Chapter Seven

One of Mrs. McBee's chief pleasures in life was her entrance into the greenhouse each morning. After washing the breakfast dishes, tidying the house and feeding the beagles, a frantic swirl of activity which through the years she had managed to narrow down to a good half-hour's work, she would remove her apron, put on her rose-colored smock, glance up in the direction of John Bedford's room, then with what amounted to almost relief she would calmly enter the moist-warm doorway of her true home.
Sometimes she thought of these plants and flowers as children, the kind of children she had never had, cheerful, playful, endearing, and in her mind she would speak to them: "There, there, darlings. Good morning! What a beautiful day!" And the sweet odor of soil and green would come to her as she inspected the beds of seedlings and hanging baskets.

The silent Mystery of this handiwork never failed to awe her, and she would stand gazing in wonderment that these firstfruits had borne the dark night and now greeted morning—and her. God's glory surely. It was the way she would have wanted her life, her family, could she have made the choice.

But this morning she gave herself no such pause. She glanced wildly about to see if Mrs. Flemming had come, if, in fact, she had carried out her threat to quit. She was nowhere in sight. Mrs. Mcbee strode outside. There was no one. "And after all I've done for her, too." She gave herself no time to consider what all those things were but instead wheeled around preparing to march herself right over the stile and give the woman a piece of her mind.
"Quitting me right now--at the most important time!"

She was mumbling aloud when out of the morning came the piercing shrill cry of song:

Settin' with Je-za
Speakin' with Hee-yim
He's my buddy 'n
He's your buddy 'n
Gone be no rest
Till we shake a little hand
With Jee-bee...

It was the sweetest sound Mrs. McBee had ever heard. "Phew," she said to herself. She should have known better. Mrs. Flemming might be some things, but she wasn't a quitter. Mrs. McBee was so grateful for the sound of the voice she began thinking she might even present a little gift to Mrs. Flemming. She wasn't sure just what, but she would think of something. After all, as hard as the woman worked she deserved a little surprise now and then.

Mrs. McBee went outside and there by the tool shed was Mrs. Flemming. She was placing the canvas over the tile bed preparatory to steaming the soil.

And I didn't even have to ask her, thought Mrs. McBee. Usually she had to ask her to do everything, three or four times. But then the thought came to her that this unusual bit of initiative might be a sign she was going
to quit, getting everything ready so she could quit. 

'Til we shake a little hand 
With Jee-ee-zus...

The voice pierced Mrs. McBee's eardrums.

"You're certainly energetic this morning, Mrs. Flemming." Sometimes Mrs. McBee teased her this way.

"Mornin," screamed Mrs. Flemming.

"And cheerful, too," said Mrs. McBee.

"Mornin. Mornin." Mrs. Flemming went right on fastening the canvas.

"It's nice to be cheerful," said Mrs. McBee, eying her sharply. By nature Mrs. Flemming was anything but cheerful.

Mrs. Flemming said nothing, and Mrs. McBee watched as the steam began to lift. Mrs. Flemming wiped her face with the side of her sleeved arm and inspected her work, the small eyes darting as the vapors grew. At last she pursed her lips, satisfied, wiped her hands on her apron, and cast a dark look at Mrs. McBee as if she were about to announce something.

She came forward, her hand reaching underneath her apron and into the pocket of her dress. "Look at this here." She took out a small newspaper cutting and handed it to Mrs. McBee. Then she stood back,
her arms folded in front of her, reared back.

The cutting was clearly from the Ashton News and Courier, from the "Letters to the Editor" column commanding the readers to "Speak Out!" Mrs. McBee found her glasses, irritation mounting. Mrs. Flemming was constantly cutting out things in the newspaper: reports of crime, rapes, murders, "Thank you cards" from the want ad section from mothers whose babies had died, the latter usually in homemade rhyme.

"Just read it," said Mrs. Flemming.

In larger type were the words "Help Offered."

Then the following:

I am called from God to preach his word, and I am educated from God to do his service, and I am licensed from Him, and I am at your service.

If anyone needs me at any time my phone number is 765-4732.

Yours in Christ.

Bro. Thomas Jefferson Flemming

Money, thought Mrs. McBee. Just another scheme for that rascal to make money.

"That er was in this mornin's paper," said Mrs. Flemming.
"Well," said Mrs. McBee, glancing up at Mrs. Flemming. The woman's lips were pinched together, but there was pride in her eyes.

"Well," said Mrs. McBee again.

"He seen the light yesterday in church. Holy Ghost come down on him just all at once. Give hisself up to Jesus."

The scene was one Mrs. McBee did not want to contemplate. "I didn't know things like that could happen so suddenly," she said, not concealing an icy tone.

"Holy Spirit'll come to you any time, any where," shot back Mrs. Flemming.

Mrs. McBee handed the cutting back to her.

"That's fine, Mrs. Flemming. I'm pleased for you that your little misunderstanding with Mr. Flemming must be over now."

Mrs. Flemming smiled shyly. "Aw, he didn't mean no harm. Women've always took a shine to T. J. Man can't help hisself none if some woman wants make a fool of herself. He done make his confession, 'bout liquor and such as that."

Mrs. McBee turned away. "I'm going to feed the roses now and when you finish with that I wish--"
"He's goin into biness for hisself, too."

Mrs. McBee turned back to her. "Mr. Flemming is going to quit his government job?"

"No ma'am." Mrs. Flemming stood with her arms still crossed, her eyes looking skyward and her right foot tapping.

"What will he do then?" The fact she had to ask was irritating.

"Sell garden equip-mint." She continued her gaze and the tapping of the foot.

Mrs. McBee could feel a swimming in her head.

"What sort of garden equipment, Mrs. Flemming?"

Mrs. Flemming hugged her arms closer to her and fixed her eyes just above Mrs. McBee's. "Well, T. J. he figgered, see, how as there's all this building going up round these parts and with that new mall and everthang movin' out this way now's a good time to set up in biness."

The woman's face faded in front of Mrs. McBee, and she could feel the heat rise to her neck. "What sort of garden equipment, Mrs. Flemming? Is Mr. Flemming planning to build a greenhouse?"
"Not yetta while. Main thang he's gone sell is statues and them silver balls you see everwhar. Such as that."

"I see," said Mrs. McBee. "He'll lose everything he has. The overhead on such things is very high."

She had once considered doing the same thing herself. It was one of those things she had just put off.

"Not the way he got it figgered. He figgers all the trade what comes out this way, them that buys from you and some of these other places, will want some nice statue or something. He's even gone have angels and fountains and St. Francis Assassys. Such as that.

Gone put up a pump out front later on this summer."

"What sort of pump?"

"For gas."

"And who is going to manage all that?"

"Buster, Junior'll take over in the mornings and T. J. he gets off at three-thirty in the afternoons since the new shift."

"Who is Buster, Junior?" Mrs. McBee knew very well. Mrs. Flemming pursed her lips. "Son-in-law Buster. Lojean's husband. He's gotta head on hisself for biness."

Yes, thought Mrs. McBee. She remembered the time
Mrs. Flemming didn't think so much of Buster, Junior's head when he gave that child to Lojean before her time. As if it wasn't enough their planning to compete with her, now she was supposed to admire that cracker's mind.

"Well," Mrs. McBee said, "it looks as if you're going to be a rich woman, doesn't it?" Purple, orange and green spots were floating in front of her eyes. Her breath was becoming labored.

"T. J. he's worked hard. He aint never set down. Aint like some folks I know that just sets around waiting for handouts." She paused and narrowed her tiny eyes. "Niggers and such as that."

"How long has Mr. Flemming been at his government job?" Mrs. McBee just thought she would bring that up. If that wasn't a handout she didn't know what was.

"Ten years, goin on leven. Never missed a day except that time when my sister got so low and nearly died. Like I said he aint never set down." The mist from the steam pipes was whirling about her head. "Some folks is just sorry. Wanta live like the lily-of-the-field." A sort of peaceful look spread over the woman's face. "What's John Bedford doing with hisself these days?"
The blood rushed to Mrs. McBee's face. "Now you listen to me, Mrs. Flemming. John Bedford is a worker! He's a writer, a teacher. You wouldn't know about that kind of work. It's the most difficult work anyone can do. It's working with the mind." She hadn't meant to show her temper. In its way it was a defeat.

"Is that so?" said Mrs. Flemming as unconcerned as could be. "Well, like I said, some folks is just plain sorry."

"Some people, perhaps."

Mrs. Flemming crooked her arm to her waist. "Last week Nigger come by the house beggin'. I aint never turned nobody away that's wantin'. Remember Hoover days too well. So I give him a messa greens and what else I had..."

The mist thickened round Mrs. Flemming's head and shouting as she was Mrs. McBee had the impression she was talking to some hysterical ghost.

"...While the Nigger was soppin' it up T.J. he told him a thang or two. Said--said anybody with two arms, two legs and nothin' but a chicken brain could git work nowadays. Told him what all he done, how he'd worked and such as that. And you know what? That boy didn't
even thank nobody for nothin, ack like it was due him, gettin sumpin for nothin, just like all of 'em." She wagged her head and looked over Mrs. McBee's head. "You don't never hear nothin from that daughter of yours, do you?"

"I hear from Mary Hughes every week, every week of my life," lied Mrs. McBee.

"Some chirrun just grow up and leave you, don't care about all the pain and sufferin you goes through to bring 'em in the world."

Mrs. McBee started to turn away, but Mrs. Flemming stuck her head through the mist.

"Something else. You know what I seen last night on television?"

"I'm sure I have not the slightest idea." Mrs. McBee closed her eyes.

"Seen a Nigger man kiss a white woman. And she as white-headed as that grandgirl of mine over yonder." A thin blush of pink spread across her face. "God separated the white folks and the black folks and tended for them to remain thetaway. And you know what else?"

Mrs. McBee looked away.
"When men that thank they are smarter'n God try to change the setup in the Bible, they're headed for trouble."

Mrs. McBee gazed back at her. "When does Mr. Flemming propose to build his greenhouse?"

"Huh?" asked Mrs. Flemming.

"I said when does Mr. Flemming plan to build his greenhouse?"

Mrs. Flemming chewed on the inside of her cheek. She did not like her tirades to be interrupted. "Won't be fore the end of the summer what all he got planned."

"What all has he got planned?"

"Settin up his biness like I said. If thangs goes like he wants he gone stock up a few groceries, sell fishin' equipmint, rods and worms, such as that. No tellin' when he'll git round to the greenhouse."

Mrs. McBee left her without another word, went straight to the house, removed her smock and went to the back room to sit down. She rocked furiously in the rocker. They're just trying to beat me, that's all. Trash and they're trying to beat Letitia Graham McBee.
One of her images came: Over the stile was a huge modern greenhouse; people were everywhere, holding angels and urns and statues of St. Francis of Assisi. Over it all was the loud sound of a cash register. On her side of the stile there was no one, only silence, only herself and John Bedford, pale and hungry, watching. Beside them was an abandoned greenhouse...

The door to the room creaked open. "I'm gone, Mizz McBee."

Willie, the Negro cleaning woman, stuck her head through the door. She had on a man's battered hat and a wad of snuff in her right jaw, the latter a sure sign of departure.

Mrs. McBee rubbed her forehead. "Oh, Willie."

She had meant to tell her earlier. All last night she had planned it and she meant to tell her first thing this morning. "Willie, would you wait a minute."

She kept rubbing her forehead. "It's just been one thing after another this morning. There's something I want to ask you, show you."

"Yis'm," said Willie, obviously disappointed. Departure was the high point of her day with Mrs. McBee. She squinted her eyes. "You feelin low?"
Mrs. McBee let her hand drop to her lap and sat up straighter. "No, not really. Mrs. Flemming told me something a little distressing this morning. Nothing serious. Just a little disturbing."

"Govmint folks," said Willie disdainfully.

"Yes, Mr. Flemming works for the government."

Mrs. McBee glanced up at the sound of her own words coming back to her. "Come in, Willie. Sit down." She patted the sofa beside her.

"I hope they aint tryin to make no fuss or nothin, sorry thangs."

"No, nothing like that."

Willie eyed the sofa warily. An older woman, she was very black with one missing front tooth. She had abandoned her "open-face crown" (gold) a year ago with the complaint that it was too long.


Willie removed her hat and came to sit beside Mrs. McBee, carefully adjusting herself and the mysterious packages she usually departed with, brown paper sacks, newspapers full of only the Lord knew what, and a large over-size black pocketbook.
"Willie, something really quite wonderful has happened," said Mrs. McBee, adjusting her mood to the problem at hand.

"Is?" asked Willie, her face torn between a frown and a smile.

"Yes, good news. And you and I have been together so long I want to share it with you."

"Yes'm." Willie cocked an alert eye at Mrs. McBee.

"It's about John Bedford."

"Lawd, don't tell me," frowned Willie. "He done got one of them slips again." Through the year Willie, too, had received the gloom brought on by rejection slips. "Look lak those folks--" "No, I said this was good news."

"Yes'm, good news, good tidings."

"John Bedford is interested in a young woman."

Mrs. McBee beamed at Willie.

"Do say?" said Willie, her disappointment apparent. Mrs. McBee was sure she had expected the news to have something to do with money.

"You know what a fiance is, don't you?" asked Mrs. McBee.

Willie looked about the room. "Got something to
do with insurance, aint it?" And then batting her eyes and straining her neck sideways she began to giggle.

The giggle was contagious. Mrs. McBee laughed, too. How much more pleasant it was to be with Willie than someone like Mrs. Flemming. Willie flattered her, she knew. But she loved the woman. She had been with Mrs. McBee since John Bedford, Senior died, and she and Willie had shared their dark days as well as the few bright ones.

"A fiance is--well, you might say, a bride-to-be."
Mrs. McBee beamed at her again.

"Hush yo mouth. John Bedford gone mah'y somebody?"
"We don't know," said Mrs. McBee teasingly.

"Well, do master," said Willie and she shot a glance at Mrs. McBee. Then satisfied about something she began to laugh, then wheeze, then laugh again. She took out a knotted handkerchief, brought it to her eyes, crossed, uncrossed her thin legs. One never knew with Willie whether she was laughing at somebody or with them. "Mah'y," she said finally. "Well, all right then."

Mrs. McBee patted her hand. "Now, we musn't tell anyone about this. We want it to be a secret."
"I wouldn't tell nobody for nothin," Willie pouted. Mrs. McBee gazed up at her mother's portrait. "I just do hope the girl is all right. I would like to see John Bedford married. He would be so much happier."

"Yes'm."

"Now, Willie, I'm going to need your help."

"Yes'm."

"You see, she'll be coming here next week, just for a little dinner. I guess she wants to look us over a bit."

Willie's mouth turned down. "She better not come here lookin for no trouble. She won't find no better folks nowheres."

"Yes, well. But we want it nice when she comes, don't we?"

"She won't find no nicer house nowheres."

"What I thought—we would just give a little dinner, just the family, so we can get to know each other." She looked at Willie with business-like seriousness. "Willie, have you ever waited on a table? Learned to serve?"

"Yes'm," said Willie pondering. "I think I has."

"I mean serving, passing dishes from the left, that sort of thing."
"I worked for some white folks once at Thanksgiving time. But they didn't do no left. Look lak they just plopped it all on the table."

"Oh no," said Mrs. McBee. "That wouldn't do. I mean really serve."

Willie stuck out her lower lip and looked up at the ceiling. "No'm, I aint never done that." She shook her head as if there was no further room for discussion; she would not be able to do that.

"But you could learn," said Mrs. McBee. "We could practice. We're never too old to learn, I always say."

"Naw, we aint evah too old. All yo' mouth is for is to ask, I always say."

"Absolutely," said Mrs. McBee. "Now, of course, you'll need some sort of uniform." She gazed at Willie's faded cotton dress. "And I have just the thing." She rose from the chair, pushing down hard on the arms of the rocker. "Now you wait right here." She smoothed out the back of her skirt.

While Willie waited Mrs. McBee trudged up the stairs, then up the attic stairs, carefully holding onto the stairway. A musty heat met her as she opened the door. She turned on the lights and went about opening the windows.
All of the past was in the attic, neatly stored in boxes, labeled and tied with string. Old magazines, books, postcards, photographs, ancient yellowed letters whose spent passions were as dead as the past. In the closet were the wedding gowns, her grandmother's, her mother's, her own. Beneath the gown boxes was a smaller one and on the top, written in her mother's careful handwriting, were the words "Ginny's dress uniform."

Ginny: warm and good and forever gone. Friend of her childhood, spinner of tales, comforter of the grieved. Ginny had died on a May day when the roses bloomed fat and pink and shedded all in the same hot scorching day. Her mother had wept and nothing ever had been the same again. That was in 1922. Her mother had placed the uniform in the box and no one had ever worn it again.

Mrs. McBee stooped now and easily untied the neat bow. She lifted the lid. Blue tissue folded the contents fastened with a rusted pin. How careful her mother had been about such things. Always neat even in sentiment.

Inside lay the little starched cap, edged in lace and twined with a small black ribbon, also the
apron and black uniform with the lace cuffs. There had not been much yellowing through the years because of the tissue, and holding up the uniform Mrs. McBee was almost sure it could be made to fit Willie.

She could see Ginny wearing it as if it were yesterday. Her mother and father's silver wedding anniversary, the candelabra glowing on the dining room table, champagne glasses, and Ginny standing there, plump and proud, the prettiest Mrs. McBee had ever seen her. Two days later she was dead. Death and roses and May. "Oh, dear." But there was no time for sentiment.

She came back down the stairs, leaving the past locked where it had to be.

"Now, Willie," said Mrs. McBee. She held the uniform over her arm. "I think this will do. It will take some adjusting, of course."

Willie eyed the uniform suspiciously. "Old, aint it?" she said. "That's old-timey."

"Things haven't changed very much," said Mrs. McBee. "Except they don't make things as well as they used to. See the lace. It's real. And the cap."

Willie placed her right hand on her hip, the inside
of the hand turned out. She worked her mouth as she
further inspected the goods. "Thems dead folks' thangs,
aint they?"

The question took Mrs. McBee aback. She glanced
at Willie. "Why, yes. No. It's been packed away."

"Willie can't wear no dead folks' clothes. Naw
suh, Willie aint never worn no dead folks' thangs."

Mrs. McBee sighed. "Now, Willie. Let's not be
silly about such things. Besides, I don't think anyone
ever really wore this." She sighed. It seemed as if
even the simplest things were difficult.

"Bad luck to wear dead folks' thangs." Willie's
voice was high.

"We'll have it cleaned and freshened and it will
be as good as new. You'll see." She held up the dress
to Willie. "Yes, it's just fine. Needs only a tuck
here and a tuck there."

Willie's eyes widened.

"So, that's that." Mrs. McBee put aside the
uniform. "Now, come. Let's see about the serving."

Willie followed, obviously disgruntled over the
delayed departure.
Mrs. McBee sat at the head of the dining room table. She instructed Willie to fetch a plate in the kitchen and come with it into the dining room as if she were serving.

"You may come now," called Mrs. McBee, sitting straight and frowning, her fingers drumming on the table. Mrs. McBee waited, nothing happened.

"Willie?"

"Yo's'm," came the thin voice from the kitchen.

"Come now. With the plate. We're just pretending." Willie entered staring down at a saucer held in both hands. She walked like a bridesmaid, self-consciously pausing between steps with the saucer held before her like a bouquet.

"It's easier, I think, if you don't look so carefully at the dish."

"Yo's'm," said Willie, not looking up.

"Of course, now, I won't tell you to come that night. I mean I won't call out to you. When we need service I will ring this little bell." She held up the small dinner bell. "Now, let's try it again."

They went over the procedure five times, Willie protesting she knew she would drop things: "Drap it
all over that woman."

"No, no, you're doing just fine," cheered Mrs. McBee. "Now pass the rolls to Miss Blank. We'll just call her Miss Blank for now. Good. That's very good. A day or two more practice and you'll be excellent."

Excellence Mrs. McBee was not sure of. Sufficient she could hope for.

At least working with Willie had taken her mind off the Flemmings and their scheme to ruin her. She vowed she would not think of that again until after the dinner for the young woman was over. After that perhaps it wouldn't matter so much. That is, if the girl was the right sort. With a family and responsibility John Bedford would have to work then. First things first, she considered.

Mrs. McBee watched as Willie entered from the kitchen with her hands clutching a trembling bowl of water, a facsimile of soup.

"What's all this?" John Bedford had suddenly appeared at the entrance to the dining room.

Crash! The bowl fell to the floor, water splattering on the wallpaper.

The three stared at the broken bowl.
"I done broke your bowl," cried Willie. "I aint never broke nothin' before in my life, aint broke nothing."

It was Mrs. McBee's mother's bowl, hand-painted by her with golden filigree. They called it "the golden bowl."


"I aint never broke nothing," cried Willie.

"It's all right, Willie," said Mrs. McBee, still staring at John Bedford.

"Christ, how was I supposed to know you were passing bowls of water to each other," said John Bedford.

"What you doin' it for?"

Mrs. McBee twitched her shoulder. "For you, that's what for."

John Bedford just gazed at her. "What for?"

"For the young woman you're bringing for dinner. Willie's offered to help."

"What young woman? What dinner?"

"You know very well." Of course, he probably didn't. She hadn't really discussed it with him again, just that one mention. But with anybody else
that would have been enough. She didn't have time to
keep reminding him of everything all the time. He was
just trying to humiliate her and in front of Willie, too.

"Just never you mind," she said. "Just never you
mind. That's all." She began picking up the broken
pieces from the floor. She would have the dinner, she
vowed. She would have it and that girl would be here
even if it had to be...

"Over my dead body," she muttered aloud, and both
John Bedford and Willie looked at her curiously.

But she didn't care. She didn't care what they
thought. Life was too hard, too unbearably hard.
Nothing ever worked out the way you wanted it to.
Nothing.

###