

## **Cierra Bear and the Purloined Pastry**

CB practically slid down the last two stairs, launched herself through the hallway, and had one paw on the front door handle when Mama's voice froze her in her tracks.

"CB!"

She hesitated for half a second, wondering what Mama wanted. She had changed out of her church dress. She had left it in the laundry like she was supposed to. She'd picked up her room. She'd eaten all of her lunch, even the carrots.

"Mama. I'm headed outside to play."

She had the door open with one foot on the porch when Mama called out again, louder.

"Cierra Loquacious Bear. You close that door and get back in here. Right. Now."

CB didn't know how Mama could always tell what she was doing, even from the other side of the house, but she recognized Mama's serious voice, and she knew that when Mama used her middle name, she had better pay attention.

She walked back, closed the door, and found Mama in the laundry, holding her yellow church dress, and scowling.

"Do you have something you want to tell me?"

Now CB was intelligent, even if she was only 8 years old, and she recognized a trick question when she heard it.

She knew that if she had done something wrong, she had better own up to it, or it would only get worse. But she couldn't think of anything to admit to.

She'd almost left her backpack down by the pond on the way home from school on Friday, but she had remembered it at the last second. Emily had worn a red bow to class, and she had thought about making fun of it, but Emily was her best friend, so she had told her how nice it looked instead. She'd finished her History homework and Science, and Geography.

"Hmm..." she said.

Papa had taught her that when you weren't sure what to say, you could either be silent, or say "Hmm..." If you said "Um" or "Er" or "What?" you might look like you couldn't remember, or worse, like you were making up a story. If you used "Hmm..." you appeared thoughtful and (what was Papa's word?), introspective.

"Hmm..." she said again.

“That’s not going to work with me young lady. Out with it.”

CB racked her brain, but still came up with nothing.

“Mama, I can’t remember anything.”

“Hmmm...,” said Mama. “What if I told you I just got off the phone with Mrs. Brown? Would that help?”

This time CB was just silent for a bit. Mama stared at her patiently, though sternly.

“No Ma’am,” she said finally. “No it doesn’t.”

Mama held out the dress, and CB saw a dark purple spot on the white lace collar.

“Oh.”

That was another phrase that Papa recommended she stay away from, but it slipped out before she could think of anything else.

“I’m sorry I got the dress dirty Mama, but I still can’t remember how it happened. I was very careful walking home from church not to brush up against the pine trees, and not to pick anything up out of the dirt, and not to sit on the fence in front of Emily’s house.”

Mama still stared at her.

“It’s not the dress I’m worried about. The stain will come out. It will be hard, but you will help me and we’ll get it done.”

CB breathed a sigh of relief. It might take a half an hour of scrubbing to remove the stain, but then she could go play.

“Do you know what kind of stain this is, CB?”

She shook her head.

“Go ahead. Taste it.”

“Taste it??”

“Yes. It’s safe. Taste it.”

CB reached out a paw, managed to get a little bit of the purple splotch on one claw, looked at it, and finally put it in her mouth.

“Mmmm,” she said.

Now “Mmmm” was usually even better than “Hmm,” because it meant you were enjoying what you were tasting, but Mama still didn’t look very happy.

“What do you taste, CB?”

“Hmmm...blueberry!”

“That’s right...and how did it get on the white collar of your Sunday dress?”

“Um...I don’t know.”

“Well, do you know what Mrs. Brown did today before church?”

“Er...nope.”

“She baked a blueberry pie, with some of the fresh blueberries that she picked with Emily yesterday at Stallion’s Farm. Then do you know what she did?”

“Nuh uh”

“She put that pie on her windowsill to cool. And guess what she found on her windowsill when she got home from church.”

“Uuhh... the pie?”

“No CB. The pie was gone.”

Mama looked CB straight in the eye.

“Now, can you tell me where it went to?”

“Hmm. Um. Er. Hmm. No Ma’am.”

“No?”

“No Ma’am.”

“CB. It’s hard for me to say this. But I don’t believe you.”

“Really Mama. I don’t know who took the pie, and I don’t know how the blueberries got on my dress. Please believe me!”

“I’m sorry, CB. I can’t. But here’s what you can do to make it right.”

Mama looked thoughtful.

“Why don’t you finish helping me scrub out this stain, and then you can look around the neighborhood and maybe you will be able to, hmm, find the missing pie.”

“OK Mama, I can do that.”

“Oh, CB. There’s one more thing.”

“Yes, Mama?”

“If you don’t find the pie by dinnertime, you’ll be inside for the next three weeks.”

“But Mama!”

“No more, Miss Bear. We’re done talking. Now let’s get to work scrubbing that dress.”

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CB was a little hurt, and puzzled, and angry, all mixed into one. It wasn’t fair! She wasn’t sure what to say, but Mama didn’t seem to want to listen to her anyway. So she took out her energy doing two things. She worked very hard scrubbing the collar on the Sunday dress, and she thought and thought about how to find the missing pie.

Finally, she finished, and the collar looked clean. She and Mama hung it on the clothesline to dry, and CB walked out of the house to look for someone to help her. Finally she thought of Mr. Beaver.

She left the house and went down to the pond. She walked around most of it, and finally found Mr. B down by the dam, cutting a tree for repairs.

“Tim-ber!!!!” he yelled, and she stood back enough to watch the tree fall to one side, and felt it shake the ground around her. It kicked up dust and little pieces of leaf, and she could smell the scent of freshly chewed, wood.

Mr. B stood there in his work overalls, covered in wood chips, and smiling at her.

“Why if it isn’t my favorite young bear! How are we today?”

“Hmmm. Not too good Mr. B. Mama thinks I stole a pie.”

Mr. B got a quizzical look on his face, and CB explained everything that had happened with Mama, and how she had to find the pie before dinner time or be grounded for three whole weeks.

“Well,” said Mr. B. “There is something that I have found in all my years of building.”

“Oh. What’s that Mr. B?”

“I’ve found that every problem can be solved. It just takes a lot of thought, and planning, but especially, it takes persistence.”

“What are persistons, Mr. B?”

“Not persistons, child. Per-sis-tence. It means trying and trying and never giving up.”

“Oh”

“Now you go think of everywhere that pie might be, and you look for it in all those places, and if you still don’t find it, look again. If you keep trying, you’re bound to find it eventually.”

“But Mr. B, I don’t have until eventually. I only have until dinner time.”

“Nevertheless, young lady, go look for that pie now. A dam won’t build itself, you know. And be persistent.”

So CB set off to Mrs. Brown’s house to start looking.

Emily was swinging in a swing in the yard, and asked CB to come join her.

“I can’t Em. I need to be persistent right now. Do you want to come be persistent with me?”

She explained to Emily what had happened, and Em said sure, and together they looked all over.

They looked around the foundation of the house, and they looked around the yard, and over by the swing set, and in the cellar doorway, and on the porch, and under the porch, and over by the fence.

Then they looked by the trees, and in the trees, and in the forsythia bushes, and under the car.

Then they looked at the Whites’ house, and at the Cinnamons’, and at the Cuddles’, and the Cocoas’, and at the Tawny-Espressos’.

Then they looked on the path through the forest, and the street to the church, and through the rest of the neighborhood.

Then they did what Mr. B had said, and they looked again.

But they found no pie.

“I’m tired of being persistent,” said Emily. I need to go eat lunch.

So CB found herself standing by the windowsill again, trying to figure out what to do next.

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She started walking back through the forest path to home, and then heard a crunch in the underbrush to her right, and then another one to her left, and then one behind her, and then one ahead.

“Otter!” she shouted. She knew that there was no one else besides Otter that could move so quickly in every different direction and seem to be in four places at once.

Otter popped up from beneath a pile of leaves, vibrating like a swarm of honeybees protecting a nest. He shook, starting at his head and working through his body to his tail.

“Pffft,” he said, spraying a few bits of leaf onto the forest floor. He adjusted his tie, pulled his sunglasses up so they rested on his forehead, and squinted at her.

“Hello, CB. Hi. Hello. How are you this fine day? How ya doin? What’s up? Hi.”

“Hmm,” said CB. “OK, I guess. But I’m starting to get a little worried.”

“Worried? Really? Nervous? Anxious? Yes? Tell me about it. Spill the beans. Fess up.”

So she did. Otter listened, though he kept tilting his head one way and then the other. Finally, he took a deep breath.

“OK,” he said. “Time to slow down.”

He was still speaking quickly, but not moving quite as much.

“There’s one thing I’ve learned in all my peripatetic meanderings.”

“What?”

“I’ve learned that speed creates opportunity.”

“I’m sorry Otter. I didn’t mean what did you learn. I meant the other thing you said. What’s a pepper tickly mander thing?”

“Oh. Peripatetic meandering. I just mean I wander around a lot.”

“You sure use some big words.”

“Well, yes. That’s exactly what I was articulating. Speed creates opportunity. If you speak quickly, you can fit in bigger words.”

“Is that better?”

Well, I can fit more words in, so I guess it means I can say more.”

“Doesn’t that slow you down when you have to explain what you mean to somebody and say it a second time?”

“Er. I don’t imagine so. Maybe. But that wasn’t my point.”

“Really? What was your point?”

“My point is use your speed.”

He started to vibrate again.

“If you need to look for a pie, do it quickly. Rapidly. With speed. Apace.”

Now he was moving back and forth so quickly he was starting to blur a little.

“The faster you search, the more places you can look. So you increase your chances of finding the pie.”

“OK. I’ll try it”

“Ok. Very good. Alright. Good luck. Have fun. Ciao! Adios. Bye.”

With that, he pulled down his sunglasses, and vanished leaving behind a swirling pile of leaves.

CB decided to search, so she ran from tree to tree, raced up and down the forest path, sped around the yards of all the neighbors’ houses, jogged to church and back, and finished, huffing and puffing, in front of the windmill.

She had still seen no sign of the pie.

“Hmm,” she said. “I’m not sure if that worked.”

“You’re not sure if what worked?” said a high-pitched and elegant voice behind her.

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CB turned and looked at a string of web dangling from the handle of the water pump next to the windmill.

“Hello, Ms. Spider. You look...very fit.”

Ms. Spider hung lightly from the end of her thread, glistening with fresh perspiration. She wore spandex leotards, and muscles bulged from each of her eight arms and legs.

“Thank you dear. I just returned from the gym. Now, what were you saying about something not working?”

“I’ve had some trouble looking for a pie.”

“Arr. A dessert gone astray. Always a perplexing conundrum, don’t you think?”

“Um...I’m not sure, Ma’am. What’s a purplish cone drum?”

“Conundrum, my girl. A puzzle. An enigma. I always find it difficult to track down baked goods when they go missing.”

“You do?”

“Yes. But, I have a secret that makes it easier.”

“You do? Could you tell me?”

CB waited, and leaned in to hear the answer.

“Certainly. The secret is strength.”

“Strength?”

“Yes, Dearie." Did you know, for example, that my webs are stronger than steel?”

“No. Really?”

“Yes. I am incredibly strong. So when sweets disappear, I use strength to track them down. I look places that others might not. You should try it.”

“Thank you Ma’am. I will.”

So she did. CB looked everywhere, but this time she used her strength. She pulled herself up into trees. She turned over a log by the stream. She pushed her brother’s wagon to look underneath it, but she still didn’t find anything.

She went back to the Browns’, and collapsed, exhausted, under the tree right outside the window where the pie had sat to cool.



She thought about how much trouble she was going to be in, if she didn't find that pie, and she thought about what she would like to be doing instead of looking for it.

After a while daydreaming, she began to get sleepy. Eventually, she dozed off.

She woke up with a start. She looked at her watch. Oh no! She had slept almost until dinner time. Now she was really going to be in trouble.

She was muttering to herself, and pacing back forth, when she noticed two eyes staring right at her. Two very still eyes.

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"Hello, Mr. Owl," she said.

But Mr. Owl said nothing. He just stared at her.

She stared back for a while. It was amazing how still Mr. Owl could be. The first time she'd seen him, she had thought that he was a statue, but she knew better now.

Normally, she would just stare back at him for a half an hour or so, and sooner or later he would talk with her, but she knew that this time she couldn't wait. It was almost dinner time.

"Mr. Owl, can you help me. Please?"

He said nothing.

"Please? I wore my yellow dress to church and I didn't get it dirty at all but I came home and it had a purple spot on it and it was blueberry and Mama thinks I stole a pie from Mrs. Brown's window sill right there behind you and I tried persistence and peripatetic meandering and a perplexing conundrum but I didn't find it and now I'm going to be grounded for three weeks and um, er, um, now I see Mama coming this way down the street and she looks mad and um, um, um, um I don't know what to do!"

Sure enough, Mama was walking right up the street, and Junior was right beside her carrying a basket and Mama was holding a rolling pin and she was almost here!

"What do I do?" said CB.

And Mr. Owl blinked at last, and he said two words. "Stop. Look."

"Um, OK. I'm listening."

"Not listen. Look."

She looked at him.

“Not at me, child. Look.”

CB looked up the road at Mama, who was getting even closer. She looked around the yard, and saw Emily’s swing, and the tree that Mr. Owl was in, and the porch, and finally she looked at the window sill, and she saw it.

Mama came around the corner, but CB wasn’t looking at her. She was looking at a purple spot, just like the one on her yellow dress, in the grass underneath the window.

“CB. Have you found that pie?”

CB didn’t answer right away. She was still looking.

She looked at the stain on the ground, and then she looked up at the siding on the house and saw another purple stain.

“CB! This time it was Mama’s serious voice.

Still, CB didn’t look at Mama. Her eyes kept going up the wall, then they opened wide.

“CB! You tell me where that pie is right now!

CB pointed at the roof. Mama looked up. Mr. Owl looked up. Junior looked up. Emily and Mrs. Brown looked up.

So did Mr. B., who had just come out of the woods, and Otter, who had zipped around the corner, and Ms. Spider, who was now hanging from Emily’s swing set.

They looked, and they saw what had happened to the pie.

Two very fat and full black birds sat on the roof, with Mrs. Brown’s almost empty pie tin between them. The bigger one burped.

“Mama,” said CB. “It’s the Crow Brothers.”

“So it is,” said Mrs. Brown, who had grabbed a broom off the porch and began swatting at the two birds.

They stumbled to the edge of the roof, and flew off awkwardly, barely staying in the air.

The pie tin fell off the roof and landed on the grass under the window.

“I’m sorry about your pie, Mrs. Brown,” said CB. “I looked all over for it.”

Mrs. Brown tilted her glasses down and looked kindly at CB. “Well, I’m sorry you had to look for it so hard, dear. Emily told me all about it.”

Mama came over and gave her a hug then. “I’m sorry that I didn’t believe you CB. I’ll think better of you next time.”

“I’ll try to keep my things a little cleaner Mama, so you don’t have to wonder about me.”

Then CB turned to face the others.

“Thank you Mr. B. for teaching me how to keep trying. I guess I should have tried some more. Thank you Emily for looking with me. Thank you Otter for teaching me about speed, and Ms. Spider for teaching me about strength.

Then she looked at Mr. Owl.

“Thank you for teaching me to stop, and to look.”

Mr. Owl blinked back at her, once.

“Well, that’s settled. Now, let’s have some dinner,” said Mama.

“OK. I’m ready to go home.”

“Now hold on a minute. We’re not going home yet. Mrs. Brown invited us to eat with their family.”

So they sat on the porch, and had salad, and barbecued brisket, and cole slaw, and corn on the cob, and lemonade, until they looked as happy and as full as the Crow Brothers.

“Did everyone leave room for dessert?” asked Mama.

And with that, Junior went to the basket and pulled out a warm blueberry pie.

“Thank you for lending me your rolling pin, Myrna,” she said to Mrs. Brown. “I thought it might be a good idea to replace the missing pie.”

With that, they sat, and ate pie, and told stories into the evening until the fireflies came out, and walked home with smiles on their faces, pie in their tummies, and warmth in their hearts.