

27. The Finger

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.

D
27

The Finger

Dodo was awakened by a shaking of the crib and looked up to see Monkey Pants staring at him. His left hand, which Monkey Pants could hold steady and which he used mostly to communicate, was pointing at Dodo, and his mouth was moving.

"Later," Dodo said.

The last cast had come off the day before. Dodo had been taken from the bed and been escorted to a room where he was issued hospital johnnies and slippers, and was shown his locker, which had nothing in it and to which only the attendants had the key. He was placed in the parade of men to the cafeteria, then the day room, back to the ward briefly, then the cafeteria for lunch, where he collapsed, for his legs were still weak from lack of use, so he was sent back to his crib on the ward, where he'd fallen asleep, to spend the afternoon and evening with Monkey Pants in the relatively empty ward. He was glad to be away from the men.

Monkey Pants wanted to know what the rest of the ward looked like. The bathroom, the day room, the cafeteria. But Dodo was in no mood to talk. The enormity of where he was had crashed on him a second time once he walked among the general population. The desperate loneliness of the place didn't just chafe him, it began to destroy him. He could feel it. The patients, some of whom were kind, spoke to him—he could read their lips—as men speak to children, yet they were powerless when the attendants showed up. Everything was up for grabs, and the kindest patients suffered the worst. At meals, when Dodo turned his face away from the gruel on his tray to lip-read a conversation, hands grabbed at his food. There was a pecking order. The most able patients ran everything, the less capable ones were left on their own. The constant movement—the talking, chattering, biting, shoving, making deals, and pilfering of newspapers and cigarettes—was maddening. He was forced to sit on the floor in the day room because to sit in a place that someone else regularly sat in drew wrath and curses. The constant flow of questions from his fellow patients, many of whom he could not understand, for they had speech disorders or disturbing mannerisms, made lip-reading difficult. Several spoke to him as if he were mentally incompetent. Others discussed matters of great complexity. All seemed to think they didn't belong there. One man said: "Everybody here is sick mentally except me. I have a bad nervous system. Do you have a bad nervous system?" Another confided: "I got here by mistake because I was at night school." Still another, a white man, declared: "You can't be sick, son. When I was a Negro, I never got sick." Their talk frightened him.

When Son of Man appeared, the room snapped to attention. Several patients avoided him, but most, especially the more able ones, gathered around him. He towered over them in his all-white uniform, an ebony messiah exuding power, standing over the flock of society's tossaways, who drifted about him as he moved, an entourage following Moses. Even the second attendant, a white man, seemed to acquiesce to Son of Man. Dodo eased as far from him as possible, burying himself into a corner, but there was no running away in the day room. He noted Son of Man watching him, and when Dodo caught his eye, Son of Man winked. That attention, and the constant buffing of the floor with some kind of powerful-smelling disinfectant, left him with a tremendous headache.

But Dodo could not communicate those things to Monkey Pants. He was too exhausted and confused that day. Also, for the first time, now that the pain in his legs had receded, he began to feel something even more painful: guilt. He thought of the many things he'd done wrong. The occasional swiping of a piece of chocolate in Miss Chona's store. The snatching of a marble from one of Miss Bernice's daughters in her yard. Why had he done those things? Why had Miss Chona been hurt? Why had Uncle Nate and Aunt Addie not come to visit? Because of me, he thought. I did wrong. I attacked a white man. I am in jail. I am here for life. He ignored Monkey Pants's frantic hand waving and looked away until Monkey Pants finally gave up.

They lay there a long while, and when eventually he looked over, he saw Monkey Pants lying on his back, staring at the ceiling, his mouth open, his legs curled in a fetal position toward his chest. He looked odd, as if he were having trouble breathing. Dodo sat up.

"What's the matter, Monkey Pants?"

Monkey Pants was not listening. He stared at the ceiling, drawing his breath in fast huffs and puffs. Dodo thought he might be having a seizure, for he knew what they looked like, having seen Miss Chona have several. Monkey Pants had had several since Dodo arrived. They were short, more frequent than Miss Chona's but equally frightening bursts of gyrations, which sent Monkey Pants heaving and lifting, as if a hand were pushing his back into an arch, his body curved awkwardly, his stomach and pelvis thrusting high in the air, then coming down, several times, followed by the windmilling of his legs and arms as if they were operating on separate motors, his body twisted so horribly and the crib shaking so violently that the floor shook. Those events usually brought several attendants and a nurse bearing needles or pills, which seemed to calm him and brought long hours of fitful sleep afterward. Monkey Pants hated his medicine, and many times Dodo watched him pretend to swallow the litany of pills that were his daily dose only to spit them out the moment the attendant turned away.

As he watched, Monkey Pants's breathing seemed to slow as if he'd willed the spasm away. Then he turned to Dodo again and nodded, signaling that he was better. But Dodo had already retreated under his cloud of depression. "I made a mistake, Monkey Pants," he said. "That's why I'm here."

Monkey Pants's furrowed eyebrows frowned a "no."

"If it wasn't for me, Miss Chona wouldn't have gotten hurt."

Monkey Pants frowned a "no no no," but Dodo shook his head. "Yes yes yes. Don't tell me."

Monkey Pants held out his finger to sign something.

Dodo ignored it.

Then he produced the marble, which always drew Dodo's attention.

"What?"

He watched as Monkey Pants signed a T.

"What else?"

O

"What else?"

And on it went until he spelled out:

T.O.U.C.H.

M.Y.

F.I.N.G.E.R.

"Why?" Dodo asked impatiently.

The disappointed smirk of his friend was too much. So Dodo reached out and the tips of their first fingers touched. Then Monkey Pants removed his finger.

"I bet you can't hold it like that," Dodo said.

Monkey Pants chuckled, and Dodo read that to mean "I bet I can."

"All right then," he said. "Let's see who can hold it the longest."

Monkey Pants thrust his finger out of the crib. A challenge.

Dodo accepted and the two boys held fingers together through the bars of their cribs. Five minutes. Ten minutes. But Dodo's arm became tired and he withdrew. "Not fair. You can rest your arm on the bed."

Monkey Pants shrugged.

Suddenly the gloom and the guilt and the pain fell away, for here was a challenge, and Dodo became a boy again. He shifted to his right side, propped his left fist under his head for support, and thrust his right hand through the crib bars, first finger outward, and said, "Again."

Monkey Pants obliged, and they battled again, fingers touching. Five minutes. Ten minutes, twenty. Thirty. As they held, Dodo began to talk, for Monkey Pants needed his left hand to talk, which meant Dodo was free to do the talking for both of them. He told Monkey Pants what the day room looked like, and the bathroom, and the weird attendant who had the hiccups all day, and the patient who said he was a Negro once. His arm was so tired that he wanted to quit, so he chatted more, hoping that his talk would cause Monkey Pants to tire. But Monkey Pants held on.

After an hour, Dodo quit and dropped his finger.

A glint of white teeth and laughter from Monkey Pants's crib drew a frown out of him.

"You're cheating. You're lying on your back."

Monkey Pants motioned that he should do the same.

So he did, turning on his back and offering his right finger to Monkey Pants's left finger. "Let's battle."

They held like that for twenty minutes. Forty minutes. An hour. Two hours. Dinner came. The attendant who came with their dinner trays, amused by the game he saw afoot, left the trays and returned to pick them up later, the food uneaten. The two boys ignored him, their contest of wills now full-out. Monkey Pants soiled his bed. Dodo did the same. The attendants noted it and moved on to the next bed. Nobody else came. Both boys held their fingers tightly together, neither willing to give up.

Then night came, and with it, change.

At first, they held on, like the men they imagined themselves to be, but as the patients filed in from the day room and stirred about, finally settling into bed, the new shift of attendants dimmed the overhead lights, then the room went to blackness, leaving only the lights from the attendants' work

station reflecting into the room. Most of the men lay in their beds fitfully, trying to sleep.

Still the boys held on.

Dodo could not see Monkey Pants's finger now, but he could make out the shape of his arm from the light of the attendants' desk. The ward was U-shaped, with beds lining both sides and the attendants' desk in the middle, so that light from the attendants' station cast an eerie glow on both sides of the unit. But the light only stretched to the middle of the floor, just enough so that Dodo could make out the thin white arm of Monkey Pants but not much more.

Most of the men were asleep now, for they were an hour into bedtime, with several of the men snoring, Dodo guessed, as he recognized the familiar humps going up and down steadily. Drowsiness laid on him hard now, and he could not hold up his head but rather lay with his head back on the pillow, looking at the ceiling, with his arm out, touching Monkey Pants. He realized he could not hold out much longer. Sleep was winning. Monkey Pants, too, was weakening. Finally Monkey Pants's finger fell off his, then he recovered and offered his finger again, which Dodo took on, for he was up to the challenge. He was the better man! Then Monkey Pants's finger dropped off again.

"Come on, or I win," he hissed, holding out his finger.

But Monkey Pants's finger did not come.

Dodo lay on his back, fighting sleep, satisfied. Exhausted, he raised his head to look over at his friend in triumph just to make sure, but in the dim light, he could not see Monkey Pants or his arm. He had triumphed.

Then the light that came from the attendants' desk suddenly shifted and he saw movement at the foot of his crib, and Dodo forgot all about his victory. For there he stood, clad in his sparkling white attendant's uniform, smiling, his teeth visible in the dim light, his handsome face silhouetted against the light that reflected from the attendants' desk.

Son of Man.

"Hey, Peacock," he said.

The two cribs were five inches apart, and Dodo felt terror squeeze his throat as Son of Man lifted the edge of his crib away from Monkey Pants's crib, making no noise, then slipped into the space between them, blocking out the view of Monkey Pants. It was as if a wall had been set between him and the only safety he'd known in that place.

With one quick motion, Son of Man flicked the locks on each side of Dodo's crib and slid the bars down.

Dodo sat up quickly but his legs were weak, and an arm slammed him down. Dodo opened his mouth to scream but a hand clamped over his mouth and nose, and squeezed, crushing his face so hard that he felt his nose might break off. Son of Man placed a finger to his lips as if to say "Shh."

In one swift motion, he pushed Dodo's head to the side, grabbed him, flipped him onto his side, slammed a pillow on his head, and pressed it tightly against his face. With one hand holding the pillow, Son of Man yanked up Dodo's hospital johnnie, baring his backside.

Dodo squirmed and resisted, but Son of Man was strong and powerful. Dodo kicked his legs but the man pressed one knee on his bottom leg and held the other up easily.

Then Dodo felt cold salve being rammed between his butt cheeks and then an explosive hot burst of pain—but only for a second—for at that

moment the floor began to shake and the knee that held down his legs drew away swiftly as Son of Man turned away and loosened his grip. Something had distracted him.

He tossed the pillow off Dodo's face, and Dodo felt the shaking of the ward floor at the same time—a heavy shake, heavier than he had ever felt—as if an earthquake had come. The lights were suddenly snapped on and there was a quick scrambling about the room as several patients sat up and began squawking, with several already out of bed and wandering about, confused. Son of Man stood among them, ignoring them, enraged, ripping off his white attendant's jacket, using it as a towel to wipe his face and head, which, to Dodo's surprise, were covered with human feces.

In the crib next to him, Monkey Pants was wriggling uncontrollably, having his biggest seizure yet, his legs and arms twisting wildly, his mouth open—obviously yelling, Dodo guessed, but with intent, for his good hand, his left, was holding what was left of the excrement he'd tossed at Son of Man, striking him in the head and smearing some on Son of Man's jacket and pants as well. His seizure and yelling had awakened the entire ward and summoned other attendants.

Dodo saw two attendants rush to Monkey Pants's bed and try to place a spoon in his mouth, but it was impossible, for his seizure was in full charge. After several long seconds, his seizure ended, and he lay back on the bed. An attendant moved to change Monkey Pants's bedding. But Son of Man stopped them. Now that the lights were on, Dodo could read Son of Man's lips.

“Leave him be,” he said. “I'll change him.”

They stepped aside and were about to return to the attendants' station when a young white doctor appeared. Dodo could not understand everything he said, but he got the gist of it, for Son of Man and the other two attendants turned suddenly obsequious. The doctor noted that the cribs of Dodo and Monkey Pants had been moved apart and seemed to want to know why. He noted the side of Dodo's crib had been pulled down and asked about medication being delivered at that hour. Whatever explanation Son of Man offered did not seem to impress the doctor. He indicated that Monkey Pants should be cleaned up, and that the two cribs should be placed close together again, as Dodo's crib was against the poor patient whose bed was on the other side. The doctor examined Monkey Pants and quickly ordered something from one of the attendants, then examined Dodo briefly, declaring that since he was now healed, Dodo should be moved to a bed in the morning. He issued other instructions that Dodo did not understand. But by the time the doctor was finished talking, Son of Man had left the ward. The doctor then turned to examine Monkey Pants again, this time more carefully. Monkey Pants had not spoken. He lay inert, breathing in and out in quick, shallow breaths. An attendant returned with a tray of medicine, the doctor administered a shot, and Monkey Pants seemed to recover. He moved normally, sleepily, before closing his eyes and settling into sleep. Order was restored. Then the lights were doused again.

But Dodo could not sleep. He lay in terror that Son of Man would return. He fought sleep. He was terrified that he'd awaken to Son of Man returning to visit that extreme pain on him again. He did not know what to do. He could not help himself, and once again, guilt assailed him. I did wrong, he thought. I did wrong, wrong, wrong. I'll be here forever.

Sleep began to push at him again, and as it did, his terror grew. He began to wonder whether he was sleeping or not, and since he could no longer tell,

that increased his terror. He began to sob. He was doomed.