

AVA

and

PIP

by Carol Weston

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for kids who are shy,
and for kids who are not,

and

in memory of
Christopher Joseph Todd
who loved books

DEAR NEW DIARY,

You won't believe what I just found out.

Fifth grade started today, and my homeroom has three Emilys but only one Ava, so at dinner, I asked Mom and Dad why they named me Ava.

Innocent question, right?

Well, Dad answered: "We like palindromes."

"Palinwhat?" I said.

"Palindromes," Dad replied, passing the salad. "Words that are the same backward and forward."

"Like M-O-M," Mom said.

"And D-A-D," Dad said.

"And P-I-P," Pip chimed. Apparently she knew all about this. "And H-A-N-N-A-H," she added. That's Pip's middle name.

My full name is Ava Elle Wren. When people ask what the L stands for, they expect me to say Lily or Lauren or Louise, but I say, "It's not L, it's E-L-L-E."

I thought about P-I-P, H-A-N-N-A-H, A-V-A, and E-L-L-E, and stared at my parents. "You chose our names because

of how they're spelled? Wow." Then I noticed how you spell "wow" (W-O-W).

And suddenly it was as if I saw the whole world—or at least the Whole World of Words—in a brand-new way.

My parents' names are Anna and Bob (A-N-N-A and B-O-B), and they are word nerds.

"Why didn't you tell me before?" I asked.

"You never asked," Dad answered.

"When did you tell Pip?"

"A while ago," Mom said, "when she asked."

Pip looked at me and shrugged. "At least we didn't get named after Nana Ethel."

Pip is twelve—for one more month. She talks at home, but at school, she is extremely shy. Pip was a preemie, which means she was born early. Since our last name is Wren, which is the name of a bird, Mom and Dad sometimes call her Early Bird.

When Pip was little, they worried about her a lot. To tell you the truth, they still worry about her a lot. They also pay way more attention to her than to me. I try not to let it bother me...but it kind of does. I'm only human.

"Guess who was the first woman in the world?" Pip asked.

"Huh?" I replied, then noticed how "huh" (H-U-H) is spelled.

"Eve," Pip said. "E-V-E!"

Dad jumped in. "And guess what Adam said when he saw Eve?"

"What?" I said, totally confused.

"Madam, I'm Adam!" Dad laughed.

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“Another palindrome!” Mom explained. “M-A-D-A-M-I-M-A-D-A-M.”

“A whole sentence can be a palindrome?” I asked.

“Yes.” Dad pointed to Mom’s plate. “Like, ‘Ma has a ham!’”

Pip spelled that out: “M-A-H-A-S-A-H-A-M.”

I put down my fork, looked from my S-I-S to my M-O-M to my P-O-P, and started wondering if other people’s families are as nutty as mine. Or is mine extra nutty? Like, chunky-peanut-butter nutty?

A-V-A

9/2
RIDICULOUSLY LATE

DEAR DIARY,

It's wayyy past my bedtime, and I'm hoping Mom and Dad won't barge in and tell me to turn off my light. But something's been keeping me awake.

After dinner, Pip and I played Battleship. We usually like sinking each other's carriers, cruisers, submarines, destroyers, and battleships. It's fun. She'll say, for instance, "B-8." And I'll say, "I can't B-8 because I'm 10!" Or I'll say, "I-1." And she'll say, "No, you didn't! The game isn't over!"

Tonight I was about to sink Pip's last ship when I said, "I-4." But Pip said, "I-quit."

"You can't quit!" I protested.

"I can and I did!" she said and stomped off to her room.

That made me so mad! I hate when my big sister acts like a little sister! I hate when she's a sore loser!

Once, after a teacher conference, I overheard Mom and Dad talking about Pip's "social issues" and how they wish they could help her "come out of her shell."

Well, sometimes I wish I could take a hammer and break Pip's

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“shell” into a million zillion pieces. What if she *never* comes out? What if she grows up to be a sore loser quitter with no friends and a hundred cats and only me to talk to?

Thinking about Pip drives me crazy. Here’s why: I always end up feeling mad at her *and* bad for her all at the same time!

The problem is that sometimes her problems turn into *my* problems. Like when I have to clean up after a game of Battleship or Clue or Monopoly by myself. Or when I have friends over and Pip doesn’t come out of her room. Or when I walk into the kitchen and Mom and Dad suddenly go all quiet because they were in the middle of talking about her.

I know Pip isn’t shy on purpose, but it still gets me mad.

AVA, ARRRGGGHHH

DEAR DIARY,

Whenever I start a new diary—like I’m doing this week—I end up accidentally writing something totally embarrassing that I would never want *anyone* to see. Then I put my pen down and bury the diary in my dresser drawer.

So far in my life, I’ve started seven diaries and finished zero. It’s like there’s a dead diary graveyard underneath my underwear!

Today in language arts, Mrs. Lemons asked us what we read this summer. Well, my family reads big books for fun—they even reread and *rereread* them. But long books intimidate me.

Long words (like “gigantic” and “intimidate”) don’t scare me, just long books.

Here’s how I pick books:

1. I look at the front and back covers.
2. I check to see if it’s about a regular kid with normal problems (not superscary or supernatural problems).
3. I read the first page so I can hear the “voice” and how it sounds.

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4. I peek at the last page to see how long it is.

If there are too many pages, forget it, I put the book back.

In *short*, I like *short* books.

Mrs. Lemons also asked us when we read. A lot of kids said, “Before bed,” but one girl, Riley, said, “On the bus,” and one boy, Chuck, said, “If I read on the bus, I’d barf. I get bus sick.”

Mrs. Lemons said, “How about you, Ava?”

“Sometimes I read before bed,” I said, “but sometimes I write.” I did not add that when I was little, I thought I was a great writer because I could write my whole name before Elizabeth and Katherine and Stephanie could write theirs. (Pip burst my bubble by pointing out that Ava has only three letters and theirs each have nine.)

“It’s good to keep a journal,” Mrs. Lemons said. “And, Ava, your handwriting is excellent.”

“It used to be terrible,” I confessed. “In first grade, Mrs. Quintano said I didn’t even hold my pencil right.”

I don’t know why I blurted that out except that it was true. In first grade, I erased more than I wrote, and I collected erasers—pink rectangle ones and colorful ones shaped like cupcakes and rainbows and sushi.

Now I like pens more than pencils, and I have a favorite pen. It’s silver with black ink and is the kind you click, not the kind with a cap. Dad bought it for me at the Dublin Writers Museum, and I am using it right now. I think of it as my magic pen, and I like to imagine that it has special powers and that I can write anything I want with it—anything at all!

Dad is a real writer. He’s a playwright—which is spelled

playwright, not *playwrite*. He works at home writing plays and tutoring students.

Mom has a regular job—she runs the office of a vet named Dr. Gross who is more grumpy than gross.

At the end of class, Mrs. Lemons asked one last question. She said, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” Everyone said things like “President,” “Ballerina,” “Doctor,” “Actor,” “Fireman,” “Rock star,” “Comedian,” “Chef,” and “Fifth-grade teacher.” Maybelle (my best friend) said, “Astronaut,” and Chuck said, “Championship boxer.”

I was the only person who said, “I don’t know.”

AVA WITH A FUZZY FUTURE

9/4
FRIDAY NIGHT

DEAR DIARY,

We had the first spelling test of fifth grade today and I got a 100. So at dinner, I said, "I got a 100 on a spelling test."

Dad said, "Great," but I could tell he was mostly concentrating on cutting up the chicken. Mom didn't really hear me either. She was talking about an operation Dr. Gross did on a dog that ate a rock.

I decided to tell a dog joke, so I said,

"Question: What does a dog eat at the movies?"

Answer: Pup corn!"

I was going to point out that P-U-P is a palindrome and that popcorn goes P-O-P P-O-P P-O-P, but since no one laughed, I didn't.

And okay, I realize my joke was lame, but couldn't Mom and Dad have laughed a little?

Sometimes it feels like they don't quite see me. Or hear me. It's like I'm not even at the table.

Maybe *I* should go eat a rock.

A

9/6
SUNDAY MORNING

DEAR DIARY,

Pip was on the sofa with her freckly nose in a book. “You read that book last week!” I said.

She said that when she first reads a book, it’s to find out what happens, but when she rereads a book, it’s like being with a friend.

Here’s what I did not say: “You need *real* friends!”

Instead, I went to the basement and opened a few old boxes. In one, I found a bag of plastic animals that Pip and I used to play with. I picked out a lion cub and took it to the kitchen and put it in a jar and covered it with corn oil. Why? So it would be a lion in oil.

Get it? L-I-O-N-I-N-O-I-L is a palindrome! And I came up with it all by myself!

I put the jar on the windowsill and am waiting for M-O-M and D-A-D and P-I-P to find it and figure it out. They are going to love my little L-I-O-N-I-N-O-I-L!

AVA IN ANTICIPATION

9/7
AT SCHOOL

DEAR DIARY,

Our librarian, Mr. Ramirez, knows I'm big on words. "Ava, you like to write," he said. "You should enter the Misty Oaks Library story contest."

"I don't think so," I said.

"Why not?"

"Because I won't win."

He frowned. "Well, you definitely won't win if you don't enter. Why not give it a shot?"

I wanted to say, "A shot? I'm not a doctor." But I just listened as he explained that the story had to be four hundred words, the title had to include the name of a living creature, and the deadline was October 12.

"I'll think about it," I said. And I have been. A lot. Maybe too much.

If I won a library contest, Mom and Dad would be proud of me for sure, so I'm trying to come up with ideas.

Like, what if I write about two crazy cats that are losing their minds? I could name them Nan (N-A-N) and Viv (V-I-V) and call the story:

SENILE FELINES

Carol Weston

Get it? S-E-N-I-L-E-F-E-L-I-N-E-S is a palindrome!

Pretty smart, right?

>^..^< >^..^<

A-V-A A-V-A

9/8
BEDTIME

DEAR DIARY,

I read what I wrote yesterday, and omg, what a stupid idea!

Good thing no one ever sees what I write in here except me.

To tell you the truth, I'm getting tempted to bury this diary underneath my underwear!

The reason I came up with the crazy cats idea is that Mom is always saying how sad it is when old pets get "put down." Yesterday, some lady realized that her beloved cat, Whiskers, had gotten so rickety, he could no longer drink or eat and that "his time had come."

Mom says the worst part of her job is when a person walks in with a pet and walks out without one. The second worst is when someone gets the pet back, good as new, and Mom hands them a bill for a thousand dollars, and the person faints on the floor. (That almost happened to the lady with the rock-eating dog.)

Anyway, instead of writing any sad sagas (S-A-G-A-S) about ancient cats, I might write about glamorous rats: star rats (S-T-A-R-R-A-T-S). Who knows? With my magic pen, I might even win!

X-O-X
A-V-A

9-9
(A NUMBER PALINDROME)

DEAR DIARY,

So far, no one has spotted my L-I-O-N-I-N-O-I-L.

AVA, ACTUALLY

9/11
BEDTIME

DEAR DIARY,

This might sound dumb and immature, but I'm sitting in bed crying. Two little drops just fell on *you!*

At dinner, I said, "I got another 100 in spelling." I wasn't expecting a bunch of high-fives or a confetti parade or for them to dance around the room or phone Nana Ethel. But couldn't they have said, "Way to go"? Or, if they wanted to be nutty, "Yay, Ava, Yay" (Y-A-Y-A-V-A-Y-A-Y) or "Atta girl" (A-T-T-A girl)?

Dad said, "Ava, you're on a roll," and Mom said, "Now please pass me a roll." Dad laughed at her not-that-funny joke, then Mom and Dad and Pip started talking about rolls and Pip's art class and a calico kitten named Fuzz Ball who got hit by a car and operated on and now has just three legs but still scampers around just fine.

And I can see how all of that is wayyy more interesting than a 100 in spelling, but I still wish that what mattered to me mattered to them.

After dinner, I remembered my palindrome project, so I said, "Hey, did anybody notice my little lion?"

Mom, Dad, and Pip stared at me blankly, so I hopped up to show them. But it wasn't on the windowsill! I looked all around, and it was *nowhere* to be found! I came back and said, "I put a lion cub in a jar next to the cactus." Dad and Pip looked at me like I had three noses, but Mom said, "Oh, sweetie, I threw it out. I thought it was garbage." And she didn't even apologize!

I stomped upstairs to write in you, but I left my magic pen in the living room and I didn't want to go back down, so now I'm writing with an old pencil. That's how I feel anyway: like a stubby yellow pencil covered with teeth marks with a worn-down eraser and a broken point that no one even cares about.

AVA FEELING AWFUL

9/12
MORNING

DEAR DIARY,

One nice thing about keeping a diary is that it never interrupts or changes the subject or thinks your jokes aren't funny or that you're boasting or whining. And it's not a writing contest, so there's no pressure. A diary just lets you be honest. And I appreciate that.

I also appreciate that Dad made a big Irish breakfast with eggs, sausages, baked beans, mushrooms, and scones.

AVA THE APPRECIATIVE

9/12
SATURDAY NIGHT

DEAR DIARY,

Maybelle invited me to dinner, but I was with our neighbors Lucia and Carmen. They're fourth-grade twins, and they don't dress exactly the same, but they always wear the same color. Today it was pink.

Maybelle said they could come too, so Dad drove the three of us over.

At dinner, which was a cookout, Maybelle's parents asked me lots of friendly questions. Maybelle told them about the writing contest and even said, "Ava can spell anything!"

Maybelle's dad said, "Spell *anything!*"

I said, "A-N-Y-T-H-I-N-G," and everyone laughed.

After dinner, we all went for a walk. We didn't need flashlights because the moon was almost full. When it was just me and Maybelle, I told her about my oily lion palindrome project and how my mom threw it out. Maybelle looked sad for me, but then Lucia and Carmen caught up with us so she changed the subject. She said, "I like the moon more than the sun."

"What do you mean?" Carmen said.

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“You can’t look directly at the sun,” Maybelle explained. “But you can look at the moon all you want. And it changes!”

“I like when it’s bright and there are no clouds,” Lucia chimed in. “Like tonight.”

“Moon shadows are cooler than sun shadows,” Maybelle added.

Well, I started waving my arms in the air, and my shadow started waving its arms on the ground. It was all stretched out in front of me, long and skinny. Maybelle, Lucia, and Carmen started waving their arms too, and soon we were all jumping up and down—and so were our long skinny shadows.

Maybelle said, “The moon is 240,000 miles away.”

Lucia looked surprised, but I’m used to Maybelle being a math wonk and coming out with random facts.

“Another thing I like,” Maybelle said, “is that you don’t have to worry about moonscreen or moonglasses.”

“Hey, I brought moonscreen!” I blurted. “Smell!” I squeezed a pretend blob onto everyone’s palm.

“Lemon lavender!” Maybelle said.

“Gingerbread spice!” Lucia said.

“Strawberry shortcake!” Carmen said.

“Grape with a hint of honeysuckle,” I said, and then at the exact same time, we all went “Mmm!” (M-M-M).

“I also brought moonglasses!” I said and handed out pretend pairs.

“I’m putting mine on top of my head,” Maybelle said. “The movie star way.”

“Me too!” Lucia said.

Carol Weston

“Me three!” Carmen said.

“Me four!” I said, and we laughed.

“What so funny?” Maybelle’s dad asked.

“The man in the moon!” Maybelle said, and we all kept walking and laughing with our moonglasses on top of our heads, in the dark but not-too-dark.

I wish we could have walked for hours.

And I wish my family liked to laugh and have fun together.

AVA IN THE MOONLIGHT

9/13
BEFORE SCHOOL

DEAR DIARY,

I told Mom how fun last night was, and instead of saying, “That’s nice,” she said, “You should have invited Pip.” Well, that made me mad because it’s not my fault that Pip doesn’t have real friends!

AVA IN THE MORNING

9/13
IN THE LIBRARY

DEAR DIARY,

Mr. Ramirez just asked how my story was coming along.

My story? What story? I didn't tell him that I don't have a character or a plot or even a first sentence.

At least I have a magic pen.

O-X-O

A-V-A

9/17
8 P.M.

DEAR DIARY,

After school, I went to Dr. Gross's and waited for Mom. She was really busy, so I had to sit in the waiting room. After a while, I said, "I'm bored."

Mom said, "Shhh."

She hates when I say, "I'm bored."

I hate when she says, "Shhh."

I also hate being quiet. Pip is the Queen of Quiet. She's even quiet when she goes up and down stairs while I, according to Mom, sound like "a herd of elephants."

In school, Pip can go a whole day without saying five words. Last year, Lacey, a loudmouth girl with thick bangs and thick eyeliner, teased her and called her "Pipsqueak." It made Pip even quieter!

I don't know why Pip is so quiet. She just is. It's like she has permanent stage fright—and she's not even an actress.

I realize it must be hard for her, but does she realize that it's hard for me too?

Pip and I don't look that much alike (I have longish brown

hair and brown eyes and no freckles, and she has medium red hair and green eyes and tons of freckles). We also don't act alike (I talk fast and a lot, and she barely talks at all, and I write a lot, and she draws a lot). To be honest, I'm glad most people don't know we're related. It can be embarrassing when kids find out we're sisters. They say, "You mean the short pretty girl who never talks?" or "You mean the weird girl who eats lunch by herself?"

Pip isn't weird. She just has no life. Hardly anyone besides me even knows that deep down, she's normal. And nice—well, except when she's bratty.

One thing I like about having a big sister is she tells me stuff about when I was little. Like, she says I used to call "marshmallows" "marshmelons." And once I had a tick on me and called it a "ticket." And once I got us both in trouble because instead of a lemonade stand, I wanted to have a flower shop, so I cut all of Mom and Dad's tulips so we could sell them. (Oops!)

Anyway, while I was waiting in the waiting room, I started thinking about how Dr. Gross does *cat* scans on *cats* and *lab* tests on *Labs* (Labrador retrievers). And I came up with an unbelievable four-word palindrome: Step On No Pets (S-T-E-P-O-N-N-O-P-E-T-S).

I was really proud of myself, and I told Mom I was going to make them a sign. I even started digging markers out of her drawer. But Mom said, "Not now, Ava! Can't you see I'm trying to finish up?"

I said, "Okay." But it was *not* okay. It was not one bit okay! In fact, it made *me* feel stepped on.

AVA AND PIP

At 5, Mom made sure all the animals were happy. There were lots of cats and dogs, two birds, two hamsters, one ferret, and a green basilisk lizard that would probably be walking on water if it weren't stuck in a tank at Dr. Gross's. Mom and I locked up, and I asked where the lizard came from. She said Central America and started telling me about a famous palindrome about a Central American waterway: "A man. A plan. A canal. Panama" (A-M-A-N-A-P-L-A-N-A-C-A-N-A-L-P-A-N-A-M-A).

"H-U-H," I said, and wondered how many other kids have word-nerd families and silent siblings and moms who sometimes seem like they care more about other people's pets than their own daughter.

AVA ALL ALONE?

9/19

SATURDAY, BEDTIME

DEAR DIARY,

I found a two-word note from Pip on my desk. It said:
“Wanna talk?”

I do, but her lights are off, and she gets mad when I wake her up.

AVA IN SUSPENSE

9/20
AFTERNOON

DEAR DIARY,

Pip and I were on the floor in her room doing Word Scrambles. I asked what she wanted to talk about, but she said she changed her mind.

I said, "That's not fair!"

She shrugged.

Dad shouted up from the kitchen, "Who wants a Sunday sundae?"

A Sunday sundae is my favorite dessert, so I shouted, "Meeeee!" and ran downstairs.

While Dad was sprinkling nuts on our ice cream, I told him about the contest. Big mistake! He said I should definitely submit a story.

I told him my ideas about S-E-N-I-L-E-F-E-L-I-N-E-S and S-T-A-R-R-A-T-S.

He asked, "Does the 'living creature' have to be a palindrome?"

I said, "No," and started feeling small.

"Then think big," he said. "You'll come up with something. You have a facility with language."

“H-U-H?” I asked palindromically.

“A way with words.” He smiled. “Be patient. You’ll find your voice.”

Dad says the best writers have a “voice,” which means their words flow naturally, and you can recognize their style, and it’s almost as if you can “hear” them reading to you.

I wish I had a “voice.”

I wish I had a subject!

I guess I should be glad I can write about anything. Anything at all. Anything in the whole wide world! Anything alive!

But what should I write about? Princesses or presidents? Lions or lionfish? Friends or enemies? Frenemies??

Blank pages can be scary.

And I’m *not* patient.

“A way with words”? Right now I feel like shouting: “Away with words!”

AVA THE ANXIOUS

9/20
BEDTIME

DEAR DIARY,

Pip's door was open a crack, so I said, "Pip, c'mon, tell me the thing you were going to tell me."

"It's not a thing," she said. "It's a person." Then she said she was going to bed, but that tomorrow we could do some more Word Scrambles.

AVA IN MYSTERY

Carol Weston

