

# The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF CHRISTOPHER PAUL CURTIS

Christopher Paul Curtis was born on May 10, 1953, in Flint, Michigan, a place that would later become the setting of some of his most famous works. He was born to Dr. Elmer Curtis and Leslie Jane Curtis and is the second oldest of five siblings. While Curtis was growing up, his father practiced podiatry for some time before ultimately beginning a job at an assembly line for better pay. It wasn't too long before Curtis followed his lead. After graduating from Flint Southwestern High School in 1972, Curtis enrolled at the University of Michigan's Flint campus and applied for a job at Fisher Body Plant No. 1 General Motors assembly facility. This allowed Curtis to make decent pay, which went towards paying for his part-time degree (which he received in 2000). At the assembly line, Curtis set up his work schedule so that he and his colleague would each work 30 minutes before alternating. Curtis would then use his "free" time to read novels and combat his boredom by writing while on the job. After working a series of other low-paying jobs, Curtis took the year off from working in 1993 to focus on writing what would eventually become *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*. For this debut novel, Curtis won a Newbury Honor Award in 1996. More books followed, as well as more honors and literary awards such as the Coretta Scott King Award for his next novel, *Bud, Not Buddy*. Curtis remains a prolific writer and continues to write historical fiction with young Black protagonists for a young adult audience. He currently resides in Ontario, Canada, with his wife and children.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In many ways, *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* is a timeless story about a young Black boy coming of age and dealing with ordinary problems—like bullying, getting along with his siblings, and learning tough lessons about the harsh reality of adult life. However, the novel takes place against the backdrop of the civil rights movement, which took place in the 1950s and 1960s and was a time of massive cultural upheaval, as Black activists pushed for racial equality and desegregation. The civil rights movement was particularly focused on Southern states that followed racist, segregationist Jim Crow laws, which ensured the continued oppression of Black Americans even 100 years after the end of slavery. In particular, Birmingham, Alabama was a significant location in the civil rights movement, since Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and other important organizers chose to focus on the city because of its glaring mistreatment of Black citizens and its overt

segregation. Although *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* doesn't spend all that much time exploring the historical events that took place in Birmingham that summer, it *does* reference the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church, which took place on September 15, 1963. The bombing was carried out by members of the extremist hate group known as the Ku Klux Klan, who specifically targeted the church during Sunday School, ultimately killing four young Black girls and injuring many others. Even though the police knew who carried out the attack, no legal proceedings took place until 12 years later, in 1977.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Like *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*, many of Christopher Paul Curtis's novels feature coming-of-age stories that center around young Black protagonists. His second book, *Bud, Not Buddy*, shares a number of similarities with *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*, since both novels are set in Flint, Michigan, have young Black boys as their main character, explore race and history, and involve road trips through the United States. *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* also has a lot in common with *One Crazy Summer* by Rita Williams-Garcia, another Young Adult work of historical fiction in which three sisters go to live with their mother in Oakland, California in the summer of 1968 and end up in the same orbit as the Black Panther Party. Because *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* is also about bullying, it's worth considering alongside *American Born Chinese* by Gene Luen Yang and Lynda Mullaly Hunt's *Fish in a Tree*, both of which are about what it's like to experience bullying as a young person. In terms of relevant books outside the Young Adult genre, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s *Why We Can't Wait* provides an in-depth account of the push for desegregation and racial equality that took place in Birmingham in the summer of 1963.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*
- **When Written:** 1993
- **When Published:** 1995
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Children's Literature, Young Adult Fiction
- **Setting:** Flint, Michigan and Birmingham, Alabama in 1963
- **Climax:** After the church that Joey attends in Birmingham gets bombed by racists, Kenny goes inside, looks through the rubble, and becomes convinced that Joey has been killed.
- **Antagonist:** Bullies like Larry Dunn and racists like the ones who bomb Joey's church in Birmingham, Alabama

## EXTRA CREDIT

**Television Adaptation.** *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* was adapted for television in 2013 and aired on the Hallmark Channel.

**Write What You Know.** Just like Kenny, Christopher Paul Curtis grew up in Flint, Michigan in the 1950s and 1960s.



## PLOT SUMMARY

Ten-year-old Kenny Watson lives in Flint, Michigan with his parents Wilona and Daniel, his older brother Byron, and his younger sister Joey. It's winter and extremely cold, so everyone huddles together in the house—everyone, that is, except Byron, who is 13 and doesn't want to touch his family members. The family decides to go to Kenny's aunt's house because she has better heating. Daniel sends Byron and Kenny outside to scrape ice off the Brown Bomber, which is what he calls the family's old, beat-up car.

Kenny hates scraping ice, since Byron always finds ways to make him do all the work. As he scrapes one side of the car, Kenny hears Byron saying his name, but he doesn't check what his brother's doing because last time Byron called his name in the cold, he ended up spitting snow right in Kenny's face. Soon, though, Kenny gives in and looks at his brother—only to discover that Byron's lips are stuck to the side mirror! Kenny fetches the rest of his family and watches as Wilona frets over Byron. Meanwhile, his father can't stop making fun of Byron for kissing his own reflection. Kenny, for his part, knows Byron would do terrible things to him if their positions were reversed, but Kenny would never act so cruelly toward Byron. After some time passes, Wilona yanks Byron off the mirror, sending him crying into the house.

At school, kids make fun of Kenny, especially since he's extremely smart and has one crooked eye. A bully named Larry Dunn picks on him, but only a little bit because he's afraid of Byron and Byron's friend, Buphead. Both Byron and Buphead are in the sixth grade, and they rule the school, though they only provide a small amount of protection for Kenny. For this reason, Kenny is very happy when a new kid named Rufus gets on the bus one day. Rufus has a strong southern accent and instantly gets made fun of for saying, "Hiya, y'all!" Kenny hopes Rufus will take attention away from him, but then Rufus starts seeking him out. At first, Kenny doesn't want to be friends with Rufus, worrying they will attract bullies if they spend time together. But he comes to like hanging out with Rufus, sitting with him every day at lunch and giving him some of his sandwich, since Rufus never has food of his own.

As the school year progresses, Byron gets into trouble time after time. At one point, Larry Dunn steals Kenny's nice leather gloves and bullies both him and Rufus. Afterwards, Kenny tells

Byron what happened, so Byron finds Larry and bullies *him*. He takes the gloves away and smacks Larry on the side of the head. He then pushes him into a chain-link fence. It's an extremely cold day, but Kenny notices—as his brother beats up Larry—that Larry is wearing a thin, ripped windbreaker and a t-shirt. He also has holes in his shoes, which makes everyone laugh. Unable to watch, Kenny leaves the crowd, wishing he'd never told Byron what Larry did.

After an incident in which Byron gets a perm, Wilona and Daniel are furious. They've forbidden Byron from straightening his hair like this, but he did it anyway. As a punishment, Daniel shaves Byron's head and then laughs at how silly he looks. And though Kenny and his siblings don't know what their parents are doing, Daniel and Wilona start acting strange. They have long telephone conversations with Grandma Sands, who lives in Birmingham, Alabama. Wilona spends the next few days drawing out a budget in her notebook while Daniel makes improvements on the Brown Bomber. Finally, when the Brown Bomber looks better than ever, he calls the family outside for a surprise: he has outfitted the car with a "drive-around record player." Everyone is excited—except, that is, for Wilona, who storms into the house while muttering about finances. Soon enough, though, even she comes back out to sit in the car and listen to music with the rest of the family.

After having fun with the record player, Daniel and Wilona break some news to their children: pretty soon, the family will be driving to Birmingham, Alabama, where they will stay with Grandma Sands for a couple weeks before leaving. Byron, however, will stay in Birmingham with Grandma Sands for the entire summer. If he behaves, he can come back to Flint for the school year. If not, he'll have to spend the year in Birmingham. Enraged, Byron storms into the house, swearing loudly as he goes.

Byron plans to run away the night before the family leaves, but his parents thwart his plans by making him sleep in their room. He also decides not to say a word for the entire trip, but he breaks his silence before they even pass Detroit. Soon enough, he and his siblings fall fast asleep. Wilona falls asleep, too, and even though she meticulously planned where the family would stop each night, Daniel decides to drive all the way from Flint to Birmingham in one shot. They stop at some rest stops that only have outhouses without the kind of toilets the kids are used to, and Byron is horrified to hear that this is the exact kind of bathroom setup that Grandma Sands has at her house. While peeing in the woods at a rest stop in Tennessee, Byron scares both Kenny *and* himself by talking about how there are white "rednecks" here who have never seen Black people and who would hang them if they had the chance—a thought that sends both boys running back to the car.

Finally, the Watsons arrive in Birmingham. Kenny has heard all about how strict and scary Grandma Sands is, so he's surprised to see that she's so small. Even more surprising, though, is that

Byron treats her with respect, calling her “ma’am” and gladly doing whatever she asks him to do. Later, Byron senses that Kenny is disappointed by how quickly he surrendered to Grandma Sands, but he claims that he just doesn’t want to be responsible for accidentally killing her. Kenny, however, thinks Byron is just making excuses and doesn’t want to admit that he’s actually afraid of their grandmother.

A few days later, Kenny, Byron, and Joey go swimming. Grandma Sands tells them to stay away from Collier’s Landing, where there’s a dangerous whirlpool that recently killed a young boy. When the siblings reach the path leading to Collier’s Landing, Kenny tries to convince his brother and sister to come with him to check it out. Joey objects, trying to remind Kenny about what Grandma Sands said, but she can’t remember the word “whirlpool.” Byron jumps in and tricks her into thinking that Grandma Sands was referring to the “Wool Pooh,” who he claims is Winnie the Pooh’s evil twin. According to Byron, the Wool Pooh lurks beneath the water’s surface and then pulls young children into the depths when they get too close. Thinking he has sufficiently scared his siblings out of going to Collier’s Landing, he starts walking in the other direction. But Kenny doesn’t want to leave—he still wants to go to Collier’s Landing and can’t believe that his brother, who always breaks the rules, is passing up the opportunity to have an adventure.

Kenny goes to Collier’s Landing on his own. He passes a sign warning swimmers that six people have died in the water here, but he ignores it. He wades into the water and, at first, nothing seems particularly dangerous. But then the ground drops away and he slips into the water. The whirlpool sweeps him up and pummels him. In his struggle, he thinks he sees an **angel** reminiscent of his sister Joey, who tries to tell him to swim to the surface—but he can’t. He then thinks he sees the Wool Pooh emerge from the depths and grab him. No matter how hard he tries, he can’t fight off the Wool Pooh, but then Byron appears and drags him out of the water and onto the riverbank, where he holds Kenny upside down as water pours out of his mouth. Byron cries and repeats Kenny’s name over and over, pressing his mouth against his little brother’s head and holding him close.

That Sunday, Joey gets ready to go to Sunday School at a local church. Kenny says goodbye to her and compliments how pretty she looks. Shortly thereafter, everyone in Grandma Sands’s house hears a huge boom. After some initial confusion, they learn that a bomb went off at the church where Joey went to Sunday School. They all rush to the church, where there’s a ton of rubble and groups of distraught Black community members. Kenny pushes his way into the church and looks around. He sees a shoe that looks like Joey’s. It’s buried in the rubble, so he tries to pull it free. As he struggles, he thinks the Wool Pooh is holding onto the shoe, but he manages to rip it free, at which point he sprints home. He thinks Joey died in the church bombing and that he’s holding her shoe, and he wishes

he told her about seeing her when he was drowning in the whirlpool. All of a sudden, though, he hears Joey’s voice: she’s standing in front of him! They’re both confused, but she explains that she was too hot in the church, so she went to stand on the porch. While standing outside, she thought she saw Kenny, who started running away. Joey chased him all the way home, but she now realizes that the Kenny *she* saw was wearing different clothes...

The Watsons drive back to Flint that very night. In the coming weeks, Wilona and Daniel try to figure out how to explain to their children that two racist white men bombed a church full of Black children, ultimately killing four little girls. Daniel and Wilona don’t know what to say about this to their kids. Sometimes they just sit on the couch and cry. Meanwhile, Kenny feels troubled by what he saw that day, so he spends his time hiding behind the couch. The family pets always used to go behind the couch when they were injured or sick and would only come out when they felt better, so Byron used to tell Kenny that there are “magical powers” back there. Now, though, Byron forces his little brother to stop going behind the couch. When Kenny admits that he’s sad because of what he saw at the church, Byron says that his sadness is perfectly understandable. But Kenny feels guilty because he ran away from the Wool Pooh even though he thought the Wool Pooh had Joey. Byron tells Kenny that the Wool Pooh isn’t real and that magical powers don’t exist. He reassures his little brother that everything will be all right, saying that sometimes life is hard but that he can still be happy. Finally feeling better, Kenny thinks his brother is right overall, but wrong about one thing: magical powers really *do* exist. They might not come in the form of “genies” or “angels,” but they appear in other ways, like in the moment that his father smiles at him, or when his mother dresses him in warm clothes, or when his older brother plays with him.



## CHARACTERS

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

**Kenny Watson** – Kenny is a 10-year-old boy living in Flint, Michigan. A kind and gracious little boy, he is very intelligent for his age and loves to read. Because he’s so smart, though, his older brother, Byron, often makes fun of him and calls him “square.” Similarly, many of the kids at school tease Kenny, making mean jokes about the fact that one of his eyes doesn’t point in the same direction as the other one. Thankfully for Kenny, Byron’s reputation as one of the toughest kids in school prevents anyone from messing with Kenny *too* much, though Larry Dunn still steals the nice leather gloves that Kenny’s mother gave him. When Byron finds out what Larry has done, he humiliates the bully in front of a large group of people, but Kenny feels bad. As Byron roughs up Larry, Kenny sees that Larry is wearing light, torn clothing on an extremely cold day.

He feels so bad for Larry that he's unable to watch his brother beat him up anymore, so he leaves—a decision that demonstrates his kindness and empathy. Kenny's kindness also shines through in his friendship with Rufus, with whom he shares his lunch every day because he notices that Rufus never has any food of his own. On another note, although Byron often tricks him and bullies him at home, it's clear that Kenny looks up to his older brother. For example, after Kenny witnesses the gruesome aftermath of a church bombing in Birmingham, Alabama, Byron is the one to cheer him up and make him feel better about life, helping Kenny understand that, although the world can be a scary and ugly place, it's still possible to be happy.

**Byron Watson** – Byron is Kenny's older brother. A 13-year-old boy who has been held back in school, Byron constantly gets in trouble for breaking rules. He and his friend Buphead often play mean tricks on Kenny, but Byron also looks out for Kenny. When Larry Dunn bullies Kenny and steals his nice leather gloves, for example, Byron makes a point of getting the gloves back and humiliating Larry in front of a large group of people. Kenny, however, doesn't like watching his brother act so cruelly toward Larry. Throughout the novel, Byron disobeys his parents multiple times, never listening to them when they threaten to send him down to Birmingham, Alabama, to live with the strict Grandma Sands. Finally, after he gets a perm even though his parents forbade him from straightening his hair, Daniel and Wilona decide they've had enough. The whole family drives down to Birmingham with the intention of leaving Byron there with Grandma Sands for the entire summer and possibly the following school year, depending on whether or not his behavior improves—which, surprisingly, it does. As soon as the family reaches Birmingham, Byron starts behaving respectfully toward the adults in his life. He even refuses to break the rules, surprising Kenny with how quickly he surrenders to Grandma Sands and her strict ways and indicating that he responds well to true authority. But Byron doesn't end up staying in Birmingham as intended, since the Watsons return to Flint after white racists bomb a nearby church. Sensing that Kenny is traumatized after seeing the destruction of this bombing, Byron ends up helping his little brother go back to living a happy life by lending him emotional support. In this way, Byron doesn't just stop breaking rules but also becomes a responsible and thoughtful young man who understands the importance of supporting his loved ones.

**Daniel Watson (Kenny's Father)** – Daniel Watson is Kenny's father. A good-natured man, he enjoys making jokes and getting his family to laugh. He sometimes even makes fun of Byron, making it clear that his eldest son isn't quite as cool and untouchable as he'd like to think. At the same time, though, Daniel is a serious disciplinarian and won't stand for Byron's antics. For example, when Byron gets a perm to straighten his hair, Daniel takes him to the bathroom and shaves his head.

After consulting with his wife, Wilona, he also decides that it's time for Byron to experience some *real* discipline. He and Wilona take the entire family down to Birmingham, Alabama so that Byron can live with Wilona's mother, Grandma Sands. When he tries to explain to Kenny why it's necessary to send Byron away, Daniel references the civil rights movement and the tension taking place in the early 1960s in the South. He points to the struggle for racial equality as a way of explaining why young Black people like Byron don't have much wiggle room in life: there are many racist white people who are all too eager to make someone like Byron's life harder, so Byron must—according to Daniel—learn to behave. His explanation has a significant impact on Kenny, who appreciates his father for speaking to him like an adult. In the end, Kenny is the one Daniel and Wilona end up worrying about the most, since he ventures into a Birmingham church after it has been bombed. Daniel and Wilona struggle with how to explain such violent and racist hatred to Kenny, often breaking down and crying because they know there's no good way to tell children about the harsh realities of the world.

**Wilona Watson (Kenny's Mother)** – Wilona is Kenny's mother. Originally from Birmingham, Alabama, she moved to Flint when she married Daniel. Even after living in Michigan for many years, she can't take the cold and often playfully criticizes Daniel for making her leave behind the warm climate of the South. Her Southern upbringing is something everyone in the family is particularly aware of, especially since her Southern accent becomes more pronounced whenever she's angry. Daniel, for his part, often makes fun of this accent, and though Wilona always defends her Alabama roots, she also takes her husband's jokes in stride. Still, she thinks that spending time in Birmingham would help Byron learn a little discipline, which is why she and Daniel agree that their eldest son should live in Birmingham with Grandma Sands—Wilona's mother—for the summer and possibly the following school year. The entire family drives Byron to Alabama and stays for a little while, giving Wilona the chance to catch up with her mother for the first time in a long while. She learns that Grandma Sands has taken a new lover, Mr. Robert. This discovery upsets her and causes her to forget her manners, giving Kenny the strange opportunity to see his mother behave like a child. When Kenny feels sad after witnessing the aftermath of a church bombing in Birmingham, Wilona and Daniel worry about how to help their children make sense of such violent and racist hatred, but all they're able to do is fret and cry, hoping he'll find a way to move on—something Byron ultimately helps him do.

**Joetta Watson (Joey)** – Joey is Kenny's little sister. A loyal sister, she often tries to defend Byron from their parents, never wanting her older brother to get in too much trouble (regardless of whether or not he deserves it). She frequently tries to intervene when Wilona punishes Byron, crying for Byron and making excuses for him. She even actively prevents

Wilona from burning Byron's fingers with a match after she catches him playing with fire. Of all three children, then, Joey represents the kind of loyalty and support that people often show their siblings, embodying the caring, kind attitude that Kenny and Byron are only able to show each other in rare moments of tenderness. Joey is also a devout churchgoer, never missing Sunday School. She even goes to Sunday School at a church near Grandma Sands's house in Birmingham, narrowly missing the racist bomb attack on the church when she decides to leave the hot building and chases Kenny—or who she *thinks* is Kenny—down the street.

**Grandma Sands** – Grandma Sands is Wilona's mother and Kenny's grandmother. She lives in Birmingham, Alabama, where Wilona grew up. Because she's extremely strict and old-fashioned, the children fear her. For years, Daniel and Wilona have threatened to send Byron to live with her if he doesn't behave, but both Byron and Kenny always assumed this was an empty threat—until, that is, Daniel and Wilona announce that the family will be traveling to Birmingham to drop Byron off at Grandma Sands's house. When the family arrives, Kenny is astounded to see how small and elderly she looks—he has never seen her before, but he always assumed she was large and scary, since everyone always talks about how strict she is. Byron, however, immediately treats her with respect, and though he tells Kenny that he behaves this way because he doesn't want to be responsible for accidentally killing Grandma Sands, Kenny senses that he's lying: in truth, he just doesn't want to upset her. Grandma Sands has a boyfriend named Mr. Robert, who lives with her.

**Rufus** – Rufus is a new student at Kenny's school. Originally from the South, Rufus has a strong Southern accent and a friendly way of treating others. Unfortunately for him, his kindness attracts negative attention at Kenny's school, causing people like Larry Dunn to bully him. Kenny, for his part, is happy about this at first, since he hopes Rufus will distract people from picking on *him*. However, he soon becomes friends with Rufus and discovers that he's incredibly nice, so he starts playing with him on a daily basis. And because Rufus's family doesn't have a lot of money, Kenny shares his lunches with him. In the end, then, Rufus becomes Kenny's closest friend.

**Larry Dunn** – Larry Dunn is a bully who picks on Kenny and Rufus at school. Because Kenny is related to Byron, though, Larry doesn't treat him quite as badly as he otherwise might. Still, though, he steals Kenny's nice leather gloves and roughs him and Rufus up one day when it's really cold. When Kenny and Rufus tell Byron, he tracks Larry down, takes back the gloves, hits him on the side of the head, and then starts pushing him around in front of a large crowd. As Byron shoves him against a fence time and again, Kenny sees that Larry's jacket is nothing but a ripped windbreaker over a t-shirt—even though it's freezing out! When Larry falls down, he sees that the bully's shoes have large holes in them, suggesting that his family

doesn't have enough money to give him warm clothes for the winter. Although everyone else laughs at Larry, Kenny feels awful and decides to leave, thinking that only Byron could possibly make him feel bad for a bully like Larry Dunn.

**Mr. Robert** – Mr. Robert is Grandma Sands's new boyfriend. She started seeing him at some point after her husband—Wilona's father—died. Because Wilona never knew about Mr. Robert, she's alarmed when she arrives in Birmingham to find him living with her mother. The way she reacts to this new development makes Kenny think that his own mother is acting like a child.

**The Wool Pooh** – The Wool Pooh is a make-believe character that Byron invents as a way of discouraging his younger siblings from swimming in a whirlpool in Birmingham. He comes up with the character when Joey can't remember the word "whirlpool," telling her and Kenny that the Wool Pooh is Winnie the Pooh's evil twin brother who lives beneath the water and drags swimmers into the depths. Kenny thinks he sees the Wool Pooh when he gets swept up in the *real* whirlpool. He also thinks he sees the Wool Pooh when he goes inside the bombed-out church to look for Joey.

## MINOR CHARACTERS

**Cody** – Cody is Rufus's younger brother. He looks a lot like his older brother and sometimes plays with him and Kenny.

**Buphead** – Buphead is Byron's friend. Like Byron, he bullies other students and constantly misbehaves. Both Wilona and Daniel see him as a bad influence on their son.

**LJ Jones** – LJ Jones is a boy at Kenny's school. Kenny used to play with him, but because LJ always devises elaborate ways of stealing Kenny's toys, Kenny stops spending time with him.

**Moses ("Hambone") Henderson** – Moses Henderson was a young man from Birmingham, Alabama who tried to convince Wilona not to marry Daniel. Daniel calls him "Hambone" because his head is as big as a hambone.



## THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



### CHANGE, COMING OF AGE, AND MATURITY

In *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*, 10-year-old Kenny Watson watches his older brother, Byron, transition into adolescence. As Byron makes mistakes and gets into trouble, both he and Kenny learn valuable lessons

about what it means to grow up and become more mature. But learning these lessons isn't always easy. When Byron finally brings his parents to a breaking point by misbehaving, they inform him that he will be spending the entire summer—and possibly the following school year—in Birmingham, Alabama with his strict grandmother, Grandma Sands. For Byron, living with Grandma Sands sounds like a terrible punishment, but his father, Daniel, believes it's a necessary step, since Byron needs to learn that "the world doesn't have a lot of jokes waiting for him." In other words, Daniel wants to show Byron that adulthood is full of real consequences—although Byron might find it easy to shrug off his responsibilities as a 13-year-old, doing so in adulthood might cost him dearly. Kenny, for his part, finds the idea of adulthood "scary," and though he's still somewhat protected from the real world, the novel suggests that he isn't necessarily wrong; the world really *can* be scary, which becomes overwhelmingly clear when Kenny witnesses the horrific aftermath of a church bombing carried out by racist white people. Dealing with this traumatic experience is very difficult for Kenny, but it emphasizes his father's point about the seriousness of the real world, and it suggests that growing up means acknowledging troubling realities in life and learning to go on in spite of them.

In its exploration of the coming-of-age process, the novel calls attention to the fact that older siblings often play a big role in young people's lives. For Kenny, a huge part of growing up means observing Byron and learning from his behavior. When Byron gets caught playing with fire, for instance, Kenny pays close attention to how much trouble his older brother gets in. He takes careful note of what happens to Byron not because he necessarily wants his brother to suffer, but because *he's* interested in playing with fire, too. If Byron gets off easy, Kenny thinks it might be worth taking the risk of doing exactly what his brother did to get in trouble in the first place. In the end, though, he sees that his mother is extremely serious about punishing Byron, since she tries to burn his fingers to teach him a lesson (though Joey interferes, making it impossible for her to go through with this plan). Kenny therefore learns from Byron's mistakes, which help him identify which boundaries can be crossed and which ones *can't* be crossed.

While children often look to their siblings for guidance, the novel also portrays coming of age as a process of discovery—a process of trial and error in which children figure out what it means to grow up and become mature. Indeed, it can be hard to develop a sense of maturity, especially when it's not always clear what the world expects of people. Kenny feels this way when he tries to understand why his parents decide to punish Byron by sending him to Birmingham. He knows that Byron deserves some kind of disciplinary action, but he doesn't quite grasp why his parents think they have to send him away—it seems like an overreaction. But his father explains that growing up forces people to take responsibility for their own behavior.

Byron can't just continue misbehaving and expect that nothing will happen as a result. Listening to his father, Kenny begins to comprehend that maturity requires people to think carefully about what they do. And yet, his father's wisdom also mystifies him, making Kenny feel like he'll never know "how to take care of things." He feels as if adulthood is confusing and "scary," perhaps fearing that he, too, could end up in really big trouble if he doesn't pay close attention to his behavior and the decisions he makes. In other words, he finds the responsibilities that come along with growing up intimidating and frightening.

What both Kenny and Byron eventually learn, though, is that the real world is often frightening no matter *what* they do—regardless of the decisions they make or the way they behave, there's no avoiding the fact that life can be scary. After a church bombing in Birmingham nearly kills Joey, Kenny is deeply disturbed. Emotionally unsettled by what he saw at the church that day, he has trouble enjoying the things in life that used to bring him pleasure. Thankfully for him, though, Byron is able to help him see that he shouldn't cut himself off from the joys of life just because the world can be ugly and cruel. Byron's wise words in this moment illustrate that he has matured over the course of the novel. Before the family went to Birmingham, he didn't seem to care about anything. Now, though, he shows compassion and kindness toward his little brother, suggesting that his exposure to hardship and injustice has given him a new sense of maturity and responsibility; the world can be unpredictable and awful, but Byron won't let this unsettling reality derail his life or his ability to be happy. In turn, he demonstrates what it looks like to approach life with a level-headed sense of maturity, which in this case means showing emotional strength in the face of the world's many challenges.



### FAMILY, FRIENDSHIP, AND SUPPORT

*The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* underlines the importance of having other people to turn to for emotional support. Because he doesn't have many friends at school, Kenny knows how nice it would be to have supportive people in his life. He often gets made fun of, so he's overjoyed when a new kid in school, Rufus, turns out to be even easier to pick on than him. Though at first he hopes Rufus will attract all of the negative attention, he soon becomes close friends with Rufus. Unlike LJ Jones, who used to steal Kenny's toys, Rufus is kind and approachable, making Kenny feel like he can relax and have fun with his new friend. Unfortunately, Kenny doesn't even have this kind of companionship with his older brother, Byron, who always plays mean-spirited tricks on him. And yet, their relationship is complicated by the fact that Byron actually *does* care about Kenny—he just doesn't always let his love show. He frequently plays the role of the protective older brother, even saving Kenny's life at one point by jumping into a whirlpool and dragging him out. Even though it might not seem like it, then, the truth is that Kenny really *does* have

people in his life who look out for him, whether it's his new friend or his tough older brother. He also has his loving mother and father, as well as his sweet little sister, Joetta. By calling attention to the fact that Kenny's loved ones stand by him, the novel implies that it's not necessary to be popular or have a lot of friends—instead, a close group of kindhearted people can be more than enough to help a person through life.

People often take friendship for granted, but Kenny's experience of temporarily losing Rufus as a playmate demonstrates how lonely it can feel to not have any friends. He's extremely happy when he and Rufus first become friends, even though he originally thought it would be a bad idea—he worried that bullies would pick on them because they both get teased. But the benefits of friendship end up outweighing all else, and Kenny discovers how rewarding it is to have a friend who genuinely wants to spend time with him. Their friendship contrasts with the other relationships in Kenny's life, like the strained friendship he had with LJ Jones, who didn't appreciate Kenny and just wanted to play with (and steal!) his toys. Rufus, on the other hand, legitimately enjoys Kenny's companionship and likes him as a person, which is why Kenny finds it so devastating when Rufus stops talking to him for a short period. Rufus isolates himself after Kenny laughs at a joke Larry Dunn makes about Rufus's family. Of course, Kenny doesn't *mean* to laugh, but the way Larry Dunn makes the joke catches him off guard and makes him chuckle, causing Rufus to ignore him for several days. Suddenly, everything in Kenny's life feels like it has gotten worse. Without Rufus, Kenny feels a sense of joylessness, realizing that Rufus and Cody (Rufus's little brother) are “the only two kids in the whole school” with whom he feels comfortable. His misery during this period highlights just how important friendship really is, making it clear that meaningful companionship can greatly improve a person's quality of life.

Although Kenny places quite a bit of importance on his friendship with Rufus, he doesn't necessarily think much about the support and companionship he receives from his own brother. Because Byron constantly picks on him, Kenny doesn't see him as someone who provides much in the way of emotional support or camaraderie. However, the dynamic of their relationship slowly shifts over the course of the novel, as Byron becomes increasingly attuned to Kenny's feelings. It's never made clear what, exactly, inspires Byron to be more attentive to Kenny, though it's possible that his behavior changes simply because his blossoming sense of responsibility helps him recognize the important role he occupies as Kenny's older brother. To that end, he makes a point of protecting Kenny from harm, like when he dives into a whirlpool to save him from drowning. After pulling Kenny onto dry land, Byron doesn't hold back from letting his emotions show: he cries, says Kenny's name over and over, and presses his mouth to the top of his head. In this moment, it becomes clear that Byron cares

deeply for his little brother and—despite his tendency to bully him—is eager to show him support when he really needs it.

In fact, Kenny's *entire* family shows him love and support, even if they can't always help him overcome his problems. When Kenny feels sad and disturbed after witnessing the effects of a church bombing, nobody in the family knows how to cheer him up—but this doesn't mean they aren't there for him. To the contrary, his parents spend long hours talking about how to make him feel better and trying to get him to stay active. However, their efforts to cheer him up are unsuccessful. Nobody but Byron is able to make him feel better, perhaps because Byron speaks directly to him about what's bothering him. He offers understanding and support, but he also doesn't shy away from speaking frankly with Kenny, telling him that he can't spend his entire life dwelling on his sadness. In this way, Byron helps his little brother see that life is scary and hard, but he does so in a way that gently encourages Kenny to be brave and resilient, thus inspiring Kenny to stop hiding behind the couch every day. And once Kenny decides to return to his normal life, he's happy to see that everyone (including the rest of his family and Rufus) is ready to greet him with open arms—a clear sign of how gratifying and important it is to have a strong network of support and companionship, even if that network is small.



## BULLYING AND INJUSTICE VS. KINDNESS AND COMPASSION

Kenny experiences a fair amount of unkindness in *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*. At home, Byron constantly pulls pranks on him and insults him by calling him “square.” And unfortunately for Kenny, the teasing doesn't stop there, since he also faces bullies like Larry Dunn at school, where he's often made fun of for having a **lazy eye**. Even LJ Jones, who is supposedly Kenny's friend, steals his toys whenever they play together. In seemingly every area of his life, then, Kenny faces mistreatment and unkindness, but he himself still practices kindness. For example, when Byron gets his lips stuck to the car's mirror while trying to kiss his own reflection in the freezing cold, Kenny tries to help him. He knows, however, that Byron would “do some real cruel stuff” to him if their positions were reversed—“but not me,” Kenny says, suggesting that he sees the value of kindness and compassion. The novel presents this compassion as an admirable quality, but it also doesn't shy away from depicting the world as a place that can be full of cruelty. When Kenny witnesses the immediate aftermath of a gruesome bombing at a Black church in Birmingham, Alabama, he comes face to face with racist violence and finds it difficult to move on from such staggering injustice. But Byron eventually reaffirms Kenny's tendency to respond to injustice by practicing kindness in everyday life. The novel thus celebrates people who choose to spread love and compassion instead of letting cruelty prevail in their lives.

On the whole, kindness comes naturally to Kenny. He's not the sort of person who takes advantage of other people or kicks them when they're down. In fact, it's almost as if he literally *can't* adopt a cruel mindset. For instance, he ends up becoming close friends with Rufus even though he initially hoped the school bullies would pick on Rufus, thinking this would take negative attention away from Kenny himself. Before long, though, Kenny not only becomes Rufus's best friend, but even starts sharing his lunch with him every day so Rufus won't go hungry. It's clear, then, that Kenny has a natural impulse toward kindness, perhaps because he finds it easy to put himself in other people's shoes. He also demonstrates his empathy and compassion when Byron gets his lips stuck to the car mirror while kissing his own reflection on a blisteringly cold evening. Of course, he playfully makes fun of Byron for acting so foolishly, but he doesn't take the rare opportunity to mess with his brother. Since Byron is stuck, Kenny could really do *anything* and wouldn't have to fear immediate payback. But he doesn't do anything mean to his brother because that's not the kind of person he is. He knows that Byron would mess with *him* if they were in opposite positions, but even this knowledge doesn't drive him to cruelty, thus demonstrating his unflinching habit of practicing kindness.

In fact, Kenny is such a compassionate person that he's able to respond with kindness even when other people mistreat him. Even though Larry Dunn steals his nice **leather gloves** and beats him up, Kenny feels bad when Byron takes revenge by bullying Larry in front of a large crowd. Kenny watches in horror as his older brother pulverizes Larry, pushing him around on one of the coldest days of the year. As Larry scrambles, everyone sees that his jacket is only a thin, torn windbreaker and that the bottoms of his shoes have holes in them. And though everyone laughs at him for having such worn-out clothing, Kenny feels bad—so bad, in fact, that he can't bring himself to watch the scene anymore. Even though Larry frequently beats him up and humiliates him, Kenny *still* feels empathy toward him, recognizing that Larry is a human being with his own challenges. Instead of simply resenting him and hoping that he suffers, Kenny would rather see Byron leave Larry alone, making it quite clear that his own compassion isn't limited to a select few people in his life; rather, Kenny feels compassion for seemingly *everyone* and always tries to respond to adversity with kindness.

It is perhaps because Kenny always tries to respond to cruelty with kindness that he has trouble moving on in the aftermath of the Birmingham church bombing. When he finally breaks down and cries, he asks his brother why anyone would purposefully hurt children by bombing a Sunday School meeting. This unjust and hateful act of racism is so severe that it defies all understanding, which is why Byron says the men who bombed the church must have “let hate eat them up and turn them into monsters.” In the past, Kenny has been able to understand why

his aggressors act the way they do—for example, he empathized with Larry Dunn when he saw that Larry's family didn't have enough money to give him warm winter clothing, ultimately making it easier for Kenny to forgive him for stealing the leather gloves. But it's not really possible to empathize with the reasons that drove racists to bomb the church in Birmingham, since it's such a sickening and unforgivable act. However, that doesn't mean that kindness isn't still important in everyday life—after all, practicing kindness is a sure-fire way for people to protect themselves from letting hatred “eat” away at them and turn them into “monsters.” What's more, the compassion that Byron shows Kenny is the only thing that helps him move on from the traumatizing experience of the church bombing. In this way, then, Byron shows his little brother that kindness is still worthwhile and enriching—even in moments of hardship.



## RACE AND CLASS

*The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* spotlights Kenny and Byron's growing awareness of the ways in which race and social class impact people's lives—including their own. Their family doesn't have a lot of money, but the Watsons are still better off than other people in their community. For instance, Kenny learns to share his lunch with Rufus, who never has anything to eat at school. Kenny also notices that the school bully, Larry Dunn, wears light clothing on the coldest winter day—a realization that emphasizes Kenny's growing understanding that not everybody comes from the same background or has the same privileges. He has a similar realization when his family travels to Birmingham, Alabama. Because their community in Flint is mostly made up of other Black families, Kenny and Byron don't think about race very much. As they travel south, though, they hear their parents make small remarks about racial segregation. On the road trip, for example, Kenny's father acknowledges that Black people can't drive into a Southern town and automatically assume they'll find a motel or restaurant that will serve them. Worse, after white supremacists bomb a church near Grandma Sands's house, Kenny and Byron glimpse the terrifying hatred that racists harbor toward Black people. Left to piece together why anyone would ever harm a church full of children, Kenny and Byron are unable to come up with any good answers, since there *aren't* any good answers to this question. By showing how Kenny and his brother grapple with these issues, then, the novel shows just how difficult it can be to make sense of why, exactly, things like race and class can divide society so starkly. Although Kenny and Byron don't think much about race until they leave their predominantly Black community, they *do* think about wealth and social class. Their family certainly isn't rich, but they enjoy certain privileges that not everyone at school has. For instance, Wilona buys her children high-quality **leather gloves** each winter. In fact, she buys them each two pairs so



that they'll still have good gloves if they lose the first ones. In contrast, Larry Dunn has nothing but lightweight, torn clothing. Similarly, Rufus and his little brother, Cody, have to share clothing, switching off who gets to wear their single pair of jeans. Rufus also doesn't have winter gloves, nor does he ever bring lunch to school. Kenny takes note of the ways in which the children around him don't have quite as much, but he doesn't let this discrepancy make him feel superior to his peers. Rather, his impulse is to help people who have less than him, as evidenced by the fact that he shares both his gloves *and* his lunches with Rufus. Kenny's way of navigating class differences is therefore to selflessly share whatever he has, suggesting that he cares more about making his friends happy than about hoarding his own possessions.

Byron, on the other hand, is fixated on the idea that having money can give people a certain sense of status or superiority. His thoughts about money and status surface when his mother tells him to go to the store and ask if the family can pay for the food later on. Byron immediately jumps to the conclusion that his family is on welfare—an idea that horrifies him. The mere thought that his family might need governmental assistance to feed itself feels shameful to him, but Wilona tells him that he's acting privileged and conceited. She calls him “Mr. High and Mighty” and reveals that, though the family *isn't* on welfare at the moment, Byron has eaten welfare food in the past and will, “if need be,” eat it again. What's more, she emphasizes that “food is food,” thereby urging her son to see that his condescending view of people who eat welfare food is shallow and classist. Somebody who has a lot of money isn't any better or more respectable than somebody who *doesn't* have money, which is why Wilona makes a point of chastising Byron for placing too much value on whether or not their family is financially well-off.

As Byron and Kenny come to terms with their family's financial status, they also begin to see how race impacts their position in American society. Their parents are well aware that Black people face many challenges in the United States. This was especially the case in the early 1960s, when racial segregation was still widely practiced in the South. But Kenny and Byron haven't had many firsthand experiences of racism or discrimination because they live in a predominantly Black community in the North, where there are fewer tensions between white and Black citizens. And yet, it's worth noting that racism still impacts people even when it's not overt or immediately recognizable—like, for instance, by making it harder for people in the Black community to secure well-paying jobs, ultimately leading to the kind of widespread financial struggles that seemingly everyone in Kenny's neighborhood experiences.

When the Watsons drive down to Birmingham, though, Byron and Kenny encounter a much more observable kind of racism. They learn that even the simplest things—like peeing in the

woods at an empty rest stop—can be dangerous for Black people traveling in the South in the 1960s. Even more devastating, they have to find some way to understand why two racists bomb the church that Joey attends while in Birmingham. And yet, it's *impossible* for them to understand why anyone would do such a thing. Indeed, the novel itself doesn't suggest that there's a good way of making sense of racist violence. To the contrary, it simply spotlights Kenny and Byron's attempt to emotionally process the bleak reality of racism in the United States, indicating that—one way or another—this reality is something that most (if not all) Black Americans are unfortunately forced to recognize at some point in their lives.



## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



### KENNY'S LAZY EYE

Kenny's lazy eye—and the fact that it embarrasses him—symbolizes his struggle to develop self-confidence in the face of bullying and teasing. Many kids at school laugh at him because both his eyes don't point in the same direction, making him extremely self-conscious about the way he looks. One day, though, Byron gives him some advice: if he stands sideways when he's talking to people, they will only be able to see one of his eyes and, as a result, won't know that his eyes don't point in the same direction as each other. That Byron gives Kenny this advice suggests that he wants to help his brother feel better about himself, which is somewhat surprising, since Byron usually just makes fun of Kenny and pushes him around. In reality, though, he actually cares about his little brother, ultimately helping him devise a way to feel more confident about himself. When Kenny temporarily has a falling out with Rufus and Cody, he realizes that they're the only people in school he feels comfortable looking at head-on—with everyone else, he stands sideways so they won't see his lazy eye. In turn, his eye comes to represent the extent to which he's comfortable being himself in front of others.



### LEATHER GLOVES

The leather gloves that Wilona buys her children each winter represent the ways in which Kenny and his siblings are financially privileged. Of course, they're certainly not rich, but they *do* have some things that other kids at school don't have—like, for instance, beautiful leather gloves lined with rabbit fur. Rufus doesn't have *any* gloves, so Kenny gives him a pair of his own, since the Watson children each receive two pairs every winter. Kenny's willingness to share with Rufus is a testament to his tendency to help others

whenever he can. Rather than gloating about how nice his gloves are, he comes up with a way to make sure his friend doesn't have to play in the snow with his bare hands. However, Larry Dunn ends up stealing Kenny's second pair of gloves. At first, Kenny is angry about what Larry has done, so he tells Byron, who takes back the gloves and beats Larry up. But as Kenny watches Byron pushing Larry around, he sees that Larry is wearing extremely light, torn-up clothing on a very cold day, suggesting that Larry's family—like Rufus's—can't afford to give him warm clothes. In the end, Kenny wishes he had never said anything to Byron, since he would rather have let Larry keep the gloves than watch his brother humiliate him in the cold. The gloves themselves thus symbolize not just the few privileges that Kenny gets to enjoy, but also his awareness that not everyone comes from the same financial background.



## ANGELS AND MAGICAL POWERS

The angels and “magical powers” mentioned throughout the novel represent the idea that love and emotional support can sustain people in ways that often feel magical. When Kenny is drowning in the whirlpool, he sees a vision of Joey dressed as an angel. This angelic version of Joey tells Kenny to swim toward the surface of the water, thus encouraging him to keep fighting against the strong current keeping him in the depths of the river. Similarly, Joey claims that Kenny came to her church on the day of the bombing and led her to safety just before the bomb went off—but this version of Kenny was wearing different clothes than the real Kenny. What's more, Kenny later realizes that, although magic might not exist in the elaborate, outlandish way that he used to think, it *does* exist in other, more ordinary ways. He insists that there's something magic in the way his father accepts him even when he makes mistakes, or in the way his mother fusses over him to make sure he doesn't have a smudge on his face. On the whole, then, there's one commonality between all of the novel's talk about angels and magic: love. In moments of danger, both Kenny and Joey were motivated to seek out safety because they thought of each other, seeing their loving siblings as a guiding force of sorts. And when Kenny thinks about how magic exists in the everyday interactions he has with his family members, he's really thinking about how love is a beautiful thing. After all, it's this exact kind of familial love that convinces him to stop hiding behind the couch by himself after the church bombing, ultimately helping him accept that, though the world is full of cruelty and ugliness, it's also full of love and kindness—which feels like a magical thing in and of itself.



## QUOTES



Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Yearling edition of *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*

published in 1997.

## Chapter 1 Quotes

☞ All of my family sat real close together on the couch under a blanket. Dad said this would generate a little heat but he didn't have to tell us this, it seemed like the cold automatically made us want to get together and huddle up.

**Related Characters:** Kenny Watson (speaker), Byron Watson, Daniel Watson (Kenny's Father), Wilona Watson (Kenny's Mother), Joetta Watson (Joey)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 1


### Explanation and Analysis

At the beginning of *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*, Kenny's family huddles together because the weather is so cold. Freezing, they seek each other out for warmth, sitting “real close together” beneath a blanket. Their decision to group together in this moment is practical, but it also shows that they have a close bond with one another, hinting that they support each other. What's more, though, the mere fact that they have to huddle up while sitting indoors implies that they aren't particularly wealthy—if they were, they'd most likely be able to pay for a heating system that properly warms the entire house. Instead, they're forced to generate their *own* warmth, thus indicating that, though they're not impoverished, they also aren't rich. Grouping together in the freezing cold is the best way for them to avoid freezing, so their lack of resources actually drives them closer to one another, suggesting that they respond to hardship by turning to each other for support.

☞ “Oh yeah,” Dad interrupted, “they're a laugh a minute down there. Let's see, where was that ‘Coloreds Only’ bathroom downtown?”

“Daniel, you know what I mean, things aren't perfect but people are more honest about the way they feel”—she took her mean eyes off Dad and put them on Byron—“and folks there do know how to respect their parents.”

**Related Characters:** Daniel Watson (Kenny's Father), Wilona Watson (Kenny's Mother) (speaker), Byron Watson

**Related Themes:** 



**Page Number:** 6

### Explanation and Analysis

As Kenny and the rest of his family huddle together in their freezing house, Wilona talks about how much better off she would have been if she had stayed in her hometown of Birmingham, Alabama, instead of following Daniel to Flint, Michigan (where the family currently lives). According to her, Birmingham is a much better place to live, especially because it's so much warmer than Flint. But Daniel points out that Birmingham has other problems—like, for instance, the fact that it is, as a Southern city, still segregated by race. His comment about segregated bathrooms reminds Wilona that living in the South as a Black person means encountering overt racism on a daily basis. Wilona, for her part, dismisses his comment by suggesting that at least people are “honest about the way they feel.” It's unclear exactly what she means, but it's possible that she's remarking on the fact that there are still plenty of racist people in the North—they just aren't as vocal about it. Either way, Kenny and his siblings overhear this conversation and are left to make sense of it on their own, since they haven't had many experiences with overt racism—though this will change when they travel to Birmingham later in the novel.

☝ I could have done a lot of stuff to him. If it had been me with my lips stuck on something like this he'd have tortured me for a couple of days before he got help. Not me, though, I nearly broke my neck trying to get into the house to rescue Byron.

**Related Characters:** Kenny Watson (speaker), Byron Watson

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 13

### Explanation and Analysis

After Kenny and Byron's father sends them outside to scrape ice off of the family car, Byron gets his lip stuck to the side mirror while trying to kiss his own reflection. For many younger children, seeing their older brother in such a vulnerable position would feel like an incredible opportunity—after all, Byron wouldn't be able to immediately retaliate if Kenny wanted to mess with him. In fact, Kenny knows that Byron would *certainly* take advantage of the situation if Kenny were the one with his lips stuck to the car's mirror, considering that Byron loves playing tricks on Kenny and generally beating him up.

However, Kenny doesn't do anything mean to Byron. Instead, he quickly goes inside to fetch the rest of his family, hoping that they'll be able to help his older brother. In doing so, he demonstrates his tendency to prioritize kindness over everything else in life. He's not mean-spirited, nor does he ever want to hurt people when they're down—he just wants to be kind and help others when he can.

### Chapter 2 Quotes

☝ I couldn't believe it. I think Byron was proud of me!

When everybody saw Byron wasn't going to do anything to me for being smart they all decided that they better not do anything either. I still got called Egghead or Poindexter or Professor some of the time but that wasn't bad compared to what could have happened.

**Related Characters:** Kenny Watson (speaker), Byron Watson

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 25



### Explanation and Analysis


Because Kenny is incredibly good at reading for his age, the teachers at his school like to take him from class to class so he can read aloud to his fellow students. He even reads for kids in the older grades, since his reading level is so advanced. One day, though, his teacher takes him to Byron's class. Suddenly, he fears that Byron will beat him up for being so smart—and, to be fair, it *does* seem like Byron is unhappy that Kenny is in his class, since he scowls at his little brother the entire time he's reading. And yet, later that day, Byron comes up to Kenny and, instead of beating him up in front of everyone, makes a joke about how Kenny should charge the teachers money to make him read in front of other people. Surprised that Byron didn't punish him for showing him up, Kenny realizes that Byron is proud of him, ultimately indicating that Byron has a soft spot for his little brother—even if he usually hides this soft spot by treating him harshly. What's more, Byron's reaction sets the tone for how the rest of the school should treat Kenny. Instead of teasing him for being so smart, everyone else leaves him alone. It therefore becomes clear that Byron has a lot of power and that, in many ways, Kenny's experience at school largely depends on Byron's influence.

●● Finally Byron gave me some good advice. He noticed that when I talked to people I squinched my lazy eye kind of shut or that I'd put my hand on my face to cover it. I only did this 'cause it got hard to talk to someone when they were staring at your eye instead of listening to what you had to say.

"Look, man," he told me, "if you don't want people to look at your messed-up eye you just gotta do this." Byron made me stand still and look straight ahead, then he stood on my side and told me to look at him. I turned my head to look. "Naw, man, keep your head straight and look at me sideways."

**Related Characters:** Kenny Watson (speaker), Byron Watson

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 26

### Explanation and Analysis

Kenny is self-conscious about the fact that one of his eyes doesn't point in the same direction as the other. Other kids at school often make fun of him for having a lazy eye, which bothers him a fair amount—so much, it seems, that even Byron notices how down Kenny is about his eye. As a result, Byron gives him advice about how to make it look like he doesn't have a lazy eye. He tells Kenny to stand to the side while talking to people, ensuring that they can only see one of his eyes and, therefore, can't see that both eyes aren't pointing in the same direction.


That Byron gives Kenny advice in the first place is noteworthy because Byron otherwise doesn't seem to care about his brother and rarely goes out of his way to help him. By teaching him this trick, then, he reveals that he actually *does* care about Kenny and wants to help him feel better about himself. At the same time, though, it would probably be more helpful if Byron helped Kenny *accept* his lazy eye instead of telling him to hide it or make it less noticeable—that way, Kenny would learn to develop some self-confidence that would help him stay positive when people make fun of him. Either way, though, it's still meaningful that Byron gives Kenny this advice, ultimately foreshadowing the more significant ways that Byron helps Kenny later in the novel.

## Chapter 3 Quotes

●● Then he said something that made me get all funny and nervous inside, he said, "How come your eyes ain't lookin' in the same way?" I looked to see if maybe this was the start of some teasing but he looked like he really wanted to know. He wasn't staring at me either, he was kind of looking down and kicking at the dirt with his raggedy shoes.

**Related Characters:** Kenny Watson, Rufus (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 34



### Explanation and Analysis

While eating lunch with Rufus for the first time, Kenny is disconcerted when the topic of his lazy eye comes up. He doesn't like it when people ask him about his eye, since most of the kids at school make fun of him for having an eye that doesn't point in the same direction as the other one.

Consequently, he puts his guard up when Rufus asks why his eyes aren't looking "in the same way" as one another. But Rufus's question is an innocent one—it's not the "start of some teasing," it's just a question that comes out of pure curiosity. Of course, it's not the most tactful thing to ask a new friend, but Rufus doesn't mean any harm by it. When Rufus doesn't follow up his question by teasing Kenny, it becomes clear that he's a good-natured little boy who doesn't want to hurt anyone's feelings. Rather, he's just trying to make conversation, which makes it that much easier for Kenny to eventually befriend him. Still, though, the fact that Kenny immediately gets so defensive when Rufus asks about his eye is a good illustration of the unfortunate effect teasing can have on people, making them overly sensitive and quick to defend themselves even in friendly situations.

●● The other thing wrong with him was his clothes. It didn't take people too long before they counted how many pairs of pants and shirts Rufus and Cody had. That was easy to do because Rufus only had two shirts and two pairs of pants and Cody only had three shirts and two pairs of pants. They also had one pair of blue jeans that they switched off on; some days Rufus wore them and some days Cody rolled the legs up and put them on.

**Related Characters:** Kenny Watson (speaker), Rufus, Cody

**Related Themes:**   



**Page Number:** 42


### Explanation and Analysis

Kenny describes the reasons that other kids at school make fun of Rufus. He notes that Rufus gets targeted by other students because he has to share his clothes with his younger brother, Cody. People make fun of them for switching off wearing blue jeans. They also memorize Rufus and Cody's outfits and tease them for having such a limited wardrobe. Although it's pretty obvious that their clothing situation is due to the fact that their family doesn't have much money, nobody at school seems to care—instead, they openly laugh at Rufus and Cody, as if it's somehow *their* fault that their parents can't afford to buy them more clothes. Of course, it's quite insensitive to make fun of someone because of their financial situation, which Kenny seems to understand on some level, since he doesn't partake in the teasing. Still, though, Kenny himself is clearly very aware of the limited number of clothes his new friends have, implying that he's quite attuned to matters surrounding money and social class.

“I couldn't believe how sad I got. It's funny how things could change so much and you wouldn't notice. All of a sudden I started remembering how much I hated riding the bus, all of a sudden I started remembering how lunchtime under the swing set alone wasn't very much fun, all of a sudden I started remembering that before Rufus came to Flint my only friend was the world's biggest dinosaur thief, LJ Jones, all of a sudden I remembered that Rufus and Cody were the only two kids in the whole school (other than Byron and Joey) that I didn't automatically look at sideways.”

**Related Characters:** Kenny Watson (speaker), Rufus, Cody, Joetta Watson (Joey), LJ Jones, Byron Watson

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 45

### Explanation and Analysis

Although Kenny doesn't make fun of Rufus and Cody for only owning a few articles of clothing, he *does* accidentally laugh at a mean joke Larry Dunn makes about their limited wardrobe. Rufus sees him laugh along with everyone else

and decides to stop hanging out with him. He won't even speak to Kenny, only saying that he thought Kenny was different than everyone else but now sees that he was wrong. In the aftermath of this falling out, Kenny is devastated. He only realizes how much his friendship with Rufus means to him once it's (temporarily) over—a fact that emphasizes just how important it is for people to appreciate their friends. Without Rufus in his life, Kenny feels lonely and misunderstood. When he says that Rufus and Cody are the only “two kids in the whole school” at whom he doesn't “automatically look at sideways,” he references Byron's suggestion that he hide his lazy eye when talking to people by turning his head to the side. The implication, then, is that Rufus and Cody are the only people in school with whom Kenny feels comfortable just being himself. He doesn't care about hiding his lazy eye when he's with them. Now that they won't talk to him, though, he doesn't have anyone in his life—other than his siblings—who makes him feel at ease with himself.

## Chapter 4 Quotes

“But you notice that not everybody gets froze like that, it's just them folks from down South who got that thin, down-home blood who freeze so quick. And you know Momma ain't from Flint, she grew up in Alabama and that means half of y'all's blood is real thin, so Momma's worried that one morning it's gonna be cold enough to freeze you all.”

“That's where them fake garbage trucks come in. Every morning they go round picking the froze folks off the street, and they need them big doors because someone who got froze don't bend in the middle and they wouldn't fit in no regular ambulance.”

**Related Characters:** Byron Watson (speaker), Kenny Watson, Joetta Watson (Joey), Wilona Watson (Kenny's Mother)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 54

### Explanation and Analysis

Whenever Kenny and his siblings go to school during the winter, their mother forces them to bundle up in multiple layers of warm clothing. Joey hates having to dress in such warm clothing, since she gets so hot that she sweats beneath the many layers. She therefore asks her mother if they can dress differently, but Wilona refuses. That day, Byron tricks Joey and—to a certain extent—Kenny into


thinking that people literally freeze to death on the streets if they don't dress properly. The reason Joey and Kenny have never seen these frozen people, Byron says, is that the garbage trucks that drive around in the mornings always scoop up the dead people.

Byron's tall tale is mischievous and, in some ways, mean-spirited, since he's primarily interested in scaring his younger siblings. At the same time, though, his story is also something of a cautionary tale that keeps Joey from taking off her warm clothing. In a way, then, Byron ends up *protecting* his little sister from the cold, thus showing her a subtle kind of brotherly love.

●● Byron jerked Larry's arms over his head three times. Larry Dunn was really tough! Not only because he wasn't crying when By was going to mess him up, but also because when Byron jerked his arms over his head like that we all could see that Larry's skinny little windbreaker was ripped under both arms and Larry just had on a T-shirt underneath it.

**Related Characters:** Kenny Watson (speaker), Byron Watson, Larry Dunn, Rufus

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 61

### Explanation and Analysis



After Larry Dunn beats up Kenny and Rufus on a cold winter day, they realize that he was the one to steal Kenny's pair of leather gloves. Frustrated, Kenny goes to Byron to tell him what happened and then follows his older brother as Byron tracks Larry down and takes revenge. As Byron beats Larry up in front of a large crowd, Kenny sees that Larry isn't wearing very warm clothing. In fact, Larry has hardly anything on at all, other than a ripped windbreaker and a t-shirt—two incredibly skimpy pieces of clothing that would provide almost no warmth at all. Suddenly, it starts to make sense why Larry would want to steal Kenny's nice winter gloves: he doesn't have sufficient winter clothing of his own. Kenny's realization puts Larry's bullying into perspective. Although it's true that Larry shouldn't have stolen Kenny's gloves and certainly shouldn't have beaten him up, Kenny still finds it within himself to look on Larry with empathy and compassion. After all, Kenny gave his other pair of gloves to Rufus because Rufus's family doesn't have enough money to buy him gloves, so it makes sense

that Kenny would feel bad for Larry, who seemingly also can't afford warm clothing.

## Chapter 5 Quotes

●● It was hard to do, but I kind of felt sorry for Byron, though not too sorry because I knew he deserved whatever happened, first because he had a chance to escape and didn't take it and second because he was being a bad influence on me. *Nazi Parachutes Attack America and Get Shot Down over the Flint River by Captain Byron Watson and His Flamethrower of Death* looked like a real cool movie for me to make too. If Momma just gave Byron some stupid punishment, then maybe it would be worth it for me to flush some Nazis down the drain myself. But if you got set on fire for doing it the movie wasn't worth making.

**Related Characters:** Kenny Watson (speaker), Byron Watson, Wilona Watson (Kenny's Mother), Joetta Watson (Joey)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 70


### Explanation and Analysis

Even though he's not supposed to play with matches, Byron gets caught burning little pieces of paper and throwing them into the toilet one day. He does this because he's pretending to make a movie in which Nazi parachuters attack the United States and are shot down by a flamethrower. Kenny eagerly watches as his mother drags Byron downstairs to punish him, since she promised the last time she caught him playing with fire that if he ever did it again, she would burn him. Kenny surprises himself by feeling bad for Byron, once again demonstrating his capacity to empathize with others even when they're often mean to him. Moreover, though, Kenny wants to know what will happen to Byron because he himself would like to play with matches in the same way—if Byron doesn't get into very much trouble, then it might be worth it for Kenny to break the rules and do the same thing. It thus becomes overwhelmingly apparent that Kenny looks to Byron to set an example, often learning from his older brother's mistakes more than from anything else in life.

## Chapter 6 Quotes

☝☝ “Listen here, Mr. High and Mighty, since you just got to know, food is food. You’ve eaten welfare food in this house before and if need be you’ll eat it again. Don’t come playin’ that nonsense with me. I already told you, this is not welfare food. You’ve got about five seconds to have that door hit you in the back. Kenny, move.”

**Related Characters:** Wilona Watson (Kenny’s Mother) (speaker), Byron Watson, Kenny Watson

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 77

**Explanation and Analysis**

Wilona sends Byron and Kenny to the grocery store one night, but when Byron asks her for money, she tells him to just ask the grocer to put their name on a list. Byron jumps to conclusions by assuming that that their family is on welfare and, because of this assumption, refuses to go to the store. He won’t, he says, embarrass himself by eating welfare food. Wilona responds by pointing out that “food is food.” In doing so, she tries to get Byron to see that *nobody* is too good for welfare food, since being on welfare says nothing about a person’s integrity or character. Calling him “Mr. High and Mighty,” she criticizes his elitist attitude. Indeed, Byron’s refusal to eat welfare food is quite shallow, especially because he has eaten it in the past and didn’t even seem to notice. Whereas Kenny doesn’t tend to care about money and often goes out of his way to help people who have less than him, Byron appears to think that whether or not people are well-off says something about who they are—an idea that is quite superficial.

## Chapter 9 Quotes

☝☝ I tried to look real intelligent and I guess it worked ‘cause finally Dad said, “Kenny, we’ve put a lot of thought into this. I know you’ve seen on the news what’s happening in some parts of the South, right?” We’d seen the pictures of a bunch of really mad white people with twisted-up faces screaming and giving dirty finger signs to some little Negro kids who were trying to go to school. I’d seen the pictures but I didn’t really know how these white people could hate some kids so much.

“I’ve seen it.” I didn’t have to tell Dad I didn’t understand.

“Well, a lot of times that’s going to be the way of the world for you kids. Byron is getting old enough to have to understand that his time for playing is running out fast, he’s got to realize the world doesn’t have a lot of jokes waiting for him. He’s got to be ready.”

**Related Characters:** Kenny Watson, Daniel Watson (Kenny’s Father) (speaker), Byron Watson

**Related Themes:**   



**Page Number:** 122

**Explanation and Analysis**

Kenny has an insightful conversation with his father after learning that the family will be sending Byron to live in Birmingham, Alabama for the summer. When he asks Daniel why it’s necessary to send Byron away, Daniel speaks to him like an adult, honestly explaining that Byron’s misbehavior could negatively impact his life because of the tumultuous and dangerous environment in the United States. His implication is that young Black people like Byron don’t have much wiggle room when it comes to getting in trouble, since the country is full of racist people who would jump at any opportunity to severely punish a Black man (even for insignificant reasons). To make his point, Daniel references the civil rights movement taking place in the South in the early 1960s—a movement with which Kenny is somewhat familiar, since he has seen pictures of angry white people trying to maintain racial segregation. Because the atmosphere in the country is so tense, Daniel implies, Byron has to shape up “fast.” Otherwise, he might find himself in a position of extreme vulnerability because he’s a Black person living in a hostile and racist country.

☝☝ “Well, that’s what being a grown-up is like. At first it’s scary but then before you realize, with a lot of practice, you have it under control. Hopefully you’ll have lots of time to practice being grown-up before you actually have to do it.”

**Related Characters:** Daniel Watson (Kenny's Father), Kenny Watson (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 125


### Explanation and Analysis

While talking to his father about why Byron has to go to Birmingham for the summer, Kenny admits that he finds the idea of adulthood scary. He doesn't understand how his mother and father always know what to do. In response, Daniel says that being an adult really is pretty scary sometimes. But he also says it's like driving a car, referencing the times he has let Kenny steer the family car. Using this analogy, Daniel says that learning to be an adult is like learning to drive: "At first it's scary but then before you realize, with a lot of practice, you have it under control." The idea here is that maturity doesn't come all at once. Rather, young people gradually learn how to make informed decisions and how to keep their wits about them in challenging situations. After a while, these skills accumulate, at which point it becomes a bit easier to relax into adulthood.

☝ I thought about it for a minute, then asked, "Momma, how come we don't just drive until Dad gets tired, then stop?"

Dad did an imitation of a hillbilly accent. "Cuz, boy, this he-uh is the deep South you-all is gonna be drivin' thoo. Y'all colored folks can't be jes' pullin' up tuh any ol' way-uh an be 'spectin' tuh get no room uh no food, yuh heah, boy? I said yuh heah what I'm sayin', boy?"

**Related Characters:** Kenny Watson, Daniel Watson (Kenny's Father) (speaker), Wilona Watson (Kenny's Mother)

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 132

### Explanation and Analysis

After the Watson family starts out on its road trip down to Birmingham, Alabama, Kenny wants to know why Wilona has so meticulously planned out every place they'll stop along the way. In response, Daniel jokingly talks about how Black people can't always assume they'll be able to find a safe place to eat or sleep in the South. Although he puts on an exaggerated Southern accent intended to make his family laugh, what he says is actually true: Black people

traveling in the South in the early 1960s didn't have the privilege that white travelers had, since racial segregation was still in wide practice in the Southern states at that time. What's more, overt racism was still quite common, and many police departments in the South actively ignored racist hate crimes, meaning that Black people had little to no protection when traveling in these areas. Therefore, it makes sense that Wilona has planned the trip very carefully, clearly knowing that they couldn't roll up to just any motel and expect a warm welcome.

## Chapter 10 Quotes

☝ "Man, they got crackers and rednecks up here that ain't never seen no Negroes before. If they caught your ass out here like this they'd hang you now, then eat you later."

**Related Characters:** Byron Watson (speaker), Kenny Watson, Daniel Watson (Kenny's Father)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 146

### Explanation and Analysis

Kenny wakes up in the middle of the night during the road trip and discovers that his father has driven all the way to Tennessee. The family is at a dark, abandoned rest stop, and instead of using the outhouses, Kenny and Byron decide to pee in the woods. As they do so, Byron tries to scare Kenny by talking about how there are some white people in the South who have never even seen Black people (Byron uses the outdated word "Negroes," which is no longer a generally accepted term). What's more, he tells Kenny that these white people might hang Kenny if they catch him peeing in the woods. Byron is just trying to scare Kenny, as evidenced by the fact that he claims white people would "eat" Kenny after hanging him—something that's pretty unlikely to actually happen. And yet, the possibility of encountering a hostile racist person in the middle of the night in the South during the early 1960s *isn't* all that far-fetched. In turn, it becomes clear that Byron is aware of some of the dangers related to traveling through the South as a Black person during this time period, even if he only references such dangers in a joking way.



## Chapter 11 Quotes

☝☝ After Grandma Sands gave us directions Byron looked at me sideways and said, “What you starin’ at, square?”

I just shook my head.

“What you expect?” By asked. “You seen her. That bird’s as old as dirt. She’s so old I bet she used to step over dinosaur turds. I ain’t gonna have her death on my hands.”

I knew that was a lie.

It seemed like all of the fight was out of Byron and we’d only been in Birmingham for a couple of minutes.

**Related Characters:** Kenny Watson, Byron Watson (speaker), Grandma Sands

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 161


### Explanation and Analysis

When the Watsons finally reach Birmingham, Alabama, Kenny is excited to watch his brother challenge Grandma Sands, who is supposedly intimidating and authoritative. However, Byron immediately defers to Grandma Sands, calling her “ma’am” and behaving with more respect than Kenny has ever seen him show another person. Sensing that his brother is surprised by his behavior, Byron claims that he doesn’t want to harm Grandma Sands by treating her badly—she’s so old, he says, that he might end up *killing* her if he misbehaved like he normally does. The mere fact that Byron worries about Grandma Sands’s health is a good reminder that he isn’t quite as disinterested and careless as he’d like people to think. In fact, he genuinely cares about other people, he just rarely lets that side of himself show. Now, though, he doesn’t want to inconvenience Grandma Sands and has no choice but to own up to his more sensitive side, though what he *doesn’t* admit to Kenny is that he’s frightened of Grandma Sands’s authority.

## Chapter 12 Quotes

☝☝ I picked up my spoon and kept eating. This was great! I’d never seen Momma act like a little kid who just got yelled at but there she was, picking at a piece of paper towel and looking kind of embarrassed.

**Related Characters:** Kenny Watson (speaker), Wilona Watson (Kenny’s Mother), Grandma Sands, Mr. Robert

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 168

### Explanation and Analysis

While staying in Birmingham, Wilona learns that Grandma Sands—her mother—has taken a new lover named Mr. Robert. On the first morning of the Watsons’ visit, she sits in the kitchen with Kenny and Grandma Sands and asks about the nature of her mother’s relationship with Mr. Robert. It’s clear that she’s unhappy about the entire arrangement, having trouble adjusting to the idea of her own mother dating somebody other than her father, despite the fact that her father has been dead for many years. Kenny, for his part, loves listening to this conversation between his mother and Grandma Sands, relishing the fact that Wilona is acting “like a little kid who just got yelled at,” since Grandma Sands eventually tells her to mind her own business. In this moment, then, Kenny sees that even parents sometimes have trouble acting mature. Daniel has already suggested to Kenny that people slowly and steadily learn how to be adults, but now Kenny comes to understand that even full-grown people like his mother are still figuring how, exactly, to be mature.

## Chapter 13 Quotes

☝☝ Who could understand Byron? Here was a chance for another Fantastic Adventure and he was going in the wrong direction. Something was wrong with him. If he was in Flint and you told him not to do something he’d go right out and do it, but now he was acting real dull and square. Maybe it was the heat, maybe just like it had sucked all the energy out of me it had sucked all the meanness and fun out of Byron.

**Related Characters:** Kenny Watson (speaker), Byron Watson, Joetta Watson (Joey), Grandma Sands

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 170


### Explanation and Analysis

During their stay in Birmingham, Kenny, Byron, and Joey decide to go swimming. Even though Grandma Sands tells them to stay away from Collier’s Landing, where a local boy recently drowned, Kenny tries to convince his brother and sister to check it out. He’s surprised, however, that Byron is uninterested in seeking out what he calls a “Fantastic Adventure”—or, in other words, Kenny is surprised that Byron doesn’t want to misbehave. After all, he’s always the one who wants to act out and disobey orders. Because he’s

used to his older brother constantly breaking the rules, Kenny is disoriented by Byron's sudden change of heart. Although Kenny always thought that Byron's misbehavior was driven by "meanness," he also apparently thinks that his brother was "fun" when he broke the rules. There was something dangerous and exciting about watching Byron test the limits of what was allowed. It becomes clear in this passage, then, that Kenny looked up to his brother for breaking the rules, even if he himself was never inclined to act out. Now that Byron has changed, though, Kenny wants to fill his shoes as the troublemaker.

☞ There's one good thing about getting in trouble: It seems like you do it in steps. It seems like you don't just end up in trouble but that you kind of ease yourself into it. It also seems like the worse the trouble is that you get into, the more steps it takes to get there. Sort of like you're getting a bunch of little warnings on the way; sort of like if you really wanted to you could turn around.

**Related Characters:** Kenny Watson (speaker)

**Related Themes:** 



**Page Number:** 173

### Explanation and Analysis

As he wades toward a whirlpool, Kenny reflects on what it's like to get into trouble. In this case, "trouble" means a dangerous situation, which is exactly what Kenny gets himself into when he finds that he's unable to swim back to the shore after getting swept up by the whirlpool. Before that moment, though, each step he takes feels deceptively insignificant. When he first decided to go see the whirlpool on his own, for example, he took a step that wasn't all that dangerous in and of itself, since he could have easily turned back without any repercussions. Then, when he reached Collier's Landing, he took yet another step toward trouble by wading into the water—but even *that* wasn't completely irreversible, since he still had the chance to turn around. Finally, though, he took one last step that he couldn't take back: he lunged for a turtle and suddenly realized that he couldn't touch the ground anymore, at which point the whirlpool dragged him away from land. The entire situation is a good metaphor for how easy it is to talk oneself into behaving in ill-advised ways—an important lesson for Kenny to learn as a 10-year-old boy who, until this point, has always followed the rules.

☞☞ Byron dropped me on the ground right on top of all the water and junk that I'd thrown up. I knew he was going to make a stupid joke about me landing face-first in all that mess but he didn't, he just wrapped his arms around my shoulders real tight and put his mouth right on top of my head! Byron was shaking like he was getting electrocuted and crying like a baby and kissing the top of my head over and over!

**Related Characters:** Kenny Watson (speaker), Byron Watson

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 179

### Explanation and Analysis

After Kenny gets swept up in the whirlpool, Byron heroically appears to rescue him. He manages to drag him out of the water, at which point he holds him upside down so that Kenny will cough up all of the water he swallowed. Finally, he drops Kenny to the ground, and though Kenny thinks his older brother will make fun of him for landing "face-first" in the gross water he coughed up, he's wrong: Byron is too emotional to make fun of him. Instead, he holds him tightly and keeps kissing him on the head. Even more astounding to Kenny is the fact that his brother is *crying*—an incredible thing to happen, since Byron usually pretends that he doesn't care about anyone (especially Kenny). Kenny therefore sees for perhaps the first time that his older brother really *does* care about him quite a lot. Byron likes to tease Kenny and even bullies him from time to time, but that doesn't mean he doesn't love him, which becomes quite clear when he reacts so emotionally to Kenny's near-death experience.

## Chapter 14 Quotes

☞☞ I gave the shoe one more hard tug and it popped loose from a frilly white sock. I got real scared. I walked as slow and as quiet as I could out of the church. Maybe if I moved quiet enough he wouldn't come for me. Maybe if I walked and didn't look back he'd leave me alone. I walked past where the adults were still screaming and pointing, I walked past where that guy had set the little girl in blue, right next to where someone else had set the little girl in red. I knew if Joey sat down next to those two their dresses would make the red, white and blue of the American flag.

**Related Characters:** Kenny Watson (speaker), Joetta Watson (Joey)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 185

### Explanation and Analysis

After learning that the church Joey attends for Sunday School in Birmingham has been bombed, all of the Watsons rush to see if she's still alive. But Kenny doesn't just stand outside the church with the other worried community members; he actually goes *inside* the church. On his way in, he sees a man put down a young girl wearing a blue dress next to another young girl wearing a red dress—an image that will stay with him after this experience, causing him to wonder what happened to them and whether or not they were all right. Because he knows Joey wore a white dress to church that day, he thinks about how she and the other girls would make up the colors of the American flag. His thought in this moment is symbolic in a somewhat disturbing way, hinting at the fact that the history of the United States is made up of *many* injured Black people who suffered as a result of racism. However, Kenny himself isn't necessarily aware of this thought process or the significance of his ideas about the American flag—rather, he simply focuses on the traumatizing image of the bombed-out church, which will haunt him in the days to come.

## Chapter 15 Quotes

☝☝ Grandma Sands called a couple of times and told them that the police thought two white men drove by in a car and threw it in during services, or that they'd already hidden it in the church with a clock set to go off during Sunday school. However it got in the church it had killed four little girls, blinded a couple more and sent a bunch of other people to the hospital. I couldn't stop wondering if those two little girls I saw on the lawn were okay. From my secret hiding place in the living room I could listen to Momma and Dad and it seemed like they spent most of the time trying to figure out how they could explain to us what happened. Some of the time they were mad, some of the time they were calm and some of the time they just sat on the couch and cried.

**Related Characters:** Kenny Watson (speaker), Grandma Sands, Wilona Watson (Kenny's Mother), Daniel Watson (Kenny's Father)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 191

### Explanation and Analysis

After the church bombing in Birmingham, the Watsons return to Flint. Kenny is deeply disturbed by what he saw at the church, so he spends as much time as possible hiding behind the couch by himself. From this hiding spot, he overhears information about what happened that day at the church, learning that two racist white men were responsible for the bomb, which killed four young Black girls. Such hateful violence is obviously extremely hard for him to process. In fact, even his parents struggle to come to terms with what happened, trying desperately to figure out what they should tell their children. The reason they spend so much time trying to “explain [...] what happened” is that there's no good way to tell children such horrific things—racism and violence are horrifying, and there's no good way to sugar-coat the fact that some people are driven by hatred to do terrible things to others. In the days after the bombing, then, Kenny and his entire family grapple with the challenging prospect of having to move on after coming face to face with just how ugly the world can be.

☝☝ He waited a long time before he answered, “I don't know, Kenny. Momma and Dad say they can't help themselves, they did it because they're sick, but I don't know. I ain't never heard of no sickness that makes you kill little girls just because you don't want them in your school. I don't think they're sick at all, I think they just let hate eat them up and turn them into monsters. But it's O.K. now, they can't hurt you here. It's all right.”

**Related Characters:** Kenny Watson, Byron Watson (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 199-200

### Explanation and Analysis



Byron tries to make Kenny feel better by talking to him about the church bombing. Kenny hasn't talked to anyone about what he saw that day, but he finally lets his feelings pour out to his brother, asking him why anyone would bomb a church full of young children. In response, Byron admits that he doesn't know—a very understandable answer, since it's unlikely that *anyone* would be able to come up with a good reason why people would want to inflict harm on children. But Byron also goes on to suggest that the people who bombed the church did so because they “let hate eat


them up and turn them into monsters.” In other words, they held onto hatred for so long that it overrode their sense of humanity. At the heart of Byron’s point is that people who behave with such unconscionable violence and racism are full of bitterness. Kenny, in contrast, is surrounded by the love and support of his family and friends.

●● He was also very wrong about there not being anything like magic powers or genies or angels. Maybe those weren’t the things that could make a run-over dog walk without wobbling but they were out there.

Maybe they were in the way your father smiled at you even after you’d messed something up real bad. Maybe they were in the way you understood that your mother wasn’t trying to make you the laughing “sock” of the whole school when she’d call you over in front of a bunch of your friends and use spit on her finger to wipe the sleep out of your eyes. Maybe it was magic powers that let you know she was just being Momma. Maybe they were the reason that you really didn’t care when the kids would say, “Yuck! You let your momma slob on you?” and you had to say, “Shut up. That’s my momma, we got the same germs.”

**Related Characters:** Kenny Watson (speaker), Byron Watson, Daniel Watson (Kenny’s Father), Wilona Watson (Kenny’s Mother)

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 204-205

### Explanation and Analysis

Trying to make Kenny feel better after the church bombing, Byron tells him that magical powers don’t exist. Kenny has been hiding behind the couch, where he believes there are magic spirits that might heal his emotional wounds. Because Byron wants Kenny to stop hiding from the world, he insists that magic doesn’t exist, and though Kenny agrees that it’s foolish to keep hiding behind the couch, he disagrees with the idea that magic isn’t real. To him, magic *does* exist, though not necessarily in the outlandish ways most people assume. Rather, Kenny feels a sort of magic lurking in the loving relationships he has with his family members. He feels magic in the way his father loves him despite his flaws, or in the way his mother always wants to look out for him, even if her attention might seem embarrassing. His newfound belief in the power of this kind of magic is important because it’s what will help him move on in the aftermath of the church bombing. He has seen that the world can be a scary, ugly place, but he now remembers that it can also be beautiful and full of love. It is this loving magic, then, that will carry him through hardship.



## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

## CHAPTER 1

It's an extremely cold Saturday in Flint, Michigan. Kenny Watson is huddled up in the living room with his family, which consists of his father Daniel, his mother Wilona, his older brother Byron, and his younger sister Joetta. Kenny is used to the cold because he grew up in Flint just like his father and siblings, but his mother can't stand such low temperatures. She grew up in Alabama and often blames Daniel for dragging her to such a freezing state. Still, *everyone* in the Watson family is cold tonight, even Byron, though he refuses to get close to his family members because he's a teenager now and doesn't want to look like he needs anyone.

Daniel tries to distract the family by turning on the TV, but the weather reporter starts talking about how hot it is in the South, so he quickly turns it off. Wilona criticizes him for making her live in Michigan, saying that she should have listened to Moses Henderson, who tried to dissuade her from marrying Daniel and moving to Michigan. Daniel jumps in and starts making fun of Moses Henderson, telling the kids that everyone used to call him "Hambone Henderson" because his head looked like a hambone—a nickname that Daniel himself coined. As he makes fun of Hambone Henderson, everyone laughs, including Wilona. Kenny and Joey crack up, and even Byron lets out a small chuckle.

As Daniel makes fun of Hambone Henderson and the way people talk in the South, Wilona defends her hometown of Birmingham, Alabama. It's a nice place, she insists, saying that people are very kind there. But Daniel reminds her that Birmingham still has intense racial segregation. Still, Wilona maintains that Birmingham is a good place, especially since the people there know to respect their parents and elders. As she says this, she throws Byron a meaningful look.

*The way the Watson family huddles together in the cold suggests that they're a tight-knit family who support each other in moments of hardship—even if that hardship is something as insignificant as braving the cold. What's more, the fact that they have to huddle up for warmth while they're inside hints at their financial situation as a family, suggesting that they don't have enough money to fully heat their house. And yet, even though it's blisteringly cold, Byron doesn't want to touch his family members, indicating that he's in a somewhat rebellious, fiercely independent phase of life.*



*Daniel's comments about Moses Henderson illustrate his tendency to crack jokes in an attempt to make his family members laugh. He often resorts to humor as a way of developing a sense of camaraderie within his family—and it works. For example, even though Byron likes to act too cool for anyone else, he can't resist his father's humor, indicating that he's not quite as uninterested in spending time with his family as it might otherwise seem.*



*Daniel is skeptical of the South because, as a Black man, he knows that many Southern states are still divided by racism. It's worth remembering that the novel takes place in 1963, a time when the civil rights movement was picking up momentum in the South and encouraging people to reflect on the tragic lack of racial equality in the United States. The tension surrounding racism and segregation therefore lurks in the background of *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*, and though Kenny and his siblings don't necessarily think much about racism, it's clear that the topic still factors into their daily lives, since their parents are very aware of what's happening in the South.*



The Watsons decide to go to Kenny's aunt's house, since she has better heating than them. In order to do so, though, they have to get the Brown Bomber started. The Brown Bomber is the old car that everyone in the family makes fun of, though Daniel loves it. Because the Brown Bomber is so old, though, it doesn't run very well in the cold, so Daniel goes outside to work on getting it started. Once it's going, he comes in and tells Kenny and Byron to go scrape ice off the windows. As they make their way out, Kenny tells Byron that he has to do his fair share of the work, since Byron always finds ways of getting out of chores and somehow tricking Kenny into doing them.

As Kenny scrapes ice off the car, he sees Byron admiring himself in the side mirror. Byron brags that he must be adopted, since he's more attractive than everyone else in their family. Kenny ignores him. But then he hears Byron saying his name in a muffled voice. He knows Byron's probably tricking him. The day before, Byron and his friend Buphead were playing in the snow and told Kenny they were going to teach him how to survive a blizzard. They put him through a series of tests that involved pushing him into snowbanks and roughing him up. Finally, Byron secretly stuffed snow into his own mouth, said Kenny's name, and then—when Kenny turned around—he spat the snow into his brother's face.

Kenny keeps ignoring Byron, thinking he'll just spit snow in his face again. But Byron's voice starts to sound frantic. Finally, Kenny goes to look and sees that Byron is stuck—his lips are attached to the icy mirror! Byron calls out for his mother, so Kenny runs into his house and fetches his parents. Wilona is distraught and worried about Byron, but Daniel finds the situation hilarious. He playfully makes fun of Byron for trying to kiss his own reflection. Meanwhile, Wilona fusses over her oldest son, suggesting that they pour hot water on his lips. Daniel isn't sure this is such a good idea, but they try it anyway.

Kenny is the one to pour the water on Byron's lips, since his mother's hands are shaking too much and his father is laughing too hard. He knows Byron would do something really mean to him if their circumstances were reversed, but he doesn't want to be cruel. All the same, though, his father was right: pouring water on Byron's lips isn't a good idea at all! It just turns to ice, making him even *more* stuck. Byron is so frustrated that he reaches out and smacks Kenny right in the forehead.

*Again, the fact that the Watsons can't stay warm in their own home suggests that they don't have a lot of money. The run-down state of their car—the Brown Bomber—confirms this idea, making it clear that, although the Watsons have enough to get by, they certainly aren't rich or even all that financially comfortable. Meanwhile, Kenny's warning to Byron hints that, at least in some ways, they share a pretty normal brotherly relationship.*



*Byron doesn't treat Kenny with much kindness. To the contrary, he seems to actively give his little brother a hard time, teaming up with his friend Buphead to trick and mistreat Kenny. It's therefore understandable that Kenny is hesitant to listen to his brother while scraping off the car. After all, experience has taught him that Byron is not to be trusted, which is a hard lesson to learn, since brothers often give each other love and support—but, at this point, Byron unfortunately doesn't show Kenny that kind of support.*



*Although Wilona just wants to help Byron get unstuck from the car, Daniel isn't afraid to laugh at his son a little bit. To be fair, the situation is pretty funny, since Byron was clearly trying to kiss his own reflection, indicating that he's a bit narcissistic and full of himself. While Kenny worked hard scraping the car, Byron didn't do anything but stare at himself in the mirror, so the fact that he's stuck seems like a strange form of justice, as if bad things happen to people who only think about themselves.*



*Kenny's decision not to mess with his older brother highlights his habit of practicing kindness. Even though he's certain that Byron would do terrible things to him if their situations were reversed, Kenny isn't the kind of person to mistreat others just because they're in a vulnerable position. Byron, on the other hand, isn't even capable of appreciating Kenny for trying to help, since he ends up hitting Kenny in the head when the warm water doesn't melt the ice. It's evident, then, that the two brothers have much different ways of moving through the world, as Kenny prioritizes kindness while Byron only thinks about himself.*



Daniel and Joey go inside to call the hospital to ask what they should do. While they're gone, though, Wilona nestles up to Byron and, after comforting him for a moment, yanks his head away from the mirror. Kenny closes his eyes, not wanting to see what happens. When he opens them again, Byron is crying out and sprinting toward the house. And though Kenny is hesitant at first to watch something so painful happen to his brother, he later pokes fun at him by calling him the "Lipless Wonder."

*Byron usually acts like a cool, disinterested teenager, so it's humorous when he ends up crying and frantically running into the house. Kenny, for his part, behaved with kindness and integrity by not kicking Byron when he was down. After Byron becomes unstuck, though, Kenny lets himself joke about the incident—after all, Byron behaved ridiculously, so Kenny sees no harm in joking around with him a little bit, indicating that even Kenny knows there's a time and place for friendly teasing.*



## CHAPTER 2

At Kenny's school, Clark Elementary, there's a bully named Larry Dunn. Larry rules over everyone in kindergarten through fourth grade, but he's not the most powerful student in school—that would be Byron and his friend Buphead, both of whom are in sixth grade and are the oldest kids in school, since they (like Larry Dunn) had to repeat some grades. Larry Dunn picks on Kenny, but not as much as he probably would if Kenny weren't related to Byron. For example, Kenny once found a dollar and foolishly showed it to Larry Dunn. Instead of just taking the whole dollar, though, Larry Dunn went to the school's store, got change, and only kept 50 cents. Kenny knows Larry would've kept the *whole* dollar if he weren't afraid of Byron.

*Although Byron bullies Kenny at home and frequently gives him a hard time, his presence in school also provides Kenny with a small amount of protection. Even Larry Dunn—the school bully—doesn't want to mess with Kenny too much, since he knows that Byron might take revenge if he did. There are some benefits, then, to having a mean older brother, though it's worth pointing out that Kenny's relation to Byron doesn't completely protect him from bullies, suggesting that Byron doesn't actually care that much about defending his little brother.*



There are a couple things that attract negative attention to Kenny. For instance, there's the fact that he loves to read. Once teachers find out how good he is at reading, they start bringing him around to other classes and having him show off his talent. He loves this until one day he finds himself in Byron and Buphead's class. Byron's scary teacher encourages Kenny to read Langston Hughes. He also tells the class that, as young Black people in the United States, they will experience many challenges. The ability to read well, he says, is a vital skill for any Black person making their way through the "hostile" environment of a racist country.

*Again, the adults in Kenny and Byron's life acknowledge the challenges that Black people face in the United States—something that Kenny and Byron themselves don't necessarily seem to think about very much, perhaps because they're still young and living in a predominantly Black community, where they don't come into contact with white people very often. And yet, that doesn't mean they won't have to navigate the treacherous racism running rampant throughout the country in the 1960s. Byron's teacher therefore tries to prepare his students to succeed in a challenging world, believing that things like literacy and academic success will help young Black people pursue important opportunities.*



Byron's teacher tells him to stop glaring at Kenny, saying that he might learn a thing or two from his younger brother. Kenny is sure Byron will beat him up later for showing off, but he's surprised to find that Byron seems somewhat *proud* of him. Byron even tells Buphead to leave his brother alone and jokes that, if he were in Kenny's position, he'd charge the teachers money to parade him around to read in different classes. Seeing that Byron isn't going to bully Kenny for being smart, nobody else gives him a hard time for it, either.

*There's no doubt that Byron often teases Kenny and mistreats him, but that's not what happens after Kenny reads to his class. To the contrary, Byron takes pride in his younger brother's intelligence, indicating that—although he doesn't always let it show—he does love Kenny and wants him to succeed.*



However, many students at Clark Elementary *do* make fun of Kenny for having a lazy eye. Kenny is very self-conscious about his inability to make both his eyes look in the same direction, but Byron gives him some advice. He tells Kenny that, if he doesn't want people to focus on his lazy eye, he should just stand so that people can only see one side of his face. Kenny thinks this is pretty good advice, but he still gets picked on. He's nervous that Byron will one day graduate from Clark Elementary and no longer be there to protect him. He knows, after all, what it's like not to have his brother to watch over him, since Byron often skips school. Just before getting on the bus in the morning, he'll frequently sneak away.

After Byron sneaks away from the bus one day, Kenny gets on and rides in the front seat—that's where it's safest when Byron's not there, since the driver can protect him from bullies. Suddenly, the driver stops because two students are running for the bus. When the two boys get on, Kenny sees that they're brothers. They're new at Clark. The older one grins, looks at everyone, and says "Hiya, y'all!" Everyone bursts out laughing at him, and Larry Dunn chucks an apple at him. The driver intervenes and tells the older boy to sit next to Kenny. Kenny is elated because he thinks the arrival of this new boy will mean that people no longer pick on him, since they'll be focused on making fun of the new kid, whose name is Rufus.

### CHAPTER 3

The teacher sits Rufus next to Kenny in class. Kenny isn't happy, since he wants to distance himself from the new kid—that's the only way Rufus's presence will distract people from making fun of Kenny. But Rufus tries to be friendly with him, which only frustrates Kenny.

Much to Kenny's dismay, Rufus sits with him at lunch. Rufus doesn't have any lunch but claims to have just forgotten to bring one. Eventually, he asks why one of Kenny's eyes is crossed. Kenny prepares himself for Rufus to tease him, but Rufus doesn't. Instead, he casually changes the subject, pointing out a squirrel that he thinks is "fat" and "dumb." Kenny doesn't understand—what's wrong with the squirrel? Rufus explains that where he's from in Arkansas, squirrels are much more careful because everyone hunts them. Astounded to hear that Rufus has shot a gun before, Kenny gives him part of his sandwich.

*Again, it becomes clear that Byron really does care about Kenny, as evidenced by the fact that he wants to make him feel better about himself. He knows Kenny is self-conscious, so he tries to help him stop worrying quite so much about whether or not people are thinking about his lazy eye. Of course, it might be more helpful if Byron encouraged Kenny to simply accept his lazy eye instead of trying to hide it, but Byron's advice still helps Kenny and shows him that his older brother cares about how he feels.*



*Although Kenny is kindhearted, he can't help but relish the idea of everyone making fun of Rufus instead of him. More than anything, his momentary, mean-spirited wish simply demonstrates how bad it feels to get picked on—so bad, it seems, that Kenny is willing to think unkind thoughts about Rufus even though he's normally a compassionate person who doesn't wish harm on anyone.*



*Kenny's hope that everyone will make fun of Rufus instead of him becomes a bit more complicated when the teacher sits them next to each other in class. In order for Kenny's plan to work, he can't get too close to Rufus—otherwise, he might end up getting made fun of, too. And yet, he can't deny that Rufus seems quite friendly, which most likely makes it harder for Kenny to wish ill upon Rufus.*



*Slowly but surely, Kenny opens up to Rufus, who is quite friendly—so friendly, it seems, that it's hard for Kenny to dislike him. Unlike other people at school, Rufus doesn't make fun of Kenny's eye. Instead, he simply asks about it because he's curious, but he doesn't want to make Kenny feel bad about himself. To the contrary, Rufus just wants to make conversation, and though Kenny originally hoped that Rufus would attract the attention of the school bullies, he can't help but warm up to his kindhearted new friend.*





Rufus starts hanging out with Kenny a lot, coming over to play with his toy dinosaurs. Kenny doesn't mind playing with Rufus, since he no longer has anyone to play with his dinosaurs. His old friend, LJ Jones, always stole the toys. Kenny and LJ would set up huge fights with all of Kenny's dinosaurs, pretending some were Americans and some were Nazis. LJ always made Kenny be the Nazis. One day, they had the biggest dinosaur fight ever, and LJ tricked Kenny into burying the dead dinosaurs in mass graves in the ground. Then, at the end of the war, he distracted Kenny from digging up the dinosaurs. Later that night, Kenny remembered they were still out there, but by the time he went to check, LJ had already circled back and taken them home.

Everyone at school picks on Rufus. They make fun of him for talking in a Southern accent and because he and his brother, Cody, only have a few articles of clothing. Rufus and Cody switch off wearing a single pair of jeans, so Larry Dunn makes fun of them by asking—in front of everyone—if they also share underwear. Everyone cracks up. Although he doesn't mean to, even Kenny lets out a laugh. As soon as he does, Rufus pierces him with a scathing look. For the next few days, Rufus refuses to talk to him. When Kenny goes to Rufus's house, Rufus says he doesn't want to play dinosaurs. He thought Kenny was his friend and that he was different than everyone else, but now he's not so sure.

In the coming days, Kenny is really sad because he lost his friend. Other than Byron and Joey, Rufus and Cody were the only people in school whom Kenny didn't feel like he had to **look at sideways**. His mother senses that something is wrong, so he eventually explains what happened. She tells him to give Rufus some space. The next day, Wilona talks to Rufus herself. That evening, Rufus appears at Kenny's front door. Kenny greets him and apologizes, insisting that he really is different than the other people at school. Rufus admits that he knows Kenny isn't like everyone else, and then they rush inside to play with the dinosaur toys.

*Rufus's kindness stands in stark contrast to LJ Jones's untrustworthy, mean-spirited ways. In the past, Kenny hasn't been able to simply enjoy hanging out with a friend, instead constantly having to worry about how that friend might steal his toys. Similarly, Kenny is used to being around Byron, who often picks on him. Spending time with Rufus is therefore quite refreshing, since Kenny has finally found someone who seems to treat others with the same kindness and compassion that he himself practices.*



*Rufus feels betrayed by Kenny. They've developed a close friendship that is seemingly based on a sense of mutual appreciation and kindness. By laughing at Larry's joke, then, Kenny violates his friend's trust, thus throwing their bond into question. Worse, laughing at Rufus and Cody's limited clothing supply is cruel in a classist way, making it seem to Rufus like Kenny thinks he's somehow better than him simply because his family has enough money to clothe all of their children without any of the siblings needing to share.*



*Kenny is devastated when Rufus stops playing with him, since Rufus and Cody are the only people with whom Kenny feels truly comfortable. With everyone else, he feels like he has to look at them sideways, using the technique Byron taught him of hiding his lazy eye. With Rufus and Cody, though, Kenny feels like he can just be himself, so the idea of no longer having them as friends is deeply upsetting. Thankfully for him, though, Wilona recognizes just how important Rufus is to Kenny, so she helps them patch things up, thus giving Kenny the understanding and support that a dedicated parent can provide. Rufus quickly accepts Kenny's apology, again showing his compassionate nature.*



## CHAPTER 4

Because she grew up in the South, Wilona isn't used to the cold. She therefore makes her kids dress in very warm clothes each winter—so warm, in fact, that Joey can't even get out of her snowsuit without help. Each day at school, then, Kenny takes off his own coat and finds Joey to help her peel off the many layers.

Joey is always sweating and hot when she finally gets free of her snow clothes, so she asks her mother if she can wear fewer layers. Wilona refuses, insisting that people can die from the cold. If that's the case, though, Joey notes that there would be frozen people in the streets, but Wilona disregards such an outrageous idea. But while waiting for the bus, Byron tricks Joey and Kenny by claiming that people really *do* freeze in the streets. The only reason Joey and Kenny have never seen frozen bodies is because garbage trucks come around and collect them before anyone can see. Suddenly terrified of garbage trucks, Joey starts crying, but Byron doesn't care—he just tells Kenny to give his “regards” to Clark Elementary and leaves them there in the cold.

Because Wilona is so afraid of the cold, she gives each of her children real **leather gloves**. Nobody else at school has such nice gloves—they have to run around with their sleeves pulled over their hands. But Kenny and his siblings each get two pairs of leather gloves. Knowing he still has another pair, Kenny gives his first pair to Rufus, who doesn't have anything to wear on his hands. He tells his mother that he lost the first pair, but then he *actually* loses the second pair, so he and Rufus have to share, each of them only wearing one glove whenever they have snowball fights.

One snowy day, Larry Dunn encounters Rufus and Kenny and starts bullying them. He rubs their faces in the snow and torments them for a while before eventually moving on, though not before Kenny notices that he's wearing leather gloves that look quite similar to the pair he originally “lost.” The only difference is that they're black instead of brown. After Larry leaves, Rufus points out that Larry must have stolen the gloves, since all of the snow that Larry touched is now black. It becomes clear that Larry stole the gloves and then changed their color by covering them in black shoeshine, which is now rubbing off in the snow.

*The fact that Kenny takes time out of his day to help his little sister get out of her snow clothes is endearing. It demonstrates just how much he thinks about other people and is willing to show kindness to his little sister. Although some children might be embarrassed by the idea of helping their little sister take off her coat, Kenny doesn't mind because he would rather show Joey kindness than think about his own reputation.*



*It becomes clear in this scene that Byron doesn't just pick on Kenny—he also likes to trick Joey. However, his story about garbage trucks collecting frozen people isn't all that harmful. It scares Joey, but it also encourages her to dress warmly. In a way, then, Byron uses his trickery to help his mother, since his scary story makes it less likely that his little sister will take off her coat in the freezing cold. He therefore shows a subtle kind of brotherly love and support, even if it's disguised as a mischievous trick.*



*Kenny recognizes that Rufus's family doesn't have enough money to give him warm gloves, so he willingly shares his own with his friend. In doing so, he demonstrates his desire to help people whenever he can, though his plan ultimately backfires when he loses his second pair of gloves. But instead of asking Rufus for his gloves back, he agrees to share them with his friend, once again revealing just how devoted he is to treating others with kindness.*



*Even though Kenny is Byron's little brother, he still has to deal with bullies like Larry Dunn. Worse, he and Rufus discover that Larry is the one who stole the original pair of gloves, which left them with no choice but to share a single pair with each other. In this moment, then, it doesn't seem like Kenny's relation to Byron has protected him from Larry at all.*



Kenny and Rufus tell Byron that Larry bullied them and stole Kenny's **gloves**. After finding Larry, Byron slaps him multiple times and rips the gloves off his hands. He pushes him into a nearby chain-link fence over and over again. Larry has no good way of defending himself, since he's standing on a patch of ice. He therefore keeps crashing into the fence, but he doesn't cry.

Kenny marvels at how tough Larry is, especially when Larry lifts his hands over his head, inadvertently revealing that he's only wearing a thin, ripped windbreaker and a flimsy t-shirt. When he falls down, everyone can see holes in the bottom of his shoes. The gathering crowd laughs at him, but he maintains his composure. Still, Byron keeps thrashing him, but Kenny doesn't stay to watch—he wishes he never even told Byron what happened. He would rather have gone with just one **glove** for the rest of the year than watch his brother treat Larry so cruelly.

*Larry soon learns that what goes around comes around—in other words, he's forced to realize that he can't pick on Kenny without expecting to hear from Byron. There's a hierarchy at play in the schoolyard, and Byron is at the very top. The question is, though, whether or not bullying Larry will really teach him to stop bullying others himself—after all, two wrongs don't make a right, so it's unlikely that Byron's fierce response will do anything but embitter Larry.*



*Kenny told Byron about what Larry did as a way of getting his gloves back and taking revenge—but revenge doesn't feel very good. Instead of feeling vindicated and satisfied, Kenny just feels bad for Larry, especially when he sees Larry's flimsy winter clothing. The implication is that Larry's family—like Rufus's family—doesn't have enough money to buy him warm winter clothes. Suddenly, the fact that Larry stole Kenny's gloves seems forgivable, which is why it's so hard for Kenny to watch Byron beat him up.*



## CHAPTER 5

When Wilona was young, her house caught on fire. For the next two years, her clothes always smelled like smoke. Because she remembers this experience so well, she's very strict whenever she catches Byron playing with matches. But he never listens to her. Finally, she tells him that if she finds him playing with fire one more time, she's going to burn him to teach him a lesson. Still, Kenny comes across Byron playing with matches one day in the bathroom. He's pretending to direct a movie scene in which Nazi fighter pilots (played by small pieces of paper) are hit by Captain Byron Watson's "flamethrower of death." This involves lighting pieces of paper on fire and dropping them into the toilet.

Wilona smells smoke and storms into the bathroom. She grabs Byron and pulls him by his neck to the living room. Kenny and Joey follow them, and Joey starts crying because she always wants to protect Byron. She pleads with her mother to let him off the hook, insisting that he has surely learned his lesson. But Wilona doesn't listen, instead getting some matches, a paper towel, some Vaseline, and a band-aid. It becomes clear that she intends to burn him and then patch him up herself. Before she can do anything, though, Joey places herself between Wilona and Byron.

*No matter what Wilona says, Byron doesn't listen to her. His disobedience is, it seems, a kind of rebellion that many adolescents go through. For Kenny, though, watching Byron defy orders time and again feels like an incredibly big deal, since Kenny himself follows all of his parents' rules and knows exactly when Byron steps out of line. He thus observes his brother's misbehavior with apprehension, just waiting to see what his mother will do when she finds out that he has stepped out of line once again.*



*Joey is a fiercely loyal younger sister. She knows that Byron blatantly broke their mother's rules by playing with fire, but she still doesn't want to see her older brother get punished or hurt. She therefore demonstrates her own kindness and compassion, showing empathy for Byron that even Kenny can't quite muster up.*



Wilona reasons with her daughter, explaining that she doesn't want to hurt Byron. But she has to burn him, she says—otherwise, Byron will never learn his lesson and will keep playing with fire, thus putting the entire household in jeopardy. Plus, Wilona swore to God that she would burn Byron if he ever played with fire again. If she didn't do it, then, she'd be breaking her word to God. Since Joey is very religious and attends Sunday School multiple times every week, she relents and steps aside. But just when the flame of Wilona's match is about to touch Byron's finger, Joey rushes over and blows it out. This happens four more times. Eventually, Wilona gives up.

*Again, Joey demonstrates her sisterly loyalty to Byron. Although she understands that Wilona has to punish Byron for misbehaving, she can't let her mother hurt her brother—a good indication of Joey's capacity for kindness and compassion. She simply can't stand the idea of Byron suffering any pain, even if she agrees with her mother that he deserves it.*



## CHAPTER 6

One evening, Wilona asks Byron to run to the grocery store to pick up a few things. When he asks for money, she instructs him to tell the grocer that he wants to “sign” for the food, explaining that they've already made an arrangement to pay for the groceries later on. Byron is distraught because he thinks his mother is saying that the family is on welfare—something he thinks is extremely shameful. He says he won't eat any welfare food, which enrages his mother. She tells him that he has eaten welfare food in the past and that he's not too good for it. Unconvinced, Byron goes to the grocery store with Kenny.

*Byron's negative reaction to the idea of his family using government assistance to feed itself suggests that he thinks wealth says something important about people. In other words, he thinks that people who don't have a lot of money are inferior to people who do—a classist, elitist idea that Wilona challenges by informing him that he has eaten welfare food in the past without even knowing it. Her comment urges her son to see beyond his shallow, superficial ideas about money.*



Byron makes Kenny sign for the food at the store, so Kenny asks the grocer to put his name on the “welfare list.” The grocer laughs and says that the list isn't a “welfare list,” it just indicates that the Watsons are going to pay once a week instead of every time they go to the store. Byron is overjoyed when he learns that the family isn't on welfare. He even puts his arm around Kenny on the walk back home. But Kenny ruins his mood by asking which of their family meals their mother was talking about when she said they'd had welfare food before. Byron takes his arm away and talks disparagingly about big blocks of cheese and large containers of powdered milk that their father sometimes brings home.

*Despite Wilona's attempt to show Byron that it's ridiculous to think that people on welfare are somehow inferior to rich people, Byron clearly still resents the idea that his family has used governmental assistance to feed itself in the past. Kenny, on the other hand, doesn't seem that perturbed, which isn't that surprising—after all, he frequently lends Rufus things to help him get by, and he does so without judging Rufus for not having money. In turn, it becomes clear that Kenny sees no shame in the idea of people accepting assistance when they need it.*



A week later, Kenny finds Byron behind the grocery store. He's gorging himself on Swedish creme cookies and an apple. He offers Kenny a cookie, which Kenny finds suspicious until he realizes that Byron has already eaten a bag and a half of Swedish cremes. The apple is from an overhanging tree. Byron grabs a Swedish creme, sees a bird sitting on a nearby telephone wire, and flings the cookie at it. He misses. But he keeps trying. Eventually, one of the cookies strikes the bird and sends it to the ground. Byron runs to it while Kenny yells about how impressive it is to actually hit a bird, but then Byron looks up with a terrible expression on his face and vomits in the snow.

*Having discovered that he can tell the grocer that his family will pay for food later in the week, Byron has clearly taken advantage of the system by buying huge bags of cookies—purchases his parents would never allow if they knew about them. What's ironic, of course, is that he was so upset by the idea of his family struggling financially, but now he takes advantage of a system that was clearly devised to relieve some of their financial burden. After all, getting an advance from the grocery store is a sign that Wilona and Daniel need a little financial help, but Byron has no problem exploiting this arrangement to his own benefit—despite the fact that it will only push his family that much closer to actually needing welfare.*



Kenny puts his hand on Byron's shoulder in sympathy, but Byron wheels around and tells him to go away. He punches Kenny and claims that he's only sick because he ate too many apples. Kenny runs away as his brother pelts him with apples, and all the while he thinks about how mean and terrible Byron can be sometimes. Later that day, though, he goes back to look at the dead bird, but it's gone. There's a small grave where it landed, and Kenny realizes that Byron gave the bird a funeral. He feels confused, wishing he were as smart as everyone thinks he is—maybe then he'd be able to figure out what's going on with his brother.

*Byron clearly feels bad about killing the bird, but he doesn't want to show his emotional vulnerability to his little brother. Consequently, he acts mean so that Kenny will go away—a confusing turn of events that makes it hard for Kenny to understand what, exactly, is happening inside his brother's head. Suffice it to say, what's happening is that Byron wants to look like a cool, apathetic teenager when, in reality, he's a caring and sensitive soul deep down.*



## CHAPTER 7

Kenny is in the kitchen with his mother one night when Byron walks in wearing a hat. When he sees his mother, he tries to back out undetected, but it's too late—she has already seen him. She tells him to take off his hat. She's incensed to discover that he has gotten a perm. He's been wanting to for a long time, but he has known his parents would never let him. But now he has done it anyway. Wilona says Byron's father is going to be enraged. Before his father comes home, though, Wilona wants to know something: was it worth it? Does Byron *really* think he looks good with straight hair? As she starts playing with her son's hair, she lets out a little laugh and says he looks like a clown.

*Byron's decision to get his hair straightened has some significant implications. As a Black person, his hair is naturally curly, but it was popular in the early 1960s for Black men to get what was known as a "conk"—a hairstyle that relaxed curls through the use of a chemical. Once the hair was straight, many barbers would style it to look like a white person's hairstyle, with a part on one side and the hair combed neatly to the other. It is most likely because the hairstyle emulated white styles that Wilona has a problem with Byron's new look, as it suggests that he covets white style over natural Black hair.*



When Daniel finally comes home, he and Wilona call Byron downstairs. Kenny keeps taunting him, so Byron punches him in the stomach as they descend the stairs. In the end, Daniel shaves Byron's hair and then laughs about how big his ears look. He and Wilona also send the children off so that they can have an adult conversation. When the children return, Daniel and Wilona are on the phone with Grandma Sands—Wilona's mother in Alabama. The kids think that's the end of the entire ordeal until a week later, when Daniel mysteriously outfits the Brown Bomber with a portable turntable.

*Even as Wilona and Daniel discipline Byron, they never lose sight of their humor. They're unhappy with Byron for straightening his hair, but Daniel doesn't let this overshadow his ability to playfully laugh at his son after shaving his head, suggesting that, although Daniel and Wilona are serious about disciplining Byron, they're still kind and warmhearted parents.*



## CHAPTER 8

After speaking to Grandma Sands on the phone, Daniel and Wilona start acting differently. Wilona spends time making budgetary calculations in a notebook while Daniel goes around town buying new things for the car. One weekend morning, Kenny gets up early and finds his dad shaving in the bathroom. When he was younger, Kenny used to let his dad lather his face in shaving cream so that he could pretend to shave alongside Daniel. His father offers to do that, but Kenny feels too old for that now—besides, he has a *real* mustache coming in, though Daniel has to look really closely to see it.

*At this point, it's unclear what Daniel and Wilona are planning, though it's obvious that they're planning something. For the time being, though, Kenny just focuses on his daily life, which involves bonding with his father. The fact that he claims to have a mustache at 10 years old is humorous and endearing, suggesting that Kenny wants to be seen as an adult even though he's still very much a young boy.*



After shaving, Daniel tells Kenny he'll be back soon and leaves the house without telling anyone where he's going. When he returns, he summons everyone outside to see the final improvement he has made to the Brown Bomber. Everyone is excited—even Byron. There's a small towel over something in the middle of the dashboard. After letting the suspense build, Daniel finally lets Kenny take the towel off: it's a record player. All of the kids are thrilled and can't believe that their car has something as cool as a "drive-around record player." But Wilona just shoots Daniel a look and goes inside, mumbling as she goes about money.

Daniel and the kids spend the day sitting in the Brown Bomber listening to their favorite records. Even Wilona eventually comes outside to hear the new system. After a while, they turn down the music and share some important news with the children: the family will be driving down to Birmingham, Alabama, where Byron will live for the summer with Grandma Sands. If he behaves, he can come back to Flint for the school year. If not, though, he will stay in Alabama for the whole year—what happens is really up to him and how he decides to behave.

Byron is beside himself, but his mother reminds him of all the ways he has misbehaved in the last year. He has skipped school, lit fires, stolen money from her purse, run up a huge bill at the grocery store, and has gotten in trouble in many other ways. No matter what his parents tell him, he never listens. Wilona also says that Byron will like Birmingham, adding that her old neighborhood is safe, despite all of the unrest they've been hearing about in Birmingham on the news. Enraged, Byron gets out of the car, slams the door, and curses. Daniel makes a move to go after him, but Wilona stops him, saying that Byron might as well get such behavior out of his system before he's under the care of the strict Grandma Sands.

*In 1963, it was a big deal to have a record player in a car—it wasn't like contemporary times, when people can easily listen to seemingly any song they want wherever they go. The mere fact that Daniel buys a portable turntable is interesting from a financial perspective, since it has already been made clear that the Watsons have enough money to get by but certainly aren't wealthy. After all, Wilona even told Byron that the family sometimes relies on government assistance in order to feed itself. With this in mind, it's apparent that Daniel has made a lavish purchase, which upsets Wilona because it will most likely strain the family's finances.*



*By forcing Byron to live in Birmingham, Alabama, Daniel and Wilona show their son that his misbehavior has consequences. They further emphasize the importance of taking accountability by telling him that only he can determine whether or not he's allowed to come back to Flint at the end of the summer. If he behaves, he can come home; if not, he'll have to stay. His fate is therefore up to him, giving him no choice but to take responsibility for the way he conducts his life.*



*Again, the adults in Byron and Kenny's life mention tensions surrounding racial inequality and segregation—issues that the young boys haven't had to face in their daily lives (at least not in immediately observable ways). Birmingham, however, was at the center of the civil rights movement in 1963, so it's unlikely that the children will be able to ignore what's going on any longer. For the time being, though, Byron is more focused on the fact that his parents have decided to punish him by sending him away, which he finds deeply unfair.*



## CHAPTER 9

The next morning, Kenny finds his father listening to the Ultra-Glide in the Brown Bomber. He goes out and sits with him and, after a moment, asks why Byron has to go to Alabama. Daniel tries to explain that Byron needs to learn some important lessons that he isn't learning in Flint—in fact, he's only learning things that the Watsons *don't* want him to learn. Speaking to Kenny like an adult, Daniel references all of the unrest taking place in the South. He says that sometimes life is going to be complicated and tumultuous for Black children like Byron and Kenny. What Byron needs to see, he claims, is that “the world doesn't have a lot of jokes waiting for him,” so he has to be “ready.”

Grandma Sands claims that everything is safe and peaceful in her neighborhood, but Daniel and Wilona think living in the South will help Byron see what “kind of place the world can be.” Listening to his father, Kenny admits that sometimes being an adult sounds scary—he doesn't understand how people like his parents know how to navigate the world. In response, Daniel says that it really *is* scary at first to be an adult. After a while, though, things start to feel more comfortable and natural. What's more, by the time Kenny is grown up, he will—his father hopes—have had plenty of time to practice being an adult.

To Kenny's surprise, Byron doesn't seem concerned in the days leading up to the family's departure. He doesn't even seem nervous or upset on the night before they leave—until, that is, his parents come into the bedroom and inform him that he'll be sleeping with them for the night. He's angry, but they don't care. Joey was the one to tip them off that Byron wanted to run away before the trip, since she didn't want Byron to get in even *more* trouble. But on his way to his parents' bedroom, Byron gives Kenny a nasty look, assuming that *he* was the one to warn their parents.

*Once again, Kenny's parents reference the struggle for racial equality and desegregation taking place in the South in the early 1960s. Although the plan to send Byron to live with Grandma Sands is mainly based on the fact that Grandma Sands is a strict disciplinarian, Daniel seems to think that witnessing the civil rights movement in Birmingham might help Byron gain a sense of maturity. Daniel knows that, unfortunately, white society is stacked against young Black boys like Kenny and Byron, which is what he means when he says that the world “doesn't have a lot of jokes waiting” for Byron. The sooner Byron recognizes how unjust and cruel the world can be, the sooner he'll see that it's important to set himself up for success instead of misbehaving—this, at least, is what Daniel seems to believe.*



*At its core, The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963 is a coming-of-age novel. Kenny's conversation with his father in this scene provides insight into what it feels like for a 10-year-old boy to make sense of complex issues surrounding racism and growing up in a world that is often hostile and cruel. Kenny listens to his father's words of wisdom, but he doesn't know how he'll ever possess the same knowledge that his father seems to have. Daniel, however, assures him that this kind of responsibility and levelheadedness comes with practice, which is why it's important for Byron (and, eventually, Kenny) to learn how to be a mature young man.*



*Joey shows loyalty to Byron in a strange way—namely, by tattling on him. But she doesn't tell on him in order to get him in trouble. Rather, she goes behind his back to protect him from getting in even more trouble. In a way, then, Joey is more responsible and wise than her older brother, suggesting that, though they often think they have everything figured out, adolescent boys could sometimes use the advice of little girls like Joey.*



In the car the next day, Wilona reads out the trip itinerary from a notebook in which she has everything all planned out. The notebook is labeled “The Watsons Go To Birmingham—1963.” She has every stop charted out and meticulously planned. When Kenny asks why they can’t just drive until Daniel gets tired, his father puts on a fake accent and jokes about how Black people can’t just pull up to any town in the South and expect to find a hotel room or a restaurant that will serve them. Everyone laughs, but Byron just smiles. Kenny knows that Byron plans to not say a word for the entire trip. But a couple hours into the trip, Byron breaks his silence to ask when he gets to play a record on the Ultra-Glide.

## CHAPTER 10

In Ohio, the family pulls over at a rest stop to use the bathroom. But Kenny and Byron are horrified to find that the toilets are really just wooden boxes with holes cut into them. They smell foul, so both Kenny and Byron decide to do their business in the woods. When they get back to car, their parents say that Byron better get used to this kind of outhouse, since it’s exactly what Grandma Sands has!

Eventually, everyone but Daniel falls asleep. Kenny wakes up every once in a while to find Joey’s head in his lap. He also hears his father tell his mother that, despite the original plan, he’s only going to stop in Cincinnati to fuel up and have a stretch. She’s skeptical, but he assures her that he has plenty of energy and wants to keep going for a little bit. Wilona agrees, not knowing what Kenny himself knows, which is that Daniel plans to do the entire drive—all the way from Michigan to Alabama—in one shot. Kenny heard his father telling his neighbor that he was going to try to do the drive in one go, since he heard of people driving all the way from Michigan to Texas, which is much farther.

Kenny wakes up in Tennessee. Because the family is in the Appalachian Mountains, the air is thinner and makes him feel strange. Everything is dark at the rest stop where they pull over, and all of the children—including Byron—are scared by how menacing the surrounding mountains look. When Kenny and Byron go into the woods to pee, Byron scares both Kenny and himself by talking about white “rednecks” who have never seen Black people before and who, as a result, would hang a Black boy like Kenny if they found him in the woods right now. The conversation sends both brothers running back to the safety of the car. When they’re back on the road, Daniel puts his hands out the window and says it feels like he’s running his hands through God’s beard.

*Although Daniel is joking around when he puts on a Southern accent, what he says is actually true: Black families traveling in the South in the early 1960s really did have to be extra careful, since it was unfortunately common for Black people to suddenly find themselves in hostile, racist environments. Once again, then, Kenny’s parents reference the ways in which racism impacts Black people, even if Kenny and his siblings haven’t experienced the overt effects of such bigotry.*



*As the family gets farther from home, Kenny and his siblings begin to experience new things—like, of course, what it’s like to search for a bathroom and find, instead, an outhouse. Such experiences are part of the process of growing up, as all children encounter new things that can feel off-putting and that challenge their sense of what’s considered “normal.”*



*Daniel’s playful, mischievous side comes out when he secretly decides to do the trip in a single run from Michigan to Alabama. Kenny knows that his mother would probably disapprove of doing so much driving all at once, but he doesn’t say anything. He therefore silently helps his father get what he wants, becoming something of a co-conspirator.*



*As the family drives south, Byron seems to have a growing awareness of the grim reality of bigotry and racist violence. Although he and Kenny haven’t thought much about these things in Flint, they are aware that this kind of hatred exists in the world, and though Byron only talks about scary racists as a way of scaring Kenny, it’s clear that the matter is truly on his mind—after all, he even scares himself, indicating that he’s genuinely worried about the possibility of encountering racist violence in the South.*





## CHAPTER 11

Kenny wakes up periodically throughout the night. Finding himself in the front seat, he sees that everyone except his father is fast asleep. Daniel, for his part, is staring out at the road with a strange smile on his face while the record player repeats the same line over and over again. When Kenny points out that the record is skipping, Daniel says that he thinks there's something wrong with the Ultra-Glide, though he asks Kenny not to mention anything about it to his mother. Finally, when it's starting to get light out again, everyone else wakes up. Wilona criticizes Daniel for disregarding the road trip plans, but she can't argue with the fact that they saved a lot of money by not having to sleep in motels.

When they finally arrive at Grandma Sands's house in Birmingham, Kenny is surprised that the surrounding area doesn't look so different from Flint. It isn't full of "log cabins"—there are big houses and large trees everywhere. Most surprising of all, though, is Grandma Sands. She looks very old and is very small. Because he has heard how strict she is, Kenny had expected her to be as big (or bigger) than his father, but now he worries that Byron will run her into the ground.

When Byron greets Grandma Sands, she makes a joke about his buzzcut and then says they're going to get along just fine, to which Byron says, "Yes, ma'am." In fact, he acts very respectfully toward her every time she addresses him. When she asks if he's good at following directions (because she wants to send him to the store), Kenny pipes up and says that Byron can indeed follow instructions because he's "not as dumb as he looks." Grandma Sands glares at Kenny, who instantly regrets his joke. Turning to Wilona, she says that maybe Kenny should stay in Birmingham, too.

As Grandma Sands talks to the Watsons, she mentions someone named Mr. Robert, who seems to live with her. Wilona has never heard of Mr. Robert, so she pulls her mother aside and asks who he is, but Grandma Sands just says she'll meet Mr. Robert soon. After all, Mr. Robert is still asleep—a comment that seems to upset Wilona. Meanwhile, Kenny is disappointed that Byron has already surrendered to Grandma Sands. He thought they were going to have an epic battle, but it's obvious Byron won't be giving his grandmother a hard time. Sensing his brother's disappointment, Byron claims that Grandma Sands is too old to argue with, since he doesn't want her death on his hands. But Kenny thinks his brother is lying: in reality, Byron is just afraid of Grandma Sands.

*When Daniel asks Kenny not to tell his mother that the portable record player is malfunctioning, it becomes clear that there's still some tension in their marriage surrounding this lavish purchase. Although the rest of the family was overjoyed when Daniel brought home the drive-around turntable, Wilona was upset because it cost a lot of money—and the family doesn't have much money to spare. The fact that Daniel doesn't want Wilona to know that the turntable isn't working indicates that she's still upset that he spent the money on such an expensive item.*



*Kenny learns in this moment that a person doesn't have to look intimidating to be somebody other people fear. At the same time, though, he knows that Byron is quite capable of defying authority, so he worries that he'll overwork Grandma Sands. What he doesn't take into account, though, is that being a strict disciplinarian has nothing to do with a person's size or age, meaning that Grandma Sands will most likely have no trouble keeping Byron in line.*



*Byron's immediate obedience is surprising, since his general attitude about living in Birmingham has been quite negative. As soon as he sees Grandma Sands, though, it's as if something in him changes. It's not clear what, exactly, prompts this change, other than the possibility that he doesn't want to disrespect such an elderly person. Kenny, on the other hand, isn't quite as careful about how he behaves in front of Grandma Sands—something he regrets, realizing that she really is as strict and scary as everyone made her out to be.*



*When Wilona responds negatively to the idea of Mr. Robert living with Grandma Sands, the implication is that she has just discovered that her mother has taken a new lover—something that distresses her. Even though she's a full-grown adult, then, she responds to this new development much like a child might respond, finding it disconcerting to think of her mother dating someone other than her father (who is dead). On another note, Byron's unwillingness to misbehave in front of Grandma Sands suggests that he really is capable of respecting authority, despite his years of misbehavior in Flint. He has, it seems, come to terms with the fact that misbehaving has negative consequences.*



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## CHAPTER 12

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The next day, Kenny wakes up after a long, sweaty night in the Alabama heat. He goes outside to find his father and Byron standing in the yard with Mr. Robert and his dog. Mr. Robert tells them stories about hunting raccoons with his dog, claiming that the dog was one of the best raccoon hunters around. Byron is impressed by Mr. Robert's hunting stories, showing a sense of enthusiasm he never shows at home.

Kenny goes inside and finds his mother, Grandma Sands, and Joey in the kitchen. Wilona asks her mother questions about old neighbors and acquaintances. They also talk about the difficulties many Black community members have been having with certain white people, but then the conversation shifts to Mr. Robert. Wilona tries to figure out what kind of relationship Mr. Robert and Grandma Sands have, wondering if her own father knew Mr. Robert. But Grandma Sands implies that Wilona should mind her own business—it has been a long time since Wilona's father died, and Grandma Sands is entitled to do what she wants. Her tone surprises Kenny, who realizes that his grandmother is subtly scolding his mother as if she's just a little girl.

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## CHAPTER 13

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Kenny, Byron, and Joey decide to go swimming. As they leave, Grandma Sands warns them not to go to Collier's Landing, where a little boy got caught in a whirlpool a few years ago and died. When they come to a fork in the path, they see a sign for Collier's Landing. Kenny immediately says they should go, but Joey refuses, reminding him what their grandmother said—but she can't remember the word "whirlpool," so Byron jumps in and says that Grandma Sands was talking about the Wool Pooh, whom he claims is Winnie the Pooh's "evil twin brother." According to Byron, the Wool Pooh hides in the water and then pulls kids down under when they get too close, which is why they shouldn't go that way.

Byron takes Joey's hand and starts in the other direction, but Kenny decides to prove that he's not afraid of the Wool Pooh. He also doesn't like how much his brother has changed. Byron always breaks the rules, but now he's suddenly starting to follow them, so Kenny decides to go to Collier's Landing on his own. Byron lets him go but tells him to stay out of the water.

*It's obvious that a change has overtaken Byron since arriving in Birmingham. At the beginning of the novel, he was sullen and withdrawn, but now he doesn't mind showing enthusiasm and interest in the stories Mr. Robert tells him. Again, it's not explicitly clear why he has changed, but it seems likely that the mere experience of traveling to Birmingham is what's responsible for this sudden shift in his attitude, since the trip has shown him that his actions have consequences, thus encouraging him to change his behavior.*



*What Kenny realizes in this scene is that even adults sometimes have trouble acting mature. Wilona is unsettled by the idea of her mother dating somebody new, so she acts as if she's still a child who can't accept big changes. Witnessing his mother act like this, Kenny sees that his father was right when he said that sometimes adults don't necessarily know what they're doing. Everyone is just feeling their way through life, meaning that sometimes they'll find it difficult to handle things maturely—even when they're full-grown adults.*



*Kenny wants to disobey his grandmother's orders by going to Collier's Landing, but both Joey and Byron refuse. Byron, for his part, tries to trick his younger siblings into not wanting to visit Collier's Landing, perhaps thinking that scaring them off will make it easier to dissuade Kenny from checking out the whirlpool. What's interesting, then, is that Byron uses his tendency to play tricks on his siblings to make sure they stay out of trouble—yet another sign that he has become more mature since arriving in Birmingham.*



*Kenny tries to make up for the fact that Byron is no longer misbehaving. In a way, he sees his brother's sudden change of heart as a distressing thing, as if he no longer understands who his brother is if Byron isn't constantly getting into trouble. The fact that Kenny acts out thus suggests that it can be difficult to watch an older sibling change.*



Kenny doesn't know what to think about the Wool Pooh. He suspects it's nonsense, but he's unsure. He eventually comes across another sign warning people not to go to Collier's Landing. The sign says that six people have died there. But Kenny pushes on. When he gets there, he sees nothing particularly sinister—he even peers into the water to see if the Wool Pooh is hiding beneath. And then he has a realization: the warning signs are only there to keep people away because this is the best swimming spot around.

Kenny thinks about how getting into trouble happens somewhat gradually. There are always several steps before you're *really* in trouble. That's exactly what happens as he eases into the water. At first, he feels fine. Soon, though, he sees a big drop-off, where the water gets much deeper. He also sees a turtle, which he lunges for. The turtle swims away, and then Kenny realizes that he can't touch the ground anymore. The more he struggles, the harder it is for him to get back to shore. He gets swept up in a whirlpool and eventually can't even keep his head above the water.

Kenny gets really scared and tries to swim back to land, but then he feels as if the Wool Pooh comes swimming up from the depths and grabs him by the leg. The Wool Pooh doesn't look like Winnie the Pooh. Instead, he has large, gray, stony fingers that refuse to let go of Kenny, pulling him under. As he thrashes beneath the surface, Kenny thinks he sees another person in the water: it's a little girl, maybe an **angel**. When he looks closer, he realizes that it's Joey, except she has a halo and wings. She tells him to swim up to the surface again, but he can't. And then, all of a sudden, Byron is there, fighting the Wool Pooh and pulling Kenny out of the water.

On land again, Kenny throws up water while Byron holds him upside down. Byron won't stop repeating Kenny's name. He stops holding Kenny upside down and then hugs him tightly, pressing his mouth against the top of his brother's head and crying hard.

*Kenny's supposed realization is incorrect: the warning signs aren't there because locals want to keep the best swimming spot a secret—they're there because there's a dangerous whirlpool! The problem, though, is that powerful undercurrents aren't always visible from the surface. Just because the water looks calm doesn't mean it's safe for swimming, but Kenny's a little boy who doesn't have much experience, so he doesn't know any better.*



*Kenny's gradual process of getting swept up in the whirlpool is a good metaphor for what it's like to get into trouble. The novel suggests that trouble accumulates slowly—people start by making a small mistake that seems excusable, so they make another, then another, until they've gone too far and realize that they've been completely foolish. Kenny's first mistake is to go to Collier's Landing without Byron and Joey. His second mistake is to step into the water. His third mistake is to lunge for the turtle—and then it's too late: he's in serious danger.*



*As Kenny gets pummeled by the whirlpool, he thinks he's struggling with the Wool Pooh, suggesting that he's still young enough to believe the nonsense stories that Byron tells him. When he sees an image of Joey outfitted like an angel, the novel takes on a religious tone. However, *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* isn't necessarily a religious novel. Rather, Joey's appearance as an angel is more symbolic than anything, indicating that Kenny sees his family members and loved ones as saviors of sorts—people who can help guide him out of trouble. To that end, Byron appears in real life and does exactly that, dragging Kenny away from danger.*



*Byron openly shows his affection for Kenny after saving him from the whirlpool. His love for Kenny is intense, making it clear that he cares very deeply about his little brother and would be devastated to lose him.*



## CHAPTER 14

On Sunday morning in Birmingham, Kenny hears Joey getting ready for church. She always goes to Sunday School, but he doesn't usually join her. As she's on her way out, he has the urge to say something to her, so he tells her that she looks pretty. Shortly after she leaves, there's an extremely loud sound, and everything around Kenny shudders. Everyone in the neighborhood rushes outside to see what happened. Wilona, Daniel, and Byron all ask each other what made the sound, and then somebody stops by and tells them that a bomb went off at the church where Joey went to Sunday School.

Kenny is dumbfounded at first, but then he goes into the street and makes his way to the church. He feels as if his ears have stopped working, but he can still see everything around him. He sees Byron and his parents huddled together with a crowd outside the ruined church. Nobody stops Kenny from walking up to the church and standing where the door used to be. He sees a man covered in blood and carrying a little girl's body out into the open. The girl is wearing a blue dress. Next, Kenny observes the rubble created by the bomb. Among pieces of broken concrete, he finds a shiny shoe that he tries to pick up—but it won't budge. Suddenly, he thinks the Wool Pooh is holding onto it with big gray fingers.

Terrified, Kenny yanks the shoe free and leaves the church. Outside, he walks by the girl in the blue dress, who has been lain out on the grass next to another girl in a red dress. Since Joey's dress was white that day, Kenny realizes that if she were lying next to them, their dresses would make up the colors of the American flag: red, white, and blue. Kenny walks all the way back to Grandma Sands's house, passing people with looks of dismay on their faces.

*Given that the novel is set in Birmingham in 1963, it's reasonable to assume that this bombing is based on the real-life bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church, which took place on September 15, 1963. The church was bombed by members of the Ku Klux Klan, an extremist hate group known for its racist violence. As is the case in this scene, the bombing took place during Sunday School, when the church was full of children. Four young Black girls died that day, and many others were injured. The novel dramatizes this event, giving readers a window into how devastating and heart-wrenching it must have been for families who sent their children to church that day.*



*Kenny's mind once again latches onto the idea of the Wool Pooh. For him, the Wool Pooh is the epitome of evil, so it makes sense that he thinks he sees the creature lurking in the rubble. The implication is that only someone as cruel and wicked as the Wool Pooh would bomb a church during Sunday School—and, in a way, Kenny's right about this: such a racist act of violence really is monstrous.*



*Kenny's thought about the American flag symbolically hints at some deeper ideas about the racist violence upon which the country was built. If Joey were lying injured or dead next to these two Black girls, the image would represent the fact that the United States was shaped by slavery—many Black lives, in other words, were cruelly sacrificed just so that rich white people could make more money and live prosperously. This twisted kind of prosperity, it seems, is what the racists who bombed the church want to preserve.*



Back at the house, Kenny examines the shoe, which he recognizes as Joey's. There's a rip in the heel that Kenny thinks developed when he was wrestling it out of the Wool Pooh's grasp. He thinks about Joey, wishing he'd told her that she helped Byron save him that day in the water, since her image appeared in the form of an **angel**. But then he hears her voice: she's asking him what he's doing. He doesn't respond, so she asks where everyone else has gone. He refuses to look at her, thinking that she's dead. Instead, he thanks her for saving his life, but she has no idea what he's talking about. Still, he tells her that he loves her—at which point she throws the shoe at him, and he looks up.

Joey stands in front of Kenny looking exactly like she did when she left for church that morning. Kenny asks if she went to Sunday School. She says that she did but that it was too hot in there, so she went to stand on the porch. While she was standing on the porch, she saw Kenny come down the street. He was laughing and wouldn't stop to let her catch up, so she chased him all the way down the street, she says. However, Joey slowly points out that Kenny was wearing different clothes when she ran away from the church with him. Finally, Kenny realizes that the Wool Pooh *didn't* get Joey. Overjoyed, he bursts out of the house to go tell his parents and Byron that Joey is perfectly fine.

## CHAPTER 15

Back in Flint, Kenny spends most of his time hiding behind the couch, where he often hears his parents talking about the church bombing. Not knowing he's listening, they talk about how the police suspect that two white men bombed the church, killing four little girls and injuring many more. The Watsons left Birmingham that very night, taking everyone—including Byron—back home. Kenny, for his part, can't stop thinking about the girls in the blue and red dresses—what happened to them? Are they okay? As for Wilona and Daniel, they talk a lot about how to explain to their children what happened that day in Birmingham. Sometimes they're furious, sometimes they're calm, and sometimes they just sit there and weep.

*Kenny thinks he's talking to some kind of ghost, since he believes Joey died in the bombing. He therefore regrets not telling her that he loved her before she left for church. He also wishes he'd thanked her for appearing when he was in the midst of drowning, since mentioning her appearance would have been a good way to show how much she means to him—so much, it seems, that he sees her as his savior.*



*In the same way that Joey appeared as an apparition or angel to help save Kenny from drowning, Kenny seems to have appeared to help lure Joey away from the church just before the bomb went off. Again, the novel isn't necessarily interested in exploring religious themes—rather, it simply uses these angelic appearances to symbolize how important family members are when it comes to supporting each other. Kenny and Joey are so connected, it seems, that they're capable of saving each other from mortal danger.*



*It's difficult for Wilona and Daniel to talk to their children about the church bombing, since it was such a gruesome act of racism and cruelty. The problem, of course, is that they can't—as parents—pretend like everything is all right. After all, Kenny went inside the church and saw for himself the horrible aftermath of racist violence, so it would be pointless and irresponsible for his parents to sugar-coat what happened that day. The novel therefore suggests that the world can be a twisted, scary place and that sometimes there's nothing to do but acknowledge its ugliness.*



Daniel and Wilona are particularly worried about Kenny, since he keeps disappearing for long stretches of the day. Little do they know that he's hiding behind the couch. They worry that he saw something terrible at the church that day. The nook behind the couch is where the Watson family's pets always used to go whenever they were hurt or sick. Sometimes they would stay in there until they got better, so Byron started calling the space the World-Famous Watson Pet Hospital, claiming that it has "magical powers" and that "genies and angels" live there. Kenny has been spending time in the Pet Hospital in the hopes that the magical powers will make him feel better.

Wilona urges Kenny to be more active, but he's uninterested in the things he used to like. He feels like Rufus has somehow changed since he got back, and he's not interested in playing with dinosaur toys anymore—he's too old for that, so he gave Rufus and Cody all his dinosaurs. And though Byron takes him to play basketball with his older friends, Kenny rarely wants to leave the Pet Hospital, so he starts sneaking back there whenever possible. When his parents go to bed, for instance, he creeps behind the couch and sleeps there.

One morning, Byron leans over the couch and wakes Kenny up. He promises not to tell their parents where Kenny has been hiding, but he also tries to get his brother to come out and watch TV with him. Kenny refuses. And though Byron isn't the type to tattle, Kenny senses that he ended up telling their parents, since Wilona and Daniel's conversations on the couch suddenly change. They stop talking about sad things and instead say nice things about Kenny, though this doesn't make him feel any better. At one point, Byron starts sleeping on the couch to be near Kenny.

After sleeping on the couch, Byron wakes up one morning and convinces Kenny to come out to have some cereal. After they eat, Byron gets him to change out of pajamas and watch cartoons with him. It becomes a regular thing for Byron to appear and somehow convince Kenny to leave the Pet Hospital behind the couch. One morning, he excitedly drags Kenny to the kitchen and shows him two hairs growing out of his chin. Inspired, Kenny decides to check his mustache, which he hasn't looked at in a while. As soon as he sees his face in the mirror, though, he starts crying.

*Kenny is traumatized by what he saw at the church, but he doesn't know how to deal with that trauma. Instead of turning to his family members for emotional support, he hopes that hiding behind the couch will help him heal, since that's what always worked for his sick or injured pets when they crawled back there. The idea that the crawlspace has magical powers comforts him, then, but it also keeps him from reaching out for the help he really needs.*



*Kenny's sadness in the aftermath of the church bombing makes it hard for him to be interested in daily life. He has witnessed just how cruel and ugly the world can be, so it's difficult for him to just go along like normal. He therefore loses interest in the things that used to excite him, like playing with dinosaur toys and spending time with Rufus. It's evident, then, that encountering such hateful and racist violence is a deeply traumatizing experience, especially at the impressionable age of 10.*



*Byron tries to give Kenny the emotional support he needs. He recognizes that his brother is in pain, so he tries to spend time with him and show him that there are still things in life that are worth appreciating. The fact that he tells his parents where Kenny has been hiding also suggests that he's very worried about his little brother, since he wouldn't normally tattle. In this case, though, he realizes that it's important for his parents to know what's going on with Kenny, since it's clear that Kenny needs as much support as he can get.*



*Byron does everything he can to get Kenny to become more active, clearly thinking that his brother needs to distract himself from his sorrows. And he's right: Kenny does need to do something other than hide behind the couch, but he also needs to process the horrible things he saw in the church. Seeing his own reflection in the mirror helps him do exactly that, since he has no way of ignoring how sad he feels—after all, he can see the sorrow on his own face. Finally, then, he breaks down.*



Byron closes the bathroom door and rests Kenny's head in his lap. Kenny can't stop crying, but Byron doesn't mind—he tells his little brother to cry as much as he'd like. Through tears, Kenny asks why anyone would bomb a church full of children. Byron admits that he doesn't know. His parents have told him that the people who did the bombing were sick, but what Byron thinks is that “they just let hate eat them up and turn them into monsters.” Kenny then says that he went to the church and saw the little girls laid out on the ground. He then finally says what has been on his mind: he feels guilty because he thought the Wool Pooh had Joey and instead of staying to fight him off, he ran away.

Byron tells Kenny that the Wool Pooh isn't real, but Kenny refuses to believe him. Still, Byron insists that the Wool Pooh was just a made-up story. He also says “magic powers” don't exist, either. He knows Kenny has been spending time behind the couch because he thinks there are magic powers back there that will heal him. But he says that Kenny could spend his entire life back there without any magic powers ever helping him in any way. What's more, he points out that Joey left the church because she thought she saw Kenny leading her away—if Kenny believes in magic powers and **angels** behind the couch, then he should also believe that some part of him helped save Joey's life.

Kenny listens to what Byron says but asks how, exactly, it's fair that nobody was there to save the four little girls who died in the church bombing. Byron thinks for a moment and then says that it *isn't* fair. What's more, he says that things will *never* be fair, pointing out how unjust it is that two white men would hate Black people so much that they're willing to kill children just to make sure Black kids don't go to the same school as white kids. It's also unfair that the police in Birmingham seem to know who did the bombing but probably won't arrest them. None of this, he says, is fair. The only thing to do, he tells Kenny, is to “understand that that's the way it is and keep on steppin'.”

*The way Byron tries to answer Kenny's question about why people would bomb a church is important, as it highlights the fact that racism is capable of turning people into “monsters.” Such hatred, Byron implies, can overtake people and distort the way they view the world. Perhaps more importantly, though, Byron also admits that there's no good way to understand why racists bombed the church. An act of violence like that is completely unjustifiable, so there will never be a way to really understand it.*



*When Kenny says that he thought the Wool Pooh had Joey, Byron tries to make him feel better by revealing that the Wool Pooh doesn't exist. He also uses this conversation as an opportunity to point out that Kenny can't just hide from life and hope that “magic powers” will come along at some point and make him feel better. Rather, Kenny has to actively resume his everyday life and learn to take pleasure in the things that used to bring him joy, despite the fact that the world is often ugly and cruel. And if he absolutely wants to believe in “magic powers,” then he should just think about how special it was that Joey thought she saw him that day and ran away from church because of her vision—at the very least, this kind of magic will help Kenny see how much his family members care about him.*



*Byron emphasizes that the world is often full of injustice. Such injustice is especially glaring in the struggle for racial equality, as made clear by the fact that white racists bombed the church in an effort to stop the Black community from advocating for the desegregation of schools in Birmingham. Byron doesn't mean to depress his little brother by talking about how cruel and unjust the world is, though. Rather, his intention is to show Kenny that he shouldn't let such things interfere with his own ability to be happy. The world is often a terrible place, he implies, but that doesn't mean Kenny can't still try to lead a good life.*



Byron tells Kenny not to go behind the couch anymore. When he leaves the bathroom, the rest of the Watson family is crowded around the door. He tells them Kenny is going to be all right now. Meanwhile, Kenny thinks about how Byron is both right and wrong—for instance, Kenny still believes the Wool Pooh exists. He also thinks there *are* things like “magic powers or genies or **angels**” in the world, though maybe these aren’t the things that heal pets behind the couch. Still, these magic things exist in other moments of life, like when Kenny’s father smiles at him when he’s made a mistake, or when his mother bundles him up so he won’t get cold, or when his older brother lets him play basketball with the older kids.

Joey bangs on the bathroom door, asking if Kenny is all right now and, if so, if she can come in and pee. Looking at himself in the mirror, Kenny realizes that Byron was right: he really *is* going to be okay. Smiling, he thinks it’s true that he’s too old to believe that magic lives behind a couch. As he leaves the bathroom, he decides to go to Rufus’s house to see if he can get some of his dinosaurs back.

*For Kenny, “magic powers” aren’t all that mysterious—rather, he simply finds magic in the everyday love he receives from his family members. To him, it feels like magic to connect with his mother or father, just like it felt like a certain kind of magic when Joey appeared to him in the whirlpool. Magic, the novel implies, is actually quite ordinary and common, since it exists in any bond built on love and support.*



*The fact that Kenny feels so much better after talking to Byron is a testament to how helpful it can be to have strong support networks. Kenny is happy again because his older brother has given him confidence, showing him that he can still enjoy life even though certain aspects of the world are scary and cruel. With this in mind, he reinvests himself in the things he loves, which is why he goes straight to Rufus’s house, perhaps understanding that friendship is one of the most important and meaningful parts of life.*







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