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Chapter] Twelve

On a scorching blue Sunday afternoon in July Mrs. McBee lay on her bed and thought of death. Her own. There was no particular reason for this. The day was bright, and outside her window the holly tree was noisy with the sound of blue jays. For days she had watched the mother jay trying to teach the young to fly. It had excited her, the birth of the little ones, and now they were loud with life.

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Back.

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What she had been thinking about earlier was her mother-in-law. Varina McBee, dead now these eight years. She had come into her thoughts like a vision, that dour pinched-mouthed Presbyterian woman who had done her best to ruin her marriage and in the process all but did ruin her son. She was thinking how much there was of the woman in Mary Hughes, how alike they were in some respects.

It was the Scotts in them. Once the old lady had called Mrs. McBee "extravagant" just because she had thrown out an empty match box. Penny-pinching, close-mouthed, cheerless, Bible-reading, Varina McBee had one eye on God and the other, the good one, on the cash box. She ruled and died hungry, as her dictates called for.

Mrs. McBee had not got along with her mother-in-law, not until her last days when it turned out it was she who sat up with her night after night through the final illness. Ethyl, her own daughter, couldn't find the time to leave her home in Rocky Mount, North Carolina. Her husband Morris was too ill for her to leave, she said. Morris Heppinstall to this day was roaring away in the North Carolina legislature, as well as anybody could be.

"You've turned out to be a good woman," the ailing

Varina had told Mrs. McBee before she died, and those were the kindest words she had ever spoken to her. In so many ways Mary Hughes was like her grandmother.

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There wasn't much from her side in the girl. The Hughes and the Grahams were all high^Nspirited people. They loved life, reveled in it.

1/2 px "Yes, they just reveled too much," Varina McBee had said once. "If they hadn't reveled so much you'd still have the land they reveled away."

Which was nothing in the world but just plain downright Highland meanness. The family had lost the land because the South was poor, and she had told the old lady that in no uncertain terms. She had not allowed ~~her to walk over her~~ ^{herself to be walked on} ~~her~~. (Still, Mrs. McBee had to admit the woman did have her good points. They all did, the McBees. They were intelligent, thrifty, hard^r working, honest. Just not much fun. Boring, actually. John Bedford, Senior had been the most interesting of the lot (when you could get him to talk^U.) But even he had been so dominated by his mother he didn't have much "get"^U. That was why she had started the greenhouse in the first place, because John Bedford, Senior didn't have any "get"^U. His students at the high school walked

all over him. He had no idea what the word "discipline" meant.

1113 She wished Mary Hughes had had more of the Hugheses and the Grahams in her. John Bedford, Junior got some of it, the devil-may-care part, which was not good. If only things had been reversed. It didn't matter if a girl was charming and irresponsible. Women like that always got on. But to have the boy irresponsible and the girl a dour dictator was an unhappy twist of things at best.

Mrs. McBee had not heard from Mary Hughes since she had roared off in the car with Horace. She had written her, of course. Many times. She never mentioned their little misunderstanding in her letters. Instead, she wrote about how well the nursery was doing, how she was planning to have the house painted, bits and pieces of Ashton gossip. All harmless, innocent letters, which was the intent. With each letter she felt further and further removed from the top of Horace's garage.

That was in the letters. In life the garage welcomed her in the morning and went to bed with her at night. It was the same old worries: John Bedford and the Flemmings. John Bedford was not teaching his

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one class during the summer months, and she never knew where he was. In the mornings he pecked away on his typewriter or stared; after that he was gone like a shadow.

And yet it was peaceful. There were no disruptions in routine. And for that she partially credited John Bedford.

After Mary Hughes had left that day Mrs. McBee spied him over by the rose garden, just standing there staring at the roses. She went over to him.

"They're beautiful this year. Aren't they?" she said idly.

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PX

"Yes," he said. "Yes, they are."

And they were like two people who had long grown accustomed to each other and were relieved that an alien element had now gone. It was as if, in their way, they were celebrating Mary Hughes's departure. Yes, that was what they were doing. Celebrating. And the thought brought momentary guilt.

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"Mary Hughes is also a child of mine," she said, and there was a tint of defiance in her voice. "And Horace is a good provider. He's built two rooms over his garage."

John Bedford just looked at her, puzzled.

11/13 But that night they had a fine conversation about Henry Langston in Ashton. Mrs. McBee had just heard about it that afternoon. Henry Langston had been arrested for drunken driving, and Mrs. McBee told John Bedford all about it, adding that there had never been a McBee or a Hughes or a Graham who had ever been put in jail.

John Bedford listened just as nice as could be, and afterward it occurred to Mrs. McBee that John Bedford had never suggested putting her away in a garage or any place like that. You could say what you wanted to about him. But he had never suggested anything like that.

Actually it was the Flemmings who had occupied most of her thoughts during the summer. They were as busy as a bed of ants. Mrs. Flemming wasn't working regularly at the greenhouse because of the slack season, so Mrs. McBee hadn't seen as much of her as usual. But the woman had made herself felt all right enough, and if not felt, heard. All day she was outside giving out orders, singing her hymns and raging at one thing or another. All of it floated over the privet hedge and followed Mrs. McBee from dawn to eventide.

The gas pump was now standing out front on the highway. And behind it they had built a small shed fronted by Buster, Junior's garden statuary. St. Francis of Assisi was the hottest thing going. Mrs. McBee saw one after another being placed in the trunks of cars. Sixteen dollars a piece. Almost any time of day she could glance over the hedge and cars were parked there.

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1/2 PX | One day a big truck backed up to the shed, and two Negroes began hauling out old pieces of furniture, beds, rolled up mattresses, broken¹/_N down bureau drawers, an iron gate, lamps, tables, plates, gilt china figurines, an iron pot. And the next day Mrs. McBee saw Buster, Junior on top of the shed nailing down a sign.

"Trash and Treasures," read the sign, and after that, almost every¹/_N day, the place was filled with cars and people rummaging through all that mess. It occurred to Mrs. McBee people would buy anything. Just put up a sign and people would buy. By mid-July the sign was changed to simply "Antiques".)

The Flemmings were on their way, and Mrs. McBee watched it all, smoldering. She checked and re¹/_Nchecked her own books. Sitting at her father's roll-top desk, she added, subtracted, erased, figured and refigured

and at the end she always came up with the same answer. Eight thousand four hundred and seventy-two dollars and ninety-two cents.

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Five acres of land. That was how much the Flemmings owned. If she could buy that land for a couple of thousand, she would still have enough left over to enlarge the greenhouse and expand the gardens. She needed at least another acre or so for evergreens and another acre for cedars.

She had decided to sell Christmas trees. All she would have to do was get on the phone and call her regular customers. It would save them all the fuss of having to go downtown and buy a tree. John Bedford could deliver them in the station wagon. The exercise and air would do him good, take him out of himself, build him up. And who knows? He might just take to it, become a gentleman farmer, marry, and carry on after she was gone.

her Mrs. McBee rehearsed it all in her mind. T. J. Fleming was a fool but a shrewd one. Still, he was like all crackers. Money in the pocket was all they cared about. Offer him a couple of thousand and he'd probably jump at it.

18 pgs. | She set up a date with him through Mrs. Flemming.

As casually as she knew how she told the woman she would like to have a little conference with Mr. Flemming "at his convenience." She thought it was best to meet him in her own setting. In the house.

He had never been in her house before, and the advantage in this was that it would give stature to herself and tend to diminish him. Besides, it was private, and she didn't want Mrs. Flemming putting in her two cents. Mrs. Flemming was by far the brighter of the two, and Mr. Flemming never moved without a prod from her. Mrs. McBee wanted the contract signed and sealed before he left the house.

He knocked on the back screen door that very afternoon, and right off Mrs. McBee saw the "Drink Coca-Cola" sign on the front of his T-shirt. It made his caved-in chest look slightly tubercular, and standing in the doorway looking down at him as he stood on the bottom step, brown hat in hand, Mrs. McBee had the odd sense she was manipulating a puppet, so much taller and grander did she feel.

18 pgs. | "You want me, Mizz Tisha?" He seemed preoccupied, as if her request had been an interruption. He had

never appeared that way before.

1113 She asked him to come in, noting how his brown eyes took in everything in the kitchen, the stove, the refrigerator, the old-fashion sink with its heavy dull water spouts. Comparing, she thought, feeling superior because he had a stove that fit in the wall and a refrigerator that made ice all day long.

"You were good to come," said Mrs. McBee. "You seem to be quite busy at your place this summer."

"They keepin me hoppin all right enough."

Mrs. McBee led him into the hall. She didn't miss his glance at himself in the pier mirror, the way he smoothed his hair down with his hand. In its way the gesture was an indication that her scheme was working. He was impressed.

In the living room Mrs. McBee sat on the settee. He remained standing in the middle of the room, hat in hand. All at once he began tapping his hat on the side of his leg. "I just don't git it," he said, shaking his head. "I wouldna believed it if I'da seen it with my own eyes."

"Yes? What is that, Mr. Flemming?"

✓ He looked about the room, at the portraits, the

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turn-top table, the silver bowl filled with Queen Elizabeth roses. Almost bashfully he toed the oriental rug. "Somehow tuther I'd never thought you wa^s the kind ~~that~~^e took up with niggers."

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The remark was so unexpected Mrs. McBee felt the palms of her hands instantly moisten. She sat taller. "That was business," she said. "My son's. He teaches, you know, and the college is so integrated now. I suppose we'll have to get used to that sort of thing."

"I first heard it in town," he said as if he were announcing some happy surprise.

Mrs. McBee looked away. If he heard it, it was from his own mouth. The whole town was probably talking.

^{1/2} PX | He cocked his head. "Ate here, too. Didn't she?"
Mrs. McBee touched her throat with her hand. "Do sit down, Mr. Flemming." She indicated the chair nearest the piano, as far away from her as possible.

He sat forward in the chair, twirling his hat in his hands. "I heared ~~them~~^q niggers at the college aint satisfied bein with just whites; they wanta be by theyselves. I coulda told ^vem ~~that~~^e. Knowed it all the time. Forcin folks to mix up aint gone do nothin but make a mess." ^v

"Well, times are changing. Aren't they?"

"Some thangs aint gone never change."

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Mrs. McBee let the remark pass. You couldn't talk sensibly to anybody like that anyway. Besides, she wanted to get on with her proposal. She would think about the gossip, if indeed there was any, later. "May I get you some tea? Or anything to drink?"

Mr. Flemming looked up at her and grinned. "You aint taken to spirits, too, is you Mizz Tisha?" And then with horror she saw the wink. It was his right eye and a definite wink.

She immediately averted her eyes. But the image of the wink remained. Idiot. She had to get all this over with as soon as possible.

"Naw, I done already ate." He looked at her questioningly.

"In that case then²_M" She dampened her lips, and she knew she was nervous. Of course she was used to bargaining. She had stood up to every salesman in the county at one time or another. Come out on top, too. Most of the time. But she had never bargained with the Flemmings before, and the wink had disturbed her.

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She rested her hands in her lap and looked beyond the man, out the window to the pine trees red now with the sun setting behind them. "I have been thinking for some time now, Mr. Flemming, about enlarging my operations here." She shot a glance at him. His gaze was sober as he stared straight in front of him. He was like a man sleeping but with his eyes open.

"...The time has come to enlarge, you see. And for that I'm going to need more land."

She was sure she would have got some reaction out of that. There was none, not even a bat of an eye.

"...Of course I know you and Mrs. Flemming aren't overly attached to the place you are now. It isn't as if it were your real home, not like the place you used to farm. That was your true home." She paused. "Isn't that so?"

$\frac{1}{2}$ | He nodded once, still gazing straight ahead.

PX | Mrs. McBee took a deep breath. "I was thinking about your land, Mr. Flemming. You don't seem to be using it. And, well, I'm willing to take it off your hands --
M for a reasonable price, of course."

He did not look at her. "Out back, you talkin
↓ bout?"

11/13 "Yes. I know you're paying taxes on it, and as I always say what's the good of putting out when nothing is coming in? That's what my father used to say." She cleared her throat. "In other words I'm perfectly willing to buy that do-nothing land, Mr. Flemming. Perfectly willing."

he He turned to her then. The brown eyes with the curled-up eyelashes regarded her soberly; they were not the smiling eyes that enraged her so when he was trying to overcharge her for his fertilizer. "Aint for ~~sale~~," was all he said, but there was such a ring of finality in the words Mrs. McBee was completely put off.

"I don't mean $\frac{2}{M}$ " she sputtered.

"Not a chince." He wagged his head sorrowfully and began twirling his hat again. He was like some impenetrable wall.

"And why not, may I ask? You're doing nothing with it!"

"Lady," he said, "now don't be ~~g~~attin your dander up with me here."

Mrs. McBee slowly closed her eyes, but her whole body throbbed with rage. She wanted to tell him to get

out of her house. He was out of place here.

"You gotta know your which from your what."

She opened her eyes and, maddeningly, saw he was grinning at her.

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^{er's}
"That ~~that's~~ gone be Buster, Junior's house."

"Just what are you talking about, Mr. Flemming?"

"That ~~er~~ land you gone take off my hands. Buster, Junior, he's gone build hisself a house on it. All brick."

"I see." In her mind she saw the house already built. A onestory brick nothing with a white shining roof and Lojean inside with her hair done up in pink curlers all day long.

"Gone plant soy beans back ~~that~~^{er's}" All at once he looked quite shy. "That ~~er~~ boy gotta head on hisself. Going ~~er~~ to night school ever night, putting ~~er~~ money away for his youngun's education." He shot his face out like a dare. "That ~~er~~ boy's gone ~~er~~ git somewhars. Just look out."

Roosevelt, Mrs. McBee was thinking. Franklin Roosevelt had caused all this. If it hadn't been for ^{er's} ~~er's~~ "I suppose you know," she said, "that my grandfather used to own all this land; your land, my land and clear

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across the highway into Piney Point. All of it."

"~~That~~ so? Well, like you say, times has changed a heapa thangs." He got up from the chair. "No ma'm, Buster, Junior he got plans for ~~that~~ out yonder."

Mrs. McBee also stood. "Thank you for coming by, Mr. Flemming."

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He glanced about the room once more. "We got one of ~~them~~ ^{them} ~~thar~~ thangs," he said, pointing.

For a moment Mrs. McBee could not figure out what he was talking about. And then she saw the clock in the bookshelf. It was an old clock brought back from Switzerland years ago by her grandmother. It had been an expensive piece even then, as delicate and intricate as her grandmother herself. Mrs. McBee had grown up with the clock; the chimes had marked her half-hours every inch of the way.

"Nadine's nephew he was over crosst the water, in the arm forces, and he sent Nadine one. But the bird he don't come out no more; got broke."

It had been an ~~an~~ ^{12#} humiliating encounter, and Mrs. McBee had not allowed her thoughts to dwell on it overly much during the summer. Gradually she reconciled herself to

the defeat. After all she would probably need the money if she got sick; lying down sick, that is.

Perhaps it was the remembering that brought on the thought of death. She was thinking of Buster, Junior and his elaborate plans. And that naturally led to John Bedford. She was wondering how much of a threat an educated Buster, Junior could be.

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1 1/2 px | Somehow while talking to Mr. Flemming she had the distinct feeling he would have liked to have reversed things. There was a decided air of "a man of property" about him, and she wondered if in that cracker brain of his he wasn't sitting there planning, planning to buy her out.

Then, lying on her bed thinking through these things, she had another one of her visions: ~~She~~ was dead, of course. John Bedford was living in the house as usual. Across the hedge was Buster, Junior, sitting in his new brick house surrounded by soy bean fields with a diploma tacked up on the wall. Gradually as the years went on the hedge would come down, then the fence, and on her property were six tow-headed children ~~l~~^M Buster, Junior's children, all speaking French. Inside her house was not John Bedford but Lojean Flemming, dressed in summer green waiting for guests to arrive.

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Mrs. McBee stared blackly at the wall before her. It was as ugly a vision as her own death. Neither of which she cared to dwell on at any length. Dying was natural, of course -- for someone else. She could not imagine the world without her. Trillions and trillions of years from now and no Letitia Graham McBee. In her mind she had often tried to imagine heaven and hell, tried to convince herself that there were such places. She said she believed it, even argued the point:

"I believe every single word the Bible has to say, every word."

✓ It was a kind of whistling in the dark. She did not like to think of herself as a nothing, just lying out in a hole somewhere beneath the stars, a nobody, her hands not moving, just a nothing. More and more these days her mind was troubled by such thoughts. She had always been troubled by it, of course, but she was so far removed from it when she was younger she could even boast about death.

"I'm perfectly prepared. I fear nothing."

Now, however, she wanted to linger, postpone. "I have to linger," she muttered, "see it out, see it all settled."

She could not die the way things were now. "Just a nothing, lying in a ² ~~---~~"
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18 pbr] It was all too unpleasant, black. She got up from the bed and went to the window. Outside the blue jays were still squawking in the holly tree.

"You die, too," she said angrily to the birds.
"Even you die."

But her thoughts were soon averted. Down below she saw John Bedford get into the station wagon and drive off.

Where could he be going on a Sunday afternoon? There was nowhere to drive to on Sunday.

18 pts] Her gaze followed the car to the highway, and she noticed he turned left instead of right as he usually did. She was thinking, too, how parched everything looked. Hot and parched.

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