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Chapter Two

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It was cold and windy outside with a high sun, one of those early March days in Georgia that tricked the mind into thinking spring had come. Mrs. McBee walked briskly with her head held low so that the wind would not blow her hat or disturb her carefully coiffed hair (done yesterday by Maylene, the hairdresser).

18pts She had called to John Bedford that she would be waiting in the car. There was no answer, of course, but the idea that she would be waiting in the cold seemed sufficient reason for him to hurry.

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Bakersville

John Bedford never hurried. Just like his father, thought Mrs. McBee. Just like all intellectuals. She shivered as the drafts found their way into the old station wagon.

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Bakerville

1 1/2 PX She sat huddled gazing out at the stretch of pine woods before her. Nothing looked as if it had been permanently damaged over the night. The forecast had called for a hard freeze, one of those sudden freezes that usually ruined her fruit trees, azaleas and flowering shrubs. Ordinarily she would have gone to the greenhouse to see if there had been any damage there. One year the water pipes had burst and she had lost two hundred dollars worth of Easter lilies. A cruel spring, one of the hardest she had known since her husband John Bedford, Senior had died.

1 1/2 PX That was the spring, too, she had wept, twenty years ago. "Just sat down and wailed," she was always telling Mrs. Flemming, her helper in the greenhouse. But things were better now. If she sold enough plants and flowers this spring, plus the usual preserves and pickled things, she was almost sure she would be able to fix up the house a bit. She looked now at the old

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 clapboard house, her father's house and his father's before him. One of the older places in the county, it was not a large house; But it did have its distinction with the two-story portico, the octo^agan shaped porch and the flat arched windows.

It was badly in need of paint, and the shutters and gutters needed mending. One of Mrs. McBee's eternal dreams was to bring the house back to the white perfection of her girlhood. Once her grandfather had owned all the land around these parts. It was nothing but country then, pine forests and cotton fields. But year by year, it seemed, their lives went by the acre until at last, now, the house stood on one patch of ground crowded and pushed by low^N-slung cheap dwellings with their flat roofs and treeless grounds. "The "Parade of Homes," the contractor had rather grandly christened it.

"Parade of Fools," Mrs. McBee had said. Still, the houses were new and there were the times when she envied those people with their garbage disposals, pipes that never burst and roofs that never leaked. "But in a year or so^M-you just wait," she told John Bedford. Mrs. McBee had watched as the houses went up, quickly

put together with green lumber and unskilled labor. "It'll be nothing but a ghetto," she warned darkly. "A slum. Letitia Graham McBee, living right in the middle of a slum. Who would ever have thought?"

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$\frac{1}{2}$ px | There was a knock on the ~~window~~^{pane} and Mrs. McBee gave a little gasp. She turned to see Mr. Flemming's false white teeth gleaming at her through the ~~window~~^{glass}. She put her hand to her breast. "Good gracious, man," she muttered and then rolled down the window.

Mr. Flemming was the husband of Mrs. Flemming, who helped Mrs. McBee in the greenhouse, and as such he seemed to view his relationship with Mrs. McBee as privileged, a view Mrs. McBee herself could only tolerate since it was unlikely she could ever find a replacement for Mrs. Flemming.

"I didn't aim to startle you or nothin, Mizz Tisha."

$\frac{1}{2}$ px | Miss Tisha, indeed. Mrs. McBee didn't know how Mr. Flemming felt he had the right to call her by her ~~maiden~~^{given} name. He had begun that more than a year ago when the Flemmings had moved into the Parade of Homes. Prior to that they had lived on a small farm, before Mr. Flemming got his government job.

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She regarded the slender, hollow-cheeked face of the man. A year ago on his fiftieth birthday he had suffered a bleeding ulcer, and when he came home from the hospital he had a different look in his eyes, a kind of pleading as if he were announcing to the world some secret torment, the burden of which he had carried solitarily these long years. Mrs. McBee had seen at once he had wanted sympathy; she gave none. Mr. Flemming's eyes were almost pretty, dark brown with eyelashes that curled upward. The eyes led Mrs. McBee to believe Mr. Flemming led two lives; one, she was convinced, involved other women. The old fool, she thought, with all his talk about the Lord and God and how he had been "saved."

John

"Why aren't you at work, Mr. Flemming?" She gazed at him with cold eyes.

"You musta got your days mussed up, Mizz Tisha. This here's Sarady."

"So it is, so it is. People with government jobs don't work on Saturday. I had forgotten." But she made a mental note that if John Bedford had not offered to take her in to the doctor she would not have been

able to ride with Mr. Flemming after all. She folded her arms and looked at him, his eyes this time.

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"I brung you over the chicken[!]-uh-[!]-droppins you wanted. Won't find no better fertilizer nowhars."

Mrs. McBee looked away. She had heard Mr. Flemming refer to the "fertilizer" before but in more basic terms. He hadn't known she was listening but she had heard. Always putting on airs when he was around her. But she knew him for what he was. Trash, if you wanted to be downright plain about it. At least his not saying that word showed some respect for her.

1/2 | "You wanted it for your box bushes?"

px | Mrs. McBee still did not look at him. "Yes, they're getting scraggly."

"I kin spread it round for you if you like. But don't be lookin for no sweet smells for a spell."

Mrs. McBee said nothing.

"You'll have the greenest, bushiest scrubs you ever saw. Cheap, too."

He would overcharge her, of course. Anything to get a dime. Anything at all, providing it didn't in[↑]volve too much work. "That would be good if you could

find the time to apply it." She cleared her throat.

"I have to go to the doctor this morning."

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"Naw? Aint nothin ailin you, is there, ^{are} young lady?"

Young lady. Flip. Just like his eyes and the hat placed too jauntily on the back of his head. "No, I don't think so. Just a routine check^fup."

"Nadine, she gotta wen on her back."

"Mrs. Flemming?" Mrs. McBee turned to him.

"Yes'm. Gotta come off thar, the doctor says."

Mrs. McBee had not the slightest idea what a wen was. Something those kind of people were always having, no doubt. "Why, she never mentioned it to me." Mrs. McBee was more concerned Mrs. Flemming might have to take time off from her work in the greenhouse.

"It's thar, all right enough, big as ^{ou} yer fist." He gnarled his bony red hand to show the exact size.

The front door banged shut. John Bedford wearing a worn car coat and no tie was coming down the porch stairs. He looked like somebody straight out of the Parade of Homes. The reason he hadn't worn a tie was simply because she had asked him to. Ask him the simplest thing and he was bound to do just the opposite.

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Regarding him now, Mrs. McBee wondered for the one thousandth time just what it would take to wake up John Bedford, put some fire under him. But if she knew the answer to that she probably wouldn't be going to the doctor right now.

^{1/2} px | "John Bedford gone take ya in?" asked Mr. Flemming.
Curious. Mr. Flemming had to know everything.
Just like a woman.

"Yes," said Mrs. McBee with quiet dignity. She didn't like the man to see John Bedford looking the way he was, as if there were no difference in their stations. The Flemmings were already too presumptive as it was. ^{you}

"Then I'll get on with the chicken--" he lowered his head-- ^M "droppins if'n it's all right with you." ^{da}

"Thank you, Mr. Flemming."

"Lord look after you at the doctor's, heah.
Don't you mind none."

Mrs. McBee nodded her head solemnly.

Mr. Flemming went to the other side of the car.

"How you, John Beford?"

"Morning, T. J.," mumbled John Bedford, not looking at the man.

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Mr. Flemming stole a backward glance at John Bedford. Both Mr. and Mrs. Flemming regarded John Bedford suspiciously. Mrs. Flemming was always asking what John Bedford did inside the house all day.

"He studies," Mrs. McBee always answered. It was as good an answer as she could think of.

When they drove out the red clay road and onto the highway Mrs. McBee asked John Bedford if he called Mr. Flemming "T. J." all the time.

"That's his name."

"I call him Mr. Flemming." Once Mrs. McBee had asked Mr. Flemming what T. J. stood for, and he had said Thomas Jefferson, though Mrs. McBee knew he was lying. Mrs. Flemming had told her T. J. stood for nothing, that his parents had just liked the initials. Might as well have given him a number as far as Mrs. McBee was concerned.

"Looks like the Flemmings are coming up in the world," she said.

"About time, I guess," said John Bedford.

"I wouldn't want that kind of money. Government money."

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Only last month Mr. Flemming had driven into his driveway in a brand[!]~~N~~new baby blue automobile with a white top. Mrs. McBee had seen him through the upstairs window and the sight sent a small chill of fury through her. "You see that?" she ~~told~~^{asked} Willie, the Negro woman who once a week came in to clean. "Just look at him. That's your money and my money. Government money. Mr. Flemming works for the government."

1 1/2 PX | "Is?" was all Willie had said.

Only once had Mrs. McBee been inside the Flemming's house and that was last year. Mrs. Flemming wanted Mrs. McBee to see a dress she had made for her sixteen-year-old daughter Bertha Mae. Bertha Mae, a sullen-looking blond^e, was the youngest of the Flemming's two daughters and, according to Mrs. Flemming, had ambitions to "make sumpin of herself." All of which seemed highly unlikely to Mrs. McBee. The girl didn't look as if she had pea brains, always sitting on the front porch steps staring into space. She never spoke. Mrs. McBee didn't think she had ever heard the girl utter one word.

girl a

"She don't wanta turn out like Lojean," said Mrs. Flemming in one of her many confidences to Mrs. McBee.

11/13 She was referring to her older daughter. "Not that that aint a right life for a woman, but Bertha Mae she wants sumpin more, don't wanta get tied down yet awhile."

Mrs. McBee said she thought that was admirable. Lojean was seventeen, had been a mother for two years. After court action the father of the child finally married her and moved in with the Flemmings. But to hear Mrs. Flemming talk now you'd never think anything out of the ordinary had ever occurred. Buster, Junior, the father, was just like a son, she declared. "He aint no son-in-law. He's a son, just like he was torn outta my own flesh."

The house was just about what Mrs. McBee had expected, a huge television set dominating the living room (Mrs. McBee didn't even own one) and raw red "suites" of mahogany furniture.

Mr. Flemming also sold beagle puppies and, of course, the "fertilizer", both of which ^{added to} implemented his income. That, plus his government job and what Mrs. Flemming earned working in the greenhouse, gave ^{them} a sizeable income. Their refrigerator was mammoth and made ice all day long.

"Some day you'll be reading about the Flemmings,"

said Mrs. McBee, glancing sideways at John Bedford. "And do you know where?"

$\frac{1}{2}$ px | "No," said John Bedford.

"In the society pages. That's the way the world is going." She sat up straighter and stared darkly at the road ahead. "Why don't you see more of your friends in town?"

"What friends?"

"Why, all the boys and girls you grew up with. You've got to remember you're still somebody."

"Who am I?" John Bedford yawned.

"Mr. Respectability, that's who. There's nobody in Ashton who can touch your blood--^I_Munless, of course, it's the Whitfields. They're nice people. And maybe the Ewings. But I've always been a bit suspect about Bob Ewing."

John Bedford pressed his foot further down on the accelerator.

"When you're somebody there is responsibility that goes with it. Noblesse oblige. Don't drive so fast, John Bedford."

$\frac{1}{2}$ px | "I'm only going sixty." His mouth was pressed

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x24

Back.

into one thin line. He did not slow down. Ask him to do the simplest thing, and he's bound to do...①

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It occurred to Mrs. McBee she might ask the doctor why John Bedford didn't see any of his friends any more, the nice people in Ashton. If he was the right sort he would probably be interested in that, maybe even invite John Bedford in for something himself. He wasn't too much older than John Bedford, four or five years, if that. And he had married the Crutchfield girl, a nice enough connection.

She might even tell Dr. Wilson that it was probably her fault that John Bedford wasn't more sought after. She could have done more in the year he had been home, maybe given a little dinner or something, let everybody know he was home again.

But he could have done something himself, she excused herself, called up a few people. All he had done since he had been home was stay in his room reading or pecking on the typewriter. Nothing about Ashton interested him. She would try to tell him bits and pieces of things that happened. But she knew he wasn't interested, unless the news was bad. Bad news, ^{always} brought the light to his eyes.②

"I like people who are loyal, don't you?" she said.

1/2
PX
"Loyal to what?"

"To their town, the place where they were born.

11/13
I think you ought to do something for the place you live in. Make a contribution. Heaven knows your father's people worked for this town."

"Not much to show for it all, is there?"

There was no sense in arguing with him, not when he was in one of those moods. She started to tell him that she didn't like people who went somewhere and when they came back thought they were superior to everybody they had grown up with. There was nothing good enough for him in Ashton any more. In New York there were people just like him, he said, people he could talk to, artists, writers, ~~free spirits,~~ he had called them, people with "style."

When he first came home he wrote great fat letters to all those people. The exchange brought thinner letters in return and finally no letters either way. Once when he had been particularly hard on Ashton Mrs. McBee had said: "No, this is not New York City and thank heaven for it." But he had only let out an exasperated moan.

"I think this new doctor is loyal," she said now.

"Dr. Wilson. He's on the vestry, you know."

"I like people who are loyal, don't you?" she said.

"Loyal to what?"

"To their town, the place where they were born. I think you ought to do something for the place you live in. Make a contribution. Heaven knows your father's people certainly worked for this town."

"Not much to show for it all, is there?"

There was no sense in arguing with him, not when he was in one of those moods. She let the remark pass.

~~"I think this new doctor is loyal. Dr. Wilson. He's on the vestry, you know."~~

"Witch doctor," mumbled John Bedford. "I wouldn't be caught dead in that office."

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"And just what do we mean by that?" Criticizing. Always criticizing everything.

A car passed them and John Bedford blew his horn frantically. "Watch where you goin, you damn fool," he yelled, his head stuck out the window.

Mrs. McBee put her hand to her hat. "Good gracious, son!"

John Bedford was frowning. "Yellow line. Damn fool didn't even pay any attention to the yellow line."

Mrs. McBee idly slapped her gloves against her purse. Almost timidly she asked: "Did you get another rejection slip recently, dear?"

Mrs. McBee had learned all about rejection slips in the year John Bedford had been home. Whenever they came the Furies took hold of the boy, and he was sullen, un-approachable for two full days. It had got so now that Mrs. McBee almost dreaded going to the mailbox for fear another manilla envelope would be resting there with John Bedford's familiar pinched handwriting penned there like a silent curse. Inside would be the printed card thanking John Bedford for sending his story but that the editors were "sorry." In the beginning Mrs. McBee would try to cheer him up.

1/2 px "Why, those people up there don't know what they're doing," she would say. "I'll bet if you told them you were this poor Negro boy trying to be a writer they'd print your story in a minute." But John Bedford had just gone into a rage and said she, his own mother, was just like everybody else in this God-forsaken land. His own home he was talking about.

See → Mrs. McBee had read one of his stories once. She

didn't understand a word of it. It was about a Georgia hill girl and her crazy white trash father.

11/13 Mrs. McBee suggested as kindly as she could that John Bedford should write about some nice people, "some^f body people would want to read about^f—all anybody writes about nowadays are crazy people."

John Bedford had looked at her as if he were seeing some simple child. But Mrs. McBee stood her ground:

"Nobody wants to read about ugliness all the time. Folks want to be uplifted, John Bedford, not dragged down all the time."

They never discussed it again.

Though once when Mrs. McBee was entertaining her bridge foursome ("some of the nicest people in Ashton" and "if it weren't for the bridge foursome we'd be for^f gotten entirely") she hid one of the returned envelopes because she wanted John Bedford to be pleasant in case the ladies should see him. It was a bad thing to do because John Bedford got to thinking: since the manuscript had been gone so long, maybe, this time, the magazine was going to accept his story. Every day he went to the mailbox down by the highway and

11/13

then came back to the house sullen and irritable. Mrs. McBee finally found the courage to show him the manu^fscript. Just as cheerfully as she knew how she said it had come several days ago and completely slipped her mind. John Bedford didn't speak for two days.

"I thought we had agreed not to mention my writing any more," he said, pushing his foot further down on the accelerator again.

^{1/2 px} Mrs. McBee wanted to ask just what, if anything, she could mention. She felt like weeping again. Some^f timesⁱ _m --sometimes, she thought hesitantly, she almost wished John Bedford had not come home. She quickly dismissed the thought.

here "I think it's so fine Ashton has so many good doctors now. They say Henry Wilson is one of the best in the entire state. I've always been fond of the Wilsons. His grandfather was a great friend of your grandfather's. Did you know that?" Mrs. McBee was thinking she would have to mention that to young Dr. Wilson, too.

John Bedford rolled down the ^{window} ~~pane~~ further and rested his arm, ~~the left elbow extending out the~~

~~window~~. He was driving with one hand, nonchalantly.
Mrs. McBee gazed at him. They were driving so fast.

11/13

"I don't mind admitting I'm nervous--^Iabout the
^Mdoctor, you know." Her heart was pounding inside her,
and her breath came in little jerks.

The city lay before them spread out like a mammoth
dumping ground.

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