

8. Paper

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.

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Paper

hona's decision to hide Dodo from the state of Pennsylvania wasn't even the lead story when Patty Millison—known as Newspaper, Paper for short—held court inside Chona's Heaven & Earth Grocery Store that following Saturday.

Paper—whose smooth dark chocolate brown skin, perky breasts, slim buttocks, and wild cornrowed hair was appended by her running mouth that could keep neither secret nor food, for she ate like a horse but never gained an ounce—was a laundress who held court inside the Heaven & Earth Grocery Store every Saturday. Saturday was Miss Chona's Sabbath, which gave Paper free rein to trade quips, juicy gossip, and other vital local information out of Chona's hearing. The colored maids, housekeepers, saloon cleaners, factory workers, and bellhops of Chicken Hill who gathered near the vegetable bin each Saturday morning to hear Paper's news, however, loved her chatter. Paper knew more news than the local papers, which she actually never read. In fact, there was a rumor about that Paper couldn't read at all—she'd been seen at the Second Baptist church holding the hymnal book upside down more than once. That didn't matter. Her neat wooden frame house on Franklin Street was perched at one of the main roads leading up to Chicken Hill, giving her a view of the town in front and the Hill in the back. Still, it wasn't the location of her home that allowed Paper to serve as the source of the most intrepid reports on the Hill or her being as capable as the most able reporter from the nimble Pottstown Mercury or even the mighty Philadelphia Bulletin. Rather, it was her effect on the male species. Her beauty, her easy laughter, glimmering eyes, and instant smile for every stranger she met, made her a magnet for men. Men spilled their guts to her. Hardened thugs who gutted one another with knives in alleyways watched her sidle down the muddy roads of the Hill in the afternoon and felt a sudden urge to repent, recalling the innocence of their childhood, the glorious yellow sunlight that kissed their faces when they burst out of church after Sunday School in shirt and tie on Palm Sunday, whirling palm fronds in the air as their mothers laughed. Mild-mannered deacons who sat on their porches with grim faces after toiling all day as smiling waiters in white jackets at the Pottstown Social Club serving meals to the town's white fathers watched Paper's proud breasts swing freely beneath her dress as she floated past and suddenly heard the sound of a thousand drums pounding down the Amazon, accompanied by visions of drowning their bosses. Bricklayers paved her chimney just to watch her bend over the petunias in her gloriously full-flowered yard. Mule skinnners

hauled barrels of drinking water to her house just to hear the sound of her laughter. Pullman porter royalty from the nearby Reading Railroad floated by her porch regularly to drop off laundry and tell high stories about travels to far-off places like Iowa and Florida and even Los Angeles, dreaming of doing the bunga-bunga with Paper, whom they saw as the wild local. White men found her irresistible, which is why she held no lucrative maid's job. "I'm retired from days work," she told friends with a laugh. "Too much trouble. The men grope and the women mope." White housewives from town who wanted their husbands to climb the greasy pole of opportunity in Pottstown's thriving banking and manufacturing worlds made a steady trek to Paper's house bearing their husbands' laundry, for she washed with such thoroughness and ironed with such professional skill that even Willard Millstone Potts, the town's chief banker, grandson of Mr. John Potts himself, the old fart who lay in the graveyard gathering worms, thank God—parachuted over to hell even if the bridge was out, the old black folks prayed—sent his shirts to her house to have them cleaned and pressed. Paper, as the old folks said, had turn—talent. Women found her funny and interesting, for unlike most men, she was curious about their opinions, was yet to be married, and swore she had no plans to. "I can do better without a man," she declared, which made her high cotton and one up on the Chicken Hill's most respected stateswoman, Addie, Nate's wife, who was a Townsend, and everyone knew those Townsends were too bold to live long anyway. They'd been out of the South too long. Too black, too strong, too bold. They refused to step off the sidewalk when a white woman approached; they forgot to avoid looking a white person in the eye. They forgot all the behaviors that, back home, could have you seeing your life flashing before your eyes as a noose was lowered around your neck—or worse, staring at iron bars for twenty years with your hopes flatter than yesterday's beer, dreaming about old junk that you should've sold, or deer you should've shot but missed, or women you should have married and didn't, having wandered face-first into the five-fingered karate chop of the white man's laws. A colored person couldn't survive in the white man's world being ignorant. They had to know the news. That's why Paper was so important. She was a Pottstown special.

Thus, when she decided that the lead story in her Saturday morning announcements at Chona's Heaven & Earth Grocery Store had nothing to do with Miss Chona's decision to hide Dodo from the man from the state, not one of the group of housewives, bums, and factory janitors standing about questioned it. Everybody knew Dodo was doomed anyway. He was Addie's nephew, the child of her late sister, Thelma, who died three years after a stove in her house blew up and took the boy's ears away. The "special school," which everybody knew wasn't a school at all but rather the horrific Pennhurst sanatorium up the road in Spring City, was just another injustice in a world full of them, so why dwell on it? Plus, Paper's gossip that Saturday was too juicy to ignore. She rolled it out like this: "Big Soap knocked Fatty's gold tooth out."

Big Soap was a relative newcomer and a Hill favorite, a huge Italian named Enzo Carissimi—six feet six, majestically built with wide shoulders, huge hands, alluring brown eyes, and a gentle nature—who was constantly bursting into laughter. He had emigrated from Sicily to America at twelve with his extended family, one of the few white families still on the Hill. Fatty Davis, a clever, stout, two-fisted, gregarious hustler who owned the Hill's only jook joint, was also twelve then, and the two became fast

friends. Fatty happily served as Big Soap's translator and English tutor, the two sharing a love of building and hustling up dollars. After graduating from high school, they worked at several plants together, the most recent being Flagg Industries in nearby Stowe, which made steel nipples and fittings for steam pipes. They often walked home from work together. Paper's announcement quickly drew a crowd. Rusty, standing at the edge of the group, received the news with disbelief.

"You telling what you seen, Paper? Or what somebody told you?"

Paper's huge brown eyes landed on Rusty, whose lean frame tensed as Paper's eyes took him in. "Rusty," she said patiently, "I seen Soap knock out Fatty's tooth, okay? With my own eyes. Yesterday."

"How come I ain't heard nothing from Fatty about it? I was over to his jook last night."

"Doing what?"

"That's my business."

"Did you see Fatty last night?"

"I wasn't looking for him. I was taking care of some business."

"Well, whatever that business was, Fatty wasn't in it. 'Cause he drove to Philly last night to get his lip fixed. His top lip had swolled up to the size of a hot dog."

The women standing in the circle laughed. Addie, working the far end of the counter near the back of the store, drifted over to listen. "Were they drinking?" she asked.

"I don't think so," Paper said.

Rusty smirked. "How do you know? You smell their breath?"

Paper tipped her head and gazed at him sedately. Rusty was handsome, she thought, but he looked terrible when he smirked. She wondered if he knew how good he looked when he remained calm as opposed to making those stupid faces. She decided he didn't. He was, after all, like most men: a moron.

"What you got against me, Rusty?" Paper asked coolly.

Rusty, standing with his hands in his overall pockets, reached for his cigarettes and suddenly couldn't remember which pocket they were in. He felt about his overalls, finding himself short of breath. He always felt like this when Paper was around. "All this who-shot-John nonsense don't mean nothing unless you seen the whole thing, Paper. You seen it all?"

"Only the end," she said.

"Which was . . . ?"

"I just said it. Soap popped him."

Still patting himself for his cigarettes, Rusty gave up and dropped his hands in his pockets, feeling as if something had slipped away. He heard himself plead, "C'mon, Paper . . . story it up like you know how. Put a little pop in it, a little scoop, y'know."

"Why should I?"

"'Cause if you tell it any other way, it'll sound like a lie."

For the first time, Paper softened a bit and smiled. Rusty, she had to confess, had some curve in him. He had an innocence about him, and despite the loose-fitting overalls, his muscled arms and firm chest gave her innards a kind of shove, one she hadn't felt in years, not since she was seventeen and took her first and last bus ride out of Vestavia, Alabama, north to points unknown.

"I hear your aunt Clemy's bringing her cheese cookies to the repast after church tomorrow."

“She calls ’em cheese straws.”

“I don’t care if she calls ’em George Washington. If she brings ’em, will you remember your friends?”

“I might.”

Satisfied and now with a full audience, Paper launched in.

“I was weeding in my garden when I seen Fatty and Soap come up the Hill from work. They stopped a few feet from my yard and Fatty said, ‘Go ’head, Soap, do it. I know you wanna. Go ahead. Do it. Get it over with.’ ”

Here she demonstrated, sticking out her lower jaw, her body curving with her back arched. This drew laughter from the crowd, which now included several new customers who wandered in, stranger coloreds from nearby Hemlock Row, Phoenixville, and Stowe, a few day laborers who lived at white farms outside town and came to Heaven & Earth on weekends to enjoy the sights and sounds.

Paper, glancing at her audience, had to work to keep the smile off her face as she continued. “You know how Soap is. He wouldn’t hurt a fly. He said, ‘I ain’t gonna do it, Fatty.’ But Fatty kept on him, saying, ‘Go ’head, go ’head, get it over with.’ ”

And here her eyes sparkled and she stood up straight, her beautiful face shining in the sunlight that glowed into the store window, the light bouncing off the fruit and vegetables and cascading into the corners of the Heaven & Earth Grocery Store, illuminating the peppers and carrots, the Saltines and apple peelers, making life seem as full and new and fresh as the promise of Pennsylvania had once been for so many of those standing about who had come up from the South to the North, a land of supposed good, clean freedom, where a man could be a man and a woman could be a woman, instead of the reality where they now stood, a tight cluster of homes enclosed by the filth of factories that belched bitter smoke into a gray sky and tight yards filled with goats and chickens in a part of town no one wanted, in homes with no running water or bathrooms. Living like they were down home. Except they weren’t down home. They were up home. And it was the same. But moments like this made life worthwhile, for Paper was a banging drum. And rolling out rumors and news chatter was her gospel song, always melodious and joyful.

She stood among them, her eyes glistening. “Soap didn’t want to give in, but Fatty kept knocking at him, saying, ‘Go ’head, Soap. I’m a man. Go ’head.’ You could see the idea kind of hit Soap,” she said. “It kind of growed on him. And with Fatty pushing him along, I reckon his mind told him it was okay.”

And here she chuckled.

“So he balled up his fist . . . and I mean that white boy reached back and sent that big fist of his rambling through four or five states before it said hello to Fatty. It started in Mississippi, gone up through the Carolinas, stopped for coffee in Virginia, picked up steam coming outta Maryland . . . and boom! He liked to part Fatty from this world. It landed on Fatty’s face something terrible. I can still hear the sound of it. Knocked Fatty clean off his feet and sent that gold tooth of his, the front one, sent that tooth rambling.”

“Then?” Rusty asked.

“Weren’t no then, Rusty,” she said. “Soap turned and went on home. And Fatty set there on his poop hole. After he figured out his head was still on his shoulders, he got up and started crawling round on his hands and knees like a dog pooping a bone.”

“And what’d you do the whole time?” Rusty asked.

“What you think? I went out there.”

“You did not!”

“Sho nuff. I come out my yard and said, ‘Fatty what’s the matter?’ He said, ‘My gold tooth’s gone!’ It took us a good while searching round in the dirt, but we found it. That put a little dip in his stride, putting that thing in his pocket. He walked off with a hole in his teeth the size of Milwaukee.” Rusty and the others laughed, and when the cackling died down, Paper stuck a toothpick in her mouth. “Dick Clemens, who works over at Flaggs, he come by later and told me what happened. Turns out some big-shot inspector had come out there. He’s a top dog. Shows up twice a year from Philly. They got to spic-and-span the whole place when he comes. Wash down everything: the machines, the windows, the trusses, the posts, all the gadgets. Got to give the beauty treatment to everything.

“Well, Fatty had just got a promotion over there, and Soap was under him. They were a team, but Fatty got too big for his britches. He got high siddity ordering that white boy around. He had Soap doing all the work while he sat around napping.”

She paused, surveying the crowd, and out of instinct glanced at the empty chair at the far end of the counter where Miss Chona normally sat, lording over the sweets. The chair was empty.

“When the big inspector come to the room where Fatty and Soap was, he pointed to one of the fire hoses hanging on the wall and said, ‘Has this fire hose been taken out and tested?’ Fatty told him, ‘Yes sir, it’s been tested.’ ‘Who tested it?’ ‘Well, Soap here,’ Fatty said.

“Soap didn’t know any more about testing a fire hose than a hog knows a holiday. But being Italian and not speaking English too good, he saw Fatty nodding, so he said, ‘Aye, aye, sì sì,’ or however them Italians say yes.

“So the inspector pulled the hose off the rack and shook it. A peanut dropped out the nozzle. He said, ‘I put that peanut in there six months ago when I was here before.’

Fatty said, ‘But it’s a clean peanut, sir.’

“Well, that big cheese got mad and fired ’em both on the spot. On the way home, I reckon Fatty wanted to clear things, since he knew Soap’s momma will whip Soap bowlegged for losing his job. You know how Soap’s momma is. That little lady’ll put that giant into a condition! She’ll clean his ass up!”

The crowd guffawed, and as they dispersed, several remarked that Fatty, rascal that he was, just had too many jobs, is what it was. He drove a cab. He had a laundry service. He worked at the plant. Plus ran his jook joint and hamburger stand. Others speculated that poor Big Soap felt he owed Fatty, since Fatty had taken him down to join the Empire Fire Company before they worked at Flaggs and introduced him to the Irishmen down there who sat around drinking beer and playing cards all day while making Big Soap wash the company’s new fire truck and pull the company’s old horse-pulled fire wagon around the station just to prove to them he belonged, being that he was the first Italian in the fire company’s history. Big Soap just had the wrong kind of friends, they all agreed.

As the crowd chatted, Paper drifted away to the back counter where Addie stood. She waited until the crowd drifted far enough away so that she could not be heard easily, then leaned over the counter.

“Gimme a packet of BC Powder,” she said casually, pointing over Addie’s shoulder.

Addie reached behind her, grabbed the item, and tossed it on the counter. Her eyes flitted left to the door near the vegetable stand, stopping on a tall Negro stranger in a white shirt and felt cap who stood over the vegetables pretending to regard the onions. Paper glanced at him, then draped her long pretty fingers around the headache powder.

“You got a headache, Paper?” Addie asked.

“Naw. But that nigger’s gonna have one. It was all I could do to not tell Rusty about him. Rusty would beat the tar out of him.”

“Maybe he’s from Hemlock Row.”

“No. The Hemlock Row colored are shorter, the heads are different, and they favors one another. He’s from the state.”

“The state ain’t got no colored workers,” Addie said. “Maybe he’s a Pullman porter.”

“If he’s a Pullman porter, I’ll eat him without salt. Look at them shoes. What kind of porter would be caught dead wearing them raggedy-ass shoes. Plus, I know every porter that comes through here. I’m thinking maybe he’s a state man. Might be from the Pennhurst nuthouse. Sent to fetch Dodo.”

“A colored? Colored don’t do nothing but clean the floor and cheer up the tide out at Pennhurst, to my knowing. All the same. He could be. How we gonna know for sure?”

Paper thought a moment, then said, “Miggy Fludd, from Hemlock Row, she knows every colored up there. She might know who he is.”

Addie watched the man, then glanced away, worried. “The state sent a white feller out here to fetch Dodo three times. Same man.”

“You must’a really hit his button when you runned him off.”

“I ain’t run him off. Miss Chona run him off.”

“Well, she set him off,” Paper said.

The two watched as the man swiveled his head around quickly, looking through the crowded store and glancing around, then moved from the onions over to the okra, fingering one, then another. Paper smirked, “That’s something. I never met a colored who worked for the state before. You want me to chat him up?”

“No,” Addie said. “He got to pass your house when he leaves. If he’s driving a car, write down the license number.”

Paper chuckled. “I’m allergic to that. I can write a few wee old letters on a page here and there, but that’s it. You want me to tell Fatty? Fatty can