

CHAPTER I

Monday, May 27, 1776

YOUTH IS THE SEED TIME OF GOOD HABITS,
AS WELL IN NATIONS AS IN INDIVIDUALS.

—THOMAS PAINE, *COMMON SENSE*

*Annotation Task:
What do you notice
about characters/
relationships?*

Read aloud cycle

THE BEST TIME TO TALK TO GHOSTS is just before the sun comes up. That's when they can hear us true, Momma said. That's when ghosts can answer us.

The eastern sky was peach colored, but a handful of lazy stars still blinked in the west. It was almost time.

"May I run ahead, sir?" I asked.

Pastor Weeks sat at the front of his squeaky wagon with Old Ben next to him, the mules' reins loose in his hands. The pine coffin that held Miss Mary Finch—wearing her best dress, with her hair washed clean and combed—bounced in the back when the wagon wheels hit a rut. My sister, Ruth, sat next to the coffin. Ruth was too big to carry, plus the pastor knew about her peculiar manner of being, so it was the wagon for her and the road for me.

Old Ben looked to the east and gave me a little nod. He knew a few things about ghosts, too.

Pastor Weeks turned around to talk to Mr. Robert Finch, who rode his horse a few lengths behind the wagon.

"The child wants to run ahead," Pastor explained to him. "She has kin buried there. Do you give leave for a quick visit?" *family*

Mr. Robert's mouth tightened like a rope pulled taut. He had showed up a few weeks earlier to visit Miss Mary Finch, his aunt and only living relation. He looked around her tidy farm, listened to her ragged, wet cough, and moved in. Miss Mary wasn't even cold on her deathbed when he helped himself to the coins in her strongbox. He hurried along her burying, too, most improper. He didn't care that the neighbors would want to come around with cakes and platters of cold meat, and drink ale to the remembrance of Miss Mary Finch of Tew, Rhode Island. He had to get on with things, he said. *memory*

I stole a look backward. Mr. Robert Finch was filled up with trouble from his dirty boots to the brim of his scraggly hat.

"Please, sir," I said. *delay*

"Go then," he said. "But don't tarry. I've much business today."

I ran as fast as I could.

Pause: Who have we met so far?

I hurried past the stone fence that surrounded the white graveyard, to the split-rail fence that marked our ground, and stopped outside the gate to pick a handful of chilly violets, wet with dew. The morning mist twisted and hung low over the field. No ghosts yet, just ash trees and maples lined up in a mournful row.

I entered.

Momma was buried in the back, her feet to the east, her head to the west. Someday I would pay the stone carver for

a proper marker with her name on it: Dinah, wife of Cuffe, mother of Isabel and Ruth. For now, there was a wooden cross and a gray rock the size of a dinner plate lying flat on the ground in front of it.

We had buried her the year before, when the first roses bloomed.

very contagious sickness, can be deadly
"Smallpox is tricky," Miss Mary Finch said to me when Momma died. "There's no telling who it'll take." The pox had left Ruth and me with scars like tiny stars scattered on our skin. It took Momma home to Our Maker.

I looked back at the road. Old Ben had slowed the mules to give me time. I knelt down and set the violets on the grave. "It's here, Momma," I whispered. "The day you promised. But I need your help. Can you please cross back over for just a little bit?"

I stared without blinking at the mist, looking for the curve of her back or the silhouette of her head wrapped in a pretty kerchief. A small flock of robins swooped out of the maple trees.

"I don't have much time," I told the grass-covered grave. "Where do you want us to go? What should we do?"

The mist swirled between the tall grass and the low-hanging branches. Two black butterflies danced through a cloud of bugs and disappeared. Chickadees and barn swallows called overhead.

"Whoa." Old Ben stopped the wagon next to the open hole near the iron fence, then climbed down and walked to where Nehemiah the gravedigger was waiting. The two men reached for the coffin.

"Please, Momma," I whispered urgently. "I need your help." I squinted into the ash grove, where the mist was heaviest.

Pause: Who is Isabel visiting? Why?

*cycle 2
Read
Aloud
Same
AT*

No ghosts. Nothing.

I'd been making like this for near a year. No matter what I said, or where the sun and the moon and the stars hung, Momma never answered. Maybe she was angry because I'd buried her wrong. I'd heard stories of old country burials with singers and dancers, but I wasn't sure what to do, so we just dug a hole and said a passel of prayers. Maybe Momma's ghost was lost and wandering because I didn't send her home the right way.

The men set Miss Mary's coffin on the ground. Mr. Robert got off his horse and said something I couldn't hear. Ruth stayed in the wagon, her bare feet curled up under her skirt and her thumb in her mouth.

I reached in the pocket under my apron and took out the oatcake. It was in two pieces, with honey smeared between them. The smell made my stomach rumble, but I didn't dare nibble. I picked up the flat rock in front of the cross and set the offering in the hollow under it. Then I put the rock back and sat still, my eyes closed tight to keep the tears inside my head where they belonged.

I could smell the honey that had dripped on my hands, the damp ground under me, and the salt of the ocean. I could hear cows mooing in a far pasture and bees buzzing in a nearby clover patch.

If she would just say my name, just once . . .

"Girl!" Mr. Robert shouted. "You there, girl!"

I sniffed, opened my eyes, and wiped my face on my sleeve. The sun had popped up in the east like a cork and was burning through the morning mist. The ghosts had all gone to ground. I wouldn't see her today, either.

He grabbed my arm and pulled me roughly to my feet. "I told you to move," Mr. Robert snarled at me.

"Apologies, sir," I said, wincing with pain.

He released me with a shove and pointed to the cemetery where they buried white people. "Go pray for her that owned you, girl."

who is
he referring
to?
what does
this mean?

CHAPTER II

Monday, May 27, 1776

I, YOUNG IN LIFE, BY SEEMING CRUEL FATE
WAS SNATCH'D FROM AFRIC'S FANCY'D HAPPY SEAT: . . .
. . . THAT FROM A FATHER SEIZ'D HIS BABE BELOV'D:
SUCH, SUCH MY CASE. AND CAN I THEN BUT PRAY
OTHERS MAY NEVER FEEL TYRANNIC SWAY?
-PHILLIS WHEATLEY, "TO THE RIGHT
HONOURABLE WILLIAM, EARL OF DARTMOUTH"

[AT] annotate
details that
show conflict
between Isabel
and Mr. R.

WOMEN," WE SAID TOGETHER.

Pastor Weeks closed his Bible, and the funeral was over.

Nehemiah drove his shovel into the mound of dirt and pitched some into the open grave. The earth rattled and bounced on the coffin lid. Old Ben put on his hat and walked toward the mule team. Mr. Robert reached for coins to pay the pastor. Ruth drew a line in the dust with her toe.

My belly flipped with worry. I was breathing hard as if I'd run all the way to the village and back. This was the moment we'd been waiting for, the one that Momma promised would come. It was up to me to take care of things, to find a place for us. I had to be bold.

I stood up proper, the way I had been taught—chin up, eyes down—took Ruth by the hand, and walked over to the men.

CHAINS

"Pardon me, Pastor Weeks, sir," I said. "May I ask you something?"

He set his hat on his head. "Certainly, Isabel."

I held Ruth's hand tighter. "Where do you think we should go?"

"What do you mean, child?"

"I know I'll find work, but I can't figure where to sleep, me and Ruth. I thought you might know a place."

Pastor Weeks frowned. "I don't understand what you're saying, Isabel. You're to return with Mr. Robert here. You and your sister belong to him now."

I spoke slowly, saying the words I had practiced in my head since Miss Mary Finch took her last breath, the words that would change everything. "Ruth and me are free, Pastor. Miss Finch freed us in her will. Momma, too, if she had lived. It was done up legal, on paper with wax seals."

Mr. Robert snorted. "That's enough out of you, girl. Time for us to be on the road to Newport."

"Was there a will?" Pastor Weeks asked him.

"She didn't need one," Mr. Robert replied. "I was Aunt Mary's only relative."

I planted my feet firmly in the dirt and fought to keep my voice polite and proper. "I saw the will, sir. After the lawyer wrote it, Miss Mary had me read it out loud on account of her eyes being bad."

"Slaves don't read," Mr. Robert said. "I should beat you for lying, girl."

Pastor Weeks held up his hand. "It's true. Your aunt had some odd notions. She taught the child herself. I disapproved, of course. Only leads to trouble."

I spoke up again. "We're to be freed, sir. The lawyer,

legal document
explaining
what
someone
wants
after
their
death

Pause: What is Isabel saying?
How
does
Mr. R
respond?

Mr. Cornell, he'll tell you. Ruth and me, we're going to get work and a place of our own to sleep."

"That's enough." Mr. Robert narrowed his eyes at me.

"But Mr. Cornell—," I started.

"Shut your mouth!" he snapped.

The pastor cleared his throat. "Perhaps we should inquire . . ."

"Where is this Cornell?" Mr. Robert demanded. "Newport?"

"He left for Boston before the blockade," the pastor said. "Took his papers with him."

"The girl is lying, then," Mr. Robert said. "She knows the lawyer is absent and her cause cannot be proved. The sooner I'm rid of her, the better."

"It's the truth," I blurted out. Ruth looked up at me anxiously and gripped my hand tighter.

"I said, silence!" Mr. Robert yelled.

"Isabel, remember your place." Pastor Weeks fumbled with the latch on his Bible. "You and your sister belong to Mr. Robert now. He'll be a good master to you."

My insides went cold, like I'd swallowed water straight from a deep, dark well. This couldn't be happening. "Couldn't you send a message to Boston, seeking Mr. Cornell?"

"The matter is settled." Mr. Robert pulled on his gloves. "If I might borrow your wagon and man for the drive to Newport, Pastor, I'd be grateful. These girls should bring a decent price at auction."

"You're selling us?" The words flew out of my mouth before I could weigh them.

"Hush, Isabel," Pastor Weeks cautioned.

The cold inside me snaked down to my feet and up around my neck. I shivered in the warm spring sunshine. Ruth bent

down and picked up a shiny pebble. What if we were split up? Who would take care of her?

I fought back the tears. "Pastor Weeks, please, sir."

Mr. Robert knocked the dust from his hat. "They should go quick. Your wagon will be back by nightfall."

The minister placed the Bible in his leather satchel and pulled it up over his shoulder. He studied the ground, his hands, Mr. Robert's horse, and the clouds. He did not look at me. "You'll be wanting to bring their shoes and blankets," he finally said. "They'll fetch a better price that way."

"True enough."

"I'll have a word with Ben. Explain matters."

Pastor Weeks walked toward his own slave, keeping a hand on the satchel so it didn't bump against his side.

My heart wanted to force my feet to run, but I couldn't feel them, couldn't feel my hands, nor my arms, nor any part of myself. I had froze solid, sticking to the dirt. We were sold once before, back when Ruth was a tiny baby, not even baptized yet. They sold all of us from the plantation when old Mister Malbone run up his debts too high. His bankers wanted their pounds of flesh. Our flesh.

One by one they dragged us forward, and a man shouted out prices to the crowd of likely buyers and baby Ruth cried, and Momma shook like the last leaf on a tree, and Poppa . . . and Poppa, he didn't want them to bust up our family like we were sheep or hogs. "I am a man," he shouted, and he was Momma's husband and our father, and baby Ruth, she cried and cried, and I thought Momma would shatter like a bowl when it falls off a table. Poppa fought like a lion when they came for him, the strongest lion, roaring; it took five of them with hickory clubs, and then Momma fainted, and I caught baby Ruth just in time and there was lion's blood

on the ground mixed with the dust like the very earth was bleeding, and we left there, we three in Miss Mary Finch's wagon, and everything in the whole world was froze in ice for near two years after that.

I opened my mouth to roar, but not a sound escaped. I could not even mewl like a kitten.

What happened to Poppa?

CHAPTER III

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RUN-AWAY FROM THE SUBSCRIBER, LIVING AT NO. 110, WATER-STREET, NEAR THE NEW SLIP. A NEGRO GIRL NAMED POLL, ABOUT 13 YEARS OF AGE, VERY BLACK, MARKED WITH THE SMALL-POX, AND HAD ON WHEN SHE WENT AWAY A RED CLOTH PETTICOAT, AND A LIGHT BLUE SHORT GOWN, HOME MADE. WHOEVER WILL TAKE UP AND SECURE THE SAID GIRL SO THAT THE OWNER MAY GET HER, SHALL BE HANDSOMELY REWARDED.

-NEWSPAPER ADVERTISEMENT
IN THE ROYAL GAZETTE (NEW YORK)

THE SNAKE TOOK US TO MISS MARY'S house to collect our blankets and too-small shoes but nothing else. We couldn't take Momma's shells, nor Ruth's baby doll made of flannel bits and calico, nor the wooden bowl Poppa made for me. Nothing belonged to us.

As I folded the blankets, Mr. Robert went out to the privy. There was no point in grabbing Ruth and running. He had a horse and a gun, and we were known to all. I looked around our small room, searching for a tiny piece of home I could hide in my pocket.

What to take?

Seeds.

On the hearth stood the jar of flower seeds that Momma