

19. The Lowgods

In the opening chapter of a novel set against the backdrop of the early 20th century, the narrative introduces a group of characters embarking on a shadowy mission in the rural community of Hemlock Row, near Pottstown, Pennsylvania. Fatty, a troubled man with a penchant for dreaming big yet confined by his circumstances, drives his ancient Packard through a heavy rain alongside his companions, Paper and Big Soap, to this secluded spot. Hemlock Row is described as a desolate collection of shacks inhabited by the Lowgods, a mysterious and private community with origins rumored to be from South Carolina. Distinct from the striving population of Chicken Hill, the Lowgods are an insular group noted for their unique language, customs, and a profound sense of autonomy divorced from the wider societal aspirations of racial progress and assimilation.

The chapter delves deep into the stark contrasts between the Chicken Hill community's aspirations towards upward mobility and the Lowgods' contentment with their isolated existence. The differences are further explored through the character of Paper, who ventures into a Lowgod home seeking aid, illustrating the intersection of desperation, hope, and the search for miraculous solutions to insurmountable problems. Within this setting, the enigmatic figure of Miggy Fludd emerges, a Lowgod with a mythical aura, identified as an oracle who can communicate with the divine through dance and provide foresight and wisdom typed on cards. The narrative weaves a complex tapestry of themes, including the persistence of African cultural retentions, the harsh realities of racial segregation, the dynamics within black communities, and the power of individual agency amidst systemic constraint.

Through vivid characters and a lushly detailed setting, the chapter sets the stage for a broader exploration of identity, community, belonging, and resistance. The mission to secure the release of Dodo from the Pennhurst asylum—a character whose backstory hints at tragedy and injustice—serves as the driving plot point, drawing together unlikely allies and highlighting the lengths to which people will go to right a wrong, even when faced against insurmountable odds. The interplay of dark humor, historical context, and supernatural elements creates an engaging narrative fabric that promises a story of depth, mystery, and human resilience.