

Chapter 1

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 1

In 1988, George H. W. Bush had just won the presidential election by inviting everyone to read his lips while Michael Dukakis lost it by riding in a tank. Dr. Huxtable was America's dad, Kate & Allie were America's moms, The Golden Girls were America's grandmoms, McDonald's announced it was opening its first restaurant in the Soviet Union, everyone bought Stephen Hawking's A Brief History of Time and didn't read it, Phantom of the Opera opened on Broadway, and Patricia Campbell got ready to die.

She sprayed her hair, put on her earrings, and blotted her lipstick, but when she looked at herself in the mirror she didn't see a housewife of thirty-nine with two children and a bright future, she saw a dead person. Unless war broke out, the oceans rose, or the earth fell into the sun, tonight was the monthly meeting of the Literary Guild of Mt. Pleasant, and she hadn't read this month's book. And she was the discussant. Which meant that in less than ninety minutes she would stand up in front of a room full of women and lead them in a conversation about a book she hadn't read. She had meant to read Cry, the Beloved Country—honestly—but

every time she picked up her copy and read There is a lovely road that runs from Ixopo into the hills, Korey rode her bike off the end of the dock because she thought that if she pedaled fast enough she could skim across the water, or she set her brother's hair on fire trying to see how close she could get a match before it caught, or she spent an entire weekend telling everyone who called that her mother couldn't come to the phone because she was dead, which Patricia only learned about when people started showing up at the front door with condolence casseroles.

Before Patricia could discover why the road that runs from Ixopo was so lovely, she'd see Blue run past the sun porch windows buck naked, or she'd realize the house was so quiet because she'd left him at the downtown library and had to jump in the Volvo and fly back over the bridge, praying that he hadn't been kidnapped by Moonies, or because he'd decided to see how many raisins he could fit up his nose (twenty-four). She never even learned where Ixopo was exactly because her mother-in-law, Miss Mary, moved in with them for a six-week visit and the garage room had to have clean towels, and the sheets on the guest bed had to be changed every day, and Miss Mary had trouble getting out of the tub so they had one of those bars installed and she had to find somebody to do that, and the children had laundry that needed to be done, and Carter had to have his shirts ironed, and Korey wanted new soccer cleats because everyone else had them but they really couldn't afford them right now, and Blue was only eating white food so she had to make rice every night for supper, and the road to Ixopo ran on to the hills without her.

Joining the Literary Guild of Mt. Pleasant had seemed like a good idea at the time. Patricia realized she needed to get out of the house and meet new people the moment she leaned over at supper with Carter's boss and tried to cut up his steak for him. A book club made

sense because she liked reading, especially mysteries. Carter had suggested it was because she went through life as if the entire world were a mystery to her, and she didn't disagree: Patricia Campbell and the Secret of Cooking Three Meals a Day, Seven Days a Week, without Losing Your Mind. Patricia Campbell and the Case of the Five-Year-Old Child Who Keeps Biting Other People. Patricia Campbell and the Mystery of Finding Enough Time to Read the Newspaper When You Have Two Children and a Mother-in-Law Living with You and Everyone Needs Their Clothes Washed, and to Be Fed, and the House Needs to Be Cleaned and Someone Has to Give the Dog His Heartworm Pills and You Should Probably Wash Your Own Hair Every Few Days or Your Daughter Is Going to Ask Why You Look Like a Street Person. A few discreet inquiries, and she'd been invited to the inaugural meeting of the Literary Guild of Mt. Pleasant at Marjorie Fretwell's house.

The Literary Guild of Mt. Pleasant picked their books for that year in a very democratic process: Marjorie Fretwell invited them to select eleven books from a list of thirteen she found appropriate. She asked if there were other books anyone wanted to recommend, but everyone understood that wasn't a real question, except for Slick Paley, who seemed chronically unable to read social cues.

"I'd like to nominate Like Lambs to the Slaughter: Your Child and the Occult," Slick said. "With that crystal store on Coleman Boulevard and Shirley MacLaine on the cover of Time magazine talking about her past lives, we need a wake-up call."

"I've never heard of it," Marjorie Fretwell said. "So I imagine it falls outside our mandate of reading the great books of the Western world. Anyone else?"

"But—" Slick protested.

"Anyone else?" Marjorie repeated.

They selected the books Marjorie wrote down for them, assigned each book to the month Marjorie thought best, and picked the discussants Marjorie thought were most appropriate. The discussant would open the meeting by delivering a twenty-minute presentation on the book, its background, and the life of its author, then lead the group discussion. A discussant could not cancel or trade books with anyone else without paying a stiff fine because the Literary Guild of Mt. Pleasant was not fooling around.

When it became clear she wasn't going to be able to finish *Cry, the Beloved Country*, Patricia called Marjorie.

"Marjorie," she said over the phone while putting a lid on the rice and turning it down from a boil. "It's Patricia Campbell. I need to talk to you about *Cry, the Beloved Country*."

"Such a powerful work," Marjorie said.

"Of course," Patricia said.

"I know you'll do it justice," Marjorie said.

"I'll do my best," Patricia said, realizing that this was the exact opposite of what she needed to say.

"And it's so timely with the situation in South Africa right now," Marjorie said.

A cold bolt of fear shot through Patricia: what was the situation in South Africa right now?

After she hung up, Patricia cursed herself for being a coward and a fool, and vowed to go to the library and look up *Cry, the Beloved Country* in the *Directory of World Literature*, but she had to do snacks for Korey's soccer team, and the babysitter had mono, and Carter had a sudden trip to Columbia and she had to help him pack, and then a snake came out of the toilet in the garage room and she had to beat it to death with a rake, and Blue drank a bottle of Wite-Out and she had to take him to the doctor to see if he would die (he

wouldn't). She tried to look up Alan Paton, the author, in their World Book Encyclopedia but they were missing the P volume. She made a mental note that they needed new encyclopedias.

The doorbell rang.

"Mo-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o," Korey called from the downstairs hall. "Pizza's here!"

She couldn't put it off any longer. It was time to face Marjorie.

—

Marjorie had handouts.

"These are just a few articles about current events in South Africa, including the recent unpleasantness in Vanderbijlpark," she said.

"But I think Patricia will sum things up nicely for us in her discussion of Mr. Alan Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country*."

Everyone turned to stare at Patricia sitting on Marjorie's enormous pink-and-white sofa. Not being familiar with the design of Marjorie's home, she had put on a floral dress and felt like all anyone saw were her head and hands floating in midair. She wished she could pull them into her dress and disappear completely. She felt her soul exit her body and hover up by the ceiling.

"But before she begins," Marjorie said, and every head turned back her way, "let's have a moment of silence for Mr. Alan Paton. His passing earlier this year has shaken the literary world as much as it's shaken me."

Patricia's brain chased itself in circles: the author was dead?

Recently? She hadn't seen anything in the paper. What could she say? How had he died? Was he murdered? Torn apart by wild dogs? Heart attack?

"Amen," Marjorie said. "Patricia?"

Patricia's soul decided that it was no fool and ascended into the afterlife, leaving her at the mercy of the women surrounding her.

There was Grace Cavanaugh, who lived two doors down from Patricia

but whom she'd only met once when Grace rang her doorbell and said, "I'm sorry to bother you, but you've lived here for six months and I need to know: is this the way you intend for your yard to look?" Slick Paley blinked rapidly, her sharp foxy face and tiny eyes glued to Patricia, her pen poised above her notebook. Louise Gibbes cleared her throat. Cuffy Williams blew her nose slowly into a Kleenex. Sadie Funche leaned forward, nibbling on a cheese straw, eyes boring into Patricia. The only person not looking at Patricia was Kitty Scruggs, who eyed the bottle of wine in the center of the coffee table that no one had dared open.

"Well...", Patricia began. "Didn't we all love *Cry, the Beloved Country*?"

Sadie, Slick, and Cuffy nodded. Patricia glanced at her watch and saw that seven seconds had passed. She could run out the clock. She let the silence linger hoping someone would jump in and say something, but the long pause only prompted Marjorie to say, "Patricia?"

"It's so sad that Alan Paton was cut down in the prime of his life before writing more novels like *Cry, the Beloved Country*," Patricia said, feeling her way forward, word by word, guided by the nods of the other women. "Because this book has so many timely and relevant things to say to us now, especially after the terrible events in Vander...Vanderbill...South Africa."

The nodding got stronger. Patricia felt her soul descending back into her body. She forged ahead.

"I wanted to tell you all about Alan Paton's life," she said. "And why he wrote this book, but all those facts don't express how powerful this story is, how much it moved me, the great cry of outrage I felt when I read it. This is a book you read with your heart, not with your mind. Did anyone else feel that way?"

The nods were general, all over the living room.

"Exactly." Slick Paley nodded. "Yes."

"I feel so strongly about South Africa," Patricia said, and then remembered that Mary Brasington's husband was in banking and Joanie Wieter's husband did something with the stock market and they might have investments there. "But I know there are many sides to the issue, and I wonder if anyone wanted to present another point of view. In the spirit of Mr. Paton's book, this should be a conversation, not a speech."

Everyone was nodding. Her soul settled back into her body. She had done it. She had survived. Marjorie cleared her throat.

"Patricia," Marjorie asked. "What did you think about what the book had to say about Nelson Mandela?"

"So inspirational," Patricia said. "He simply towers over everything, even though he's really just mentioned."

"I don't believe he is," Marjorie said, and Slick Paley stopped nodding. "Where did you see him mentioned? On which page?" Patricia's soul began ascending into the light again. Good-bye, it said. Good-bye, Patricia. You're on your own now...

"His spirit of freedom?" Patricia said. "It pervades every page?"

"When this book was written," Marjorie said. "Nelson Mandela was still a law student and a minor member of the ANC. I'm not sure how his spirit could be anywhere in this book, let alone pervading every page."

Marjorie drilled into Patricia's face with her ice-pick eyes.

"Well," Patricia croaked, because she was dead now and apparently death felt very, very dry. "What he was going to do. You could feel it building. In here. In this book. That we read."

"Patricia," Marjorie said. "You didn't read the book, did you?"

Time stopped. No one moved. Patricia wanted to lie, but a lifetime

of breeding had made her a lady.

"Some of it," Patricia said.

Marjorie let out a soul-deep sigh that seemed to go on forever.

"Where did you stop?" she asked.

"The first page?" Patricia said, then began to babble. "I'm sorry, I know I've let you down, but the babysitter had mono, and Carter's mother is staying with us, and a snake came out of the commode, and everything's just been so hard this month. I really don't know what to say except I'm so, so sorry."

Black crept in around the edges of her vision. A high-pitched tone shrilled in her right ear.

"Well," Marjorie said. "You're the one who's lost out, by robbing yourself of what is possibly one of the finest works of world literature. And you've robbed all of us of your unique point of view. But what's done is done. Who else would be willing to lead the discussion?"

Sadie Funche retracted into her Laura Ashley dress like a turtle, Nancy Fox started shaking her head before Marjorie even reached the end of her sentence, and Cuffy Williams froze like a prey animal confronted by a predator.

"Did anyone actually read this month's book?" Marjorie asked.
Silence.

"I cannot believe this," Marjorie said. "We all agreed, eleven months ago, to read the great books of the Western world and now, less than one year later, we've come to this. I am deeply disappointed in all of you. I thought we wanted to better ourselves, expose ourselves to thoughts and ideas from outside Mt. Pleasant. The men all say, 'It's not too clever for a girl to be clever,' and they laugh at us and think we only care about our hair. The only books they give us are cookbooks because in their minds we are silly, lightweight know-

nothings. And you've just proven them right."

She stopped to catch her breath. Patricia noticed sweat glistening in her eyebrows. Marjorie continued:

"I strongly suggest y'all go home and think about whether you want to join us next month to read *Jude the Obscure* and—"

Grace Cavanaugh stood, hitching her purse over one shoulder.

"Grace?" Marjorie asked. "Are you not staying?"

"I just remembered an appointment," Grace said. "It entirely slipped my mind."

"Well," Marjorie said, her momentum undermined. "Don't let me keep you."

"I wouldn't dream of it," Grace said.

And with that, the tall, elegant, prematurely gray Grace floated out of the room.

Robbed of its velocity, the meeting dissolved. Marjorie retreated to the kitchen, followed by a concerned Sadie Funche. A dispirited clump of women lingered around the dessert table making chitchat. Patricia lurked in her chair until no one seemed to be watching, then darted out of the house.

As she cut across Marjorie's front yard, she heard a noise that sounded like Hey. She stopped and looked for the source.

"Hey," Kitty Scruggs repeated.

Kitty lurked behind the line of parked cars in Marjorie's driveway, a cloud of blue smoke hovering over her head, a long thin cigarette between her fingers. Next to her stood Maryellen something-or-other, also smoking. Kitty waved Patricia over with one hand.

Patricia knew that Maryellen was a Yankee from Massachusetts who told everyone that she was a feminist. And Kitty was one of those big women who wore the kind of clothes people charitably referred to as "fun"—baggy sweaters with multicolored handprints

on them, chunky plastic jewelry. Patricia suspected that getting entangled with women like this was the first step on a slippery slope that ended with her wearing felt reindeer antlers at Christmas, or standing outside Citadel Mall asking people to sign a petition, so she approached them with caution.

"I liked what you did in there," Kitty said.

"I should have found time to read the book," Patricia told her.

"Why?" Kitty asked. "It was boring. I couldn't make it past the first chapter."

"I need to write Marjorie a note," Patricia said. "To apologize."

Maryellen squinted against the smoke and sucked on her cigarette.

"Marjorie got what she deserved," she said, exhaling.

"Listen." Kitty placed her body between the two of them and Marjorie's front door, just in case Marjorie was watching and could read lips. "I'm having some people read a book and come over to my house next month to talk about it. Maryellen'll be there."

"I couldn't possibly find the time to belong to two book clubs," Patricia said.

"Trust me," Kitty said. "After today, Marjorie's book club is done."

"What book are you reading?" Patricia asked, groping for reasons to say no.

Kitty reached into her denim shoulder bag and pulled out the kind of cheap paperback they sold at the drugstore.

"Evidence of Love: A True Story of Passion and Death in the Suburbs," she said.

It took Patricia aback. This was one of those trashy true crime books. But clearly Kitty was reading it and you couldn't call someone else's taste in books trashy, even if it was.

"I'm not sure that's my kind of book," Patricia said.

"These two women were best friends and they chopped each other

up with axes," Kitty said. "Don't pretend you don't want to know what happened."

"Jude is obscure for a reason," Maryellen growled.