Chapter Eight

Mrs. Mcbee spied the cream-colored station wagon when it first turned off the highway. "Another one," she muttered to herself and looked wildly about for Mrs. Flemming. But Mrs. Flemming already had her hands full. She would have to handle this one herself.

The dollar signs she had earlier envisioned with each approaching car had long since vanished and now all she saw were pancaked faces, hundreds of pancaked faces. "Hello, Letitia. Hello, Letitia. Well, hel-lo, Letitia..."
On the very day she had hoped for a slack in business it appeared as if everyone in the county had picked this one morning to visit the nursery. Of course John Bedford's young lady friend wasn't due until that night. Still there were a million things yet to be done inside. Willie was doing what she could, but Willie knew nothing about setting a table, folding linens or flower arranging.

John Bedford was writing. He could not be disturbed even to run a simple errand. He had made all that plain enough at breakfast.

For the former anyway Mrs. McBee was partially grateful. She was just as content to have him put. The boy had complained so about the dinner that at one point she almost gave in to him. It had been enough just getting him to ask the girl.

"I'm doing it just for you," she had whimpered at last.

And John Bedford had exploded back:

"All right! All right! Now for goddamn's sake leave me alone."

The girl had accepted, as Mrs. McBee knew she would. John Bedford was a catch in any girl's book.
That is, if you didn't know some things. Who else around these parts had his blood or a park named for a grandfather—The Forrest Leigh Graham Memorial Park—even if it wasn't kept up anymore. With John Bedford's name and fine mind any girl with any sense would welcome a chance to have dinner at McBee's Station.

The girl's name was Johnston, and Mrs. McBee was pleased to note the T in the name; there were Johnstons and there were Johnsons, a whole world in between. The girl was probably one of the fertilizer plant Johnstons. It was such a large family now she didn't know any of the young people any more. But the family was one she could easily see John Bedford fitting into. The plant was one of the largest in the county.

"Ha, ha, ha," she had teased John Bedford. "I probably won't even have to buy fertilizer anymore."

"I don't know what you've got on your mind," said John Bedford, "but whatever it is it's all wrong."

Silly boy. He never had liked to show his feelings

Just too sensitive.

"Too sensitive for your own good," she had admonished...

Mrs. McBee watched as five women got out of the
station wagon. "Five more." Women were milling about everywhere, and she was finding it difficult to concentrate with her mind half inside the house and the other half distracted everytime she turned around.

It was the same way every spring. The first nice day and she was deluged. It would be all right if the people would just come, pay their money and go home. But somehow they seemed to want to make an all-day affair of the thing. It was an outing, a change of routine, something quaint to do, and they strolled about the place, inspecting the flower beds, the trees and even the house.

So far this morning no one had asked to see the inside of the house: "Just a peak at all those lovely antiques, Mrs. McBee." What they were hoping for was the day she would get so old, or poor (an event they appeared to think should not be too far away), she would have to sell.

They came in their smart cars, these women, all smiles and delight and treated Mrs. McBee as if she, too, were just another part of the scene, something quaint, a holdover from another age. To really see this quaintness one had to "take your time" because,
besides all the flowers and plants and "funny people", there were also those marvelous preserves and pickled things, the real flavor of the "old South," which you just didn't see much any more. This quaint woman even still churned her own butter, and the buttermilk was the best you could find anywhere.

Mrs. McBee had heard their talk and more. Once she overheard one of the younger married women: "She's an absolute character! I mean, I mean..." Mrs. McBee did not see herself that way. She saw herself just like anybody else except she had to work for a living. And if they wanted to know, she had worked hard, harder than anybody she knew. And it was good to work. Honorable. She had seen her duty, and she had done it. That was all there was to it.

"Thank you, hon." Mrs. Flemming's loud voice rang out over the crowd.

If the spring deluges tended to unnerve Mrs. McBee, they worked just the opposite for Mrs. Flemming. They positively rejuvenated her. Gave her energy, action. The day was never too long and there didn't seem anything she couldn't do. It was the one time in the year she went to a hairdresser, and she arrived over the
stile early that morning with her gray hair frizzed from
top to bottom, and her face oddly peaceful behind a mask
of white powder and a streak of orange lipstick. She
was on parade.

Some of the women who came to the nursery had names
Mrs. Flemming had read about in the society columns of
the Ashton newspaper and as such they held the aura of
celebrities. Some years back Mrs. McBee had detected
a certain snobbery in Mrs. Flemming, noting how she
greeted a Ewing or a Whitfield or a Crutchfield as
opposed to some of the lesser names. With the former
she was all smiles and "here, hon, lemme put the rer
in a basket for you"; the latter she merely gave the
price of the purchase and looked away.

Usually Mrs. McBee liked to handle most of the
customers herself, believing in the theory of personal
contact. But as things turned out she was more than
grateful for Mrs. Flemming today, even though it did
seem the woman was making a rather special effort to
get around to more people than usual.

Mrs. McBee knew what she was up to, of course, but
she couldn't think of that now. In her mind she kept
making lists of things to be done, and with every list
there were additions: she wanted to make sure every-
thing was right in the downstairs bathroom and she
still hadn't picked the violets she planned for the
coffee table. The dinner rolls still had to be made
up and she had to think of something for herself to
wear.

She kept running into the house with instructions
for Willie and then hurrying back outside to wait on a
customer. Her mind was in such a melee she found her-
self in a daze and regretted being short with one of the
young women:

"All the butter has been sold out. Sold out!"
she fairly shouted at the young Mahaffey girl, who all
that morning had been trying to flatter up Mrs. McBee
so she would lower her prices. Mrs. McBee knew the
type and she didn't take to the Mahaffey girl anyway.
She whined and always brought plants back saying they
had died when any fool could see they had died for lack
of water, nothing else. There were too many people
around, and she remembered she had forgotten to tell
Willie to polish the brass on the front door.

"Sun dials, angels, statues of St. Francis
Assassay--such as that." Mrs. Flemming's voice rang
over the gathering like a tolling bell. She was talking to a group of women, standing with her arms folded as if she were lecturing. Mrs. McBee felt the heat instantly rise to her face and she strode over to her.

"Mrs. Flemming, we need more pots. Pots! We need more. Will you get them?"

Mrs. Flemming sniffed the air. "Already got more'n we can say grace over now."

"Will you get them, please?" said Mrs. McBee and turned on her heels.

"The pickled artichokes, Mrs. McBee," said a woman in a powder blue suit, stopping her. "I'd like five jars, please."

Mrs. McBee's relief was extreme when by noon most of the morning's customers had driven off. She sat on one of the insecticide crates in the greenhouse and began fanning herself with an old calendar. Her face was beet-red from the heat and general excitement. Mrs. Flemming, she noticed, was as undisturbed and cool as she had been all morning.

"You know that Mizz Crutchfield?" said Mrs. Flemming, leaning with one hand on the chrysanthemum frame and the
other gnarled at her hip. "She bought twenty-five geraniums for beside her bathing pool. Ask me to come in to see 'em when she gets thangs fixed up."

Mrs. McBee fanned a little harder. "We don't have time to pass the time of day with customers, Mrs. Flemming."

Mrs. Flemming screwed up her lips and directed her gaze just above Mrs. McBee's head. "Gettin' ready for that visitor, aint you?"

Mrs. McBee thought she detected a tinge of bitterness in the way she said "visitor" as if it all involved something she was being left out of. "Yes, a friend of John Bedford's." She tried to sound as casual as possible. She wanted to reemphasize the fact that she lived a life outside the work here, that their social life was encompassing.

"It's a woman, aint it?" asked Mrs. Flemming.

"Why yes, yes it is. We're giving a little dinner party."

"John Bedford's nigh on to forty, aint he?"

"No, he's only thirty," said Mrs. McBee, subtracting the two years without a blink of an eye.

"You'd think he was older. Bald and all that."

Mrs. Flemming continued to purse her lips as if the
very action somehow helped to wind up her brain. "Buster, Junior he'll be twenty-six next month. And smart? That boy can do anyth'an. Built five dawg houses last mont and got orders for six more." The fox's eyes began darting. "Lojean she thinks the sun rises and sets in that boy."

"John Bedford is not bald, Mrs. Flemming."

"Not to say bald, but he's gotta dome all right. Buster got ever hair on his head. Some folks is just like that, don't never get bald."

Mrs. McBee twisted the calendar in her hand. "It's too bad Lojean didn't get to see more of the world before she had to settle down. I sometimes feel sorry for the young who marry so early." She just thought she would put that in.

"I don't know," mused Mrs. Flemming, "the fix the world's in now I think here's 'bout as good a spot as any to see. And havin' her chirrun young like she is Lojean won't have to live out no lonesome old age. She'll be taken kire of. Buster, too. That youngun love his Dad-dy."

Mrs. McBee stopped fanning and rose from the crate.

"I don't have any time to just pass the time of--" She
saw John Bedford come down the back porch steps. He was strolling toward the station wagon with his keys dangling in his hand. Mrs. McBee called out to him. "Son. Oh, son." Her voice was as gay as she could make it.

John Bedford strolled over to the greenhouse. He was gaining more weight and the additional cheek and jowl made his face look even more expressionless than ever. Mrs. McBee wished he had worn a hat. With the sun shining he did look almost bald.

"What time did you say Miss Johnston would be here?" asked Mrs. McBee. She knew exactly what time the girl was coming. But she also knew Mrs. Flemming was familiar with the Johnston name.

John Bedford glanced at Mrs. Flemming, muttered to her and gazed back at Mrs. McBee. "They said six-thirty."

"They?" Mrs. McBee sat back down on the crate.

"Is someone else coming?"

"I asked Dr. Myer."

"Who is that?" Mrs. McBee began to fan herself again. Another person would mean more of everything. She would have to talk to Willie, see if they had enough food. She had only prepared for three.
John Bedford yawned. "He's in the English department. Helen--Helen Johnston--is helping him with his thesis."

"Myer," said Mrs. McBee. "Is he from here?"

"Nooo," said John Bedford, "he is not from here. Is that some sort of crime?"

Mrs. Flemming started to whistle.

"Why, no," said Mrs. McBee as sweetly as she could. "He's from New York."

Mrs. McBee glanced at Mrs. Flemming. Her fox's eyes were darting, taking it all in.

"Well, that's nice," said Mrs. McBee. "It will be a cosmopolitan evening. All sorts I always say. All sorts make an evening. From New York."

"Okay?" John Bedford began rattling his keys.

"Have a nice day, son," called Mrs. McBee as she watched him stroll back to the car.

"Another person," muttered Mrs. McBee and her shoulders suddenly slumped. Her mind was spinning. Why wasn't there someone to think for her? Why wasn't there ever anyone to help her think?

"Some chirrun never thinks twice," said Mrs. Flemming, "no matter how old they gets."
"Mrs. Flemming, I can't help you this afternoon. You'll have to handle it all yourself."

"And all the pain you go through just to bring 'em here on this earth."

"Mrs. Flemming!" Mrs. McBee shot up from the crate. "I can't help you this afternoon." She was practically shouting.

That afternoon Mrs. McBee went into a whirl of activity. Willie had not polished the silver. She had forgotten. There was no yeast for the rolls and John Bedford had to go to the grocery store (reluctantly) to get it. Mrs. McBee tidied up the guest bathroom, then with the help of Willie carefully placed the linen cloth on the table. Willie stood by as Mrs. McBee set the table, occasionally cheering her on:

"Look at that lak a picture. Aint no prettier table nowhere! No ma'm!"

Glasses had to be freshened. Mrs. McBee had instructed Willie to do that earlier but Willie had forgotten. "I just forgot, Mizz McBee." Then Mrs. McBee went outside to cut the daffodils and Nandina leaves for the table and living room. She liked daffodils in glass
vases so the vase also had to be "freshened." After that she went out to pick the violets for the coffee table. This was the most difficult of all, because she wanted enough to make a showing, and the stooping so long tired her. Her back had begun to trouble her a year ago. She was almost sure it was arthritis, but she hadn't said anything about that to Dr. Wilson. Her recital of complaints had been too long as it was.

She arranged the violets in an old English silver bowl and even if she did say so they were lovely. "Nothing like violets," she said aloud to the room. People didn't pick violets so much nowadays, but when she was a girl violets meant spring and romance and all the warm days of summer ahead.

"Mizz McBee! Mizz McBee!" called Willie from the kitchen. "Dough aint risin!"

Mrs. McBee hurried back to the kitchen.

"It jist aint risin," said Willie. "How come? Guess the yeasties must aint no count!"

Mrs. McBee stared at the flat wad of dough in the glass bowl. "I told you, Willie. You've got to cover the bowl." She snatched a kitchen towel. "Now here. And put it in the oven where there're no drafts. But don't turn on the oven."
"Yes'm. I guess I just forgot."

"Well, we can't forget now. Do you understand, Willie? We can't forget anything. Not anything."

"Yes'm."

"Now, have you got your uniform ready?"

"Yes'm," said Willie, looking at the ceiling.

"Where is it?"

"It's in there, in the pantry. I thought I'd put it on jest fore they gets here."

Mrs. McBee patted her on the shoulder. "Yes, well. Now everything's going to be all right. Just all right."

"Yes'm."

Mrs. McBee glanced at her watch. It was four-twenty. She was exhausted. "I think I'll go up and rest for a few seconds and then dress. Now, when the young lady and gentleman arrive you meet them at the door, show them in and then come and tell me."

"Yes'm."

"Everything will be all right now. Don't worry."

"Lawd, Je-zus." Willie shook her head.

Mrs. McBee lay on her bed. She closed her eyes but immediately opened them. Her mind was jumping
like a frog. She got up, went to John Bedford's room.

"Dear?" she called softly, opening the closed door.

"Dear?"

John Bedford was lying on the bed reading a book. With the third "dear" he slammed the book down. "What now?"

"Don't you think you should start getting dressed?"

"There's plenty of time. It's only five-thirty."

"No, it's quarter to six. Now, you really should try to look decent."

"I'm decent. If you want to know the truth, I think I'm about the most decent person I know."

Sometimes it seemed the boy just deliberately tried to irritate her.

"Anybody wants to look decent when guests arrive," she said.

John Bedford sat up on the edge of the bed and began to yawn.

"Do you know what I was thinking?"

"I can't possibly imagine," he said, trying for another yawn.

"I was wondering about the friend. Do you suppose we should have invited another young lady? Of course
we don't know too much about him, that Dr. Whateverhis
nameis. But the Johnston girl is your friend, you know,
and--"

"I think we've done enough already," mumbled John
Bedford.

"Well, I guess I'll just have to be Dr. Whatever
hisnameis's partner then. But don't you worry. I'll
leave right after dinner. I'll just go right upstairs,
leave you young people to yourselves."

John Bedford said nothing.

"Now I'm going to take my bath. Try to look your
most handsome. You know you can look handsome when you
want to."

Mrs. McBee thought she heard him say "don't drown."
She wasn't sure.

In the tub filled with bubble bath Mrs. McBee found
herself talking out loud:

"...So you're from New York, Doctor? Well, that's
pretty foreign to us around these parts. But I hear
it's a lovely part of the country."

"...Oh? You find the South charming? How very
nice. You know there have been so many terrible things
written about the South in recent years—all exaggerations,
of course—it's refreshing to get an intelligent stranger's viewpoint.

...you admire antiques, do you? Most of these things have been in John Bedford's family for generations. But, of course, you know that, Miss Johnston. The McBees were a South Carolina family and, of course, my family, the Graham, and the Hughes families were all from Virginia. So, you see, John Bedford has quite a bit to live up to. I suppose they don't speak much about family in New York. Well, the South is still—"

A splash of bubble bath struck her square in the eye and momentarily blinded her. She felt for the towel above her head and one end of it fell into the water. Her eye pained her and she rubbed it with the dry end of the towel.

"Now look what you've done," she said aloud as the irritation persisted. "You'll have to meet those people with a big red eye."

She was suddenly overly warm and perspiration began to stream down her face. She pulled herself up from the water and stood dripping on the bath mat. Then she leaned over to glance into the mirror to inspect the eye. It was only slightly red. She turned her face slightly
sideways. "Old," she said to the mirror. "Older than Moses." But her face was remarkably free of wrinkles. People were always complimenting her on her girlish complexion.

She never thought of herself as old, not seriously so. Inside she felt as she always had, except, of course, for the tiredness and other vague feelings. She had always thought when you got older you would feel different, be a different person somehow. She remembered when she was twenty and looked at photographs of her grandmother and grandfather when they themselves were twenty; they were strangers, different people, not the frail gray-haired people they had become.

And now she had reached an age, and she felt just as she always had. She was the same Letitia Graham she had been at twenty and thirty and forty. Inside there was no difference, only the feeling she got whenever she looked in a mirror. Pleasure in this had long since disappeared. The years had gone so swiftly, and now a different face looked back at her.

But sixty-four wasn't old, she told herself, not by today's standards. Most people thought she was younger, except for those who knew. That was the
drawback in living in the same place all your life. People knew everything and memories never faltered on the important matters. But she wasn't like some people. Whenever she had to fill out a form of any kind she never lied about her age.

"I'm sixty-four," she would announce, "and proud of it!"

She dressed in a hurry, not allowing herself to linger over detail. One quick glance in the mirror told her things were satisfactory. At least she was neat, and the old green dress was still all right. The dress made a swishing sound as she turned from the mirror and retreated her steps back into John Bedford's room. Even if it killed her she was going to make sure that situation would be all right. In her hand she held a small spray of lily-of-the-valley.

"Dear?" She knocked on the door. "May I come in?" She went in anyway.

John Bedford was standing before the full mirror and when Mrs. McBee entered he immediately turned from it.

Didn't want to be caught admiring himself, thought Mrs. McBee. She had learned long ago that men were just as vain as women, if not more so.
He looked very nice in the tan suit, at least neat. She told him so. "And I brought you these," she said, holding the spray of lily-of-the-valley.

"What for?" asked John Bedford, frowning at the spray as if they were weeds.

"Father used to wear these in his buttonhole sometimes," she said sweetly as she did all references to the past. "I remember Mother and Father's silver wedding an'"

"For God's---"

"Now, now, dear. Don't. Don't use that language. It's vulgar." Mrs. McBee shook her head. "I picked these this afternoon. I thought maybe---"

"Behold, the bridegroom!" said John Bedford and threw back his head and laughed.

"Well, all right. I just thought---" She was hurt. It was the laugh, raucous and too loud, as if he were laughing at her, the past, the old ways, the good ways. She looked down at the spray. "Miss Johnston may like them."

John Bedford cocked his head. "Prepare yourself, woman," he said. And an ugly smile appeared on his lips.
"Just what do you mean?" asked Mrs. McBee.

"Oh, nothing."

"Well, I do," she said and left the room for her own. She started to sit down, but outside in the distance she heard the sound of an automobile. She hurried to the window. Over the red clay road, dust clouding the way, she saw a battered yellow convertible. The top was closed and the car traveled with more speed than necessary, bumping over the holes in the road as if inside were two souls drunk with a holiday joke.

"He can't be much, Dr. Whateverhisnameis," she muttered, and her face fell with profound disappointment as the car neared the house.