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Chapter] Three

Ashton, like most Southern towns, was growing. In the last two decades it had grown from a town of twenty-two thousand to its present population of nearly forty thousand; that is, if you took in the nearby surroundings. It was a tasteless growth. All the old houses and landmarks, which once had given the place a kind of distinction, were now being razed and replaced by modern glass and brick structures that the town's one newspaper announced intermittently with landscaped architectural drawings. The finished products never

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Book.

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 looked like the drawings, however, and the once tree-lined streets (named for Episcopal bishops) were now taking on a breached, broken look with pizza parlors here, filling stations there, and federal offices ^{standing} gaping between once respectable residences.

Doctors also had their own interest in real estate and instead of locating their offices in one central building they had taken to building their own square little structures with pyrocantha and magnolias espalied ^{re} against the windowless fronts. Signs outside promisingly announced the names of the doctors in bold gold letters. Most of the town's doctors had become Republicans. Rarely did they make house calls.

Dr. Wilson's offices were located in a small gray stucco building. (Small dwarf boxwoods; no pyrocantha.) John Bedford wheeled into the parking lot as if he were delivering an emergency case and promptly slammed on the brakes, narrowly missing another car emerging from one of the spaces. The car was driven by a Negro man in overalls, and what looked like nine or ten children were hanging out the windows, front and back.

"Stupid ^{fool} ~~damn~~ man," said John Bedford, which even in

her shock surprised Mrs. McBee owing to John Bedford's customary concern for the Negro race. John Bedford was a "liberal." (He was perfectly ridiculous with Willie, the Negro cleaning woman, bowing and scraping with overly zealous condescension, calling her Mrs. Washington with pointed emphasis on the Mrs. Willie was afraid of John Bedford. She avoided him as best she could, rolling her eyes and never looking at him when he spoke.)

$\frac{1}{2}$ px | John Bedford leaned out the window and backed up, smiling pleasantly, while the worn magenta buick with its mirrors and hanging coon tails made its way out of the lot.

"We could have been killed," gasped Mrs. McBee, her hand finger-spread over her heart.

"It's all right," he mumbled, his voice considerably softened.

$\frac{1}{2}$ px | Mrs. McBee adjusted her hat and slowly got out of the car, her body a pounding melee of nerves. She longed to be at home in her old clothes fussing with the various plants, warm and content in the old routine. The girdle she was wearing was too tight and the new dark blue suit unfamiliar.

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When they entered the waiting room, three people, two women and a child, were already sitting there. They looked up, inspecting Mrs. McBee and John Bedford with curious, examining eyes. Mrs. McBee detected a certain smugness in their faces as if they were saying, "Yes, we got here first."

A sign on a glassed-in partition commanded patients to "Please Ring Bell." Mrs. McBee rang the bell with authority.

"Yas[!]--?"
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Mrs. McBee took an instant dislike to the nurse who appeared from behind the partition. She was starched, aloof, a keeper of the kingdom, a fiftyish woman with slanted spectacles, ^{by} ~~to~~ whom intrusions obviously were not taken lightly.

Mrs. McBee stood taller as she always did in en[↑] counters of this sort. "I am Mrs. John Bedford McBee." She heard the overtones of her slightly lowered voice.

The woman's expression did not change. "Do you have an appointment?"

"I most assuredly do. With Dr. Wilson."

The nurse sighed, flipped through the pages of an appointment book.

M-A-C? Or Mc?"

"M-C. McBee." Years ago there would have been no such question.

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"Have you ever seen Dr. Wilson before, Mrs. Macaby?"
The nurse's voice was strident, too loud for the small room.

"I have not."

"I see. Then you're here for a full examination."

"No. I merely want to speak with Dr. Wilson, explain a few symptoms I have had lately."

The nurse put down her pencil, closed her eyes.

"Dr. Wilson sees no new patients without examinations first."

"There's nothing wrong with me, just a few $\frac{2}{M}$ "

"We'll have to get some information first,"

interrupted the nurse. "How old are you, Mrs. Macaby?"

Mrs. McBee gazed at the woman. "I don't think ^{sixty-four," she} ~~that is any of your business.~~"

The nurse did not glance up. "We have to have our records complete."

"That's perfectly silly. Now you go in there and tell Dr. Wilson that Letitia Graham McBee is here for

her appointment. His grandfather was a great friend
of my father's. Now you go right in there and tell
him."

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here

The nurse looked up from her writing. "The doctor has a patient just now. What seems to be your trouble, Mrs. Macaby?"

"My name is McBee! I shall tell the doctor what my troubles are, thank you." She left the partition, and the nurse, hugging the appointment book to her, walked defiantly into the inner chamber.

Mrs. McBee sat stiffly in one of the plastic-backed chairs. Little coils of anger were pricking at her. The nerve of the woman, asking private things like that in front of complete strangers.

The faces before her were sullen. An older woman with short gray hair, sloping shoulders and tired eyes looked as if she had been sitting there all the days of her life.

"They'll ast you just about anythan nowadays," the woman whined and looked everywhere except at Mrs. McBee.

Next to her sat a younger woman, no doubt the daughter, a thin, sallow-faced girl whose dark hair

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was teased so high and wide it looked like a black box. Across her lap leaned a blond, grinning, dirty-faced child of six or so.

"Asked mama here ^{eye} ~~once~~ if her biwles had moved," said the younger woman.

"Sure did," agreed the older woman. "Right chere in front of everbody." She still did not look at Mrs. McBee.

"Yes, well." Mrs. McBee slapped her gloves across her purse.

1/2 PX "Yes, ma'm, they'll ask ^t you anythan," said the older woman.

"Do you both have appointments?" asked Mrs. McBee. She was considering just how long she would have to wait.

"Just mama," said the daughter, and the child giggled. "Old giggle box," she said to the child, playfully hitting her on the back of her legs. The child, her head still in the woman's lap, rolled her eyes and grinned.

"How long have you been waiting?" asked Mrs. McBee.

"Not too long. One man he went in ahead ^{of} ~~of~~ us."

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Mrs. McBee glanced at John Bedford, who was slumped down in a chair reading a magazine. The table of magazines was beside Mrs. McBee's chair, and she started to take up a copy of ~~LIFE~~, but she had already seen it. Besides, she still was too annoyed with the nurse to concentrate.

"He any kin of yourn?" asked the older woman, indicating John Bedford with a cock of her head and looking squarely at Mrs. McBee for the first time.

"That is my son."

The woman sniffed the air.

"He looks more like his father," said Mrs. McBee whimsically.

"You don't look like you had a sick day in ^{yer} your life," said the older woman.

"Thank you," said Mrs. McBee, slapping her gloves against her purse again.

"I ain't known nothin but sick days."

"Took halfa Mama's stomach out last month," the daughter said, and there was a strange kind of pride, even boast, in the way she said it.

"Goodness," said Mrs. McBee. "What was the matter?"

Her interest was genuine. The probability that such a thing might occur to her seemed infinitely ~~possible~~^{high}. In her imaginings the last weeks, anything seemed possible.

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^{1/2} | "Doctor said my lower testines was stuck together."
^{PX} | Mrs. McBee looked away. "I've never heard of such a thing."

John Bedford lowered his magazine and gazed at the woman with dark bored eyes.

"That's what the doctor said." The woman had the slightest hint of a satisfied smile on her lips.

"Quit that, Marcelle," said the daughter to the blonde child. The child was giggling and pointing her finger at Mrs. McBee as if she were trying to engage her in some secret game. Irritating. Mrs. McBee was thinking that if she had had anything but her good lace handkerchief she would march herself right over and wipe the child's nose.

"When the doctor cut open ~~Mamma~~¹⁰," continued the daughter. But the door to the reception room opened, and a well-groomed woman in her late fifties or early sixties entered the room. She was dressed in a smart tailored gray ^asuit, low-heeled oxfords and over her

wrist hung a crocheted knitting bag. Her whole attire commanded silence as if some elegant stranger had wandered ~~der~~ ^{der} into a gathering of congenial inferiors, causing, for the moment at least, timidity and awe. The woman glanced toward the glassed-in ~~receptacle~~ ^{area} and without ringing the bell sat in one of the chairs nearest the door.

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All this Mrs. McBee took in with one quick glance. New money, the one glance told her. She looked just like one of those women who were always coming out to her place, poking around, trying to get her to sell her antiques. Ashton had a lot of new money in it. Mrs. McBee looked away. She didn't see why someone like that should cause the woman and her daughter to shrink back so. They didn't do that when she herself walked in.

"Hello, Letitia."

Mrs. McBee turned to the woman. "Well, I declare. Margaret Ewing. I didn't even recognize you."

Mrs. McBee was frankly pleased. Margaret Ewing was the wife of Bob Ewing, president of Ewing Textile Mills. She had name and money. Mrs. McBee had always liked Margaret Ewing.

"I haven't seen you in ages, Letitia," said Margaret Ewing, reaching into her knitting bag. "What brings you to the doctor?"

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"Old age," said Mrs. McBee. "Nothing in the world but old age, Margaret."

Margaret Ewing smiled, said nothing. Mrs. McBee was thinking that Margaret Ewing had got better¹/_N looking through the years. As a girl she had been tall, gawky with a slightly prominent nose. But the height and the nose now gave her a rather distinguished look. Her eyes were very blue and her hair, nondescript in youth, was white against an early tan.

The others¹/_M--the woman, the daughter and the child¹/_M--were studiously looking into space.

^{1 1/2}/_{PX} "What brings you here?" asked Mrs. McBee.

"The same thing," said Margaret Ewing and chuckled. She glanced up and then letting her knitting, an un¹/_T finished child's blue sweater, drop to her lap said: "Why, isn't that John Bedford?"

It was the that, slightly emphasized, that caused Mrs. McBee to quickly clear her throat. She was seeing John Bedford as Mrs. Ewing might be seeing him. His

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soiled shirt had separated slightly at the belt and his skin was showing. He should have worn a shirt with long sleeves. John Bedford did not look well in short sleeves since he had put on weight. And the light from the window made his head look balder. Mrs. McBee could just hear Margaret Ewing telling everybody: "...and poor Letitia, working herself to the bone all these years, and that pe¹-cu¹-liar son..."

"John Bedford, you remember Mrs. Ewing. Don't you?" said Mrs. McBee, and she heard her own voice loud in the silent room.

John Bedford sat up uneasily, the beginning of a smile on his lips. "How you, Mizz Ewing?" He didn't seem to know what to do with his magazine. But he was impressed by Mrs. Ewing, Mrs. McBee could tell. Money impressed John Bedford, no matter what he said. Mrs. McBee knew this too well and once she had told him:

"Yes, you want the ride, but you don't want to buy the ticket!"

The woman and the sallow-faced daughter sniffed the air again. Mrs. McBee saw them out of the corner of her eye. She knew what they were thinking¹--that the

three of them, Margaret Ewing, herself and John Bedford, considered themselves better than they, ignoring them like so many pieces of furniture.

1 1/2 px "What brings you home, John Bedford? Vacation?" asked Margaret Ewing casually.

"I've been home for more than a year now," he said.

Mrs. McBee raised her chin. It just went to show. They didn't count for a thing any more. Home an entire year and nobody knew or cared. "John Bedford is Mister Stay-at-Home," she said.

Silence. Margaret Ewing took up her knitting again, and the other women frankly stared at John Bedford regarding him suspiciously.

"John Bedford is an intellectual," said Mrs. McBee to the room at large.

The nurse reappeared in the room. "Mrs. Ewing, you may come in now."

Margaret Ewing said nothing, folded her knitting, put it aside and rose to follow the nurse.

1 1/2 px Well, thought Mrs. McBee. Here they had been waiting for the Lord knows how long, and Margaret Ewing ~~comes in~~ *appears* and, just like that, she's asked to come in.

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The sallow-faced daughter moved impatiently in her chair, and the mother stared at Mrs. McBee as if, by way of friendship, she, Mrs. McBee, was responsible for the affront.

"Mrs. Ewing must have made a special appointment," said Mrs. McBee, not wishing to look at the women.

"There aint no special appointments," said the younger woman. "There aint no special nothin."

The child began to whimper. "I wanna go home, Mama. I want some kindy."

"Hush that whinin, Marcelle. You caint have no kindy."

"You ^{said} ~~sed~~ I could. You ^{said} ~~sed~~..." The child began to wipe her eyes.

The room was overheated, and Mrs. McBee took up a magazine and began to fan herself. Nerves. The child, Margaret Ewing, John Bedford, and the waiting, she was convinced, had brought them on. Sometimes she could trace the reasons for the attacks. Other times they came for no apparent reason.

She always needed something to distract her when the attacks came. She gazed about the room, at the

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banana plant, a hideous overgrown stalk. What was it there for? What was all of it there for? The oversize Bible, the magazines, the pictures of woods and streams. What was one supposed to do here ^I-- ^M feed the body with bananas, the soul with scripture? All before doom. Her hands were wringing wet.

Margaret Ewing came out almost as soon as she had gone in. "Only my B-12 []]shot," she said casually and gave Mrs. McBee a little pat. "I'll see you soon, Letitia, I hope."

^{1 1/2 px} | "Dr. Toliver will see you in a few minutes, Mrs. Barnwell," the nurse said to the other woman. And then in a complete change of voice, as if she were hiding something, the nurse said: "You may come in now, Mrs. Macaby."

Inside the nurse handed Mrs. McBee a white hospital gown with starched ties. "Now just remove your clothes and put this on," she said.

Mrs. McBee stared at the gown. It looked almost evil. "I just want to talk to Dr. Wilson." The gown was so small, antiseptic. For a crazed second she wonder-
^{der}ed if her intestines were stuck together.

"Just step right in there," said the nurse, pointing to a closed door. She spoke as if she were addressing some naughty child.

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"There's nothing wrong with me the doctor has to examine," said Mrs. McBee. "All I need is just a little pill or two." That was what Mrs. Flemming had said to her: "Why don't you go to a doctor?" Mrs. Flemming had said. "He can probably just give you a little pill that will clear the whole thing up just like that."

It had all sounded so easy, so reassuring.

"Right in there, Mrs. Macaby, please now."

"Do you want me to remove all my clothes?"

Please."

"Well, I never!"

There was no mirror in the small closet of a room, so Mrs. McBee was unable to see how she looked in the ridiculous gown. It was short and the sides were indecently split. She glanced at her own clothes, the new dark blue suit with the geranium, hanging on the peg like obsolescence itself. She felt the split sides again, saw her veined legs, once her pride. "Well, I do," she said and peeked out the door.

There seemed to be no one about in the interior hall. Letitia Graham McBee, she said to herself, now you just march yourself right out there like somebody.

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She walked out into the hall. "Well, here I am," she called to the closed doors, "just like the Lord made me."

The nurse immediately appeared. "Now, now, Mrs. Macaby. We'll just go right in here."

$\frac{1}{2}$ | "I never felt so ridiculous in all my life."
PX | "We look just fine," said the nurse. "Right in here, please."

Mrs. McBee immediately saw the examining table, a twisted ~~gray~~^a steel construction aimed for utility and deceptively padded. It seemed to take up most of the space in the small room. And then as its uneasy meaning gradually came to her a strange sense of things also came, the sense that from now on nothing would ever be the same again. She felt as if she were now, this minute, entering a new phase of her life, one from which she would never return. The table was meant for others, not her. It seemed a terrible error that she should be here now.

"Hop up," said the nurse.

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The table was vastly uncomfortable, and above her a round phosphorescent light, blue^{ish} and sick, stared down ~~at her~~ like an evil eye. The room smelled of rubber somehow, and it was too hot. Encased in shelves before her were all kinds of instruments, bent and cruel like torture itself.

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Her heart began to accelerate. Why didn't the doctor come? She felt the beads of perspiration come to her forehead. She thought once of getting up, going back to that closet and putting her clothes on. "I'll just march right out of here."

But all at once she was too tired. The strain - the strain of just getting here - had left her exhausted. And then, lying there naked as a jaybird except for the little gown, she felt like weeping again. She had been alone, fought alone, too long, and people were not kind.

And then the doctor entered the room - a brisk, youthful, busy man, striding in as if he were merely a friendly caller. He bent over a basin to wash his

hands, and Mrs. McBee saw his white-coated back--^Istrong,
 young, confident. M

He straightened, came to her and looked down with smiling brown eyes. "Now, Mrs. McBee, what seems to be your trouble?"

1 1/2 px "Doctor," she began feebly. "Doctor." She tried again from the depths of her misery. Her lower lip began to quiver. "Doctor, I've--^II've got a SON!" M
 And for the first time in twenty years she was really weeping, sobbing like a child.

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