Chapter Nine

Mrs. McBee sat straight as a pin, tapping her fingers and straining to hear what went on below. She had purposely left the door to her bedroom open. The car had come to a stop under her window, but one of the disadvantages of the portico was that she was never able to look out and see what went on.

She heard the doorbell ring and afterward a silence, too long. At last she heard the sound of Willie's steps shuffling to the door. But the voices were muffled, and there was no sound from Willie.
I told her. I told her, Mrs. McBee said to herself as she sat pinched-mouth, her breath suspended. She's probably just standing there staring at them. Mrs. McBee started to get up, rush down the stairs and give them a proper welcome herself. If there was one thing she knew how to do it was to greet people properly when they came to her house. But she settled back in the chair. John Bedford should greet them first. It was better if she made a more dignified entrance.

Her eyes grew wide as she listened to the steps in the hall. The front door closed and then she heard Willie's voice:

"She say y'all to set in there till she comes down."

She. Mrs. McBee was always she to Willie.

No voices. No response from anybody. Just silence. Peculiar, thought Mrs. McBee. That was the way crackers acted, afraid to open their mouths. Of course she didn't know anything about New York crackers. But as far as she was concerned anybody who was anybody, even if they did come from up there, said thank you when they were ushered into a room. Certainly the Johnston girl knew better.

She heard John Bedford in the next room pacing
up and down like an athlete warming up. She didn't know what he could be doing. At last his door swung open and he was down the stairs, obviously bumping into Willie on the way. "Sorry, Mrs. Washington." And then into the living room. But Mrs. McBee could not hear what was said because Willie was standing at her door, her eyes two round white circles and the little starched cap incongruously placed so low over her eyebrows she had to lift her head to see.

"No, Willie." Mrs. McBee immediately rose. "That's not the way you should wear the cap."

Willie lifted her head further, her eyes still wide. Mrs. McBee adjusted the cap, placed it further back on her head.

"Now," she said and stood back, inspecting Willie from head to toe. She brought her hands together. "You look very nice. Very nice, indeed."

Willie's eyes gazed at Mrs. McBee as if she were in a trance.

"What's the matter with you?"

Willie shook her head.

"You showed them in, didn't you?"

"Yes'm."
"Well, what's?" She took hold of Willie's arm. "What are they like?" she whispered in a rasping voice. Willie gazed past her. "I ain't never seen nothin' lak that before."

"Like what?"

"They're from over there, ain't they?"

"Over where?"

"Cross the water. They foreign folks, ain't they?"

"Why, no." Mrs. McBee turned from her in disgust. "The young woman is from right here, one of the Johnston girls."

"Is?"

"And the gentleman is from New York, a worldly person, cosmopolitan."

Willie gazed dumbly out of the window. "Well, all right then."

"Why? Do they look peculiar or something?"

Willie shook her head. "I ain't never seen nothin' lak that round here."

"We don't have visitors from the North very often. Perhaps the man is a little different."

"Yes'm." Willie turned from her. "Well, they's heah," she said with finality.
Mrs. McBee gazed at the retreating figure. "Negroes, they're all alike. Suspect. Suspect of everything."

She turned to take a fleeting glance in the mirror. Everything was all right. She patted her hair, twitched a grin at her image and then taking one deep breath slowly began to descend the stairway. She was beaming broadly with her right hand extended ready to plunge it into the grasp of whatever waited on the other side of the wall.

She saw the Negro girl first. Scrawny with thin bare arms and larger, paler hands. She sat huddled on one end of the sofa, her calfless legs crossed at the ankle and her bony knees bared from the rim of her skirt. Only fleetingly did Mrs. McBee take in the man: short, thirtyish and dark with sullen-quick eyes and a slightly beaked nose. The one glance told her what he was: one of those smart troublemakers, even if he did look clean. But her own senses were so numbed by the sight of the girl not much else about the man registered except that he was white.

She continued to stand at the entrance of the room, her hand still extended as if it might be a
permanent arrangement. She watched as the girl's eyes widened, then softened, then lowered; she stood, her shoulders sloped—all in an instant, but it seemed to take forever.

She had a curious face, thin and long, and it appeared older than her body. It was an urbane face, black, without innocence. Her chin was too long for the rest of her features: the nose with the slightly flared nostrils, full mouth, rounded forehead. But the moist eyes sparkled in the face as if they struggled to compensate.

She was dressed for the occasion in a smart gray linen dress and her hair was short, simply waved in jet black smoothness. In appearance she might have been anybody, the Johnston girl in fact, except that she was black.

Mrs. McBee's gaze slowly turned to John Bedford who was seated in the chair near the piano. He looked back at her, and there was no help in his eyes, only satisfaction. He seemed to be saying: save yourself; don't look at me. It serves you right, woman, you poor dumb naive stumbling... And now your stale prejudices have come home to roost.
Well, she just wouldn't be roosted! That was for sure. This would not be tolerated. Not in my house! She tried to indicate this to John Bedford by narrowing her eyes. But the hound's eyes looked wearily past her saying: you are a stranger. These are my friends, my soul's home. Don't look at me.

It occurred to Mrs. McBee that John Bedford was having a nervous breakdown. She dropped her arm to her side.

"Mother, this is Helen. Helen Johnston," said John Bedford.

The two women looked at each other, looked at each other long. Mrs. McBee folded her hands in front of her. "How-do-you-do," she said, slowly closing her eyes and then just as slowly opening them, her mouth pinched. Brazen, she was thinking. Just plain right down...

"Child, I didn't know you had a mother," said the girl to John Bedford.

Child. Mrs. McBee considered the familiarity of the word, the intimacy.

"You never mentioned her before," said the girl.
"Oh yes," drawled John Bedford. "I have a mother—just like everybody else."

Mrs. McBee ignored the remark and half in a daze turned to the other man.

"I'm Dr. Myer, Mrs. McBee," said the man. He talked through his nose.

"Doctor," said Mrs. McBee, recognizing him with a nod of her head. He had unsure eyes. They went with his voice somehow. She knew the type. Always coming South to stir up something. As if they hadn't stirred up enough up there already. They enjoyed prejudice, these people, looked for it, searched it out, just as Mrs. Flemming sniffed out sin. It excited them when they found it, sent them into action.

Mrs. McBee turned her gaze to the Negro girl once more. "Please be seated," she said with an outward calm that belied the storm within. Carefully she felt for the love seat beside her. She sat primly and with some difficulty since her feet did not quite reach the floor and had to dangle like a child's.

Her mind was in chaos. She watched as the Negro girl sat back down, huddled on one end of the sofa again. I'll go through with this, she kept repeating
to herself, feeling the hard beat of her heart against her chest.

The Negro girl leaned forward and picked up the small silver basket from off the coffee table. She turned it over as if to examine the hallmark. The gesture sent a hot rage through Mrs. McBee and she breathed heavily as if she could somehow stuff the fury back inside her. For a moment she thought she might have another one of her attacks.

I'll go through with it, she thought again. Just this once. I am a lady. A lady. And no lady would be unkind to a guest. No matter who she is, and the thought narrowed her eyes into two uneasy slits.

It was really John Bedford upon whom her fury settled. Mother, this is Helen Johnston. Indeed! He could have told her what was coming, not put her in such a position. He purposely had not told her. All day he must have been lying on his bed enjoying the very thought of it all.

"Lovely," said the girl in reference to the silver basket and glanced up at Mrs. McBee with wide eyes.

"It was my mother's," she managed and glanced nervously at John Bedford who was regarding her
peacefully, but with eyes that appeared to look through her
with pleasure, even delight.

"Well," drawled John Bedford. "Scotch, bourbon,
vodka. Who's for a drink?" He stood up, rubbing his
hands together.

The doctor pulled at the side of his collar.
"Vodka for me," he said in his nasal Yankee voice.

"The same," said the girl.

Mrs. McBee looked from the man to the girl. Drink-
ing, she thought. As if just being here wasn't enough.
She immediately stood up. "I'll help you, son. I'll
help you get the

John Bedford turned his back to her. "Just make
yourselves at home. Perhaps you'd like to go outside,
see the garden."

Mrs. McBee took hold of the side of her skirt and
nervously fondled it.

"I saw the greenhouse as we were drivin in," said
the girl.

"Mother loves for people to see her garden. Don't
you, Mother?" John Bedford smiled sweetly at Mrs. McBee.
It was a smile she had not seen since he was a child.

Mrs. McBee nodded and watched as the two left the
room accompanied by John Bedford, still smiling his sweet smile as if it were needed, the smile, like God's smile, tenderly guiding his wayward children.

As soon as they were out of the room Mrs. McBee plopped back down on the love seat. She sat there, dazed, staring into space. Outside she could hear the muffled voices of the three. Then she heard the trunk of a car shut, then laughter.

"I am a lady," she said furiously to the room. But there was only the muffled laughter to meet her pronouncement, and she stared at the dead room. Then at once it seemed the room was full of eyes. Eyes peaking into windows, eyes from behind pine trees, behind the piano, behind doors. "Letitia Graham McBee's enter-tainin' Niggers," the eyes seemed to say. "In her house." And the eyes became a voice and the voice was an outcry:

"Letitia Graham McBee is a COMMUNIST!"

She got up from the love seat and marched herself into the dining room. She ran into John Bedford. They tried to pass each other. But instead they played a little game. John Bedford went to the left, Mrs. McBee went to the left; he went to the right, Mrs. McBee went to the right.
"Ex-cuse me," said John Bedford.

"Ex-cuse you nothing!" said Mrs. McBee, her irritation increased by the little boy's play. She knew her face was scarlet, and she took hold of John Bedford's arm. The boy still wasn't too old to receive a piece of his mother's mind.

"Just what do you mean?" Mrs. McBee spat out her words, trying to keep her voice down so it could not be heard outside.

John Bedford folded his arms in front of him.

"What's the matter?" he asked innocently.

"You know perfectly well. Inviting someone like that here!" She was so angry she began to cough.

"Someone like whom?" he said coolly.

"That girl, that's who. Why didn't you tell me she was a Negro?"

"I didn't think it was necessary. I never think of anyone that way."

"You can see, can't you?"

"I never notice the color of someone's skin."

"Well, I do!" cried Mrs. McBee, "and if you don't you must be blind. The whole town will hear about this."

"So what?" said John Bedford with a lift of his shoulders.
"It just isn't done, that's so what."

"Then it should be. Maybe we'll start a trend."

"You're not going to start any trend like that around here. Believe you me."

"Helen Johnston just happens to be a very gifted young woman." He gazed away with studied haughtiness. "Anybody with half a brain would be happy to entertain her. But even half a brain would probably be asking too much around here."

"Well, I've got a whole brain!" said Mrs. McBee. "More than someone else I know." She turned all the way round and then looked up at his hound's eyes.

"And I don't think so much of that doctor either. I wouldn't waste my time of day on a man like that."

John Bedford lifted his hand as if he were about to pronounce a blessing. "Now, down, down," he said as if he were addressing their beagle hound. "Just simmer down. Remember these are the seventies, not the thirties."

"I don't care when it is. I'm not going to entertain people like that in this house." She looked away and shook her head nervously. "Of course I'll be a lady. I'm always that. And a lady is never unkind."
"I must say you've been the epitome of all that so far," he said. "And so moral and Christian about it all, too."

Mrs. McBee looked up at him and shook her finger. "Don't you Christian me, John Bedford McBee. You don't care as much about that darky as I do, and you know it."

"The word is 'black', not darky."

She narrowed her eyes. "What's gotten into you? It just isn't natural." She spun around. "And if you ask me I think you need a doctor. A mind doctor."

John Bedford strode past her, slamming the dining room door. Mrs. McBee did not hesitate. She went straight to the table, lifted one plate, knife, spoon and fork from the table and sailed into the kitchen.

Willie was carefully placing pieces of lettuce on the salad plates. She looked up and eyed the plate and silver Mrs. McBee plunked down on the kitchen table with more force than necessary.

"I think you need help back here, Willie," said Mrs. McBee, trying to control her voice. "I think the young people would rather eat alone." She twitched a smile.

"Yas'm," said Willie, lowering her eyes.
"They will enjoy themselves more," said Mrs. McBee, and it occurred to her that her voice was almost as loud as Mrs. Flemming's.

She sat in the one kitchen chair, her body tingling. "I'll help you pass the dishes," she said. Her heart seemed to beat with each word, and her forehead throbbed with little jabs of pain. All she wanted was to go to her room, rest, be quiet.

She picked up an empty paper napkin box and began fanning herself furiously. "I think the young people would prefer to eat alone."

Willie opened the refrigerator door. "Don't know why he want a bring folks lak that here nohow," she muttered to the inside of the refrigerator.

Mrs. McBee slowed down on the fanning. "I've always liked my colored friends."

"He aint got no bidness bringin folks lak that to no McBee house. Sass in here lak they belonged. Act lak she better'n everbody else," Willie pouted. "Her face just as black as mine."

"As I said I like my colored friends. There isn't anything I wouldn't do for them. The young people will feel easier without me."
"Sho will." Willie began placing the stuffed tomatoes on the lettuce leaves. "You wants the parsely put on top?"

"Here, I'll do that," said Mrs. McBee. "You watch the rolls."

John Bedford came into the kitchen. He glanced once at Mrs. McBee. "Mrs. Washington, do you know where the tray for the drinks would be?"

Willie found the open place in the back of her cap and scratched her head with one finger. "Naw suh," she said in an unusually high voice, "I don't believe I do." Her voice was so pleasant she was almost singing.

Mrs. McBee went to the pantry and found the black metal tray painted with roses. She had planned to use the silver tray, the one with the South Carolina seal on it which had been presented to John Bedford, Senior's great-grandfather when he was governor of the state. But the fire had gone out of that plan.

"How long do you plan to drink whisky?" asked Mrs. McBee with emphasis on whisky. She wanted the word to sound as evil as possible as if it all tied in somehow. "We can't keep Willie waiting here all night."

John Bedford took the tray. "This was your idea,
remember, not mine." He placed the bottles and bucket of ice on the tray and went through the swinging door.

Mrs. McBee crossed her arms and looked at the closed door. "Willie."

"Yes'm."

"I want you to understand. Are you listening?"

"Yes'm."

"That is not Mr. John's intended. That girl in there is not Mr. John's fiancee. He is not interested in that girl in any way except professionally."

"Yes'm," said Willie. "I coulda told you that."

"Yes, well. I wanted that understood."

Willie began to hum darkly. It was a melancholy sound, more like a moan, a signal that dangerous things were about: Wars and rumors of wars; father against son; brother against brother; nation against nation... ☹

"Child, you're wrong. One hundred and eighty degrees wrong."

"Just the opposite," came Dr. Myer's nasal voice, "it's just a passing phase with the kids, like goldfish--swallowing."

Mrs. McBee sat in the back room after dinner, her
ear cocked at the open door to hear the conversation in the living room, though she didn't know why she wanted to hear it. The talk at dinner certainly hadn't been very enlightening. Boring if you asked her. All about Proust and Joyce and something about industrial complexes and people sitting around having dialogues. Airs. They were just trying to put on airs, trying to impress each other. Dr. Myer and the girl wanted a black studies program started at Ashton State Teacher's College, they said.

"The black student thirsts for his history," said the girl.

I guess so, thought Mrs. McBee. Because there isn't any. She would have liked to have gone in and said that. But she had kept her distance. Besides, she had had to watch Willie. The whole thing had sent the woman into a kind of mindless action. She kept refilling dishes, hurrying through the swinging door, passing everything three and four times, then returning with eyes excited and her face all smiles as if it were she who was the hostess, had done all the cooking, couldn't give anybody enough.

"Them two can eat," said Willie. "Act lak they
aint never seen no food before."

"It's free, that's what," said Mrs. McBee.

But John Bedford barely touched his dinner, just kept sipping from his martini glass.

"God, I've missed all this," Mrs. McBee heard him say at one point. "Someone I can actually talk to. Just someone to talk to."

As if there weren't a city full of people just fifteen miles away he could talk to if he made just half an effort. If he wanted somebody intellectual there was old Mr. Morris, who knew more about the life of the Indians in Georgia than anybody in the whole state. He had even written a book about it. There were all kinds of people like that. And they were normal, too.

Dr. Myer's nasal voice rang out from the living room again. It interrupted Mrs. McBee's thoughts. She had been thinking about the dinner and that led her to think of that girl from up North somewhere who was descended from the pilgrims. She had married a Negro and when it happened Mrs. Flemming hadn't stopped talking about it for four days. It hadn't interested Mrs. McBee very much. She dismissed it with the fact that that was the way they did up there. If it had happened
in Ashton now that would have been a different matter. Like all this, she thought blackly.

The town would hear about it, of course. She didn't know just how, but the word would get around sooner or later. How she would answer to it she had no idea. She thought of John Bedford, Senior, lying out there beneath the pine trees. "Beloved teacher," the marker read.

It's all his fault, she said to herself. Always allowing as how he wanted his son to know "all kinds of people." For the six years of the boy's life that was his whole talk: "He must know all manner and conditions of men," he had said in his teacherfied voice.

Well, he'd be satisfied now. It was wrong of him to go and die anyway, leaving her here alone to cope with what he'd put here in the first place. The boy was all McBee; there wasn't a grain of Graham in him.

But she had coped. Coped until she had run out. "And now this!"

For just one second, one single second, she would like to see John Bedford, Senior rise up and just see what he had done. She...
"No thanks," came Dr. Myer's voice. "I've got three hours work ahead of me when I get home."

"Yes, Lord," said the Negro girl. "Another drink and I wouldn't be able to see the typewriter."

They were leaving. Mrs. McBee sat straight up in the chair and clapped her hands together silently. It was dark and nobody could see them leave. It was the Flemmings she was thinking of especially. They wouldn't like anything better; just one other way they could ruin her, take all her customers away.

"Thank your mother for a delicious dinner," said the Negro girl.

Delicious. Airs, thought Mrs. McBee again. But it was a good dinner, even if she said so herself. Quickly she reviewed the dinner, dish by dish, and a kind of calm came to her. Actually the evening hadn't been so bad after all. They had come. It was over. They would never come again. She had not lost her dignity. And nobody could say she hadn't acted in the highest way about it all. She had been a lady.

Besides, it wasn't so much the fact of the Negro girl she had objected to. It was just she felt somebody was trying to put something over on her, bending her
will to their will. She hadn't thought of it exactly that way before. But analyzing it now, seeing it whole, the momentary calm sped like a thief and anger took its place once more.

"Nobody's going to tell me what to do. Nobody!"

And she shook her head. There won't be any more Negroes or telephone operators or whatever coming to this house. Ever. Not as long as she lived anyway.

They were gone. Mrs. McBee listened as the car made its way out the road and finally turned off the highway. She heard the front door close and John Bedford's heavy steps going back to the kitchen.

Mrs. McBee heaved herself out of the chair and went straight to the kitchen. John Bedford was putting ice cubes in a glass.

"You're not going to have another one, I hope."

She rested one hand at her waist.

He did not turn. "Yes."

"Well, there's one thing I want you to know. I will not..." She meant to continue. But he had turned to her, his face so curious she merely looked at him. It was as if a kind of terror was written
on his face, as if he were saying, "Endure. That is all I have to do. Endure." Mrs. McBee had never seen such a look, a face so pained. Yes, once. Once she had seen a similar face and remembering it now she was frightened. It was in New Orleans. She was alone. In a small church. Over the altar was a crucifix. The Catholic type she detested. But she had looked at the face, and the face she saw then was the face before her now.

She gave a little gasp, stepped back. "Why?"

But there was no answer.

She put her fingers timidly to her lips. "The dinner was nice," she managed thinly. "The rolls were the best we've ever..."