Chapter Ten

Mrs. McBee saw the manilla envelope first. It was rolled into the mailbox with three bills tucked inside. The word "rejection" seemed to shout out at her like a bad joke. "Surprise! Surprise!"

If it wasn't one thing, it was ten thousand. She reached in for the envelope. On the cover was John Bedford's pinched handwriting and a string of stamps stretched halfway across the top, too many at that. Wasteful. Worse than a child.
She stood tapping the envelope on the mailbox, wondering whether to replace it or bring it into the house. If she brought it in the house John Bedford would see it before breakfast and wouldn't eat. And not eating was the last thing he needed.

Last night had been bad enough, scaring her the way he had. As if the Negro girl wasn't enough for one night, he had to go and have one of his spells. And it was all because he hadn't eaten. She was convinced of that. But it had frightened her so she thought if it happened again it would surely put her in her grave.

She had no idea what had brought it on. All she had said was that about the rolls, how good they were. But you would have thought she'd said the worst thing in the world. She had said that about the rolls because she couldn't think of anything else. Just a nothing sort of thing to say. But he had looked at her as if he were half-crazed, and then suddenly lurched forward, both his hands to his throat. For a moment she was too shocked to say anything, then with his eyes wild he began gasping.

"Get the bag. Get the bag!" he yelled at her in panic.
"What bag?" she cried back.

He began pointing and gesturing toward the pantry. And she ran there, flinging open the door and searching wildly inside all the while hearing the strangled gasps and croaking behind her.

"I can't... I can't breathe..."

"What bag?" she shouted over the noise.

He practically knocked her down as he grabbed a brown paper sack full of new potatoes. He threw the potatoes on the floor and began blowing into the sack, his face crimson and his cheeks blown like two fevered balloons.

"What are you doing?" she demanded.

He threw down the bag, knocked the kitchen table out of the way with one thrust, threw open the window, knocked out the screen and hurling himself over the windowsill lay there, panting, gasping for air.

Mrs. McBean ran to the telephone, picked it up. She didn't know Dr. Wilson's number. With trembling fingers she thumbed through the telephone book.

"Wilson. Wilson." The light was poor and she could not see the number; she brought the book further under the kitchen ceiling light.
When she turned John Bedford was slumped over in a chair, his face drained, his mouth hanging loose.

"Are you--" Her voice was shaking.

He raised his face, his breath coming in jerks.

"Pour me a jigger of whisky."

She handed him the glass, and he sat sipping it, his hands trembling uncontrollably, his face white, his eyes weak and half-closed as his breathing came in more even gasps.

"What's wrong with you?" She stared down at him.

He glanced up at her, said nothing, then sat gazing at the stove, concentrating on each breath as if the one before might be the last.

"Well, I never."

He waved her away with his hand.

"I'm going to call Dr. Wilson."

"I don't want that witch doctor in this house."

He began panting again.

"Well, you need somebody. That's just not normal."

He took one long breath, expelled it, and he seemed to relax. He sipped the whisky.

"I never saw anybody carry on that way."

He put the glass down. "I told you."
"What?"

"That I get these things. You wouldn't listen."

It was his heart. Just like his father's. "I'm going to call Dr. Wilson."

"I don't need him to tell me what I've got. I already know."

"What is it?" Her voice was almost a squeak.

"Hyperventilation."

"What's that?"

He said a doctor in New York had told him it was nothing to worry about, that half the time you could talk yourself out of it. Breathing into a bag helped. Whisky also helped.

"I never heard of a doctor ordering whisky for anybody. You ought to see somebody here, somebody who knows who you are and cares."

"I don't want to talk about it." He got up from the chair. His eyes were watery and weak.

"You drink too much, John Bedford. You didn't touch your dinner. That's all in the world wrong with you."

"I said I didn't want to discuss it."

He left her standing there in the white light of the kitchen.
"...And now this," she murmured, still holding the manilla envelope. "I've got more than the Good Lord can say..."

She didn't finish. Through the pine trees she saw Mrs. Flemming looming on top of the stile. Mrs. McBee looked once more at the envelope, tapped it on the mailbox, then replaced it. "I can't worry about that now. Tonight. Tonight I'll face all that. Philosophically." And pinched-mouthed she strode to the greenhouse, muttering to herself, "The Lord only knows. The Lord..."

Mrs. Flemming was already seated on the insecticide crate, her elbow leaning on the edge of the fern table and her hand to her fat face as she stared into space. Work, Mrs. McBee was thinking, I'll get some work out of that woman today if it kills me. There wouldn't be any time to talk about soap operas or Bertha Mae or Buster, Junior, or any of it.

"I'm just woe out, woe out to the bone," said Mrs. Flemming, not even glancing up.

Mrs. McBee picked up a clump of moss. They had an order for six hanging baskets, and they should have been planted yesterday.

"We're just getting older, Mrs. Flemming. We'll just have to get used to these tired feelings."
"Aint no old age with me this here morning." She began fanning herself with her hand.

Mrs. McBee handed her one of the basket frames. "I think we had better get these out of the way before we do anything else. Mrs. Akers wants them by noon."

Mrs. Flemming took the frame and inspected it as if she had never seen one before, turning it up and over. "You know the other sister of T. J.'s I told you about?"

Mrs. McBee didn't bother to ask which one. She made another motion toward the basket. "Just a little peat moss, Mrs. Flemming."

Mrs. Flemming continued to inspect the frame. "The one what's crazy?"

Mrs. McBee wanted to say she thought they were all crazy.

"You know. I told you 'bout that one. The one what's got them 'er treasure mens, Niggers, digging up her whole back yard? Claim she's lookin for buried treasure." Her voice seemed to be louder than ever. "You never seen such a mess. Can't nobody even walk back there. Holes all over the place, some twenty foot down in the ground. And them Niggers just a diggin and folks laughin.2"
At the mention of the word "niggers" Mrs. McBee glanced at her.

"She come in the house this mornin before six. Claim T.J. done took his mama's old chir."

"His what?" asked Mrs. McBee, furiously packing the moss.

"His dead mama's chir. Rockin chir. Aint no count. Don't know what she want the thing for. Tilda she aint never had no sense nohow. You never heard such a racket. Commenced to yellin at T.J., called him everthang you can think of--a hawg--don't know what all. And T.J. he taken it long as he could, then he hauled off and smacked her one. Maaad? I thought that woman's gonna kill T.J."

And a good thing it would have been, too, thought Mrs. McBee. But Mrs. Flemming had begun lining the basket and the fact she was working lessened the irritation. "It's always a shame, I think, when a brother and a sister don't get along. That often can be such a sweet relationship."

"One of these days that crazy woman's really gonna try somethin. You mark my word." She narrowed her eyes as if she were seeing into the future, the act done.
"It's always been such a satisfaction to me that Mary Hughes and John Bedford get along so well," said Mrs. McBee almost convinced of the lie herself. "Yes, Mary Hughes has always loved her little brother."

"He ain't so little no more," said Mrs. Flemming and laughed loudly. People's infirmities, unless they were caused by an accident, an amputated leg or a missing eye (these she found infinitely fascinating) were oftentimes amusing to Mrs. Flemming. She was referring to John Bedford's weight, of course.

Look into thine own mirror, woman, thought Mrs. McBee, and took up one of the tender ageratum plants and began pressing it harder than necessary into the basket. It was strange about Mrs. Flemming. There were days when nothing about her irritated her. As a matter of fact Mrs. McBee sometimes rather welcomed her. On one of her trips to visit a sick sister Mrs. McBee had actually missed her. She was company, someone to talk to, especially when John Bedford went into one of his silent spells.

But today everything about her was irritating. She had no taste in planting the baskets. She liked fern and she used it too freely. Mrs. McBee was always
having to rearrange what she had done and the tact she had to use was tiring.

She watched her now as she packed the basket with the fern. One had to be subtle: "I believe there's a little too much fern, Mrs. Flemming. I don't think too much is attractive, do you?"

"Them folks git off all right?"

Mrs. McBee instantly felt a sensation in the pit of her stomach. "What people?"

"The ones what was coming yesterday?"

"Oh, yes. We had a little dinner and a nice visit."

"Did?"

"A very fine man. A professor," said Mrs. McBee, and she heard the hoarseness in her voice.

"Whatcha done with that er Nigger girl?"

Mrs. McBee stood up straighter. She saw the half-smile on Mrs. Flemming's lips, a tight smile, encircled in white.

"What are you speaking of, Mrs. Flemming?"

"Buster, Junior, he seen a Nigger going in your house, said he seen one. Told me. And I said--said: 'Mizz McBee aint gone put up with no Nigger.'"

"Oh, that," said Mrs. McBee. She tried to sound as casual as possible.
Mrs. Flemming pursed her lips, her fingers working nervously as she piled up the soil around the fern. "I wouldn't have no Nigger eatin' at my table. If a Nigger come in my house and tried to eat at my table--Lordy knows--I guess T. J.'d run him off fore you could say "Lespedeza."

It was like them to spy. Mrs. McBee could just picture that cracker Buster, Junior sneaking over and walking by the window as if he had some sort of business there.

"Well, I am a lady," said Mrs. McBee. "I could never be unkind to a guest in my house. Whoever he is."

"I don't think I'd be no lady about no Nigger," said Mrs. Flemming. "Give 'em an inch, they'll take a mile."

"These are the seventies, Mrs. Flemming, not the thirties. Times are changing, and we have to change with them."

"Don't just have to," shouted Mrs. Flemming in her normal voice, but all at once her face was scarlet. "Way I look at thangs a body don't have to do nothin."

"I think I will go outside for a while," said Mrs. McBee. "The roses need dusting before it gets
too hot." She brushed aside the unfinished basket.

She went straight to the bench beneath the sourwood tree and sat down. She just couldn't be having this every morning. Every morning letting that woman upset her this way. She realized her eyes were darting to and fro just like Mrs. Flemming's. (Even that was becoming contagious.)

She sat with her fingers pressed to her lips. If she could only find someone to take the woman's place. It would give her the greatest pleasure in the world just to walk into the greenhouse some morning and say: "Mrs. Flemming, you're fired!" But there was no one else; everyone decent had a job either with the government or the textile mills. And she couldn't compete with those kind of wages.

Just some nice country girl, she was thinking. Even if she could get Della back that would be an improvement. Della was a farm girl who had worked for her for eight years. Sloppy and dumb with black greasy hair, Della at least knew how to hold her tongue. But Della was married now, had eight children. Once Della had planted all the tulip bulbs upside down and not one of them had come up. Even that was better than--
Slowly Mrs. McBee brought her hands down from her lips. She blinked and looked again. Over by the stile and beyond the Flemming's privet hedge she saw a huge head floating in the air. Weightless, it appeared to be sailing like some apparition come from Doomsday.

The face was in profile, ancient with a biblical sorrow in its emaciated cheekline.

"St. Francis of Assisi!" she said aloud. And then she saw the shoulders and the praying hands.

She got up from the bench and strode over to the stile. From the bottom step she could see over the hedge. "Now if that isn't something," she muttered aloud as she gazed at Buster, Junior's huge blunt hands holding the statue upright on one shoulder. "Looks just like a tombstone."

She watched as Buster, Junior half-dropped it on the ground beside four small angels, their cherubic faces looking wistfully into a fenced-in chicken yard.

"They've begun," she muttered, staring hard at the St. Francis of Assisi, "and that buzzard there has come straight from hell to take every dime I've got."
She hurried back to the greenhouse. Mrs. Flemming was still sitting on the insecticide crate. She was humming a tune, one Mrs. McBee had become overly familiar with down the years, something about "the lamb in His bosom; it's awaitin there for you and far me-see."

"Well, he's started, I see," Mrs. McBee said, and she began tapping her finger on her cheek again.

Mrs. Flemming glanced at her and went right on planting the basket. Mrs. McBee knew the glance. It was her way of informing she was still pouting.

"I see Mr. Flemming has already purchased some of the garden statues."

Mrs. Flemming did not look up. "Most of 'em come in yesterday."

"I see," said Mrs. McBee, removing a fern from one of the finished baskets.

"Gone put up the gas pumps tereckly."

"I suppose he'll put the statues out there too, on the highway."

"Buster, Junior, he thinks it'll attract biness." She shoved aside the basket she was fixing as if it were an old argument. "Aint them angels the prettiest thangs you ever seen?" She had an unattractive smile,
fat and shy. "When I seen 'em I said, said: 'Nem'er thangzs looks just like Lojean's youngun--ceptin they got wangs on 'em.'"

"When is Mr. Flemming planning to build his green house, Mrs. Flemming?"

"Aint heard him say." She yawned.

"You put too much fern in the baskets, Mrs. Flemming. You always use too much fern. It's ugly."

As the day waned and Mrs. Flemming had at last made her queenly step back over the stile, only then did Mrs. McBee allow herself to think of John Bedford again.

She always called herself a one-event-a-day human being. "I just can't see balancing two things at once." This, she concluded, had kept what mind she had in reasonably good order.

Though the Lord knows how, she thought as she walked toward the house.

What she would have to do was to try to cheer up John Bedford. And where the strength for that would come from she did not know. To cheer, she had long reasoned, took a thousand times more energy than to depress. And though she considered herself a normally
cheerful person that particular attribute was becoming harder and harder to come by.

She knew what she would have to do. She would have had to think up something bad that happened, something unfair toward that had occurred, preferably to one of the new money people in town. It was that sort of thing that always cheered John Bedford, took him out of himself. Good things only depressed him.

By now he would have seen the rejected manuscript, so whatever she thought up would have to be pretty good. Later she would talk real sense, philosophical sense. About the Negro girl and such as that. She would tell him, as nice as she knew how, that things like that could be exaggerated, might even hurt them business-wise. And they already had enough trouble—the Flemmings for one. And just that afternoon she heard of another nursery starting up on the other side of town. "We need all the friends and good will we can find just now." She would just let him in on some of her worries. It would do him good, let him know just how hard it was to earn a dollar.

When she entered the kitchen he was already there fixing a martini. He had on the old pants and a faded
blue shirt and Mrs. McBee immediately saw the puffs over his eyes. As a matter of fact his whole face was puffed, an unhealthy bloat that was a disaster to any distinguishing lines his face might have had.

"Hello, hello, hello," she sung out.

He quickly took up his glass and started to leave.

"Well, well, well," she said cheerily, "already time for the cocktail hour, is it? What is it the old judge used to say?—'It must be five o'clock somewhere in the world.'"

"It's six o'clock here."

"Do you know what?" said Mrs. McBee clasping her hands together and thrusting out her bosom as if somehow the very joyfulness of the gesture might stop his exit.

He glowered at her.

"I am going to join you."

"What for?"

"Why, that's not a very nice thing to say. 'What for?' I just thought I would, that's all." She reached down into the cupboard below the sink. "You didn't know I had this, did you?" She held up a preserve jar filled with a black-purplish liquid. "Blackberry wine,
and if I do say so it isn't as expensive as the gin and whatnot some people are always buying. Hah, hah, hah. No, now, don't leave. I have the most awful thing to tell you—about what happened in town today. We'll just go on the front porch and have a nice little cocktail party. I don't know when I've had any blackberry wine. It reminds me of my grandmother when—"

John Bedford leaned against the refrigerator and eyed her wearily.

"I think it's nice to celebrate."

John Bedford said nothing.

"Hah. Hah. Hah. Oh dear. John Bedford, you can be so amusing." She breathed heavily. "There doesn't always have to be a reason to celebrate. We can celebrate we're both in good health, reasonably so," she added. "We can celebrate we have a roof over our heads."

She glanced at him. His lips were pursed and for some reason he was wagging his head as if he were trying to mock her. "Things like that," she said thinly.

She took down a wine glass and poured some of the dark liquid into it. Then she lifted the glass. "Lead the way, kindly light." Kindly light was one of her amusing sayings. Sometimes she even said it to Mrs.
Flemming. "You first, kindly light," she would say to Mrs. Flemming, and Mrs. Flemming always thought it amusing.

John Bedford took up the gin bottle and poured more into his glass.

"We don't want to over-do, do we?"

"No, we don't," he said.

Mrs. McBee opened the kitchen door. "You first, Alphonso."

John Bedford shrugged and sauntered past her.

There were two rocking chairs on the front porch, old-time rockers with caned bottoms. Some of Mrs. McBee's customers had been after her to sell them. But she told them those were the two chairs her father and the old judge used to sit in when they drank their juleps and she could never sell them. A lie. She had found the chairs in a junk shop, had the bottoms re-caned and she hadn't had them more than a year or so. But in her mind her father and the old judge had often sat there drinking their juleps.

John Bedford sat on his spine with his feet and martini glass resting on the banister rail. In the distance, through the pine woods, cars and trucks could
barely be seen as they sped down the highway. John Bedford had his eyes fixed on them as if they held some magical fascination. Wush, wush, wush, they sounded. Nerve-racking, never once slowing, busy, piloted by hunched figures unmindful of anything being lived out along the way.

"Hear the crickets," said Mrs. McBee. She had never liked the sound of the automobiles. They were too much of a reminder of what had happened in her life, all the land she had lost, the old life, what she wanted to return to. She did not like to think of herself living on a highway. But John Bedford liked the sound. He liked it, he said, because it made him know there was actually life somewhere.

"Hear the crickets," Mrs. McBee said again when there was no response from him.

"I hear a bull frog," he drawled.

"Tsk. Tsk. Tsk. A country boy and he doesn't know the difference between a cricket and a bull frog," chided Mrs. McBee.

"Just think of that," he said.

Cheering up John Bedford was going to be more tiresome than she had reckoned on. "I've been thinking about learning how to drive a car," she said.
"Then I'd be what my mother used to call one of those 'advanced women.' Only 'advanced women' drove cars in her day. Wonder what she would think nowadays. I do wonder what she would think. Don't you?"

John Bedford said nothing. His eyes were narrowed and as each car passed his eyes followed it until it disappeared.

Mrs. Flemming told me the most awful thing today. Do you know what she told me?"

"I can't possibly imagine," he muttered. But Mrs. McBee knew he was listening. Yes, it was true. Anything bad was sure to bring him out of himself.

"About this man. Poor thing. He wasn't much, of course, some friend of Buster, Junior's. That kind. A truck driver. But he was driving a Coca-cola truck, and another truck came along, knocked him off the highway, and you know they had to take that boy away with both his legs cut off. Just imagine."

"Bad," muttered John Bedford.

"It goes to show how thankful a being can be." She began tapping her fingers on the wooden arm of the chair. "Lordy, Lordy, I just heard more awful things today." She glanced at him.
He turned his head toward her, his puffed eyes listless.

"You knew old Mr. Blackburn died?" She caught her breath in anticipation of some reaction. There was none. Old Mr. Blackburn was practically the pillar of Ashton. "It was a blessing, of course."

"I don't think it's ever a blessing when someone dies," he said and looked away.

"I do. He didn't have any people left or anything. Nobody. And he was old. I know I wouldn't want to just linger and linger that way."

"Don't worry. You will."

Mrs. McBee let that pass, but she began to rock in her chair more vigorously. Yes, this was becoming more difficult than she had expected, and the blackberry wine wasn't very good either. "And do you know what else I heard? Elizabeth Akers came by this afternoon for her baskets. And you know Elizabeth, just full of everything. You know what she told me?"

"I can't imagine."

"Your friend Libby Neal. She's divorced! And, from what all Elizabeth said, there's going to be another divorce, and it's all tied together. Everybody's talking."
"Lucky people."

Mrs. McBee took a generous sip of the wine. "I don't think there's anything lucky about it at all. It just goes to show if you think you've got troubles, well, somebody else has a hundred."

John Bedford blinked his eyes. "That's the old saying, all right."

"It certainly is, and the old sayings had plenty of sense in them." No, the wine was no good. The berries must have soured.

Wush. Wush. Wush. The sound of cars. For the life of her, Mrs. McBee couldn't understand how somebody could just sit and stare without ever talking. If anybody ever wanted to torture her they could tell her: "Now you just have to sit there and stare. You'll never have anybody to talk to; you'll just have to sit until Kingdom come."

In the distance there was the grunting sound of a hog. It belonged to one of the Negro families in the backwoods.

Mrs. McBee cleared her throat. "Did--did the editors have anything to say about your story this time?" She tried to make her voice as bright as possible.
"That does it." John Bedford let his feet drop from the railing and started to get up.

"No, now, son," Mrs. McBee protested. "You can't be so sensitive."

"I'm not going to sit here and talk about my writing."

The editors hadn't said anything. She just wanted to know. "All right," she said. "We'll talk about something pleasant."

"Think hard," he said.

The hog sounded again. Mrs. McBee looked away from the sound. Why couldn't he think up something pleasant himself? That was the way it was with John Bedford, Senior, too. She was always having to create the mood. She was always having to think up pleasant things. Other people's husbands hadn't been that way. In many ways she had had to carry John Bedford, Senior—talk for him, laugh for him, make up for his silences with other people. It had been exhausting. She would have liked to have just sat back like other women. But if she had they would have been like two dumb mutes.

"I declare," she said aloud, thinking of the years with her husband.
John Bedford was scowling out at the automobiles.

"I wonder if we'll hear anything from Dr. Myer or--or the girl?" Mrs. McBee thought she would just bring that up. Certainly that would distract him, if nothing else. "A thank you note or anything?"

1/2 "A thank you for what?" muttered John Bedford.

1/4 "Well, I do." A thank you for what? After all the work she had gone to. Work and expense. "People who are anybody always write some kind of a note. Just a little nicety. I declare, I think Willie just out did herself. Didn't she do nicely? Served just like a veteran. I suppose we'll get some sort of a note."

He continued to gaze ahead. "I don't think we'll hear from anybody."

"If not, they just don't know what to do then." She could have told him that in the beginning anyway. But she was getting tired of this, his silence, sarcasm, not saying anything.

"Maybe they don't know the little niceties." A thin smile curved his lips.

"Ordinary if you ask me."

"Ordinary they are not."
The wine had left a sour taste in her mouth. "Well, there's one thing clear. I don't want them here in this house again."

"Don't worry."

"And if you ask me I don't think you ought to be seeing people like that either."

He sat up then and turned to her. "And may I ask why?"

She did not look at him. "You know why. You know perfectly well why."

"Because the girl just happens to have a different color of skin from yours? Is that why?"

"Skin has nothing to do with it." She did not look at him. She began twisting her ring.

John Bedford took up his drink again. "Somebody with such beautiful dreams for the world. What a pity."

"That girl doesn't have any beautiful dream for anybody. If she does it's a bank account. For herself!"

She cocked her head at him. "She wants what you've got!"

"What I've got? You must be kidding. You must be."

Mrs. McBee lifted her chin. "You know what I mean."

"Afraid I don't."
The last word. Always had to have the last word. "Well, this is not very pleasant. The old judge said one should never bring up anything unpleasant over drinks or at the dinner table. It's bad for the digestion. He was correct about that. But then the old judge was--"

"For Jesus God sakes! The old judge is dead! I don't want to hear about the old judge anymore. He's dead and damned."

Mrs. McBee stopped rocking. "John Bedford." She did not look at him. She sat shaking her head. The old judge was almost as sacred to her as her own father. "I did not deserve that." She heard the weakness in her voice.

John Bedford gazed at her, groaned, ran his hand over his head and sunk back into the rocker.

In the distance the pine woods were aglow with the setting sun and the cars speeding along the highway looked like dark phantoms, pilotless.

Ye-us, you got to go to that Promised land alone. Nobody there can go there for you; Yes, you got to go there for yo-self...

Mrs. Flemming's loud burst of song floated from over the hedge.
"Kee-rist, that woman," muttered John Bedford. Mrs. McBee batted not an eyelash. "I think you've had too many martinis, John Bedford."

"I haven't had enough. That woman. Doesn't she ever shut up? How does T. J. stand it?"

Mrs. McBee glanced at his glass. It was empty. She looked down at her own half-filled glass.

"I don't see why he hasn't got rid of her a long time ago."

Mrs. McBee crossed her arms in front of her. "She's better than he is."

"I like T. J. Flemming," said John Bedford and it was almost as if he were saying it to himself. "Typical Appalachia. He can't help his lot. But that woman!"

Mrs. McBee stared at him.

"In his way T. J. Flemming makes sense. I can talk to him. He's a kind man."

"Kind enough to take the bread out of your mouth," said Mrs. McBee and began to rock again. "And don't think he's not going to tell about you! Bringing that girl here. Ruin is all that's on his mind."

John Bedford continued to gaze as if he had not heard her. "He's suffered, you know. He knows what
suffering is. His faith is so simple with his personal Christ."

Mrs. McBee continued to rock. "Christ has nothing to do with it. If he builds that greenhouse that will have something to do with everything."

John Bedford suddenly stood up, thrusting the rocker behind him with a loud scraping noise. His face was scarlet. "Don't you ever look? Can't you ever see? Don't you know what it is? What it's all about?" His hound's eyes were wide and veined red as his fury gathered in his raging gaze.

Mrs. McBee put her hand to her neck. She was so taken aback by the outburst, none of which made the slightest sense, she could only stare back at him, her senses numbed.

John Bedford turned. "I'm going." He took the car keys from his pants pocket.

Mrs. McBee tried to say something. Nothing would come. She stared at the angry retreating figure. He's drunk. She stood. "John Bedford," she called. "Come back here this minute. You can't drive a car like that."

"Just see if I can't." He laughed back at her.
Mrs. McBee held on to the banister rail as she watched the station wagon speed down the road, dust flying in its wake.

Ye-us, you got to go to that Promised land alone. Nobody Here can go there for you; Yes, you got to...

Mrs. McBee sank into the chair and stared ahead, her mouth half-open. The sun had sunk beneath the pines and the sky was left with purple and yellow streaks as if anguished fingers had left their bruises there.

She sat for a long while. Then when she had made up her mind, definitely, she went into the house, called up her daughter Mary Hughes.

"Come," was the first word she could utter.