Chapter Four

John Bedford had two excuses for coming home: illness and ambition. At least that was the way he put it, though at greater length (seven pages back and front), when he wrote Mrs. Mc Bee from New York asking for his train fare home. "A few bad investments," was his explanation for the latter.

"Investments?" cried Mrs. Mc Bee. "He wouldn't know an investment if he saw it coming down the street."

She re-read the letter. The illness worried her only slightly. John Bedford had always been given to
imaginary ills. But the ambition annoyed her enormously. He declared he wanted to be "a writer." Which simply put meant the only thing he wanted to do was sit down and do nothing.

"I just don't understand him. I'll never understand him," Mrs. McBee wrote her daughter Mary Hughes at the height of her disgust. "And he's from a family of doers, too. The McBees and the Grahams have all been doers."

And Mary Hughes wrote back one of her rare letters: "He's still just a child, a great big odd child."

But that was typical of Mary Hughes. Childless herself, she was always ready to give an opinion about other people's children, especially if they hadn't turned out right, and especially her own brother. Mary Hughes and John Bedford despised each other. They couldn't be in a room more than five minutes before one or the other started something.

Mrs. McBee wired the fare and two days later hired a taxi and went to the railway station to meet John Bedford. He got off the train with a crowd of Negroes, his face wearing the same scowl he had left with and his body the same suit Mrs. McBee had bought him three years before.
He looked healthy enough. Mrs. McBee could see no visible change. But on the way home in the taxi he told her he occasionally had trouble breathing. Sometimes he had to rush to a window and hang his head out gulping breaths of air. It always happened, he said, in closed-in places, in somebody's apartment he didn't know very well or in a store if he had to wait for a clerk, or in a bank. Banks were the worst. He would break out all over in sweat and his heart would race, and then he would panic.

"Why, that's the silliest thing I ever heard of," said Mrs. McBee. She declared she herself got breathless sometimes, but that was usually after undue exercise or anger at Mrs. Flemming, something like that. "You've just got to learn some control, that's all."

"I knew it," he said, his mouth pinched into a beginning rage. "I knew it."

"Knew what?"

He said nothing and remained silent as he scowled out at the August-parched fields during the remainder of the ride home.

A month after he had been home and Mrs. McBee saw
"Nothing," it just came out. "Nothing." It just came out. And he went into a full-blown rage, asked her what she thought he was doing now? "Every day. Every waking moment. Work! God, woman, what in heaven do you think I'm doing?"

"For men must work and women must weep." She almost sang it. "For men must work and women must weep." She almost sang it. "For men must work and women must weep." She almost sang it. "For men must work and women must weep." She almost sang it. "For men must work and women must weep." She almost sang it. "For men must work and women must weep." She almost sang it. "For men must work and women must weep." She almost sang it. "For men must work and women must weep." She almost sang it. "For men must work and women must weep." She almost sang it. "For men must work and women must weep." She almost sang it. "For men must work and women must weep." She almost sang it. "For men must work and women must weep." She almost sang it. "For men must work and women must weep." She almost sang it. "For men must work and women must weep." She almost sang it. "For men must work and women must weep." She almost sang it. "For men must work and women must weep." She almost sang it. "For men must work and women must weep." She almost sang it. "For men must work and women must weep." She almost sang it. "For men must work and women must weep." She almost sang it. "For men must work and women must weep." She almost sang it.
That was when she read the story about the Georgia hill girl and her crazy white trash father. She could scarcely read it so conscious was she of his staring at her, watching every turn of the page, then walking in circles, stopping, his eyes burning in his face as he waited, studying the slightest reaction.

If that was work, Mrs. McBee decided after finishing the manuscript, then she had had everything backward all her life. She did not say as much, of course. But she did add that she had known writers who had jobs, real jobs.

"You've never known a writer in your life," he said.

"No, but I've read about them." What she meant to say was the writers she had read about didn't just peck on a typewriter half an hour a day and then loll around the rest. But she didn't say that either.

It was sometime after this that she had an opportunity to read more of his writing. She called it an "opportunity," but actually it was sought. She "happened" on the writing one Saturday morning when John Bedford was outside staring at a tree - "thinking," as he called it. She was "tidying" his room, and there
were the typed pieces of paper on the desk beside his typewriter.

Mrs. McBee thought possibly by reading it, studying it a little, she might come on some reason why the editors did not like his writing. She told herself that; in the depths of her soul she knew she read it for no other reason than just plain curiosity.

She reasoned the finer motive, however, and that justified the guilt that tried to nag at her. She was not a sneak; she did not spy, and in many ways the truth was her church.

"The truth is my church," she was always telling people.

But if that was so, curiosity then was her fiery hell, and the compulsion to see what he was doing was so strong she took up the pieces of paper, sat in his chair, and began to read.

As it turned out the writing was a kind of retribution, and afterward Mrs. McBee heard the Voices speaking to her: "It serves you right, Letitia Graham McBee." And the Voices combined to sound like the single warning voice of John Bedford himself.
The story was only partially completed and mostly notes. It was about a woman from California, which told Mrs. McBee right off it wouldn’t be very interesting. California and its people were only a myth to Mrs. McBee, a place no one cared very much about, certainly not to people who amounted to anything. It was just out there, remote, a foreign state, brassy and vulgar; gold rush people, soiled from the very beginning by greed. They had different standards, those people, and she was never surprised when she read about murders, or divorce scandals or any of the other vulgar things that made headlines from that part of the country. As far as she was concerned, it was as good a place as any for Richard Nixon to sit down in and retire.

The woman in the story was older, lived in a small town and had one son and a daughter. (Mrs. McBee became more interested.) But then he broke off into notes, in which she saw no reasoning whatsoever. It all sounded like gobbledygook to her:

"Bring out Virginia Woolf's statement: '...And I thought how unpleasant it is to be locked out; and I thought how worse it is to be locked in.' Wise Virginia,
who gave it all up, said to hell with it finally, and, taking up her cane, walked into the sea.

"No sea to walk into here, only acres and acres of suburban houses, shotgun affairs, surrounding the woman everywhere and reaching for her like an enormous squid. Perhaps, like the little red hen, she'll walk into one of these one day and never come out again."

Mrs. McBee paused for a moment in her reading. "Nobody's going to want to read anything like that," she mumbled aloud and read on. "The woman: Her world begins and ends in her small corner. She's never been away from it for very long. Once she took a trip to Chicago, found it so miserable she came right back to the corner again.

"She lives and judges by the old verities. No doubt will die by them. 'Fine upstanding Christian woman.' She knows this, and her Christianity makes her joyous and energetic. Bring out Kierkegaard's great statement: 'The fact of the matter is that Christianity is really all too joyous, and, therefore, really to stick to Christianity a man must be brought to madness by suffering. Most men, therefore, will be able to get
a real impression of Christianity only in the moment of their death, because death actually takes away from them what must be surrendered in order to get an impression of Christianity.'

"But this woman is joyous now! A poor, dumb, naive, stumbling creature who..." And then beside this statement, written in the margin, John Bedford had written: "Mother. The woman will be Mother!!!"

Mrs. McBee's heart began to beat frenetically. "How could he? How could he? Writing that about his own mother!" She rose from the chair and sat on the edge of the bed, her hand still at her heart, staring at the papers on the table as if they were John Bedford himself.

And then the hurt, the self-pity came. She had been as good a mother as she knew how. She thought down the years: hearing the boy's prayers every night; nursery school; seeing he made proper friends, cooking for him, working for him, even going without food sometimes during that last year of college when the water pipes froze in the greenhouse. But he hadn't known. She would never have told him.
She recalled John Bedford as a baby: plump and round with his grandfather's laughing dark eyes. The dreams she had had then. This plump, laughing son would be a great man, the greatest man in all Georgia. She saw him alternately as Governor, then industrialist, a textile tycoon. He would marry well and sometimes, then, she saw the future before her warm and sweet like the velvet air that rose from the South: she, Letitia Graham McBee, on a visit to her son, walking on carpeted grass to the pillared mansion where John Bedford and his wife, witty and intelligent, the wife dressed in summer green, waited smilingly for guests to arrive.

But the facial features began to thicken and so did the dreams.

At six, John Bedford, a large frowning child, his face a carbon copy of his father's, came home with a scrawled note from the first grade teacher: "John Bedford has no team cooperation. I should like to meet with you some afternoon at your convenience..."

The teacher, a Miss Fowler, armed with a teacher's certificate and a Cedartown, Georgia, accent, was a woman in her late twenties with a rural prissiness and
a certain arrogance as she sat behind her desk reciting
to Mrs. McBee the abuses "I and the class" had suffered
by way of John Bedford.

John Bedford, it seemed, had defied her more than
once, resolutely refusing to participate in group play,
group study or even—and Miss Fowler's voice became dark-
ly hushed—"...the salute to our flag." Miss Fowler had
noticed that during fire drills John Bedford would not
stand in line like the other children but stood just a
little outside the line. A small thing, perhaps, yet
indicative all the same.

John Bedford was a disrupting element. Miss Fowler
had been forced to place him with the yellow birds.
Following through with her ideas on group participation,
Miss Fowler had separated the class into three groups:
the blue birds were the brighter students; the red birds,
the mediocre; and the "slower" students, yellow birds.

By all rights John Bedford belonged a blue bird,
said Miss Fowler. He was a bright enough student. But
she thought it would teach him a lesson to learn that
just because one had a good mind it was no guarantee of
success in the world "out yonder."
Mrs. McBee glimpsed her son sitting in the circle of tiny yellow chairs, bigger than the rest of the children, the chair too small for him, his face almost like an adult's in that shameful dumb circle. And a kind of rage took hold of her. She decided to investigate for herself.

She went to the playground the next morning. And there was Miss Fowler huddled up against the school building, her arms crossed, shivering solitary in the chilled November winds while the children some distance away played their organized games.

Mrs. McBee watched them, girls and boys together. And then came the sweet voices of child-like song:

"London bridges done fallen down, fell-en down, My farrr la-dy."

And John Bedford screeching his head off: "That's not the right words! Dumb! Dumb! Dumb! You can't even talk right."

Mrs. McBee went right home and told John Bedford, Senior. "It's all your fault," she cried to her husband. He was a teacher of English, and he didn't have as much sense as that Miss Fowler.
What she meant was that he had forced the boy, made him nervous, excitable. At the age of four, John Bedford, Senior had taught the boy how to read. Each night he stood before them and read aloud, month by month increasing the difficulty of the books. By the time he was ready to enter school, he had read all of *Tom Sawyer* with only small assist from his father.

"The child's just bored," said Mrs. McBee, "sitting there with the yellow birds reading, 'See the tree. John likes the tree.'"

That night John Bedford, Senior had a quiet talk with his son. He told him that just because we are able to do some things better than others we don't criticize the others for their faults. He said John Bedford should not shout when the children sang ungrammatically. Nor, he added, should one use the same grammar just to be like the group.

The next day John Bedford skipped a grade. The night after that John Bedford, Senior died following a coronary occlusion.

Mrs. McBee resigned herself to the role of widowhood. And so did the community. Within a month after
the funeral people seemed to forget she had ever had a husband. She became a "character"—starting the greenhouse, selling Christmas cards, pickling tomatoes, artichokes, whatever would sell. Nerves were mistaken for eccentricities. She was sometimes abrupt with customers.

"She won't sell to you unless she likes you." The remarks all came back to her. She pretended not to care. She did. She was left to make a path for her children as best she could. She would sell to anybody. Anything to anybody. Those were the desperate years. Later, she told herself, she would pick and choose. She had her likes and dislikes.

It was during this time that the "handicaps" developed, one after the other. It turned out John Bedford had flat feet. He was unable to run as fast as the other boys. At play period he stood alone by a privet hedge throwing rocks at a garbage can. He was never chosen. As the teams were selected he stood in the diminishing group scowling. Finally left standing, excluded, he would shrug his shoulders, walk away, seemingly adjusted to the solitariness of his life.

In the fifth grade a crisis occurred which by
normal standards should have worked in the boy's favor. But John Bedford managed to turn even that against him, and it was then Mrs. McBee cried out her woe to a blank bathroom wall: "I'm too old for all this, too old to be a mother and a father, too." She was forty-four at the time. "I just want to give up, meet my God!"

It all began when John Bedford's fifth grade teacher told her she thought the reason John Bedford stumbled so much was the fact he could not see. Mrs. McBee immediately took him to the only oculist in town. The man prescribed thick bifocals. She wanted to weep as she saw his eyes magnified three times their size in his miserable face. But she was cheerful:

"They look so fine, son! I wish I could wear them."
The children called him "owl-head."

His grades began to slip. At the end of the school year he had made all D's. It was purely by accident Mrs. McBee discovered he could not see at all, or just barely. Trying to amuse him (sometimes it seemed she had spent a hundred years just trying to amuse the boy) she asked him to trace a picture of a ship on the cover of a magazine. John Bedford drew a horse instead.
"Why, you didn’t do what I asked you to do," she said puzzled.

He merely blinked back at her with his reddened owl's eyes.

He's going blind, she thought in her panic, and that very afternoon she took the bus to Atlanta to see the best eye surgeon in the Southeast.

The surgeon examined John Bedford's eyes, then he looked at the glasses and finally at Mrs. McBee. "Why, there's nothing wrong with this boy's eyes. Nothing at all. Who prescribed these glasses?"

But the oculist had long since moved away from Ashton, and Mrs. McBee's attempts to bring suit were to no avail. The oculist had caught mumps in Galena, Illinois and died following complications.

After that John Bedford seemed to want to come into his own. His grades improved. He seemed to have more life, and Mrs. McBee settled down for a little peace. But the mistake of the spectacles, instead of making him more acceptable to the other children, worked just the opposite. For this Mrs. McBee had only John Bedford himself to blame.
Instead of accepting sympathy he refused it, carrying the mishap like a gift. He had been victimized by an old man who had died of mumps in Galloway, Illinois, and because of it he was different, tragic, marked for high purpose, and he played the role to the hilt, staying aloof as one chosen by destiny, walking solitarily to the movies, sitting in the darkened theatre afternoon after afternoon, alone, eating packages and packages of popcorn as if he were making up for the time lost and defying his mother's protests by blinking his eyes, a reminder of what she and the oculist had once done to him.

Mrs. McBee tried everything. In a polite letter it was suggested to her "John Bedford just doesn't seem to be Cub Scout material..." When he was left in the woods to find his way home, one of the tests toward getting his badge, he just stayed there, and a search party had to be formed. His only answer was that he liked the woods. Besides, said his troop leader, John Bedford had never mastered knot-tying.

At the age of twelve he developed a thick waist and the smile, a secret, puzzling, knowing smile that
on sight sent everyone, including Mrs. McBee, into such irritation that at one point, on seeing him come into the house, she shouted at him: "Quit it! Quit it!" And the boy, not knowing the reason for the outburst, stood there, the smile vanishing and then returning, and for all the world he looked like a grotesque caricature of a man-child Mona Lisa.

At recess he was still never chosen.

Would the body ever grow to the face? Mrs. McBee prayed for the years to go.

By the time he was seventeen he had the scowl and no smile at all.

Mrs. McBee saw the best of things. John Bedford had a distinction about him. In time he would become a distinguished-looking man. He had the fine dark eyes, the McBee chin and mouth. In fact, had he lived anywhere else he would have been considered a rather handsome young man. He was tall, a little over six feet, and he had a certain quality that told what he had: good breeding.

But the children still remembered. They remembered the flat feet, the aloofness, the smile. He was still
"Owl." At the high school dances Mrs. McBee watched as John Bedford danced one dance after the other with the same tall, ungainly girl he was always put with. At least he didn't ride around in fast cars and drink whisky, though the fact was there was no car to ride around in, and as for whisky Mrs. McBee hadn't seen any since the Christmas before John Bedford, Senior died.

Mrs. McBee blamed his unpopularity on the town. They were narrow little people, knew nothing about the world beyond the highway. Mrs. McBee herself was born knowing, even though she had never been anywhere particularly. Some people were like that, she reasoned; they just knew things. She considered herself one of these. She was content to wait. Some day John Bedford would outrun them all. He was smarter than all of them put together, and one day they would come crawling. Her hope sustained her.

Though at the age of twenty-two even hope was small. Aloof, unbending, a perpetual frown on his face, John Bedford finished college, Winton College in southeast Georgia. He despised the place, was ashamed of it. He had wanted to go to Princeton. Nevertheless, he
graduated with honors. Mrs. McBee came for the graduation exercises. John Bedford snatched the certificates of honor, said good-bye to no one, rode home on the bus with Mrs. McBee (scowling all the way) and promptly sat down. And there he sat, listless, with the dark eyes staring into space, never saying very much, occasionally listening to music or reading, doing little else, irritable.

"Aren't you going to do something with your life?" Mrs. McBee asked him one day.

"What do you want me to do with it?" he countered.

After a summer of this Mrs. McBee took "the bull by the horns."

"If you won't do anything, I'll have to take the bull by the horns," she announced testily one September morning. She marched John Bedford right down to the public library and "saw to it" he got a job. The job lasted exactly three months. John Bedford was out of step with the group again. Group librarians this time. He kept lending a book that the board of directors deemed "pornographic." The third time he loaned the book he was fired.
Then the idling and sitting once more. Wearing an old shirt and pants he sat on the front porch for hours, just sitting and gazing open-mouthed at the automobiles screeching down the highway. Mrs. McBee thought he was ill and called the then older Dr. Wilson to come to the house to see him. Dr. Wilson in his jolly way pronounced him in ravishingly good health. "Some folks just like to set," said older Dr. Wilson. Dr. Wilson himself lived to be ninety-four, ending his days sitting on the country club porch playing poker.

"A proper and fitting end," said John Bedford at the time.

One afternoon Mrs. McBee came back from the greenhouse and found John Bedford furiously packing. He was "getting the hell out of here," he announced. He was going to Atlanta.

"What will you do?" asked Mrs. McBee distraught by the look of desperation in his eyes.

"Who knows?"

From a second cousin Mrs. McBee learned that John Bedford was practically starving to death. On his arrival in Atlanta he had been mugged, and every penny he had had been stolen. Mrs. McBee got up what money
she could and sent it to him. Finally the second cousin wrote that he was all right, that he had got a job with the telephone company.

Which didn't sound like much to Mrs. McBee. She was hoping for something in banking or a position with some distinguished corporation. Still, the telephone company was better than nothing, and she was sure that in time he would come into his own. Atlanta was the sort of place that would appreciate a young man like John Bedford, someone with his quality, presence and breeding. John Bedford was so far above "any of the little people around Ashton" he would never be happy here. Mrs. McBee sometimes told people that, confidentially of course.

Then one July day he brought home a young woman. Mrs. McBee was delighted when his letter came announcing the fact. Above all else she wanted John Bedford to marry. She wasn't like some mothers she knew, hugging her children to her, refusing to let them go; she wanted them to marry, be on their own.

Of course she wasn't altogether taken with her daughter Mary Hughes's husband. He had a round fat face and he was
cocky, thought he knew everything. An insurance salesman, he had done rather well, but the terrible truth was Mary Hughes's husband bored her. He was the most boring man she had ever met. That was her own secret. To the public Horace Toole was a raving success, "doing so weyell..."

But she was especially eager for John Bedford to marry. Her only son, and the name would be carried on. So when the letter came announcing he was to bring home the young woman she immediately got busy preparing for them. She arranged flowers throughout the house, cooked special dishes, hung curtains in the guest bedroom, polished silver.

And when they arrived she took one look at the girl and her disappointment was so deep she could scarcely get through the evening. It was almost as if John Bedford had done this on purpose, brought the girl home as a kind of vengeance, a vengeance solely against her.

True, she had sometimes hinted in her letters she wished he would marry. She reminded him that he was the last of the McBees ("this branch") and she had kind of hoped to be a grandmother before she died. But she
always drew a little face and added a "smile." She
couldn't see anything to resent in that.

The girl was a telephone operator, pretty enough
with blond teased hair, high heels, a skirt that was
too short and obviously terrified of Mrs. McBee. She
sat in the winged-back chair in the living room, never
opening her mouth, and Mrs. McBee worked herself to
the bone talking, trying to make the girl feel at ease.

Only once was there any reaction, and that was
almost hysterical. She saw one of Mrs. McBee's beagle
puppies (given to her by Mr. Flemming), and the girl
suddenly let out a scream. She loved puppies, especially
beagles, and she talked baby talk to the poor dog,
petting it and cradling it, ignoring both Mrs. McBee
and John Bedford. During her performance she said her
own father raised beagles. He was a deputy sheriff in
some tiny town in Georgia and...

Mrs. McBee listened no further. She gazed at
John Bedford and his own eyes met hers with a pleased
look as if sensing his mother's reaction he was amused
by it all, by her snobbery, her obvious disapproval.
And Mrs. McBee continued to gaze at him, in her rage forming words in her mind she would not have spoken. He had brought the girl home just to annoy her. It was his joke, his pleasure.

In her weariness Mrs. McBee rationalized John Bedford was still stubbornly defying her in any way he could. (Probably because of the spectacles. She could think of nothing else.) Sometimes it seemed he was trying to be as ordinary as possible just to annoy her. His job was ordinary, the girl was ordinary, even his looks had suffered. He had gained weight and it looked as if he had grease on his hair.

"You're not going to marry that!" Mrs. McBee said to him in the pantry. But he just shrugged his shoulders and walked away.

Mrs. McBee heard nothing from him for sometime after the girl's visit. She spent sleepless nights imagining some common wedding somewhere, and once in her dreams she saw them all coming toward her, up the red clay road, the girl with a beagle puppy in her arms and behind her miles and miles of uniformed Georgia sheriffs with their badges, all coming to live out
their days at McBee's Station. On her! And John Bedford laughing, laughing...
The next time she heard from him he had moved. There was no mention of the girl, any girl for that matter. He was living in New York. He had a chance to go into "publishing," he wrote. Mrs. McBee read the letter, and hope rose like a rocket:


Obviously John Bedford had different ideas about publishing. As it turned out he had a job in a bookstore selling books. Mrs. McBee learned this from one of his rare telephone calls home. (Collect. He needed money.)

"Is that all you're doing?" She couldn't conceal her disappointment, and she was irritated over the request for money, not so much for the money itself but for the fact that was his only reason for calling.

"Things take time," he drawled back at her. He said he was in the bookstore only temporarily, that
he was waiting for an opening somewhere else.

He stayed at the bookstore for five years, rarely writing, only occasionally answering her letters. He became a great blank in her life, an address from whence flowers were sent on Mother's Day, limp carnations delivered from an Ashton florist and which always arrived when her own garden and greenhouse flourished with every color and size blossom imaginable. She would put the sick stems in a glass vase and stare at them as if they were some wilting part of her own body that would not die.

On Christmas a pair of stockings arrived, three days late. Every Christmas. The stockings. Always late.

At least he was on his own, and as Mrs. McBee said: "You can do all you can for your children up to a certain age. After that you might as well quit worrying. You've done the best you could." She told herself that over and over. Certainly she had done everything for John Bedford the Lord God would allow. Still, in the quiet of the night she imagined New York, a howling beast of a city. "Is he safe? Is he well?"
For Mrs. McBee loved her son. She loved him more than anything in the world, more than the church, more than God. If she were given the choice, to save John Bedford or God, she would have saved John Bedford. She saw them side by side: John Bedford with his dark scowling face and God with his beard. Then she saw herself, never once wavering, pointing a determined finger at John Bedford.

"I choose John Bedford," she would say without once glancing at God.

She believed in His way He would have understood.

"Where have I failed?" she asked herself, still sitting on the bed staring at the typewriter table where the hurtful writing rested like a breathing thing.

"Dumb and stumbling, he called me." And the very repetition of the words brought anger now rather than hurt. "Writing that down. About his own mother. Ungrateful, disloyal, miserable boy." And she repeated the word "miserable." For that was it. The answer. It came to her all at once as delayed reasoning sometimes comes. John Bedford was raging at himself, not his mother. He was like everyone else, looking
for other shoulders to lay the blame.

Mrs. McBee was pleased with the thought. She rose abruptly from the bed, took one last lingering look at the typewritten papers and vowed she would have a talk with John Bedford that very afternoon. It was he who was naive and stumbling, and it was his mother, wise in her ways, only she, who could change all that, bring him from the wilderness, set him on the path again.

Mrs. McBee thought about the talk all day, rehearsed in her mind exactly what she was going to say. Once she mumbled aloud: "And now, John Bedford, there is something important I would like to say to you."

And Mrs. Flemming, who was transplanting an African violet, looked up in startled bewilderment.

"It must have just come out," said Mrs. McBee happily laughing. "I was thinking of something else."

Mrs. Flemming said nothing. One of Mrs. Flemming's favorite topics was "crazy people." As Mrs. Flemming saw it, half the people in the world were "crazy people."

That afternoon Mrs. McBee dressed carefully in her best black dress, fixed her hair, put on pearls, brought out her mother's silver tea service and when
she heard John Bedford loping down the stairs she took a deep breath and called to him in the most serious, dignified voice she could command:

"Come in, please. I would like to speak with you."

It was a very good time to say what she wanted. Mrs. McBee saw that at once. He looked as disreputable as ever, his hair uncombed, the neck of his shirt filthy, his eyes puffed.

"What is all this?" he asked, examining the tea service, the pearls and Mrs. McBee sitting straight as a needle. His eyes seemed to take in the scene with impish pleasure as if this were just another foolish game played out by his mother.

"Would you like some tea?" asked Mrs. McBee, her voice almost shaking with seriousness.

"I think I'd better have a drink," he drawled.

"Be seated, please."

He fell into the wing chair, his brooding hound's eyes looking more like his father's than she had ever seen them.

Mrs. McBee carefully poured herself some tea, vaguely noting how the afternoon sun glinted on the
silver tea pot. The room was silent. When she looked up, John Bedford was frowning.

"Now," she said. And the two looked at each other, looked as if they had never done so before, an embarrassed gaze as if one or the other were guilty and, knowing, must look anyway, stand the ground. "I want to ask you a question," said Mrs. McBee. "And I don't believe you know the answer."

"Jesus Christ," said John Bedford and leaned back further in the chair. "What now?"

Mrs. McBee let the blasphemy pass. She gazed almost peacefully. "I am very serious."

"Obviously."

"I want to ask you, John Bedford...," she hesitated, "a very sobering question."

His irritation was mounting. Mrs. McBee could tell by the tightening of his lips.

"I want to ask you," --she lifted her head-- "just what do you think it is in a man that attracts a woman?" There. It was out.

John Bedford studied her for a moment, and then, as the full impact of the question reached him, he burst into laughter.
It was an expected reaction, and Mrs. McBee waited pinched-mouth for it to pass. "I don't believe you know the answer."

John Bedford stood up, turned from her, turned back to her, scratched his head, his eyes lightened with puzzlement and amusement. He put both hands on his hips and stared down at her. "What in the name of Almighty God is this anyway? The birds and the bees—at this late date? Jesus."

"Your profanity hides nothing," said Mrs. McBee. "But you have chosen your words well. It is late. Now please be seated." She watched as he fell back into the wing chair again. Then she eyed the tea cup but did not pick it up. She went into her prepared speech, hearing her voice, pleased with its sound, the calm, the assurance:

"...woman is not attracted to a man solely because of his mind or spirituality. Not in the beginning." She closed her eyes and nodded her head in agreement. "It is the first glance, the very first one, that is the important glance. She wants to see manliness, a leader, someone with life, energy, charm—not a dull,
shrinking scowl of a man who lolls around and eats too much. She wants a go-getter, someone with vitality and life. That's what she wants.

"You do not have that, I'm sorry to say. Just look at yourself. Look hard. You should be married, John Bedford, and it is still not too late." Mrs. McBea shot a dark glance at him. He was leaning back in the chair, his arms crossed, gazing hollowly as if he were in shock.

Mrs. McBea then took up her tea cup more for support than want, for now she was to enter into the dangerous part. "You are not a happy man. I know that. And so you are not able to see others as they really are. You see them as, well, as you see yourself, stumbling and pathetic..."

She watched his expression for any change that might trigger suspicion that she had read the writing in his room. There was no change. "You need to wake up. See the world for its beauty. You should marry, have children, lead a full normal life. There is nothing wrong with you."

John Bedford cupped his hand over his mouth as if he meant to blow into it. "You mean I'm not a fag, Mother?"
And then he was grinning for what reason Mrs. McBee
could not possibly divine. She had no idea what a fag
was. Probably one of those new Negro words the young
were so fond of using nowadays.

"I don't think you are," she said. "I think you
are simply unhappy, and you are unhappy because you are
idle and..." She did not want to use the word "lazy,"
not now. "Now if I were you I would ask the college
to give you a full-time position, teaching or whatever
you want to do there. You would be a fine teacher,
John Bedford. I can't think of anything greater than
inspiring the young, challenging them, exciting their
young minds. And who knows? Being there every day
you might meet some young woman who just might be the
one, some gay, charming Southern belle."

It was a little joke, of course, that about the
Southern belle, and Mrs. McBee found herself smiling
broadly, her voice lilting as if she herself were the
belle. Then she sipped the tea thoroughly engrossed
in her enactment. "Don't you see?" She smiled happily,
eager for his reaction.

John Bedford continued to gaze at her as if he,
too, were absorbed, then he slumped his shoulders and, still looking, said: "My God!" As if to say: "It's true, you're mad; it's really true." He looked away once, then back again, shook his head, rose from the chair and left the room.

Mrs. McBee sat holding her tea cup. She listened as she heard him going upstairs. Then she heard her own words come back to her mockingly: "...some gay, charming Southern belle. God in heaven!" And a door slammed.

Mrs. McBee still held the cup. The room had the aura of one in which elaborate preparations for a party had been made, but the party having been over the room was still as it was since no guests had come.

She sat holding the tea cup for a long while, feeling simple. For she had wanted, expected, to continue. After all, she was merely a mother trying to help her son. "In the only way I know how."

She began thinking of what he had written, not just what he had written about her, but those other things about Christianity and death and walking into the sea of houses. Gibberish. All of it. And then
for no reason she could possibly explain she muttered aloud:

"Maybe John Bedford's a communist." And still holding the cup she stared wide-eyed at the empty chair before her.

Mrs. McBee told nothing of this to young Dr. Wilson. She meant to. But after her first burst of tears his kindness seemed to want to disappear, and he began shifting his weight from one foot to another. Finally he broke into one of her sentences:

"Yes. Well, now, Mrs. McBee, let's just see if we can't make you feel easier about some of these things. Just lie back down, please."