

Deza Malone
from *Bud, Not Buddy*
is back!

The MIGHTY Miss MALONE

Newbery Medal-winning author
Christopher Paul Curtis

Chapter Sampler

A FAMILY on a JOURNEY to a PLACE called WONDERFUL



DEZA
IS
BACK!

Meet the unforgettable Deza Malone
from *Bud, Not Buddy*!

When Deza's beloved father leaves to find work during the Great Depression, the rest of her family goes in search of him. As they try to build a new home, they still cling to hope. The twists and turns of their story prove that Deza truly is the Mighty Miss Malone.



The MIGHTY
Miss MALONE



Christopher Paul Curtis

WENDY
L A M B
BOOKS

Keep reading for a sneak peek . . .

Chapter One

Journey to Wonderful



“Once upon a time . . .”

If I could get away with it, that’s how I’d begin every essay I write.

Those are the four best words to use when you start telling about yourself because anything that begins that way always, *always* finishes with another four words, “. . . they lived happily everafter.”

And that’s a good ending for any story.

I shut my dictionary and thesaurus and went back over my essay for the last time.

The best teacher in the world, Mrs. Karen Needham, had given us a assignment to write about our families. I knew, just like always, she was going to love mine. She’d only asked for two pages but this was our last essay for the year, so I wrote six.

Once upon a time . . . in Gary, Indiana, lived a family of three very special, very happy and uniquely talented people. I am the fourth member of that family and much too modest to include myself in such a grandiose description of their exalted number. But many people say I am of the same ilk and for that I remain internally grateful.

My mother, Mrs. Margaret "Peggy" Sutphen Malone, was born here in Gary, Indiana. She is willowy and radiant and spell-blindingly beautiful. She is also very intelligent. She has a great job cleaning for the Carsdale family. Yes, that Carsdale family! The family whose patriarch is the president of the Gary Citizens' Bank.

Her most endearing trait is that she is the glue holding this family together.

"Deza?"

I jumped and my pencil flew out of my hand.

When I'm writing or reading a book, everything else around me disappears. Father says it's because I've settled into what I'm doing, the same way my brother Jimmie does when he's singing.

"Jimmie! I told you not to sneak up on me like that when I'm writing!"

He handed me the pencil. "I couldn't help it, sis, you were so far gone. What're you writing?"

"My last essay for Mrs. Needham."

"You know, a lot of people are saying her not coming back to teach is the best thing that ever happened at Lincoln Woods School."

"James Malone, if I ever give one-half a hoot what a lot of

people are saying, you have my permission to slap me silly. Mrs. Needham is the best teacher in the world. Now, if you don't mind. I never bother you when you're singing, don't bother me when I'm writing."

"But lots of people love listening to me sing, Deza, seems to me like only you, that little pest Clarice Anne Johnson and Mrs. Needham like reading what you write."

Jimmie is one of those people who can say something that might sound mean at first, but when he smiles and makes his eyebrows jump up and down you can't help smiling. He gets this deep, deep dimple in his right cheek and you end up laughing right along with him.

My dearest friend, Clarice Anne Johnson, has a horrible and completely un-understandable crush on Jimmie. She says she bets you could pour cornflakes in his dimple and eat them out with a spoon.

I'm hoping Clarice's taste in boys improves as she gets older.

"Jimmie, please."

"Sorry, sis. I'm heading out, can I do anything for you before I split?"

"No, thanks. Just make sure you're back for supper."

I looked at Mrs. Needham's instructions again. "What is the most annoying trait of some of your family members?"

That was easy to come up with for Father and Jimmie, but I couldn't think of a single annoying trait for Mother. I wrote:

Mother's pet peeve is that she hates the way a lot of people are mean to Jimmie for no reason.

Her dreams are to see Father get a job where he doesn't always get laid off, for Jimmie to start growing again and be happy and to watch me graduate from college and be a teacher.

My father, Mr. Roscoe Malone, was born in a village in Michigan called Flint, which is geologically located 250 miles northeast of Gary. For some reason that none of us can understand he is very proud of this. He is tall and strikingly handsome, he's also intelligent and well-read.

He toils and labors mostly for the Company doing work in a horribly hot furnace and sometimes being a janitor.

His most annoying trait is the way he uses alliteration every chance he has.

I looked up from my paper. That is so true, but I wondered for a minute if I should put it in the essay. It isn't like he can help himself.

He always calls me his Darling Daughter Deza, and I'm supposed to answer that he is my Dearest Delightful Daddy. He calls Jimmie the Genuine, Gentle Jumpin' Giant, and Jimmie's supposed to call him his Fine Friendly Father Figure. Father also calls Mother the Marvelous Mammalian Matriarch, but she says she won't respond because she refuses to play silly word games with such a "hardheaded husband who hasn't heard how horrible he is."

Mother told me, "Such nonsense is in the blood of the Malones and you should be happy that so far it looks like you haven't inherited any of it."

She says Jimmie is a different story.

I tapped the pencil on my teeth. I know it's rude and

disloyal to discuss family business with other people, but Mrs. Needham says good writing is *always* about telling the truth.

Father's most endearing trait is that he is the best storyteller and poet in the world. He can come up with a poem at the most inappropriate times. His pet peeve is that even though he's smart it's very hard to find a job.

His dream is to do what he was trained to do in Flint, being a carpenter.

The oldest child in our family, Mr. James Edward Malone, is fifteen years old and has been blessed with the singing voice of a angel.

Jimmie's most annoying trait is that he has what Mother says is a napoleon complex. That means Jimmie is not as tall or robust as most boys his age and tries to make up for it by being as loud and full of braggadocio as he can. He also gets in lots of fights.

Jimmie's most endearing trait is that he loves me more than any big brother has loved a little sister since time immoral.

Jimmie is the best big brother in the world.

On my last birthday we had just finished eating and I could barely sit still because after supper the birthday person gets something special.

It was my turn to clear the dishes and I stalled around in the kitchen to give them lots of time to get my surprise ready, then walked back into the dining room.

There were two cupcakes with a candle in the middle of them sitting at my and Jimmie's spots! A chocolate frosted one for me and a vanilla frosted one for Jimmie!

I was speechless.

Jimmie said, “Wow, Ma, these are store-bought!”

Mother must’ve been putting pennies aside for a long time to buy two such beautiful little cakes.

Father said, “James, please do the honors.”

Jimmie closed his eyes, then settled into singing “Happy Birthday.”

I got chills. I wasn’t sure if it was because of Jimmie’s voice or because I was so excited.

Mother and Father joined in on the last chorus.

When they were done I smiled so hard it felt like my cheekbones were crushing my eyeballs!

Jimmie said, “I got you two gifts. One, I’ll wash *and* dry dishes for a week, and two . . .”

He looked at Father and they walked into the other room.

When they came back each one of them was carrying a heavy package wrapped in newspapers.

They set them down in front of me.

I said, “Flint style or Gary style?”

Father always tells us Mother opens packages and envelopes Gary style. He says we Gary people pry and poke and pull the envelope so carefully and daintily and take so long doing it that we might as well be doing brain surgery. He says we do it that way because Indiana people are so cheap that we want to use the same envelope over and over.

“Word has it,” he said once, “that there’ve only been two envelopes used in the whole state of Indiana since the War of 1812.”

Then he showed us what he called opening something

Flint style. It was a race to see how quick you could get what was inside the envelope or package out.

“To be officially Flint style,” Father says, “the envelope or the wrapping paper has to be shredded into at least six different pieces. It’s got to look like confetti.”

I glanced at Mother.

She shook her head and said, “I suppose you can’t fight the fact that half of your blood is from Flint.”

I tore into the newspaper on the first present and was shocked!

It was old and tired and I had used it a million times before. How did Jimmie get this?

Jimmie said, “The library was selling books they didn’t want anymore. Here’s the receipt for these two.”

He handed me a piece of paper.

He’d paid three cents for the dictionary and two cents for a thesaurus.

Inside the first page of the dictionary someone had stamped in red ink WITHDRAWN.

Jimmie had written underneath that, *Febarery 14, 1935, happy twelve brithday sis.*

The dictionary and the thesaurus are the best birthday presents I will ever get. The best “brithday” presents too.

I looked back over my essay.

Jimmie’s pet peeve is when people call him Shorty, Little Fella, or worst of all, Pee-Wee.

His dream is to start growing again until he is a six-foot-tall man who is covered with bumpy muscles. Jimmie’s other dream

is to be the first boy to drive a rocket ship to the moon. He is very disillusional.

The youngest Malone child, your devoted author of this essay, Deza, is twelve years old, which makes me the third-oldest child in my class. I didn't flunk, but two years ago I had to sit out a year of school because Mother was struck down by a horrible disease called Tic Do La Roo. That is a French word that means "Pain of the Devil." Her face felt like it was on fire and she needed a very responsible person to look after her all day. I did it. My teachers said I could skip fourth grade to stay with my class but being a year behind meant I could be in class with the dearest friend anyone's ever had, Miss Clarice Anne Johnson. I fought to stay. And I won.

I am neither very intelligent nor very tall. I also have not been blessed with a beautiful singing voice. I have a pleasingly even disposition unless it's one of those times that I become very angry or scared and have embarrassing wishes to hurt someone real bad.

In the next part of the essay I was supposed to tell about my most annoying trait. I really did try, but I couldn't think of even one. I thought about making one up, but even with my good imagination nothing came to mind that anyone with a whit of sense would believe.

Clarice and I had been walking home. "What do you think is my most annoying trait, Clarice?"

She said, "Ooh, Deza, you're not done with the essay yet?"

"I was just having trouble with that part."

"You know that I don't think you have any annoying traits, Deza, but . . ."

She stopped.

“But what?”

“But maybe you could use some of the things other people say about you behind your back.”

I don’t pay a bit of attention to anything people say behind my back, but Mother tells me and Jimmie that we can learn something from anybody, even from a big idiot.

I said, “What do they say?”

“Well . . .”

I thought Clarice might have a problem coming up with something, but she held up a finger. “First, they think you’re too friendly with teachers. . . .”

Her next finger went up.

“Second, they say you think you’re so smart. . . .”

Another finger came up.

“Third, they say you think your family is so great. . . .”

Another finger.

“Fourth, they say you talk too much and that you talk all proper. . . .”

Her thumb came up.

“Fifth, they think you’ve got your nose stuck up in a book most of the time. . . .”

Clarice raised a finger on her left hand. “Sixth . . .”

I stopped her before we had to sit so she could take off her shoes and start counting on her toes. I said, “Maybe I do talk a little too much.”

At home I put in my essay:

My most annoying trait is that some of the time I might talk a little too much, I can be very verbose. I also exaggerate but that is

because I come from a family of great storytellers which is not the same as great liars.

My most endearing trait, and being as modest as I am I had to ask my brother Jimmie for this, is that I have the heart of a champion, am steady as a rock and can be counted on to do what is required. Jimmie also said I am the smartest kid he has ever met, but my all-encompassing and pervasive humility prevents me from putting that on this list.

My first pet peeve is when people don't pronounce my name right. They'll say Dee-za instead of Deɜ-uh, just like the first syllable of a desert, like the Sahara, which is geologically a arid, huge part of Africa. And they do it on purpose. My second pet peeve is that the Gary Iron-Head Dogs, the best baseball team in the world, have been cursed and will never win the Negro Leagues championship.

My dream is to read every book in the Gary Public Library and to be a teacher who has the reputation for being tough but fair. Just like Mrs. Needham.

I had the perfect ending for the essay.

In summation and conclusion, the Malone family has four members who are very bright, very good-looking and uniquely talented, just not all in one person at the same time. We are the only family in the world, in my ken, that has a motto of our own! That motto is "We are a family on a journey to a place called Wonderful."

I can't wait until we get there!

Chapter Two

The Pie Thief



Jimmie said, “So, what’s for dessert, Ma?”

We had just finished supper and Chiefs’ and Children’s Chow Chat, something Father had made up where we told each other what our day had been like.

Mother’s eyes locked on Jimmie’s. She saw he was serious. “Well, Master Malone, this evening the chef has prepared for your dessert a lovely stack of dishes which Deza will wash and you will dry.”

Jimmie said, “How ’bout tonight we just let those dishes drip themselves dry?”

Mother said, “How ’bout tonight, just like every other night, we let ’em be dried by a little drip?”

Jimmie was still smiling. Most times if any of us forgot and

called him anything that had the word “little” in it he’d get pouty and would quit talking.

“Can I be excused for a second?”

Mother nodded and Jimmie went into the living room.

Father said, “Dessert? Where did that come from?”

From the porch Jimmie yelled, “Hey!”

He walked back through the dining room and into the kitchen holding something behind his back.

A second later he came back smiling like a Cheshire cat, still with his hands behind his back.

He said, “Ma, I’m a give you one more chance. What would have to happen for me to take a month or two off from drying the dishes?”

Mother said, “What’s this all about, Jimmie? You can get a couple of months off doing the dishes if lightning strikes either one of us.”

Jimmie put his hand to his ear. “Wait! Was that the roll of thunder I just heard? *Ta-da!*” He showed us a pie tin holding a half a gorgeous apple pie!

It was thicker and bigger than any pie I’d ever seen. The crust was the same light-brown goldy color as the wood floor in the kitchen. There were strips of dough on it in a criss-cross way and some of the juices had bubbled up and oozed out.

Father said, “Where did you get that pie?”

Jimmie said, “You don’t know, and you don’t want to know.”

I had to shake my head. Jimmie loves talking about rocket ships and outer space and I figure that’s because he comes from a different planet than the rest of the Malones.

And most other people who live on Earth too.

He was smiling and making his eyebrows go up and down. He was hopping from one foot to the other. All he needed was a green hat and some pointy shoes with big silver buckles to look like a little brown leprechaun holding on to a pot of gold.

I shook my head. Jimmie had broken our deal.

Our deal was that if I was going to do anything that wasn't about school or books or studying, stuff he calls "regular living," I'd ask him for his advice. I said I'd do it if he promised when he made plans that were about anything more than breathing, he'd ask for my advice.

I would've told him that popping up in front of us with this pie for dessert was a terrible idea.

Mother is a pretty good baker and she couldn't ever make a pie like this one. And we all knew there was no way the Malones could afford such a pie. It was something you'd think the Carsdales would eat.

Mother said, "Where . . . did . . . you . . . get . . . that?"

Jimmie looked at Mother and Father.

I had to stop him before he lied. "Jimmie! Tell the truth. Just tell the truth."

"Uh . . . I kind of took it off of a lady's windowsill. But I paid her for it."

Father pushed his chair back and stood up. "OK, let's go."

"Go? Where?"

"You're returning this pie. Who ate the rest of it with you?"

Jimmie looked to the side, a sure sign that what he was going to say wasn't all the way true.

"No one, Pa. It was like that when I found it."

Father said, “*Found?* James Malone, you *stole* that pie.”

When Mother is upset her face gives a warning. The skin between her eyebrows folds and you can tell how much trouble you’re in by counting the lines that pop up there. If it looks like a 1, you’re OK. If it looks like 1-1-1-1-1, watch out!

She was at 1-1-1. “Hold on, Roscoe. Jimmie, this is extremely important—did you steal that pie from a white neighborhood?”

“No, ma’am. I got it over by the park.”

She dropped down to 1. “Thank God.”

Father said, “Let’s go.”

Jimmie got nervous. And that was strange.

Living on Earth had made Jimmie very tough, and something like returning a pie shouldn’t bother him this much. Then I saw what it was. He’d be humiliated to death if any of his criminal friends saw him being dragged down the street by his father like a five-year-old kid.

Father’s tone changed. “Move it. Now.”

Jimmie’s eyes went from Father to the front door. He was going to make a break for it!

I stood up, took the pie and said, “I’ll take him back. We’ll return the woman’s pie. Jimmie, promise them right now you’ll come and won’t give me any lip and will do everything I say.”

Jimmie’s eyes went from me to the door. I stamped my foot. “You apologize right now! Tell them you’ll work for the woman for as long as she wants until the pie’s paid off. Do it!”

Jimmie waited a heartbeat. “I’m sorry. I’ll do everything Deza says.”

Father wasn’t buying it. “Too late. Let’s go.”

I caught Mother's eye and she said, "Hold on, Roscoe. Come into the kitchen for a minute."

Father told Jimmie, "Don't you move."

They left us standing there.

I slapped Jimmie's arm. "We had a deal! You're supposed to come to me before you do anything like this."

Jimmie looked down. "Aw, sis, I'm sorry. I feel like I'm the only one not pulling his weight around here. I wasn't looking to steal nothing, all I wanted to do was help."

"What are you talking about? You help all the time. You don't get in as much trouble as you used to, you always bring something for supper, you sing for us whenever we ask—that helps."

"But I wanted to do something special. I only wanted you all to be proud of me."

"By stealing?"

"It wasn't stealing, I left the woman some money."

"Jimmie, you only make things worse by lying all the—"

Mother and Father came back.

Father had the kitchen clock in his hand. "How far off does this woman live?"

Jimmie said, "Just past the park."

Father set the clock on the table. "Deza, you've got forty-five minutes."

"We'll be back in time."

I got a clean dishrag to cover the pie and we left.

When we walked Jimmie tried to trick me into getting in a conversation, but I kept strong and scowled.

It was a good thing it was me walking with Jimmie instead

of Father. Every friend Jimmie ever had was sitting on their porches or walking down Gary's streets.

Jimmie started that funny walk he and his friends do. He put the thumb of his right hand in his front belt loop and swung his left arm far out in front, then far out behind. He dragged one of his legs and hopped more than walked. Mother thinks this is a scream. She says it's just a nonsense walk some young men use to draw attention to themselves. Rooster-strutting, she calls it.

"Jim-Jim," one rooster-strutter yelled, "what's shaking?"

"Ain't nothing going on but the rent, baby."

"Where you headed, pops?"

"Just taking baby sis over to the park to lay this pie on some po' folks."

"We po', baby."

Jimmie laughed. "Ain't that the truth! Catch y'all later."

I could tell we were close to the woman's house. Jimmie started walking like a normal person and the nervous look came back to his face.

He stopped. "Sis, I gotta tell you the truth about something."

"You don't have to say a word, I know you didn't pay anybody for this pie."

"I *did* pay! But it was a whole pie when I first got it. I hid it under a porch chair before I brought it in and when I got outside a rotten stray dog was chomping on it like a old bone. He ran off the porch with it in his mouth but dropped it on the sidewalk and—"

“Jimmie! You were going to let us eat a pie that a dog had dropped out of its mouth? On the ground?”

“Deza! Stop interrupting, please. I cut the chewed-on parts off and wiped the dog’s slob off the rest. I said, ‘God kissed it, devil missed it,’ and it wasn’t on the ground long enough to pick up any germs.”

He pointed at a beautiful house across the street. “It was that place there. Is there any way you and me could eat the rest and let Ma and Pa think we give it back? We could leave the tin on the porch.”

“Are you crazy?”

“I had to give it a try. Come on, let’s get this over with.”

“We’re not going to give that poor woman a pie that was dropped on the ground and that a dog has been licking! We’ve got to get rid of it.”

He said, “I’ll drop it in the sewer. I bet the rats won’t mind a little dog slob.”

I started to hand the pie to Jimmie, then stopped.

What he said made me think.

It *was* such a beautiful pie that it did seem a shame to waste. But there was no way me and Jimmie would eat it. The Malones shouldn’t get anything good from something that Jimmie stole.

I pulled the tin back. “No. Come on.”

Some poor people *do* live in the park. They sleep in huts and tents in the woods. We should give human beings first choice to see if they wanted this pie.

Except for the big baseball diamond and stands, the park

isn't really much of a park. It's just four swing sets and three or four picnic benches next to some woods.

As me and Jimmie walked between the trees we could see three saggy, sad little wood and cardboard huts with a group of women and children sitting in front of each one.

I walked over to the hut with the most children.

A woman looked up. "Hello, dear."

"Hello, ma'am. My name is Deza Malone and my brother made a mistake and took a pie from someone and we were going to return it to the woman but I found out at the last minute that half of the pie had got chewed on by a dog. Jimmie cut all the doggy parts off of the pie and wiped the dog's spit from the rest. It's the most beautiful pie I've ever seen and I thought it would be a shame to throw it away. I was wondering if you and your kids might like to have it instead?"

I took the dishrag off and the woman said, "Now, that's a pie! Sweetheart, thank you very much! We'd love to have it."

She laughed. "A little dog slob could never ruin a fine pie like this. Besides, do you know how many times we've had to fight dogs off of something we were gonna eat?"

She dipped her finger in the juices and closed her eyes. "My, my, my! Whoever baked this knew what she was doing."

She pulled a piece of apple out of the pie and reached it to me.

She said, "I think if you ate one little bit it wouldn't hurt. We won't let the thief have any if that makes you feel better."

Jimmie said, "I paid her some money."

The woman said, "Boy, hush!"

It's rude to refuse food if someone offers it. Even if it tastes

terrible and makes you want to gag, you still have to tell them how much you appreciate it.

“Thank you, ma’am.” I put the piece of apple in my mouth.

Eating this pie must be what it feels like to read the greatest book ever at the same time you’re sitting in a bathtub full of soapy bubbles like a rich white woman in a magazine!

The woman called out, “Roslyn, Coleen, come here and bring a sharp knife. This child has gone to heaven and brought a little piece back for us.”

She said, “Can y’all stay for supper? The men should be back with some catfish.”

“Thank you, ma’am, but we have to get this pie tin back.”

She slid the pie onto a piece of cardboard and looked at Jimmie. “Son, you’re so young, you need to learn not to thieve folks’ food, cut it out.”

Jimmie said, “I’m fifteen.”

She looked surprised. “I don’t care how old you are. What kind of example you setting for this here girl?”

Jimmie said, “I know it was a mistake. I said I was gonna ’pologize.”

“Fine, but before you do, could the two of you do me a favor? Whilst you’re at the pie lady’s house could you distract her so the thief here could stuff a couple of ’em under his shirt for me?”

Even Jimmie laughed. I said, “Thank you, ma’am, we’ve got to be going.”

She said, “No, sweetheart, thank you!” I wiped the tin with the dishrag as we headed toward the house of the best baker in the world.

Chapter Three

The Pie Lady's Revenge



We stepped onto the porch. Jimmie grabbed my arm before I could knock.

“This was my fault, Deza, there ain’t no shame or blame in your game. Give me the tin.”

I rolled my eyes. This was more of Jimmie’s jazz-musician talk.

“Besides,” he said, “what if she comes out shooting?”

He knocked.

A very pretty, very tall and distinctive-looking woman with a glorious mane of pulled-back silver-and-black hair and tiny glasses on her nose opened the door.

“Hello, may I help you?”

“Excuse me, ma’am. My name is Jimmie Malone and it was me who took your pie.”

The woman looked over her little glasses and put her hand on her hip. “Oh, really?”

“Yes, ma’am, I come to apologize, give you your tin back, and see what I gotta do to make it up to you.”

She came out on the porch. She was dressed like a rich lady in a very nice blue dress and a lovely pair of brown sandals.

“What do you propose?”

Jimmie said, “I can do all kinds of odd jobs until you tell me to stop, ma’am.”

The woman looked at me. “You’re his big sister?”

Oh, boy.

“No, ma’am, Jimmie’s my older brother. I’m kind of big for my age.”

She said, “You two ate that whole pie all by yourselves?”

Jimmie said, “No, ma’am, she didn’t have nothing to do with it. A rotten mutt ate half the pie and I was gonna bring the other half back but Deza told me giving you a pie that a dog had been licking on wasn’t right, so we give it to some folks in the park who are down on their luck.”

“Oh, I see. You steal from the rich and give to the poor.”

Jimmie thought for a second, then smiled. “Yeah. That’s what I did. I took from the rich and gave to the poor.” He said it like he was very humble and proud at the same time.

“Only problem with your epiphany is I don’t believe there’s a rich person within ten miles of here. All right, Robin Hood, how much did you eat?”

I’d have to look “epiphany” up in my dictionary.

Jimmie said, “I just ate the scraps I cut off that the dog didn’t finish.”

She said, "How was it?"

Jimmie said, "Ma'am, the parts I ate had some dog slob on 'em and were a little crunchy from the dirt but it still was the best thing I ever ate."

She looked at me. "Did you eat any?"

"Well, ma'am, Mother tells us it's a grand and kind gesture when someone offers you food and it's the height of rudeness to turn them down. The lady in the park handed me some so I ate one slice of apple."

"What did you think?"

"It was heavenly."

She pointed at Jimmie. "Robin Hood, sit on that top step. Miss Malone, come inside with me."

Jimmie sat and I said, "Ma'am, we're not allowed to go into strangers' houses."

She smiled. "Good girl. Make sure the thief doesn't take it on the lam. I'll be right back."

I pulled up all the sarcasm I had. "Thanks a bunch, Jimmie. I don't know if I'll ever speak to you again. You better not ever steal another thing in your life."

"I know, I know."

The woman came back with a tray and two glasses rimming with milk and two pieces of apple pie!

She set it on a table between two porch chairs.

"What was your name again, young lady?"

"Deza. Deza Malone, ma'am."

"My name is Dr. Bracy. Please join me for some pie. And I know you won't turn me down, because I'm making the sort of

grand gesture which, as your mother has taught you, is rude to refuse.”

Doctor?

Maybe she could tell us why Jimmie had stopped growing three years ago.

“Thank you very much, Dr. Bracy.” I sat and she handed me a paper napkin and a fork.

My feet dangled in the chair, but I crossed my ankles and spread the napkin on my lap.

She said, “Why do I suspect you do well in school, Deza?”

“I don’t know, ma’am, but I really do.”

“How about Pretty Boy Floyd there?”

“He works very hard.”

She knew I was exaggerating. “Really? Look what he left me.”

She passed me a folded-up piece of paper.

The note read, *do not call the polees I promes to brink the tin back hears 8 cens.*

No punctuation, no word over four letters spelled right, and a run-on sentence. Jimmie’s work for sure. He’d written his name at the end of the note but scratched it out. With one measly line.

At least he hadn’t lied about paying her, but eight cents?

I sighed and handed Dr. Bracy the note.

She gave me a piece of pie and said to Jimmie, “You look strong. You know how to chop wood?”

“Sure I do, ma’am.”

“Fine. First, even though you left me eight cents, you stole my pie. Do we agree?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Now tell me where you got eight cents. Did you steal that too?”

“I wouldn’t never take no one’s money. I worked all day cleaning out boxcars at the yard.”

“And they paid you eight cents?”

Jimmie’s eyes cut to the side. “Really they give me a dime, ma’am, but on the way home I saw a starving old blind lady crying in a wheelchair and I give her two cents of it.”

I was mortified.

Dr. Bracy laughed and picked up the other piece of pie. “Miss Malone, I was thinking about giving him this piece of pie, but now I’ll enjoy it myself. It must be quite the experience living with this one!”

She asked Jimmie, “Has school finished this year?”

“We’ve only got two more days.”

“So here’s what you’re going to do, Mr. Malone. I’ve got a field in the back that needs clearing, and there’s some wood that needs chopping and stacking. Once you’re done with that I’ve got something else in mind.

“Deza, do you think it would do any good for your brother to come here every night and work on his spelling and grammar?”

It was Jimmie’s turn to look mortified.

We had tried to help Jimmie but nothing seemed to stick. Mother says that different people are good at different things, and while being good at schooling is important, being a good singer is very important too.

Not really, but that is a kind thing to say to someone who’s a good singer.

“You can tutor him only if you want to torture him, ma’am.”

“Fine, we’ll see how he does around here. Jimmie, I’ll expect to see you at eight sharp Saturday morning.”

While Jimmie sat on the top step and pouted, Dr. Bracy and me ate our pie and chatted.

She was a most delightful conversationalist.

I told her all about my essay and how Clarice Anne Johnson and me were going to read every book in the Gary Public Library.

She told me how she wasn’t the kind of doctor who worked on sick people, but was the kind who had gone to college for a hundred years to study all about books and writing!

Me and Jimmie both jumped when a bell rang inside her house.

“You’ve got a telephone right in your house?”

She smiled. “Excuse me for a moment.”

When she came back I hopped out of the chair. “Thank you very much for the pie, Dr. Bracy. Our father gave us forty-five minutes to return the dish and we have to get going.”

We waved as she started piling things on the tray.

We were about half a block away when I heard, “Deza, could you come here for a moment?”

I ran back.

“I can’t seem to find your napkin, Miss Malone.”

I felt my face get hot. I looked at my shoes.

She said, “I don’t mind as long as you give whatever is left of your pie to Clarice and not to Jimmie. We can’t encourage that kind of behavior, can we?”

“No, ma’am. I’m sorry.”

“Deza, you’re a good girl. Next time, think things through.”
Alliteration!

Going to school for a hundred years must really be worth it.

* * *

When I got home I asked Mother how to spell “epiphany,” then looked it up in my dictionary.

Sudden intuitive perception of or insight into the reality or essential meaning of something, usually initiated by some simple, commonplace occurrence or experience.

That’s the only bad thing about dictionaries. You start by looking up one word and end up having to look up seven others to understand the first one.

I lugged the dictionary to Mother and Father. They were sitting at the kitchen table talking.

I plopped it down. “Translate, please.”

Father pulled the dictionary to him. “What’s the word?”

“‘Epiphany.’”

He didn’t even look. He closed the book and said, “Think of a light going on. An epiphany is being surrounded by darkness and bumping around. Something happens or is said that causes a light to be switched on and everything becomes clear. It’s when you suddenly understand something. The moment you *really* get it.”

So that was what Dr. Bracy meant. She’d said something about Robin Hood and it was like a light came on for Jimmie.

A dim light, but that’s probably the best you could expect from a pie thief.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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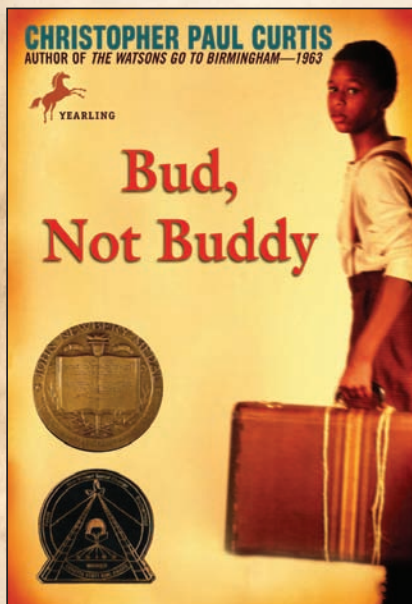
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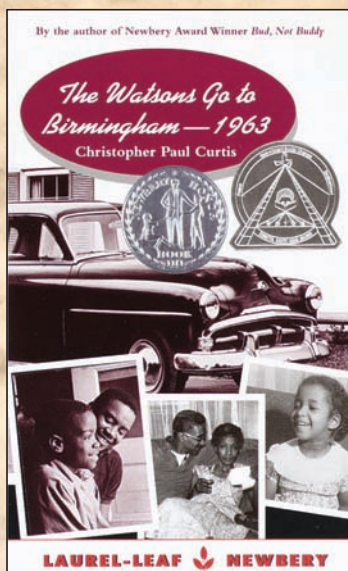
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