

## **THE WATSONS GO TO BIRMINGHAM: 1963**

by Christopher Paul Curtis

Adapted by Christina Ham

### **CAST OF CHARACTERS:**

**NARRATOR KENNY & OTHER BROADCAST VOICES** (early 50s) - African-American. Dee jay at the first black-owned FM station WDZZ in Flint, Michigan. He was born and raised in Flint in a working class family. He has a family of his own (a wife and two sons). On the eve of the anniversary of the Black Lives Matter movement's anniversary he recalls his family's road trip to his grandmother's house in 1963.

**KENNETH "KENNY" BERNARD WATSON** (10) - African-American. He's a fourth grader at Clark Elementary. He stands small in the looming shadow of his big brother Byron. He is very smart, a model student, but shy. He is often bullied at school and for that reason hides his intellect at times. Doesn't make friends easily even though he yearns for them.

**BYRON WATSON** (13) - Kenny's juvenile delinquent older brother whose also a bully, but knows how to stick up for his younger brother when he needs to. Gives his parents a lot of grief. His antics of hanging out with the wrong crowd causes his parents to send him and the other siblings to be with Grandma Sands in Birmingham, AL to turn him around.

**JOETTA "JOEY" WATSON** (5) - African-American. She is the younger sister to Kenny and Byron. She is very obedient and does what her parents tell her to do (which can make her a bit of a killyjoy). And, like any little sister she is also a bit of a tattletale. She is very empathetic to the plight of others. She is an ardent defender of even her older brother, Kenny. She is a peacekeeper and wants everyone to get along. She has a purity and goodness to her that is inescapably infectious.

**DANIEL WATSON** (40s) - African-American. He is husband to Wilona and father to Kenny, Byron, and Joetta. He is light-hearted with a terrific sense of humor even when angry. He is a great impersonator. Is a die-hard born and raised Flint, MI resident despite its lousy winter weather. He's a proud family man, but is frustrated by his juvenile delinquent son, Byron. He is a working class man, but makes sure his family wants for nothing when it comes to splurging on them on occasion.

**WILONA WATSON** (40s) - African-American. Wife of Daniel and mother to Kenny, Byron, and Joetta. A native Alabamian who is an outsider in her own family—she is the only one in the Watson clan not to be born and raised in Flint, MI. She is still nostalgic for her Southern hometown as the Flint winters don't agree with her. Her Southern accent creeps in to her dialogue when you least expect it. She is strict, but fair when it comes to disciplining her kids.

**GRANDMA SANDS** (60s) - African-American. A widow. Mother to Wilona, Mother-in-law to Daniel, grandmother to Kenny, Byron, and Joetta. She carries her signature cane because she is a stroke survivor. She is extremely strict and a disciplinarian. She is there to help discipline Byron. While grandma may seem weak...she is living in the backyard of the Civil Rights Movement in Birmingham, AL. She tries to teach her grandkids how to navigate the volatile terrain that is Birmingham in 1963.

Time and Place: The year is 1963 in Flint, MI and Birmingham, AL.

*In memory of*

Addie Mae Collins

Born 4/18/49, died 9/15/63

Denise McNair

Born 11/17/51, died 9/15/63

Carole Robertson

Born 4/24/49, died 9/15/63

Cynthia D. Morris Wesley

Born 4/30/49, died 9/15/63

*the toll for one day in one city*

“Out of the mountain of despair, a stone of hope.”  
-- excerpted from “I Have a Dream” speech  
by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

## PART I: THE WEIRD WATSONS

Lights up. It's the present. The beginning of fall plucks at the Michigan air. In the background, the rattle and hum of cars on I-75 escape as quickly as they arrive passing our cumulus radio station. A radio dial flips through the AM-FM stations until it tunes in to NARRATOR KENNY—our drive time deejay.

### NARRATOR KENNY

Good morning, Flint! This is Kenny “Weird” Watson coming at you on 92.7 WDZZ “the best variety of old school and today’s R &B”. Now, I know a lot of times y’all catch me clowning around on here during your morning commute. But, today...I gotta get real with you. Now, I know what you thinking—when am I gonna get back to playing your Aaliyah and Keith Sweat. And, I swear—I will. As a matter of fact, I got 15 songs in a row coming at you. But, first I got something more important on my mind. Some of you may have heard that today’s the anniversary of the 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church bombing in Birmingham, Alabama. It killed what some folks like to call the “four little girls”. I want to remind you people of something—they had names—Addie Mae Collins, Denise McNair, Carole Robertson, and Cynthia D. Morris Wesley. Calling them less than their Christian names is to erase them and Kenny Watson don’t want nothing to do with making the black woman invisible. I don’t really talk about this a lot because—believe it or not—I’m the quiet one in my family.

KENNY enters.

### NARRATOR KENNY (CONT.)

But, in September of 1963, my family traveled to Birmingham and was there when this tragedy struck our nation’s daughters and rocked me to my ten-year-old core. It was then that I learned how water could be a weapon, about the magic of family, and the power of get up, stand up, stay up.

The lights shift from WDZZ to the Watson household. NARRATOR KENNY plays us a track...of a distant memory. We are in winter 1963. It is the kind of cold that blows off the Great Lakes and chokes your bones. On the couch is KENNY has joined the rest of his family: BYRON, JOEY, and parents, WILONA and DANIEL. They fruitlessly try to ward off the frigid temps in sweaters, hats, gloves, and socks. WILONA’s stare shoots daggers at DANIEL. He notices.

### DANIEL

What you looking at me like that for, Wilona?

### WILONA

Daniel, I could kill you—bringing me up here from Birmingham to Michigan to be in a giant ice box.

DANIEL turns on the console television. The black and white springs to life. On Channel 12 our WEATHERMAN (NARRATOR KENNY), delivers a devastating blow to the region.

NARRATOR KENNY

This is a Special Report from the Channel 12 evening news. Flint, I wish I had better news for you. It looks like the cold snap that's settled over this part of our state just won't snap. The air that's come down here from Ontario, Canada will continue to drive down our temperatures for the next four to five days giving us daytime highs in the single digits and temps as low as 20 to 30 below zero at night! Get all of your layers out because winter isn't going anywhere...

Groans and boos from the WATSONS—except DANIEL.

DANIEL

It's 70 degrees somewhere...just not here.

He starts laughing. WILONA is not amused.

BYRON

Gimme this blanket!

BYRON yanks a big part of the blanket to cover himself up leaving KENNY with barely anything. KENNY tries to fight for his piece of the blanket, but decides to try a different tactic.

KENNY

Mama, it's freezing.

WILONA

I know, honey. Scoot closer to your brother and sister.

BYRON

He better keep his butt on his side of the couch.

WILONA

I blame this weather on your daddy.

DANIEL

What I got to do with the temperature in Flint, MI?

WILONA

You got everything to do with it. I was nice and warm in Birmingham and could've stayed that way if you had left me alone.

DANIEL

I saved you.

WILONA

From what?

DANIEL

A city that uses Colored Only signs to keep their Negroes in place. Signs that tell you which fountains to drink at, which entrance and exit to use, and to stay at the back of the bus. Tell me the truth: you miss that?

WILONA

Colored Only signs don't define Birmingham—we do. Besides, what state you know don't have something wrong with it. Flint ain't perfect either. It's been 10 years since I've been home to see my mama and brothers. I wish we could get it together to get back down there.

DANIEL

Aren't we your home?

WILONA

(sighs)

You always know the right thing to say.

DANIEL

I ain't no fool. I know marriage is always a peace negotiation.

JOEY

(looking on the bright side)

In the meantime, you got us, mama.

WILONA

Yes, I do.

The cold continues to blast on the outside but the warmth of WILONA giving each of her children a peck and a squeeze burns on the inside. When she gets to BYRON she takes in the hat on his head.

BYRON

(pulling away from her)

Stop kissing me and messing with my head.

Where you get this hat?  
WILONA

What you mean?  
BYRON

This don't look like a hat your daddy or I bought you.  
WILONA

I can't help what you don't remember.  
BYRON

Boy, what's the matter with you? Don't get smart with your mama. Did you steal that hat?  
DANIEL

What kinda question is that?  
BYRON

One that deserves an answer.  
DANIEL

I don't remember where I got it.  
BYRON  
(glares at KENNY)  
And, tell Kenny to stop breathing on me.

I didn't do anything!  
KENNY

Everybody know he's the main reason we're called the "Weird Watsons".  
BYRON

I'm not weird.  
KENNY

You the weirdest of all.  
BYRON

KENNY takes in what his big brother says...the truth hurts, but it's JOEY to the rescue.

JOEY  
You the oldest so that mean you the weirdest—not Kenny.

BYRON  
Stop flapping your gums, Joey.

JOEY  
You gone let him talk to me like that, Kenny?

BYRON  
That's what a punk does.

KENNY  
Shut up you juvenile delinquent.

BYRON  
I'm about to hurt you—

WILONA  
Byron, I done had about enough out of you.

BYRON  
Kenny started it—

DANIEL steps in as the peacemaker.

DANIEL  
We're about to get outta here and go to some place warm...

KENNY  
Where?

DANIEL  
Your aunt's house. She just put in a new furnace.

ALL  
YES!!!!

DANIEL  
Boys, go get the Brown Bomber ready.

KENNY & BYRON  
Aw, dad...

DANIEL  
Go on now...

KENNY and BYRON wrap up tight but the cold still manages to eat at their skin. Scraping the car is the suckiest job ever. The rhythm of the scraping still doesn't dull the reality that KENNY is doing most of the work.

KENNY

You better do your part, By. I'm not scraping your side of the car too.

BYRON

You do whatever I tell you to do if that lip of yours knows what's good for it.

The underscoring helps KENNY scrape the snow off of the windshield. While KENNY works, BYRON makes smooching noises at himself but, suddenly, something goes very wrong. KENNY, however, keeps working.

KENNY

By, I'm warning you...if I have to come over and finish your side of the car I'm telling daddy on you...

BYRON

MMMN...MMMN!

KENNY

Stop messing around. It's freezing and I wanna get back inside.

BYRON

MMMN...MMMMMMMMN!

KENNY

What the—

KENNY rushes over to BYRON who appears to be...stuck against the side of the car.

KENNY (Cont.)

(somewhat panicked)

You okay? Byron?

KENNY looks at BYRON whose lips are unmistakably stuck to the car.



MMN...MMMMMN. BYRON

I'm gonna get, mama. KENNY

Mmn...Mmn. BYRON  
(unmistakably "no")

I have to get her. She'll know what to do. KENNY  
(yells)  
MAMA!

After a few moments WILONA and DANIEL come running with JOEY trailing behind.

Boy, what's all that noise for? WILONA

Byron's stuck to the car. KENNY

That don't make a lick of sense— DANIEL

DANIEL gets a closer look at his son and suddenly, begins to laugh out loud. WILONA looks on in horror.

Oh, Lord. Daniel, look at our boy! WILONA

I'm looking! DANIEL  
(laughing)

This ain't no laughing matter. WILONA

Mmmn...Mmmn...Mmmn-mmmn.... BYRON

WILONA

We're gonna figure this out, baby.

KENNY

What are we gonna do, mama?

WILONA

We can get some hot water and pour it on the car mirror and see if that'll separate his lips from it.

DANIEL

That might make things worse than they already are.

WILONA

We can take him to the hospital.

DANIEL

How he supposed to get there? Is he gonna run all the way there hanging onto the side of the car and it's twenty below?

JOEY

Mama, Byron's crying. His tears are freezing on his cheeks. Help him!

WILONA gently speaks to BYRON.

WILONA

Byron, you know we love you—don't you?

BYRON

(beat)

Mmn hm.

WILONA

And, we'd never do anything to hurt you—

BYRON

(suspecting the worst)

Mmn mn. Mmn mn... mmmmmmmmmnnnnnn...

WILONA quickly rips BYRON's lips away from the mirror. It sounds like paper being ripped into.

BYRON (Cont.)

(pained shriek)

Mama, why?!

WILONA

Baby, we had no other choice—

BYRON

You could've warned me.

BYRON runs away from WILONA who follows him.

JOEY

Byron, come back!

JOEY runs inside behind them. DANIEL shakes his head.

DANIEL

I'm gonna get the car warmed up. When your mama gets Byron fixed up I expect everyone in it.

KENNY

Daddy?

DANIEL

Yes, son?

KENNY

Byron says people call us the Weird Watsons but he's the Lipless Wonder.

KENNY and DANIEL share a chuckle as DANIEL reaches for the car radio and flips the dial. It tunes to NARRATOR KENNY.

NARRATOR KENNY

Over the years I've had hundreds of you that call in to this station or stop me on the street when I'm with my family and wonder where my activism comes from. I'm here to tell you my brothers and sisters that the seed was planted not here in my hometown of Flint...but in Birmingham. My family couldn't have known what we were walking into but one thing we knew for sure...there was no turning back and my thirteen-year-old brother led the way.

Lights down.