

Summary: The 7th Day: John Grimes' fourteenth birthday, Saturday in March 1935. John lives in Harlem with his father (Gabriel, an austere lay-preacher) his mother, Elizabeth; his younger brother, Roy; and his two younger sisters, Sarah and baby Ruth. Another sibling is on the way. The family is integrally involved in the nearby storefront church, Temple of the Fire Baptized. The novel opens with John's mental descriptions of the sinners in the neighborhood, the church, a typical Sunday-morning service, Sunday school, and Brother Elisha (a few years older than John and already saved, he is the object of John's abundant admiration). The plot begins with John waking up, remembering that today is his birthday, and then recalling that he has "sinned his hand" (masturbated) in the school lavatory. This act has precipitated in him a crisis of spirit. This crisis is aggravated by an antagonism with his father, for he believes that submission to God requires submission to his father. John hopes for another future. He is intelligent, excels in school, and has earned the praise of African Americans, as well as his white teachers. This confidence in his intelligence buoys him up against his father's physical, emotional, and psychological tyranny.

John's siblings and mother are in the kitchen when he enters. As usual, Roy is arguing with their mother. He eats his breakfast as Roy and his mother argue about his father. No one has mentioned John's birthday. Roy, whom everyone at the church hopes will soon experience a divinely wrought change of heart, rails against their father's puritanical policies—he resents Gabriel's renunciation of all things external to the church and Bible, and he protests most of all his physical beatings. "When I have children," says Roy, "I ain't going to treat them like this.... I'm sure this ain't no way to be." Elizabeth defends their father, claiming that he knows what is right for Roy's soul and is doing his best to keep Roy out of jail. The obvious affection between mother and son soon ends the argument, and it is time for Saturday chores. John's assignment is to sweep the front room and dust the furniture.

Dusting the mantelpiece, John looks at photographs of himself and his siblings as infants, of his Aunt Florence, and of his father as a young man—by his side is a young wife who, according to Aunt Florence, is now in heaven. John thinks about this first wife, Deborah, and about how she knew his father when he was young in the South; maybe she could have told John how to win his father's love.

He finishes his chores and is left alone for a moment with his tortured thoughts. Then, his mother calls him and gives him a little birthday money, along with some words of love and encouragement. He perceives in these words a great sadness on the part of his mother but cannot yet comprehend this melancholy. His mother sends him out to buy himself a present.

John goes to Central Park and climbs his favorite hill. From the summit he gazes out at the city. He has visions of conquest, of a conceivable glory on this earth, in this city, as opposed to the glory of the afterlife promised by his father's narrow path. The narrow way doesn't call to him now; he wants Broadway. When these exaltations subside, he runs down the hill and out onto Fifth Avenue. He sees the beautiful, elegant (white) people treading that avenue and imagines a moneyed life for himself, his wife, his children. These people before him surely do not read their Bible every night or go to a holy church; yet he has difficulty imagining them burning in hell for eternity. Some white people have been friendly to him at school, including teachers. Thus, he feels certain that white people are kind and will honor him when he distinguishes himself. His father, however, claims that all whites are wicked and deceitful and that God will "bring them low." John now recalls reading about the atrocities committed by whites against blacks in the South. He realizes that, in fact, he doesn't dare enter any of the shops from which the white ladies emerge, that this is not his world—that he could grow to hate these people.

John goes to a movie theater, despite his apprehension that one of the saints, or saved members of his church, might see him. The fate of a character in the movie has a powerful effect on John and sets him to thinking of Hell, redemption, and the cruel choice he faces between a religious life and a life filled with the delights of the world. It is late afternoon when he returns home. There he finds the family and Aunt Florence tending to Roy, who has been stabbed in a knife fight.

Roy apparently had gone with a group of boys halfway across town to pick a fight with some white boys. John feels that his father wishes it were John who had been cut rather than his brother. His father makes John look at the cut and tells him that this is a warning from the Lord, declaring, "This is what white folks does to niggers." John's mother and aunt protest. They insist that Roy is the one who was looking for the fight, not John; Roy is the one who won't listen, who can't be controlled, who does whatever he pleases. Florence, in particular, takes issue with everything Gabriel says. Gabriel argues in vain with his sister, but, turning to his wife, he blames Elizabeth for not looking after the children, for not caring whether Roy lives or dies. Elizabeth can't accept this accusation and tells him that no one can control the child, not even Gabriel with all his whippings; there's no one to blame. Gabriel slaps her. Roy sits up and challenges his father. Gabriel begins to whip Roy with a belt until Aunt Florence grabs his arm.

John goes to the church at 6 that evening to perform his chores there. As he does his sweeping, he thinks about the church, desperately angry with his father. Elisha comes in. John's mood brightens; he feels bold and sasses Elisha until the two of them are engaged in what is one of their habitual wrestling matches. For the first time, John manages to hold his own to some extent. When the match is over, the 2 of them continue sweeping and mopping. Elisha talks to John about John's soul, about being saved. John replies that he doesn't know if he wants to be saved. Presently, 2 women members of the church arrive. Elisha plays the piano and they all sing a spiritual. The door opens again and John's father, mother, and aunt enter the church. His aunt's presence is surprising because she has never set foot in their church before. To John, she seems "to have been summoned to witness a bloody act." Believing that the Lord has brought her here, John wonders what might happen before the night is over.

Summary: Florence's Prayer: Florence has come to her brother's church for the first time. She senses that Gabriel rejoices in her presence not because it proves her entry onto the path to salvation, but rather because it signifies that some hardship has come to her. She subdues her pride before him, sings, and kneels with the saints before the altar. Fear has led Florence here, to the place her mother tried to bring her so long ago. A message has come to her repeatedly: "Set thine house in order, for thou shalt die and not live." She is ill; she has seen death standing in a dark corner of her room, waiting for her. This terrifying specter sends her journeying back mentally through the scenes of her life.

She remembers her mother leading them in prayer the night after Gabriel's first wife, Deborah, was violently raped by a group of white men. Florence's mother was a slave for more than 30 years before being freed by Northern troops. In Florence's mind, her mother was always an immeasurably old woman telling stories of slavery and Exodus in the family's cold cabin, interweaving the Bible with her own life. Florence's father had left for the North soon after Gabriel's birth, and such an escape became Florence's dream.

Although Florence was 5 years older than Gabriel, it was the boy's future that mattered more to their mother. She made Florence do most of the work, forcing her to wait on Gabriel. While she encouraged Gabriel's education (though to no avail), she denied Florence any schooling. Praying for him fervently, their mother tried to beat the wickedness out of the boy; she did not seem to trouble herself so much about Florence. Although Gabriel became a hard-drinking, sinful young man, he was still the center of everything. Florence hated him. At the age of 26 and with her ancient mother on her deathbed, Florence walked out the door and headed north.

The narrative shifts briefly to John's perspective as he surveys the church and worshippers. It then returns to Florence's recollections of her marriage to Frank and of their life in New York. Frank was an excessive drinker, an impractical and irresponsible man, extravagant with money; Florence tried in vain to change him. When they fought bitterly he would go on long binges and return penitent, pathetic, and broke. He eventually left her, lived with another woman for a while, then died in France during WWI. Florence remembers a night during their marriage when she and Frank talked about a letter from Deborah. Deborah suspected that Gabriel had a bastard child whom he wouldn't acknowledge. Florence now wonders whether Deborah ever confronted Gabriel. She is carrying the letter in her handbag, having guarded it all these years as a weapon against her brother. Now that it seems that he is winning out—she imagines he will outlive her, be saved, smile over her grave—Florence wonders whether tonight might be the night to present him with the letter.

Summary: Gabriel's Prayer: Gabriel remembers his dying mother's eyes watching him through his drunken nihilism. He recalls the awesome moment of his rebirth in God, in his twenty-second year, walking home after a night of drunken lust. This was the beginning of a new life for him. He began to preach and soon gained renown for his sermons and his righteousness. Guided by a powerful dream, in which the Lord told him that His seal would be on Gabriel's descendents, he married Deborah, whom nobody else would think of marrying after her defilement (her rape).

Brother Elisha breaks the silence in the church and brings Gabriel briefly back to the present. Gabriel is suddenly worried that John is under the power of the Lord, but then he is reassured that it is just Elisha speaking. Gabriel does not want John, who is not his real son, to come under the power of the Lord when his own sons have not. These sons are not here tonight; 1 dead; the other is at home cursing his father. John is the bastard son of Elizabeth and was an unnamed infant when Gabriel married her. Gabriel sees John as the product of a weak young woman's sins. Elizabeth does not and will never regret having John. She insists that Gabriel make no distinction between their children, but Gabriel feels there is a difference. John is not the son that God promised Gabriel in a dream—this son is Roy.

He remembers Esther, the mother of his first, deceased, son (Royal). Esther began working for the same white family as he did soon after he and Deborah were married. She was young, mocking, beautiful, irreligious. He pitied her and so invited her to attend his sermon. She came. Later on, on an evening when the family was out of town, he began chastising her for her sinfulness and ended up in her arms, on the kitchen floor. Their affair lasted 9 days before he ended it. A while later, she told him that she was pregnant with his child. Gabriel would not think of leaving Deborah for Esther. He considered Esther a harlot, an evil woman sent by Satan to tempt him. He had fallen, but he was repentant and back on the true path. He stole money that Deborah had been saving and gave it Esther so that she could go away and have her baby.

Gabriel never knew if Deborah noticed the money missing or knew of the affair. Esther sent him a damning letter from Chicago, where she died giving birth. Before she died, she named her son Royal. This is the name Gabriel had once told her he would give his son because the descendents of the faithful are a royal line. She had died mocking him, cursing his hypocrisy.

Gabriel watched Royal grow up, his unacknowledged bastard son. Although Gabriel and Deborah were in contact with Royal, it seemed no one knew of Gabriel's blood-ties to the boy; if Deborah knew, she gave no indication, no opportunity for him to make a confession. Royal was wild as Gabriel had been. 1 day, as she lay sick in bed, Deborah gave him the news: Royal had been killed in a knife fight in Chicago. Gabriel began to cry, and Deborah asked him if the boy was his. He said yes. At this point Deborah revealed that she knew and she had been waiting for Gabriel to confess the truth. She had seen through him; she knew the depth and endurance of this sin. She declared that she gladly would have taken the boy in and raised him as her own—no matter what anyone else said—since she herself was barren. She told Gabriel that he had better pray to the Lord and keep praying until the Lord made it plain that he was forgiven.

John, meanwhile, is struggling with his own thoughts and emotions. He tries to pray, hears voices speaking about salvation, struggles with his hatred for his father and his father's hatred of him. He feels that great seas are churning within him. Gabriel sees John staring at him and reads in the boy's eyes the same accusation that he has felt issuing from all the people in his life. He commands the boy to kneel down.