

The Lion's Lesson

Miss Pointy is . . . pointy. Her nose is pointy. Her ears are pointy. Her shoes are pointy. And boy, are her fingers ever pointy. Sometimes even her voice is pointy. Especially when she says *you*. The *you* she's usually talking to is Darrell Sikes. Darrell Sikes always has fire in his eyes. Anything Miss Pointy tells him, he looks at her like she just told him she ran over his dog. He makes these grunting sounds and talks under his breath, until Miss Pointy can't ignore it anymore. She takes him out in the hall, she thinks we can't hear, but we're real quiet then, so we can. She says things like, "I can't make you do anything, it's your choice, please help me," when she's not too frustrated, but when she's mad, she says things like,

"Keep talking to yourself all day in that crazy way, you're going to end up a crazy man sitting at the back of the public bus with dead pigeons in a Hefty bag! How's that sound?" I hear Darrell saying nothing, and I feel mixed up. I know that angry feeling of grown-ups trying to push their way into the room of your mind, and I know that feeling of trying to hold the door shut against them with quiet and looking down. But I knew why I was angry, at my teachers, at my counselor. I don't know why Darrell is angry. At everybody.

Miss Pointy tries to get us to leave our problems at home. She stands at the doorway every morning, smiling like she's auditioning to be a movie star, but she blocks the door and nobody gets in until they use the trouble basket. We pretend to put our troubles into the big green basket she holds out before we enter. Our troubles are invisible to the eye, but they are heavy. She practically breaks her back, holding all those troubles for us, but she says we can't carry them into the classroom ourselves or we won't be able to work. She offers the troubles back to us at the end of

the day, since they don't belong to her. Nobody's ever taken them back. Still, they seem to follow us and find us at home, like black cats.

In class, Miss Pointy ignores Darrell's Special Needs. She calls on him the same as everyone else. She waits a long time for him to answer. Then we all have to wait.

"Darrell? I'm waiting on you." Silence. "I don't know' is an acceptable answer."

"How 'bout 'I don't care'?" he sneered. As a class, we made a low moan.

"Less acceptable," said Miss Pointy, and continued to wait. And wait. Finally, she moved on.

"Stupid Miss Potty," Darrell grumbled.

"Yes, Darrell? You have something to say, now that your turn is over?" Miss Pointy grumbled back.

"You called me a *barrel!*" yelled Darrell. Some boys snorted through their noses, because Darrell is kind of round and solid, barrel-shaped. He crossed his arms and pouted.

"I certainly didn't call you a barrel, Darrell. Why would I call you a barrel?" She sighed. "Please stop talking crazy talk."

"You always calling me crazy!" he roared.

"You're always acting crazy!" she roared back.

Then Darrell got up, kicked Miss Pointy's desk, and sat back down, his chest heaving. I would have been afraid. Miss Pointy looked unhappy, but not afraid. She got up and stood next to Darrell's desk.

"Excuse me," she said. She kicked his desk firmly with her toe. He jumped. "Huh. Did kicking a desk work for you? It's not working for me."

"You're not kicking it hard enough," said Darrell sweetly.

"Mmmm," she nodded. "I see. Would you mind getting up again?" Darrell stood. She shooed him a few paces away, and then she picked up the hem of her long ballroom skirt just slightly before punting the desk so mightily that it tipped over with a terrific crash and slid about three feet.

We stared.

"Ouch," said Miss Pointy.

She took her foot out of her high-heeled shoe and rubbed her toe. Then she hobbled back to her

own desk. "It still doesn't work for me. Well, thanks anyway, Darrell. Or Barrel. Or Feral. Or whatever it is you want people to call you. Now let's get back to work."

Darrell-Barrel was too pigheaded to go and get his desk so he had to do his work on his lap. When we came back from lunch, the desk was set right again.

The point of this story is, don't try to out-crazy a crazy.

You see, even Miss Pointy's stories have points. She likes to tell stories about foxes and crows a lot. Crows putting pebbles in jugs and making the cool water rise. Foxes snapping sharp jaws at grapes just out of reach, walking away, not caring. Dogs losing bones to reflections in the stream. Ants working, grasshoppers playing. She told us a story about a fox and a stork. The fox invites the stork for dinner, but serves food in a flat saucer, so the stork can't eat. The stork invites the fox to dinner, and for revenge serves food in a narrow-necked jar, so the fox can't eat. "What's the lesson here?" she asked.

"Foxes and storks don't know how to eat dinner," said Leon.

"Fox should of just ate stork," Angelina observed.

"Maybe he was still full," suggested Michael.

"When people aren't nice, everyone ends up hungry and suffering," Ernie said.

"Hmmm, that's a good one." Miss Pointy rubbed her chin.

"No, it ain't!" argued Leon. "There's no people, just foxes and storks."

"When you go to someone else's house, sometimes they don't serve what you like," offered Mariah.

"Yeah! I slept over at Veronica's, and her momma served government cheese!" said Sakiah. Veronica turned around and sent Sakiah a stabbing look. "Well, she did!"

"Girl, your mouth is as big as a saucer!" Raphael laughed. "Come on, Miss Pointy. Tell us what's the lesson."

"Tit for tat," said Miss Pointy. This sent Raphael and some of the boys into such uncontrollable

giggles, she sent them out of the room, one at a time, to the water fountain.

"That story nasty, Miss Pointy," said Dominique upon his return.

"I didn't make up these stories, you know. Aesop did."

"Why he always writing about animals?" demanded Kiarre. "Didn't he know no people?"

"He *was* writing about people. He gave the animals the qualities he saw in people: bitterness, perseverance, foolishness, trickery, pride. But Aesop had certain qualities, too, that made it so he had to tell stories for survival. He was a slave to King Xanthus, in ancient Greece. He was *mute*, he couldn't talk. He was ugly. They say he had a humped back, bowed legs, a potbelly, and he was short as a dwarf."

"Dang! That *is* ugly!" Tanaeja agreed.

"The Greek gods looked upon him and didn't just see what was on the outside. They saw he was decent on the inside. So they gave him the gifts of speech and storytelling. Do you think those were good gifts?"

"I'd rather be handsome," Larry admitted.

"Would you have known Aesop was ugly if I hadn't told you?"

No, we shook our heads. "He writes handsome stories," said Rashonda.

"I think so, too. He used his stories to advise the king. Sometimes he disagreed with the king's way of thinking, but he couldn't say so outright, or guess what?"

"They'd kill him!" We cheered.

"Off with his head!" Sakiah shouted.

"You gotta watch The Man," warned Dominique.

Miss Pointy did not argue. "Instead of disagreeing with the king, he used his stories to offer the bit of common sense the king might have been missing. Maybe he used animals so the story wouldn't seem too personal."

"He tricked him!" Ernie said.

"*Persuaded.*" Miss Pointy winked.

Then she told us a fable she said was one of her favorites, about a lion trapped in a net, who is chewed out to freedom by a little mouse. She asked what the story showed.

"Be careful of traps, whether you're a mouse or a lion," said Ernie.

"That's a good piece of advice for a king," said Miss Pointy, nodding.

"Or if you're a mouse or a lion," added Ernie emphatically.

"You gotta watch The Man," suggested Dominique.

"Perhaps," Miss Pointy said, "but please try to think of a new lesson, Dominique. That was not the moral of all of Aesop's fables."

Dominique slumped down in his seat, blushing. "I'm just *saying*," he muttered. "Ya'll better watch him."

"That's your daddy's moral, not Aesop's," laughed Tanaeja.

"You be quiet about my daddy!" Dominique said.

"Now, now, stay on business. What's the lesson of the story?"

"Pay back favors," said Ameer.

"Good," said Miss Pointy, smiling. "Anyone else?"

"It doesn't matter if someone is different, they can be your friend and help you when you need it most," said Paris. She was smart. Miss Pointy took out her Happy Box, a little box full of stickers she takes out sometimes if you impress her. We moaned, jealous.

"Paris is right. No one is so weak that on occasion he can't be a help to you. That's what Aesop meant, so that Xanthus shouldn't overlook the smaller countries in efforts to make alliances," explained Miss Pointy.

"What's 'alliances'?"

"Friendships. If there's a *conflict*, a war, you need all the friends you can get."

"If you're in a war, we'll be your allies," Ernie spoke for all of us. Almost all of us. Darrell had been quiet, burning his look into Miss Pointy's forehead all along, silently crushing his teeth against each other inside his mouth. I could see his jaw moving.

"I'll be counting on it," said Miss Pointy. "Let's write in our journals now."

I imagined what Darrell would write. Later I

was able to see, because it was my turn to check in homework on the chart. I stayed after with Rachel and peeked when Miss Pointy took the rest of the class out.

"I don't think you should look in people's journals," said Rachel.

"Just one person's, I promise," I said.

"Whose?"

"Darrell's."

She laughed. "You're crazy. He probably can't even write."

"Come on. Want to see?"

She leaned over, but then pulled back. "No," she said. "Curiosity killed the cat."

What a way to die, I thought. "Did Aesop say that?"

"No, your momma did. Get in trouble by yourself, cuz. I'd like to get out of the fifth grade." She went back to cleaning the board in wide, wet lines with a sponge. I read.



She a bich a big one why she go sayin
that I ant never sed nothin to her ima
tell my moma then will see

Well, I wasn't too far off.

"What'd it say?" she asked.

I thought curiosity killed the cat? "You were right," I said. "It's nothing."

George Gets Busted

After lunch we push the desks to the sides of the room and gather in the middle. Then, there in the soft rosy glow of her lamp, Miss Pointy shares stories with us. Miss Pointy says some stories are for reading and some stories are for telling. She told us the story about George Washington. He cut down a cherry tree, and then his momma came and said, "Boy, did *you* do this?" And he said, "Yeah," which I thought was stupid, and so did everybody else.

"Was he holding the ax when his momma come?" Raphael asked.

"I don't know. Probably."

"Busted!"

"Dang! He should of put the ax down and said he didn't know nothing about it."

"She would have known he was lying," said Miss Pointy. "She was his mother."

"Yeah, but she couldn't *prove* it."

"She didn't have to prove it. She was his *mother*," she repeated. "Do you have to prove everything to your mother, or does she just know?" Miss Pointy was looking so exactly the other way of Darrell that I knew she was thinking about him. "George Washington went on to become the first president of the United States."

The class was silent.

"So?" came a voice.

"Excuse me?"

"I mean, so what?" shrugged Raphael. "I don't get it. He chopped down a tree, he was busted, and then he became president. I repeat," he said, smiling, "so?"

"For one thing, he wasn't *busted*," Miss Pointy explained. "He had the chance to tell the truth, and he did. People tell that story because it showed he was an honest man, and that's what the American people wanted: an honest man. I tell this story to you because I think that same quality

of honesty will get you far in life. Honesty isn't even really the right word, I think it's more like *accountability*." She got up and wrote the word on the blackboard. We couldn't see it in the dim light, but we could hear the tapping of the chalk. "Accountability means, if you've got the guts to do something, at least have the guts to say you've done it."

"How come we don't have presidents like that no more?" asked Raphael.

"Maybe you'll have to bring it back in style," Miss Pointy said so matter-of-factly, we all turned to smile at Raphael at once, and then we laughed. It wasn't a making-fun-of laugh, it was a gentle, embarrassed laugh, like we all saw the secret part of him for a second, the part that showed him all grown up, not just a smart aleck, but a man with a job.

"I don't want to be president!" His face was turning red, like the idea was buzzing around his head like a fly and frustrating him. "Anyway, the story's not true."

"Maybe it's true, maybe it's not, it doesn't matter," said Miss Pointy.

"What do you mean, it doesn't matter?" Angelina forgot to raise her hand. "The whole story is about telling the truth. How can you say it doesn't matter whether the story is true or not?"

"True things don't always happen in the world, where you can see and touch them. True things also happen in the imagination." I stared at her as she said this amazing thing so easily, as though she were telling us the time. "If it happened that somebody was living a life that made him wish for an honest man, so he made up that story, then there's something true about that story, even if the events didn't really happen. Do you see?"

I wanted to see, because I wanted to be like Miss Pointy, a woman who loved stories even better than TV. So I thought about this. I watched as some of my classmates pretended to think about this, but really were watching other people think about this.

"So, if it's not a true story about a man being accountable, it's a true story about somebody *wishing* a man was accountable?" I said as I raised my hand. I had to speak slowly. My mind felt like it

was trying to carry a shallow pie pan full of water, and if I wasn't careful, it would splash and spill. The class looked at me like they looked at Raphael, but they didn't laugh. What were they seeing in me?

Miss Pointy was looking at me, too, tenderly, like a mother who doesn't need her child to prove anything, but is just glad to know what that child is made of.

"We can turn on the lights now," is all she said. "Time to write in our journals."



*True things don't always happen in
the world, where you can see and touch
them*

*True things also happen in the
imagination*

I raised my hand today in both places

I didn't get a chance to write more than that because the door opened and there was Darrell's momma. "I've got words for you." She pointed a crooked finger at Miss Pointy and stepped forward.

Miss Pointy asked, "Did you stop in the office for a pass?"

Darrell's momma said, "I'm not going to stop at any office, I'm going to speak to you right now."

"Surely you can see, I'm in the middle of teaching a roomful of children," she said, real calm. I wrote the word *surely* lightly on the cover of my folder, in pencil, to surely use sometime.

Darrell's momma eyed Miss Pointy up and down, wrinkling up her nose at her fluffy dress. "I don't care what you in the middle of," Darrell's momma said. "You called my son a jackass in front of the whole class."

We didn't dare to breathe.

"I don't know where you got that idea." Miss Pointy looked at Luz and her eyes pointed silently to the wall. Luz got up and pressed the button twice, to signal the office for an emergency. Luz can be such a goody-two-shoes. But this time I was glad.

"You calling my son a liar?"

"Class?" Miss Pointy looked at us as if she had just asked us a review question.

"She never called him a jackass, and I have perfect attendance, so I know." Sakiah's squeaky voice came from the back. "He's the one always calling out her name and not doing his work, just messing around."

Dominique stood up. He is bigger than Darrell, so he's not scared of him. "He called her Miss Potty, but that ain't her name. It's Miss PWAH-TEE-YAY, it rhymes with a French word that means 'gotcha.'"

"Actually, 'you got me,'" Miss Pointy corrected him. "Thank you, Dominique."

Darrell's momma looked around at us slowly, but none of us said anything more. Then Darrell's momma marched right over to Darrell's desk, which was only about four steps away, because Miss Pointy keeps him in the front row. Darrell's momma took the journal off of Darrell's desk and whacked him over his skull, yelling, "Maybe you are a jackass!"

Miss Pointy stepped up and snatched the journal out of Darrell's momma's hand quick as a ninja and whacked her once on the hands, real sharp.

Darrell's momma's mouth made a shape like she was trying to inhale a hard-boiled egg.

"We don't swear in my classroom. Hardly ever. And we don't hit. Much." Just then, the door opened, and there was the vice-principal.

"Is there a problem, ladies?"

"Children. Excuse us for a moment. Please, continue to write in your journals. Maybe write the moral of the story," Miss Pointy said hurriedly, as they stepped out into the hall.

The door closed. We were too scared to speak. Most of us.

"The moral is, mind your cherry tree, George Washington," Dominique growled at Darrell. "I'll kick your behind till you look like Aesop, lying and bringing your crazy momma in here like that."

"Dominique, be quiet," hissed Tanaeja. "Ain't nobody in here be talking 'bout nobody's momma."

"Anyway, that isn't the moral of the story," said Kiarre calmly, bigger than all of us and afraid of nothing. "The moral is just what Miss Pointy said. 'Stop in the office for a pass.'"

This satisfied us, and we didn't speak any more. Darrell didn't look up. He was writing in his journal, like Miss Pointy asked. I started thinking about him. How does it feel to have a momma who doesn't know anything about you? A momma who needs you to prove whether or not you're a liar, who doesn't just know?

One thing for sure, Darrell Sikes makes school more interesting.

I know it's nosy, but I couldn't wait until I had another chance to see his journal. I hoped it had a sorry in it.

She a bitch why she hit me in front
of the hole class I dint do NOTHIN
and futhumore why dint miss POTTY
POTTY POTTY say nothin bout callin me
baril, she so foney. P.S. Domaneeek bet-
ter whach his tale Im gon whip him bad.

As I mentioned to your mother, we
do not swear in class. You will write
"bitch" ten times so you learn to spell

it correctly and then I will never see
it or hear it from you again. School
language, please.

Miss Potty

(only you may call me that, then
we'll call it even)

speekin of LANGWAGE Miss oo-la-
la why don't you speek eenglish, this is
the younited states of america not planit
of the apes. You talk fancy but I no a
secrit, you ant all that MISS POTTY

Darrell, see me during recess this
week, I'm going to teach you the
brand of English I speak. I'm invit-
ing Dominique, so you won't be lone-
ly. You don't have to thank me.

Miss Oo-la-la

(beats Miss Potty any day)