

Chapter 5

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.

CHAPTER 5

Patricia woke up the next morning with the entire side of her face swollen and hot. She stood in front of her bathroom mirror and looked at the enormous white bandage that covered the left side of her head, wrapped beneath her chin, and around her forehead. Sadness flooded her chest. She'd had a left earlobe all her life, and suddenly it was gone. She felt like a friend had died.

But then that familiar fishhook wormed its way into her brain and got her moving:

"You have to make sure the children are all right," it said. "You can't let them feel frightened."

So she brushed her hair over the bandage as best she could, went downstairs to the den, and made Toaster Strudel. And when Blue came down, followed by Korey, and they sat on their stools on the other side of the counter, she smiled as best she could, even though her face felt tight, and asked, "Do you want to see it?"

"Can I?" Korey asked.

She found the beginning of the gauze at the back of her head, untaped it, and began the long process of unwrapping it around her

forehead, beneath her chin, over her skull, until she got down to the final cotton pad and gingerly began to pull it away. "Do you want to look, too?" she asked Blue.

He nodded, and she lifted the square bandage and felt cool air wash over her sweaty, tender tissue.

Korey sucked in her breath.

"Gnarly," she said. "Did it hurt?"

"It didn't feel nice," Patricia said.

Korey came around the counter and stood so close her hair brushed Patricia's shoulder. Patricia inhaled her Herbal Essences shampoo and realized that it had been a long time since they'd been this close. They used to squeeze in together on the La-Z-Boy and watch movies on the sun porch together, but Korey was almost as tall as Patricia now.

"I can see teeth marks, Blue, look," Korey said, and her little brother dragged over a kitchen stool and stood on it, balanced with one hand on his sister's shoulder, both of them inspecting their mother's ear.

"Another person knows what you taste like now," Blue said.

Patricia hadn't thought about it that way before, but she found the idea disturbing. After Korey ran to get her ride to school, and Blue's car pool honked, Patricia followed him to the door.

"Blue," she said. "You know Granny Mary wouldn't do something like this."

By the way he stopped and looked at her, Patricia realized it was exactly what he'd been thinking.

"Why?" he asked.

"Because this woman has a disease that's affected her mind," Patricia said.

"Like Granny Mary," Blue said, and Patricia realized that was how

she'd described Miss Mary's senility to him when she'd moved in. "It's a different disease," she said. "But I want you to know that I would not let Granny Mary stay with us if it weren't safe for you and your sister. I would never do anything that put the two of you in danger."

Blue turned this over in his head, and then his car pool honked again and he ran out the door. Patricia hoped she'd reached him. It was so important that the children have good memories of at least one of their grandparents.

"Patty," Carter called from the top of the stairs, a paisley tie in one hand, a red striped tie in the other. "Which do I wear? This one says I'm fun and think outside the box, but the red says power."

"What's the occasion?" Patricia asked.

"I'm taking Haley to lunch."

"Paisley," she said. "Why are you taking Dr. Haley to lunch?"

He started putting on the red tie as he came down the stairs.

"I'm throwing my hat in the ring," Carter said, wrapping his tie around his neck and looping the knot into existence. "I'm tired of waiting in line."

He stood in front of the hall mirror.

"I thought you said you didn't want to be chief of psychiatry," Patricia said.

He tightened his tie in the mirror.

"We need to make more money," he said.

"You wanted to spend time with Blue this summer," Patricia said as Carter turned around.

"I'll have to figure out a way to do both," Carter said. "I'll need to be at all the morning consults, I'll have to spend more time on rounds, I'll need to start bringing in more grants—this job belongs to me, Patricia. I only want what's mine."

"Well," she said. "If it's what you want..."

"It'll only be for a few months," he said, then stopped and cocked his head at her left ear. "You took off your bandage?"

"Just to show Korey and Blue," she said.

"I don't think it looks so bad," he said, and examined her ear, his thumb on her chin, cocking her head to the side. "Leave the bandage off. It's going to heal fine."

He kissed her good-bye, and it felt like a real kiss.

Well, she thought, if that's the effect trying to become chief of psychiatry has on him, I'm all for it.

Patricia looked at herself in the hall mirror. The black stitches looked like insect legs against her soft skin, but they made her feel less conspicuous than the bandage. She decided to leave it off.

Ragtag clicked into the front hall and stood by the door, wanting to go out. For a moment Patricia thought about putting him on a leash, then remembered that Ann Savage was in the hospital.

"Go on, boy," she said, opening the door. "Go tear up that mean old lady's trash."

Ragtag charged off down the driveway and Patricia locked the door behind him. She'd never done that before, but she'd never been attacked by a neighbor in her own yard before either.

She walked down the three brick steps to the garage room, where she unlatched the side of the hospital bed.

"Did you sleep well, Miss Mary?" she asked.

"An owl bit me," Miss Mary said.

"Oh, dear," Patricia said, pulling Miss Mary into a sitting position and swinging her legs out of bed.

Patricia began the long, slow process of getting Miss Mary into her housecoat and then into her easy chair, finally getting her a glass of orange juice with Metamucil stirred into it just as Mrs. Greene

arrived to make her breakfast.

Like most elementary schoolteachers, Miss Mary had drunk from the fountain of eternal late middle age; Patricia never remembered her as young, exactly, but she remembered when she had been strong enough to live on her own about a hundred and fifty miles upstate near Kershaw. She remembered the half-acre vegetable garden Miss Mary worked behind her house. She remembered the stories of Miss Mary working in the bomb factory during the war and how the chemicals turned her hair red, and how people came to tell her their dreams and she would tell them lucky numbers to play.

Miss Mary could predict the weather by reading coffee grounds, and the local cotton farmers found her so accurate they always bought her a cup of coffee when she came by Husker Early's store to pick up her mail. She refused to let anyone eat from the peach tree in her backyard no matter how good the fruit looked because she said it had been planted in sadness and the fruit tasted bitter. Patricia had tried one once and it tasted soft and sweet to her, but Carter got mad when she told him about it, so she'd never done it again.

Miss Mary had been able to draw a map of the United States from memory, known the entire periodic table by heart, taught school in a one-room schoolhouse, brewed healing teas, and sold what she called fitness powders her entire life. Dime by dime, dollar by dollar, she'd put her sons through college, then put Carter through medical school. Now she wore diapers and couldn't follow a story about gardening in the Post and Courier.

Patricia's pulse throbbed in her bandaged ear, sending her upstairs for Tylenol. She had just swallowed three when the phone rang, exactly on time: 9:02 a.m. No one would dream of calling the house before nine, but you also didn't want to appear too anxious.

"Patricia?" Grace said. "Grace Cavanaugh. How are you feeling?"

For some reason, Grace always introduced herself at the beginning of each phone call.

"Sad," Patricia said. "She bit off my earlobe and swallowed it."

"Of course," Grace said. "Sadness is one of the stages of grief."

"She swallowed my earring, too," Patricia said. "The new ones I had on last night."

"That is a pity," Grace said.

"It turns out Carter got them for free from a patient," Patricia said.

"He didn't even buy them."

"Then you didn't want them anyway," Grace said. "I spoke with Ben this morning. He said Ann Savage has been admitted to MUSC and is in intensive care. I'll call if I find out anything further."

The phone rang all morning. The incident hadn't appeared in the morning paper, but it didn't matter. CNN, NPR, CBS—no newsgathering organization could compete with the women of the Old Village.

"There's already a run on alarms," Kitty said. "Horse said the people he called about getting one told him it would be three weeks before they could even make it out here to look at the house. I don't know how I'm going to survive for three weeks. Horse says we're safe with his guns, but trust me, I've been dove hunting with that man. He can barely hit the sky."

Slick called next.

"I've been praying for you all morning," she said.

"Thank you, Slick," Patricia said.

"I heard that Mrs. Savage's nephew moved down here from someplace up north," Slick said. She didn't need to be more specific than that. Everyone knew that any place up north was roughly the same: lawless, relatively savage, and while they might have nice museums and the Statue of Liberty, people cared so little for each

other they'd let you die in the street. "Leland told me some real estate agents stopped by and tried to get him to put her house on the market, but he won't sell. None of them saw Mrs. Savage when they were there. He told them she couldn't get out of bed, she was so poorly. How's your ear?"

"She swallowed part of it," Patricia said.

"I'm so sorry," Slick said. "Those really were nice earrings."

Grace called again later that afternoon with breaking news.

"Patricia," she said. "Grace Cavanaugh. I just heard from Ben: Mrs. Savage passed an hour ago."

Patricia suddenly felt gray. The den looked dark and dingy. The yellow linoleum seemed worn, and she saw every grubby hand mark on the wall around the light switch.

"How?" she asked.

"It wasn't rabies, if that's what you're worried about," Grace said.

"She had some kind of blood poisoning. She was suffering from malnutrition, she was dehydrated, and she was covered with infected cuts and sores. Ben said the doctors were surprised she lasted this long. He even said"—and here Grace lowered her voice—"that she had track marks on her inner thigh. She'd probably been injecting something for the pain. I'm sure the family doesn't want anyone to know about that."

"I feel just miserable about this," Patricia said.

"Is this about those earrings again?" Grace asked. "Even if you got back the one she swallowed, could you ever really bring yourself to wear them? Knowing where they'd been?"

"I feel like I should take something by," Patricia said.

"Take something by to the nephew?" Grace asked, and her voice climbed the register so that nephew was a high, clear note of disbelief.

"His aunt passed," Patricia said. "I should do something."

"Why?" Grace asked.

"Should I take him flowers, or something to eat?" Patricia asked.

There was a long pause on Grace's end, and then she spoke firmly.

"I am not sure what the appropriate gesture is to make toward the family of the woman who bit off your ear, but if you felt absolutely compelled, I certainly wouldn't take food."

Maryellen called on Saturday and that was what decided things for Patricia.

"I thought you should know," she said over the phone, "we did the cremation for Ann Savage yesterday." After her youngest daughter had entered first grade, Maryellen had gotten a job as the bookkeeper at Stuhr's Funeral Homes. She knew the details of every death in Mt. Pleasant.

"Do you know anything about a memorial service or donations?"

Patricia asked. "I want to send something."

"The nephew did a direct cremation," Maryellen said. "No flowers, no memorial service, no notice in the paper. I don't even think he's putting her in an urn, unless he got one from someplace else. He'll probably just toss her ashes in a hole for all the care he showed."

It ate at Patricia, and not merely because she suspected that not putting Ragtag on a leash had somehow caused Ann Savage's death. One day, she would be the same age as Ann Savage and Miss Mary. Would Korey and Blue act like Carter's brothers and ship her around like an unwanted fruitcake? Would they argue over who got stuck with her? If Carter died, would they sell the house, her books, her furniture, and split up the proceeds between themselves and she'd have nothing left of her own?

Every time she looked up and saw Miss Mary standing in a doorway, dressed to go out, purse over one arm, staring at her