world and I'm going to miss him like the dickens.

I couldn't look at his ship when it pulled out of port. I felt like a little kid — maybe if I didn't look, he wouldn't really be gone — but I didn't care. Mrs. Harada put her arm around my shoulder. Her hugs have helped me feel better after skinned knees or bad scores on spelling tests. But nothing could fill up the Hank-sized hole in my heart.

Then she told me she had something for me. "Here, Piper," she said, handing me this diary. It fit into my hand like it belonged there.

"It's beautiful." I ran my fingertips over the red cover embossed with gold cherry blossoms.

"I bought it a long time ago. I was saving it for the right time." She hugged me. "Now seems like the right time."

"It's the perfect time," Pop said. "Every thirteen-year-old girl could benefit from the self-reflection a diary offers."

I made a face. Leave it to Pop to turn a cheer-up gift into a sermon.

"This is Piper's," said Mrs. Harada. "No one can tell her what to write in it. Not even you." She wagged her finger at Pop.

I liked that idea. Having a place I could write whatever I wanted.

And I want to write that I already miss my brother.

Sunday, December 7, 1941

While we were at church this morning, Japan attacked Pearl Harbor. It's horrible. Please, God, let Hank be okay.

I've never been so scared in my life. I can't write any more.

Later

I know it's real but it doesn't seem like it can be. How could Japan attack us? *Why?*

Here's what the newsman on the radio just said, "From the NBC newsroom in New York. President Roosevelt said in a statement today that the Japanese have attacked Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, from the air. I'll repeat that. . . . The Japanese have attacked Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, from the air." That's all we know so far. And it's not enough.

Margie made tomato soup and toasted cheese sandwiches for lunch. Pop ate two bites and Margie kept stirring her spoon around and around in her bowl. It's hard to care about food when your stomach is on a pogo stick.

Hank was one of the fastest runners on the baseball team. I couldn't count all the times he'd beat

out a throw to first base. But was he fast enough to outrun a Japanese bomber? And where would he run to, there on the ship? I'm curled up on the couch, wrapped tight in the quilt Mrs. Harada made me, shivering as if I were out in the cold.

Margie was at the kitchen table, her Chem book open in front of her, and Pop was in his den, both pretending to work, when we heard those words again: "We interrupt this broadcast to bring you an important bulletin." I ran to the radio and turned up the volume. The report was coming straight from KGU, the Honolulu radio station: "About eight o'clock this morning, Hawaiian time, the first group of Japanese airplanes attacked Ford Island at Pearl Harbor, the Navy's mighty fortress in the islands. . . . Three ships were attacked. The *Oklahoma* was set afire. . . . There has been no statement made by the Navy."

Even though I was under the quilt, my teeth started to chatter. Why weren't they talking about the *Arizona*?

Margie came to sit on the sofa with me. I opened up the quilt so she could crawl under, too. "I want Hank," I said.

She nodded and said, "Me, too."

“Is there room for one more?” Pop asked. We moved over and he wedged between us, his arms around each of our shoulders, holding us tight. We sat that way for a long time.

I leaned my head on his shoulder, his starched shirt scratching my cheek. “You’re still in your Sunday clothes,” I said.

He looked down at his shirt. “I guess I am.” But he didn’t move to go change. The radio sucked me in, like a powerful magnet. I couldn’t pull myself away. I was terrified of what I might hear but even more terrified not to listen. It was as if my being parked in front of the speaker could somehow make a difference in what happened to Hank.

Margie stood up. “I’ll make us some tea.”

“Shh.” I put my fingers to my lips. “What did they just say?”

Pop reached over and turned up the volume knob. The announcer said, “There will be a complete blackout tonight at eleven o’clock. That blackout is not only for the city of Seattle; it includes every light between the Mexican border and the Canadian border. Every light must be out by eleven o’clock.”

“A blackout?” My voice was a little squeak. “Does that mean they think the Japanese might

bomb here?” I thought back to Al James’s comment. We didn’t even have air raid shelters to go to.

“It’s a precaution, Piper.” Pop slid off the couch and tucked me into the quilt. “You keep listening. Margie and I will get what we need.”

But the phone rang right then. It was Mrs. Harada. When Pop hung up, he grabbed his hat and keys. “Piper, you’ll have to help Margie. I’ve got to go.” He ran out the door.

I ran after him like some kind of little kid. “Pop! What’s wrong?”

“Help Margie,” he said, swinging open the driver’s door to the Blue Box. “I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

Margie rummaged around in the basement for something to put on the windows. I got some old blankets from the attic. We didn’t talk much while we worked. I wondered if she was straining to listen for enemy planes flying overhead, like I was.

I went right back to my post in front of the radio when we were done. The announcer said that all of the Seattle radio stations were going off the air at 7 P.M., as a precaution. “A precaution for what?” I asked.

“They need to keep the airwaves clear for really

important stuff,” Margie said in her matter-of-fact scientist voice.

“But telling us what’s happening is really important,” I said. What other surprise attacks had Japan planned? What if they came while Pop was gone? I didn’t say any of these things out loud, but swallowed them down with a sip of the chamomile tea Margie made us.

The tea grew cold in our cups as we sat in the quiet, listening to the cuckoo clock tick, listening for enemy planes, while we waited for Pop, waited for morning.