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Chapter Five

Just how long it was after the visit to the doctor that John Bedford began to cause real trouble Mrs. McBee couldn't remember exactly. She wrote to Mary Hughes detailing some of her suspicions, and she said she had first started "noticing things" after the doctor's visit. She mentioned the doctor to worry her a little; purposely she went into no further details about that.

18 rts But then, too, whenever she went over it in her mind, detail by detail, she seemed to date her concern

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Boob.

11/13 from the time of the doctor's visit because Mrs. Flemming also had begun to worry her. "Sometimes I feel just like giving up the ghost," she wrote Mary Hughes. And she underlined "ghost" twice, meaning it, too, because, as she said, without Mrs. Flemming there wouldn't be any ghost to give up. Everything would collapse.

1 1/2 PX For as much as Mrs. Flemming irritated her she was the one person Mrs. McBee absolutely could not get along without. It would take years to train somebody else, that is if she could even find anybody else who would take the job. Mrs. Flemming had helped Mrs. McBee now for eleven years and, dumb and simple as she was, she had mastered the routine work in the greenhouse and had become really quite apt in the kitchen, pickling and putting up the preserves.

If it weren't for her constant chattering and her highⁱ_w pitched voice Mrs. McBee might say she had a "jewel" in Mrs. Flemming. A jewel, however, she was not quite. Sometime^s the voice (Mrs. Flemming spoke as if everyone in the world were deaf) pricked so con^Tsistently at Mrs. McBee's nerves that she had to stop whatever she was doing and go outside just to get away for a while.

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For nerves, Dr. Wilson had said, were the root of all Mrs. McBee's troubles, causing the vague pains, the dizziness and the shortness of breath. "Nuuv's can cause a heepa fuss," he had declared. "Make us feel mighty po." He had prescribed tranquilizers. But the pills made her feel drunk, and she stopped taking them after the first day. That was the way she put it to Mrs. Flemming the next morning.

"Don't blame you. Don't blame you none," shouted Mrs. Flemming. "I don't want nothin foolin with my brains."

She added that a doctor had tried to give her something like that once, and she went around with her tongue so thick everybody thought she'd been drinkin whisky. "And me just preachin away in the church, too." She had flushed the "nasty thangs" down the toilet.

"It's just mind over matter," said Mrs. McBee.

"That's right," shouted Mrs. Flemming.

Mrs. Flemming was a ^{large} ~~plump~~ ^{blonde} graying woman in her middle fifties with her hair ^{most of the time} parted in the middle and ^{cut short and hanging in ~~with~~ frizzy} drawn back to a twisted tiny bun in the back of her

Coils at the side of her face ⊕

~~head.~~ She wore no make-up ~~and in another day she might~~
~~have resembled a pilgrim except for~~ ^{and} her small rust-
 colored eyes ~~that~~ looked out on the world with sly
 suspicion, sometimes like a fox's eyes. She searched
 out sin with those eyes.

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1/2 PX Intermittently during the day she would burst
 into song, strange hymns which always included thoughts
 about blood and bosoms and stray lambs. An Episcopalian,
 Mrs. McBee found the hymns thoroughly unrecognizable,
 and she sometimes wondered if Mrs. Flemming didn't
 invent the hymns herself. But she sang them with gusto
 in a high piercing voice which, in the summer, always
 brought forth a slammed window in the direction of John
 Bedford's room. Mrs. Flemming sometimes preached at the
 Church of God, a small brick building set a few feet
 away from the highway with a large neon cross on the
 front, which blinked like a flirting eye.

But she was a good woman, "not trash," as Mrs.
 McBee was always saying. She wished she could say
 the same for her husband. It galled Mrs. McBee that
 the money she paid Mrs. Flemming went to the garbage
 disposal, the mammoth refrigerator and all the other

things Mrs. McBee herself could not afford. "For the enjoyment of that man!"

11/13 It was after lunch, ^{two} ~~the~~ day ^p after the doctor's visit, that Mrs. McBee first noticed there was something wrong with Mrs. Flemming. They were in the greenhouse hardening off the geranium plants, inuring them to en-
vironmental change before the April sales.

Gal 2/2
Usually Mrs. Flemming returned from lunch with the latest about her grandbaby or the newest episode on the soap opera she never missed on television. But on this day she came back oddly silent, breathing heavily and her small rust eyes darting to and fro, a sure sign she was in great and profound thought, suspicions running like a network of tiny wires everywhere.

Mrs. McBee knew the woman was fairly bursting to discuss whatever was the matter. Silences were a sort of threat Mrs. Flemming held over Mrs. McBee as if the sullenness could be taken, ^{to mean,} just might ^{mean,} ~~be,~~ that Mrs. Flemming was unhappy with her job and was planning to quit.

Usually Mrs. McBee broke down and listened. But today she was determined not to waste the time. They

align
 had too much to do. Besides, she was afraid Mrs. Flemm-
 ming would tell her that someone was about to die again
 and she would have to have time off. Mrs. Flemming had
 eight brothers and sisters, all of whom at one time or
 another had been at "the point of death." None had
 ever died.

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"When we finish with the geraniums," Mrs. McBee
 said, "I wish you would finish labeling the candytuft,
 Mrs. Flemming."

Mrs. Flemming said nothing. She continued with
 her work, sitting as usual, while Mrs. McBee stood.
 She cast a dark look at the box of labels.

Mrs. McBee took up the labels with the tiny
 copper wires. "Here they are," she said cheerily.

"What fur?"

Mrs. McBee gave in. "Mrs. Flemming, is something
 wrong?"

The woman's lower lip began to quiver.

18 pts. | "Is someone ill?"

Mrs. Flemming shook her head but the small eyes
 instantly filled with tears. They looked like two mud-
 splashed rain drops.

"Why, Mrs. Flemming," said Mrs. McBee softly.

11/13 And at that Mrs. Flemming threw her head and fat arms over the pots of geraniums sobbing and moaning. "There aint no help in this world. Come to me, Jeee-zus."

Mrs. McBee stared at the broken geranium stems.

"I aint no sinner. Jeee-zus, you know I aint no sinner."

"Control yourself, Mrs. Flemming," said Mrs. McBee. She was certain that was the way Mrs. Flemming performed in church. She had heard the type over the radio, women working themselves up into emotional fits and screaming and crying for the Lord to save them. Worse than Negroes. They had no shame.

"Lard, it aint farr. You know it, Jeee-zus."

Mrs. McBee counted eight broken geranium stems. Perhaps they would re-root, but not in time. A dollar a plant. But that wouldn't bother Mrs. Flemming. Other people's money never bothered her.

"Come down and hear me, Lard," shouted Mrs. Flemming, her fist coming down hard on another plant.

"Just sit up now, Mrs. Flemming," said Mrs. McBee,

glowering at the woman's arms spread over the trays of plants.

1/2 px "I done sinned, but I made it up to you threefold."

"Sit up, Mrs. Flemming," said Mrs. McBee, not disguising her disgust. What if a customer came and heard all that racket? "Just sit up and tell me what is wrong."

Mrs. Flemming jabbed her fist in a pocket. She brought forth a wadded piece of kleenex. "Aint nothin I can talk ~~about~~."

"No one is ill, I hope," said Mrs. McBee.

Mrs. Flemming blew her nose loudly, then straightened, her head hanging as she sat fat and huddled on the crate of insecticides. "Aint nobody sick now, but if I get aholt of ~~them~~ they'll likely be."

"Yes, well," said Mrs. McBee, eyeing the broken stems again. There were eleven broken in all. "Why don't you just go in the kitchen and get you a nice cool drink of water, and I think you'll feel better."

1/2 px Mrs. Flemming continued to sit, still sniffing, not looking at Mrs. McBee. "Mizz McBee," she said finally.

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Back.

"Yes?"

Her eyes were narrowed into two mean slits as she looked up at Mrs. McBee. "T. J.'s been ho-mongring." ⁸

11/13

Mrs. McBee could feel the blood rise to her face like a slowly-heating furnace. "Mrs. Flemming, don't you think if you went inside and got a cool drink of —" ²
_M

Mrs. Flemming continued to stare at her with the slit eyes. "You know my sister-in-law, Nadine Treacher? She seen 'em in the piney woods."

"Saw whom?"

"T. J. and that ho."

"Mr. Flemming? Why, I never would have thought such a thing." I knew it, I knew it, a voice was gladly saying inside her.

"It's counta I'm not there half the time, and T. J., he thanks he can get away with anythan." The eyes became water-splashed again. "Aint a day since we been married I haven't worked, tried to make sumpin of ourselves."

Mrs. McBee put her hand gently to her own cheek and gazed at the woman. "You're a good woman," she said solemnly. "I'm always telling John Bedford, 'now —"

Mrs. Flemming is a fine woman.'" She clenched her fists.
 "I admire you, Mrs. Flemming."

18 pts. | A shy smile appeared on Mrs. Flemming's fat face.
 "I always say if there were more women like Mrs.
 Flemming in this world this would be a better place
 in which to live."

"I'm a Christian," screamed Mrs. Flemming, apparently
 recovering from her tantrum. She was speaking in
 her normal way again.

"Of course, you are," said Mrs. McBee, eyeing
 the geraniums again. There was a good five hours work
 ahead.

"Nadine ^{seen 4!} saw ⁱⁿ them right there ⁱⁿ the piney woods.
 Said-- Said she never seen a more turrible lookin
 woman."

"Do you know the woman?" asked Mrs. McBee.

Mrs. Flemming shot a glance at her. "I don't
 know that sort." She sniffed the air with a kind of
 pride.

Mrs. McBee didn't say anything for a while, then
 she said:

"There have been others, haven't there, Mrs.
 Flemming?" She did not look at the woman.

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9/23

"Other what?"

Mrs. McBee immediately saw her error. "I was speaking of otherⁱ--times, other times as bad as this. You have not had a happy life, have you, Mrs. Flemming?"

11|13

Mrs. McBee knew the latter would please her. One of Mrs. Flemming's chief pleasures was to recite the hardships of her ^{days} ~~life~~. But Mrs. McBee felt she was fighting for her life. If not life, then livelihood. And there wasn't much difference.

"Only in Jesus," shouted Mrs. Flemming.

Mrs. McBee looked away. She did not like to speak of Jesus. It made her uncomfortable.

"When He come down and saved me He split the rivers, landed me straight on the loamy soil."

Mrs. McBee gazed at the woman's swollen face with the kleenex wadded at her nose. Oftentimes Mrs. McBee was given to taking things literally and she saw Mrs. Flemming, her large body floating on a river and then suddenly being sped through space like some angry, fierce archangel and landing all joyous, her legs like posts spread before her, on a pile of rich, black dung. It was not a pleasant picture.

"I thank I'm gonna ^{e/} have to quit my job, Mizz McBee."

Mrs. McBee caught her breath, dampened her lips.

"I don't aim to let nobody get in my way."

Mrs. McBee closed her eyes. "I won't stand for it, Mrs. Flemming." Her voice was quite calm.

"Stand for ^u what?"

Mrs. McBee sat down on the other wooden crate.

"I won't stand by and watch you lose everything you've been working so hard for--your nice disposal, refrigerator, television set--" She was sure they were not completely paid for yet, "the niceties of life, Mrs. Flemming."

"They're mine, all right enough," said Mrs. Flemming. "I paid ever single pay-mint on ~~them~~ ^{them} thangs."

"It's nice for children to grow up with nice things," said Mrs. McBee. "It develops their taste for later life."

"I've worked hard to give my chirrun nice thangs."

"Of course, you have." Mrs. McBee was all but bending forward.

Mrs. Flemming was staring into space as if she were considering these things, reliving the purchase

and arrival of all the things she had brought home to her family.

"~~Think~~ I'm gonna have to quit, though." Then her expression changed, as if a decision had been made to reveal some long buried secret. "Can I talk to you just right frank, Mizz McBee?"

"Why, yes."

"Well, just woman to woman, plainly speakin you might say, I aint been no proper wife to T. J. lately."

"Why, of course, you have. Who could have been better?"

"When the door shuts only Jesus knows what goes on behind them er doors."

"I can't imagine a finer woman than you, Mrs. Flemming."

"I aint been no fittin wife now on to a year." She gave a shy, almost embarrassed smile. "You know what I mean. Don't mean to say nothin nasty or nothin. But you know what I mean. After workin here all day I aint fit for nothin ! specially bein no real wife."

Mrs. McBee did indeed know what she meant. One of her literal visions came to her again, and she

turned away. "Some things are very private, Mrs. Flemming."
She rose from the crate.

"I aint aimin to be nasty or nothin."

"I understand," said Mrs. McBee.

18 pts. | "T. J.--he's at that dangerous age. You heard ~~te~~ ^e tell
of men goin^g through the dangerous age? Well, T. J.,
he's smack dab in the middle of it."

"How are Mr. Flemming's ulcers?" asked Mrs. McBee.

"He's taken up to drinkin whisky again. He don't
think I know it, but I ~~can~~ ^a smell it on his breath."

Mrs. McBee glanced at the geraniums again. The
last thing she wanted to do was to sit and talk about
Mr. Flemming and his trashy ways. "Well," she sighed,
"I do believe we'd better get on with our work. Don't
you?"

"I still think I'm gonna ^a ~~g~~ have to quit my job,"
said Mrs. Flemming as if she were telling this to
the geraniums.

Mrs. McBee told her that if she got a good night's
rest she would feel better about things in the morning.

"Not if I get my hands on that woman, I won't,"
said Mrs. Flemming, her eyes popping with sudden rage.
"I'll tear her to pieces. You just wait."

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It had been a trying afternoon, and Mrs. McBee came back from the greenhouse exhausted. John Bedford was not in the house, and Mrs. McBee went to the kitchen, put on her apron to begin dinner. A lock of gray hair had loosened and fell over her eyes. She pushed it back. Then, on sudden inspiration, she removed the apron and went to the back room. There she sat in her grandfather's old rocker. She didn't know when it had been since she had sat down in the daytime.

The room was cold. It never used to be. It was always warm, warm with people and logs burning in the fireplace. Now the room had a deserted, museum quality. She had not changed anything in the room since her mother had died thirty years before. In the bookcases were all her father's old legal books, the pages brittle and unopened since his own death, now gathering dust and mold.

Good 24

Even so, the room still smelled of old tobaccos and worn leather, leaving its patina like an old cold hurt. Mrs. McBee had only to shut her eyes and every thing could have been as it used to be: her father, robust and in the prime of his faculties, arguing

11/13 heatedly with Judge Carpenter, the judge's own eyes twinkling on the edge of a joke, sitting there, these two good age-old friends, glasses in their hands, arguing the same, worn hope, the hope and the dream for a newer and better South. Mrs. McBee was sure that the arguments brought more pleasure than should the dream ~~o~~ⁱf it be fulfilled.

18 pgs. But those were struggling years, the entire South was poor, and health for it sometimes seemed impossible. But the impossible had happened, and now the South was rich, Republican, ~~o~~ⁱ and hard as nails. That had not been their dream, her father's and Judge Carpenter's.

Mrs. McBee glanced up at the portrait of her mother, a handsome woman with dark haunting eyes and classic features which left out half the story. Her mother had been a domineering woman who ruled her father with a will stronger than his own. Yet the artist had seen the haunted look as if it were the future itself that was to become her private ghost.

"The bottom rung on top," Mrs. McBee thought ^{to}

Mrs. McBee adored her mother, admired her good taste, reveled in her sense of the beautiful. She had loved

sunsets and flowers and the majesty of the pine woods.

11|13 Any artistic sense Mrs. McBee might have she got from her mother. Mrs. McBee's greatest love was flower arranging. She was always being asked to arrange flowers for parties, club meetings and that sort of thing. People wouldn't have anyone else do their arrangements, they said. But what she enjoyed most was arranging the memorial flowers on the altar at the Episcopal Church.

These were quiet times, and tired as she was on Saturday afternoons it gave her a kind of peace work⁷ ing there at the altar with the large Tiffany window portraying a manly Christ in a blue robe above her as she went about her work. Of course, there were the things she remembered about those being memorialized, the old scandals. Some of the people had no business being remembered in a church. But whenever her thoughts dwelt too long on all that she would glance up at the stain^{ed} glass window and, like a warning, it always brought her back again.

Even if she did say so, her greenhouse had the best clientele¹ in the entire county¹—thanks to her^M

mother and the gift she had given her. Of course, the clientelle ^I was still rather small. But money wasn't everything. She didn't want just anybody roaming around her place. In the beginning it might have been that way, but she had had too many unpleasant experiences. The hoi polloi could now go elsewhere.

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x24
Basketville

1 1/2 px Mrs. McBee took up a handkerchief from inside her dress pocket and slowly drew it across her forehead. Never would her mother have believed that this daughter of hers would have come to such a state, working herself ragged, peddling flowers, cooking until her feet ached from standing, and worse, worst of all, begging trash like the Flemmings to work for her. For since Mrs. Fleming's threat to quit, Mrs. McBee now lumped Mrs. Fleming with her husband-^I~~M~~trash.

1 1/2 px The room was darkening. Outside the late after^Inoon shadows stretched long across the diminishing field. Mrs. McBee rose. The room, as it always did, had healed her. Some people, she had reasoned years ago, took their drink; she had her room and, like alcohol, if ^{taken}~~she stayed~~ too long it brought her grief, sick grief, for the past and ^{for the}loneliness of her days.

But sitting for only a short while brought her calm.

She went outside to call the beagles--ⁱ~~M~~"Flemming puppies"--ⁱ~~M~~whom, she was sure, John Bedford had not fed. The dogs were nowhere in sight, wanderers, always running in the woods. Just like their former owner, she thought now.

In the west the sun was a great red ball as it ^asunk behind the pine trees. It was like a departing ^{glory}~~heat~~ sinking slowly into darkness. But now the entire woods blazed with its fiery brilliance.

She started to call for the pups once more. But down by the mailbox she saw two figures. Their bodies were darkly silhouetted against the colors of the sky and woods. She looked closer. It was John Bedford and--ⁱ~~M~~she froze--ⁱ~~M~~Bertha Mae Flemming. The girl was wearing tight shorts and grinning up at John Bedford's scowling face as he leaned on the mailbox. Then, as Mrs. McBee watched, the girl spun round and John Bedford, letting go the mailbox, reached out and tweaked ^{her}~~the girl's~~ bottom.

Mrs. McBee stood there, unbelieving what she saw. And then it all began to add up, slowly, like the gathering of a coming wind.

11/13

glory

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