

11. Gone

You are being provided with a book chapter by chapter. I will request you to read the book for me after each chapter. After reading the chapter, 1. shorten the chapter to no less than 300 words and no more than 400 words. 2. Do not change the name, address, or any important nouns in the chapter. 3. Do not translate the original language. 4. Keep the same style as the original chapter, keep it consistent throughout the chapter. Your reply must comply with all four requirements, or it's invalid. I will provide the chapter now.

I

11

Gone

It was close to 2 p.m. when the overhead bulb flickered in the middle of the Heaven & Earth Grocery Store, signaling to Dodo that someone was entering. The light bulb was a little tricky. Sometimes it flickered on its own, or the shaking of the floor set it off. So when it flickered the first time, he ignored it, because it was early afternoon—the usual slow time in the store. Aunt Addie had gone to the icehouse for ice. Mr. Moshe had gone to the theater. Few customers entered at that hour.

He was standing on the trapdoor ladder leading to the basement, his head nearly at floor level, hidden behind the butcher's case from anyone who entered the store. It was a good thing, too, for when the light flickered a second time, he saw Miss Chona, seated on a high chair behind the counter, reach for her walking stick and move around to the front of the counter. She had her back to him when she walked a few steps to reach the far end of the counter, but when she looped around the end and moved to the center of the room to greet the visitor, he saw her face for the first time. The alarmed look in her eyes caused him to freeze where he was.

Miss Chona was not a woman who lost her cool easily. Despite the odd tremors and occasional frightening seizures brought on by her disability, she rambled around the store freely, doing all manner of tasks. If there was a carton to be lifted, she would attempt to lift it herself. If there were groceries to be stacked or vegetables to sort, she went at those things. She did not like to be helped, and he'd learned to not help her unless asked. The only time she let him do work that kept him free and rambling, because he hated sitting still, was if she was reading. Dodo never saw someone who loved to read so much. She read all day. She reminded him of his mother. But his mother mostly read the Bible. Miss Chona read everything—books, magazines, newspapers—and urged him to do the same. He had grown to like reading in the past five months with her encouragement but not as much as he pretended to. He faked it, mostly, just for her. He reckoned he would one day, when he was all grown, sit and read one of the many books she gave him instead of pretending that he did. But not any day soon. He preferred working in the store, and playing in the yard next door with Miss Bernice's children. It was the only place he was allowed to roam freely. He had come to slightly resent that imprisonment. It wasn't fair. He should be free to roam around the Hill like before. But Miss Chona and Aunt Addie had drilled it into his head. Stay close. Watch out for the man from the state. He's coming to take you to a special school. You don't want to go there. Dodo had no idea what the man from the state looked like, but a flash of

fear in Miss Chona's eyes as the customer approached the other side of the butcher's counter gave him pause, and he instinctively lowered his head a few inches into the basement.

He couldn't be seen from where he was unless someone leaned over the counter and looked directly down into the trapdoor opening. Nor could he see clearly who was on the other side of the counter. But he could feel, and that was enough. Feel and smell. Vibrations, nearly as good as sight and sound. And the feel of matters he could sense right away was wrong.

Still standing on the ladder, he pressed the back of his hand to the floorboards on his left. He recognized the uneven bounce of Miss Chona's clumping footsteps as they approached the middle of the floor. This was followed by an unfamiliar sound, an eerie clump-clump of a similar gait coming from the store entrance. The two thumps stopped in front of the butcher's case not five feet from his head.

He could see Miss Chona's face just over the butcher's counter. The look of alarm in her eyes as she talked to the visitor, a man wearing a fedora and a black coat, was unsettling.

Then the man turned his head slightly for a moment, and Dodo saw the face from the side. Panic rose in his throat when he saw who it was.

Doc Roberts.

To the white folks of Pottstown, Doc Roberts was the kind of man whose bespeckled countenance belonged on breakfast cereal boxes. The kind, gentle country doc. Friend to all, deliverer of babies, a wonderful man, a Presbyterian. But for the black folks of the Hill, Doc was a running joke: "Why go see Doc Roberts and pay to die?" He was a special fright for black children of the Hill, center of a thousand nightmares shepherded by the exhausted mothers who needed sleep. Mothers whose children tumbled about restlessly past their bedtimes would burst into darkened bedrooms and warn, "If you don't shut your eyes right now, I'm taking you to Doc Roberts," which cut off the giggles and cackling immediately. Youngsters who refused to swallow the awful-tasting cod-liver oil and ghastly country remedies used to cure colds, fever, and unknown maladies were met with "Suck this medicine down right now or I'll fetch Doc Roberts. Old Doc'll give it to you—in jail," and down the hatch the awful concoction would go. Dodo was frightened of doctors. After the stove exploded in his face, his mother waited three long, painful days gathering money to take him by train to a colored doctor in Reading. The colored doctor firmly and without ceremony covered his swollen face with goop and wrapped bandages around his eyes and ears, which left him helpless. After the bandages were removed, the trouble in his eyes had slowly cleared up, and Dodo watched his mother weep bitterly, mouthing the words "infection" and "doc" to Uncle Nate and Aunt Addie. But neither she nor Uncle Nate nor Aunt Addie made any mention of taking him to Doc Roberts for better results. Doc Roberts was trouble.

And now he was four feet off, talking with Miss Chona.

Miss Chona was leaning on the counter with her left hand, tapping it nervously. Doc's back was to him, so he could not read the doctor's lips. But Dodo could see Miss Chona's mouth, and from his vantage point, he saw the conversation deteriorate quickly from carefully polite to stormy. "Wonderful weather . . . rain last week . . . has it been that long? . . . high school . . . graduation . . . feeling well," she said.

But she looked anything but well. Her face was pale, and he noticed her left hand was trembling slightly. Seeing this, he grew panicked, for this was

a sign she was about to faint or, worse, have one of her seizures. He'd seen those and they terrified him. She'd been shaky and weak in her movements the last week or so, and that, Aunt Addie had told him, was a sign. In fact, just before Aunt Addie left for the icehouse not twenty minutes before, she'd made it a point to tell him to keep a careful eye on Miss Chona, don't let her pick up anything, and to watch her so she doesn't fall. Stay close had been her words. He'd gone to fetch the cartons of cans from the basement only because Miss Chona had insisted. He tried to do it quickly, but obviously not quickly enough, for now he was stuck in the trapdoor opening behind the counter and unsure whether to show himself, for he didn't want Miss Chona to fall while he was down there. The wrath of Aunt Addie if that happened would not be pleasant.

Just as he was about to poke his head out of the trapdoor opening, Miss Chona lifted her left hand off the counter and pointed toward the front of the store, which caused Doc to turn around and look toward the front door. In that instant, with Doc's face turned away, she shot a quick glance down at him in the trapdoor opening and stretched her left hand out, palm flat, fingers spread, like a traffic cop's, as if to say "Stay there!" so he stayed where he was.

He felt the urge to scamper down the ladder to the relative safety of the basement, but Doc had turned to her again, and the boy stared with alarm as the conversation heated up quickly, seeing only Miss Chona's lips and face from his perch below as she talked, her face reddening in anger: "Marching in your parade . . . your problem . . . shameful . . . taxes . . . I'm American, too," the last she indicated angrily, pointing at Doc with a shaky hand. He saw the back of the doctor's neck redden and his shoulders hunch up as he responded. They were arguing full-out now, no question, and Miss Chona's face, which had been surprised when the door opened, was now tightened in rage, her eyebrows arched as she went on. "Colored people . . . Negroes . . . don't know what you're talking about . . . police." He watched Doc respond, his head moving as he yammered something, cutting her off.

She was about to respond, but just as she opened her mouth to speak, Miss Chona whitened, gasped, and her eyes rolled upward; she shook violently for a second and suddenly dropped out of sight, her face disappearing on the other side of the butcher's case. It was as if someone had snatched her from a hole in the floor.

Dodo didn't need to hear to know what happened. The thump of the shaking floor told him she'd dropped like a sack of potatoes.

He slapped a hand to his mouth instinctively, knowing from experience that even his smallest utterances caused noises—he learned that from Uncle Nate when they went hunting. No noise. Cover your mouth or you'll scare off the game. But this was no hunting trip with Uncle Nate's old rifle that knocked you off your feet when it spit fire out of its eye toward a deer or squirrel. This explosion came from inside, as the fear exploded through his body with the shuddering of the floor, and for a moment, he could not remember where he was. Many months later, he would recall the ominous, life-changing thump that ran through his left hand held beneath the floorboard, and how that same left hand had smacked over his mouth so hard he bit his own lip, hanging on to the trapdoor ladder with his right arm wrapped around the rungs, for had that arm not been there, he would have fallen off altogether, as his legs gave way at that moment and he became overwhelmed with the same feeling he'd had when he was kneeling before the stove in his mother's house three years before and the stove exploded,

sending shards of hot iron into his chest, arms, and head that felt like a thousand knives with a heat so intense that he felt cold for weeks afterward. The pain in his head then was so great that it had grown into a living thing; the burning in his eyes so unbearable that his ears, he reasoned, had shut down to defend themselves, so that by the time the bandages were removed, he was forced to stagger about wearing sunglasses for months, which he hated; the business of sound having been removed from the world felt almost secondary to the real problem: his mother's sudden illness, her life ebbing away as his own ears gradually closed. Then Uncle Nate, Aunt Addie, then what? Nothing but Miss Chona and his ears. He could faintly hear a few things sometimes. A car backfiring. The vegetable man's horse as the cart clomped past. But sight and sound were replaced by sight and vibration—noises coming from inside. Inside his heart. Thus, as Miss Chona fell, he thought he heard the sound of his own heart cracking, as if there were a sound to it at all, breaking off, deep inside, for part of him knew he would never see her the same again, if ever. Going . . . going . . . gone. Just like his mother. Just like everything.

That thought pushed power back into his quaking legs and he surged upward, braced himself quickly, and pulled himself out of the trapdoor opening, leaping catlike onto the floor, where he crouched behind the butcher's counter. The counter's face was glass. Dodo peered through the glass case silently, breathing heavily. What he saw over the neatly assembled pigs' feet, sliced meats, ham hocks, cow parts, and ground beef in the case would change the rest of his life: Doc Roberts, his back to him, crouching over the prone figure of Miss Chona.

Every single road Dodo had taken up to that point, every turn, every crevice, every movement, had been divided into the rules of adults from his world that he trusted—his late mother, his uncle Nate and aunt Addie, his cousin Rusty, Miss Paper, even the grim Miss Bernice next door. To the outside world, he was a colored boy who was “slow” or “feble-minded” by those who knew no better. Only careful drilling in the months before by those same people, including Miss Chona, kept him in place at that moment: Stay close. Play dumb. Do not leave the store. Do not venture past Miss Bernice's yard next door. Do not run about. Pretend you don't understand. To do otherwise, he understood, would be a disaster for him. Even Miss Chona had repeated those same instructions just now, before she'd fallen, with her outstretched hand. “Stay there,” she'd said. Stay there. Just keep quiet. The trouble will pass.

But now . . .

It was the thought of Aunt Addie, her fury—even worse, her disappointment—that caused him to place his foot on top of the counter and leap over it.

He was only twelve, so sex had more to do with odd pictures in his mind and an occasional curiosity about one of Miss Bernice's daughters he favored for reasons he wasn't quite sure of. His understanding of girls was that they were necessary, would one day be women, would be required in his life somehow and vice versa; but in the meantime, they were impediments in his daily quest to gather marbles, rocks, and stones, and send them skipping across the creek that ran behind both the yards of the Heaven & Earth Grocery Store and Miss Bernice's house. Girls were not important. Apparently, Doc did not agree, because he was running his hands through Miss Chona's hair and inside her clothes in a way that made the boy suck wind and lose his breath.

Miss Chona had fainted completely. She'd obviously had one of her seizures—they lasted only a few seconds—but afterward she was normally placed on her side by Aunt Addie, who wiped her face, and after a few minutes, she got better and usually sat up. But Doc didn't wait for her to sit up. He'd turned her over, and when the seizure quit, he pushed her so that she lay flat on her back. He quickly ran his right hand across her chest and squeezed. Then he held her there with his left hand and squeezed her chest with the other, the hand working into her blouse, holding her in place while he ran his other hand across her stomach, then down to her groin, pulling up her dress, her legs exposed to the thigh, the boot she wore lying awkwardly exposed, her blouse rumpled where Doc had run his hands so freely. It was a memory that would last much longer than the boy would have liked. Dodo didn't remember yelling. And later, when asked about it, insisted he did not yell, saying if he had, he would have known it. "I know how to keep quiet," he told his Aunt Addie. But that was later, long afterward. Now, without thinking, he jumped off the counter and leaped across the room, knocking Doc into the shelves of cans and crackers behind him. He'd never touched a white man before, not in his whole life, and was surprised at how soft and fat Doc felt, and how easily Doc flew backward when he piled into him, knocking him off Miss Chona and driving him into the shelves that cascaded groceries down on all three of them.

Doc recovered and shoved him off, but before he could rise, Dodo was on his feet and piled into him again like a football player; Dodo was thin but strong, and his weight and strength kept Doc in place. Whether he beat Doc with his fists like they said, the boy was uncertain, for Miss Chona had a second seizure at that moment, and while they usually lasted seconds, this one was worse than the first and lasted much longer.

The sight of her struggle seemed to awaken a strength in Doc, and the boy could feel him vibrating and knew he was shouting. Dodo ignored the shouts, pinning him against the shelf with his head and shoulders, glancing behind him as Miss Chona shook vigorously now, her body spasming wildly. He felt hands on his neck. Doc was strangling him and Dodo's struggle for life became real now. He could feel Doc's fury and wiggled free of Doc's hands and pushed him against the shelf harder, but Doc had his wind, and the boy raised his head just in time to feel Doc striking him. He instinctively struck back twice, hard in the face, and Doc's mouth ceased moving for a moment and blood burst from his lips, and at that moment, the boy realized he was in deep trouble.

Out of the corner of his eye, Dodo saw the light overhead blink, indicating that the front door had opened, and then Aunt Addie was rushing toward Miss Chona. His glance at her caused him to lighten his press on Doc, who flung him off onto the floor and crawled toward Miss Chona, who was shaking violently, her head pounding the floor. Aunt Addie placed her hand under Miss Chona's head. Miss Chona's mouth was wide open. He saw Aunt Addie glance at the countertop, and without being told, Dodo leaped over the counter, grabbed a spoon, and handed it to Aunt Addie. "I tried to help," he cried.

Aunt Addie ignored him, cramming the spoon into Miss Chona's mouth as Doc moved in. Both crouched over Miss Chona now, trying to keep her from shaking so violently, Doc placing his hands underneath her back. She seemed to shake forever.

Aunt Addie, still holding Miss Chona on her side, turned to Dodo and he saw her lips move, saying calmly, "Get some water. Hurry." He complied.

Several long seconds later, Miss Chona quit struggling and lay quiet, her eyes closed, seemingly dead, surrounded by Addie and several neighbors who had now entered and were swathing her face with towels. Dodo glanced anxiously at the door. Doc was gone. He noticed the neighbors there cleaning up, eyeing him nervously, righing the shelves and restacking the fallen items. Several Hill residents were peering through the front window of the store as well.

Aunt Addie wiped Miss Chona's face and stroked her hair and straightened her clothing, and a quick glance at him from her told Dodo she was furious. He stepped to her and tapped her shoulder. He wanted to explain, but she ignored him, speaking to a neighbor. He could see her lips moving. What was she saying?

Then someone tapped him on the shoulder and pointed toward the front door.

He looked up.

Doc was back, two policemen behind him. Over their shoulders, he could see several neighbors staring at all of it grimly.

Doc pointed to him. Dodo read his lips clearly. "There he is," he said.

There was nothing to do but run. He leaped up and tore into the back room of the store, bursting out the back door, a police officer hot on his tail. He sprinted through the yard, dodging the solitary cow that Miss Chona kept to sell kosher milk, but when he reached the creek embankment at the end of the yard, there was nowhere left to run. But he was a fast boy, quick and lithe, and when he spun about, he quickly ducked and dodged under the officer's grasp, then dodged the second officer behind him and sprinted back toward the building.

He knew he couldn't run back inside. Instead, he made for the fire escape ladder that hung from the second-floor window. It was six feet off the ground, above his reach, but there was a crate he kept beneath it just for that purpose. With one smooth leap, he swung himself on it, grabbed a rung with one hand, then the other, pulled himself up, and scurried up the rungs toward the roof.