

12. Pennies and Grits

****Chapter Summary: Pennies and Grits, 1956****

In the chapter "Pennies and Grits," set in 1956, Kya Clark, a solitary girl abandoned by her family, struggles with loneliness in the marshlands. Longing for connection, she frequently seeks out Tate, a boy who had helped her navigate the marsh three years prior. Despite spotting him fishing one day, she hesitates to approach him, torn between the desire for companionship and the fear of rejection.

Living in squalor, Kya wears old overalls and no shoes, and her attempts to maintain a semblance of normalcy dwindle as she faces the harsh reality of her isolation. A poignant moment occurs when she tries on her mother's sundress, only to hang it back up, realizing its impracticality for her life.

Her subsistence lifestyle is threatened when Jumpin', a store owner and one of the few people Kya interacts with, informs her he cannot buy her mussels due to reaching his quota. Desperately in need of money, Kya turns to smoking fish, a skill she learned from her father. Although the smoked fish are not appealing, Jumpin' agrees to try selling them on consignment.

Kya's plight moves Jumpin's wife, Mabel, to offer help. Despite skepticism that anyone would buy the smoked fish, Mabel decides to cook them and arranges for the community church to provide Kya with essential items in exchange. The next day, Jumpin' introduces Kya to Mabel, who warmly offers to trade goods for her smoked fish and assists her in other practical matters, including starting a garden.

The encounter leads to a glimmer of hope for Kya, who works to restore her mother's garden as a way to assert control over her life. Upon finding an old barrette of her mother's, memories and a sense of longing resurface, but Kya begins to accept her mother's permanent absence.

The chapter concludes with Kya returning to Jumpin's wharf to find the promised goods awaiting her, a testament to the kindness and community support she had not anticipated. This gesture marks a turning point in her understanding of human connections and tentative steps towards trusting others.