Chapter Thirteen

Mrs. McBee went straight outside. She had to busy herself with something. Just lying up there on the bed thinking black thoughts was getting her nowhere. She put on her straw-colored sun hat, picked up her basket and garden gloves. Weeds. Now there was something that could occupy a mind. She often thought that if all those people who filled up insane asylums were put to weeding the asylums would be empty before tomorrow.
She went over to the rose beds. Even with the heavy mulch of cottonseed hulls the green shoots were everywhere, nut grass, vines, volunteers. She knelt down and began tugging at the roots with a vengeance.

Sometimes she thought of the weeds as people, the kind she saw filling up most of the world. Ordinary, insensitive creatures who reproduced by the millions. Why had God seen fit to put so many of that kind on earth when He just as well could have put roses and camellias and lilies-of-the-valley? It was all anybody could do to keep from being overrun.

"...When you commence to messing round with God's moon no telling what's liable to come off..."

Mrs. McBee sat back on her heels. T. J. Flemming and the "tree man" Hanes had come alongside the fence behind the hedge. Evidently they were going to cut down the mimosa tree there because she could see the sharp edges of two axes through the lower part of the hedge.

She knew it was Mr. Hanes because she could see only three feet, two in regular shoes and one in a muddied boot with laced yellow strings. Mr. Hanes had only one leg. The other was shot off ten years ago when
his nine-year-old son Herman accidentally fired into it. At least that was what Mrs. Flemming had said. Mrs. Flemming's fascination with the tragedy was boundless.

Until recently Mr. Hanes had done work for Mrs. McBee. Odd jobs mostly, trimming trees, pruning. He had even done some carpentry work. She still needed him to do a few things. But that was unlikely now since, according to Mrs. Flemming, the man had recently been "saved" -- by T. J. Flemming. If he had been saved, Mrs. McBee thought at the time, it was so he could do full-time work for the Flemmings -- in gratitude and free-of-charge.

She had mixed emotions about the mimosa. It was an ugly variety, tan, and volunteers from it kept coming up all over her side of the fence. Still, it was the only tree on the Flemming's property, except for the scrub pine further back where Buster, Junior was planning to build his house, and it did soften the looks of the place. Besides, it was an old tree, large, and she didn't like to see any tree cut down, even if it was ugly.

"Heared tell it's gonna commence to bleeding," said Mr. Hanes. "You heared that?"
"How's that?" said Mr. Flemming.

"Moon. Seen in the paper where this man said before long you gone look up there and see this long bloody streak."

"If you ast me," said Mr. Flemming, "I don't think nobody's ever been up on no moon."

"How come?"

"What I think is they just went off somewhar and set on a rock, made folks think they was up on the moon."

Fools, thought Mrs. McBee and went back to her weeding again. Suspicious. Just like all of them. Suspicious of anything new. Still, she was grateful for the voices. They took her mind off other things. Over the voices, though, she could hear the syncopated blows of the axes against the tree trunk. You wouldn't think a one-legged man had all that strength.

"Talk about 'Our Father Which art in Heaven,'" said Mr. Hanes. "Where's He at then? Them oysternauts didn't see nothin.' Wham of the axes. "Nothin but rock and holes."

"Psalm 139," said T. J. Flemming. "...If I make my bed in hell, thou art ther. If I taken the wangs of the mornin and dwelt in the uddermost parts of the
Even shall His hands lead me, and Thy right hand shall holt me... It don't say you has to see nothin."

Wham. A chip from the tree fell into the rose bed. Mrs. McBea moved further along the hedge. She moved as quietly as possible. She didn't want them to know she was there. Earlier, when she had been in her black mood, she might have felt inclined to show herself, enter into their conversation.

"Trees is like folks," said Mr. Hanes. "Dies from the head down."

"Don't always," said Mr. Flemming. "Some of em starts off at the center."

"Old trees I'm talking bout," said Mr. Hanes. "Old men. They gets to gettin' funny in the head. That's whar they commence to dryin' at. Thangs up thar commence to dryin' up."

"Watch out this now for the heart wood," said Mr. Flemming. "Dont wanna bust it up."

"Mimosa wood aint no good for nothin. Some thangs just aint good for nothin a-tall."

Including you, thought Mrs. McBea, though the object for the thought was directed at Mr. Flemming,
not Mr. Hanes. Mr. Hanes, as far as she knew, was a
good man. Simple, of course. But a good man. She
would take a hundred Haneses to one Flemming any day.
The good country sort. That kind was getting harder
and harder to come by. All leaving the country to live
in the towns. Buying television sets, and before long
all their children would be talking just like the people
on television. The whole world would probably start
sounding like one big television commercial.

"Communists, that's what's probably settin up
thar on the moon," said Mr. Hanes.

Wham. Wham. The axes.

"That aint the onliest place they settin," said Mr.
Flemming darkly.

"How's that?"

"Sometimes they can be settin right next door to
you."

Mrs. McBee's eyes widened and all at once she felt
overheated. She had a good mind to stand up and give
that Flemming a piece of her mind. Spreading more lies,
saying anything he could think of. Ruin. That was all
he had on his mind. Ruin.

"You ever heared tell of them Black Muslims?"
asked Mr. Hanes.
"Aint everbody?"

"Met a man in town yesterday, claim he come from over in Alabama somewheres, said--said them Black Muslims has bought up 2,000 acres land over there, said one of 'em told him they was gone buy up 8,000 more acres fore the year's through. What you spose they up to?"

"Wanta buy up the whole South," said Mr. Flemming. "That's what they're after, make like it's Africar."

"Man said they bought up this here land right next to a church and a cemetery, white church, said they was willin to move the cemetery clear crosst the highway. You believe that?"

A squirt of tobacco juice shot over the hedge and barely missed Mrs. McBee's hand.

"I'll tell you one thang. They better not commence to tamperin with no daid bodies. I'll tell you that right off."

"Say they paid cash, got plenty more where that come from. Where you spose they git it at?"

"Don't nobody know," said Mr. Flemming. "But I'll tell you something else. Man kind better stay up thar where they was borned at. We don't want no such as that down here."
"Say they don't believe in Gawd or nothin'," said Mr. Hanes. "Worships some king or somethin' over in Africar."

"We don't want no such as that runnin' loose down here."

Mrs. McBee scowled at the three feet. She didn't know whether the two knew what they were talking about or not. She had heard something about some Negroes from up North who had bought land around near Wellbornville, Georgia, and there were rumors that somebody had sold some land northeast of Ashton.

But next to a church? She pictured the small country church in Alabama with the adjoining cemetery. Why, it might even happen here, to any of the little country churches around. Picturing, she had one of her visions: She saw hundreds of black hands digging in the red earth, then one by one carrying caskets across the hot highway as the grim congregation of men and women watched on in bitter silence.

It might even happen right on this very ground. And she saw herself standing by, helpless, as John Bedford, Senior was being carried across the highway to a parched piece of ground where there wasn't even
a tree. Devils. She shook her fist at them. But then in the grim parade she saw John Bedford, Junior, a sweet smile on his face, as he carefully aided in the transfer of his father.

The sound of a buzz saw and a falling limb interrupted the vision.

"Looka thar. This here thang was rotten clear through," said Mr. Hanes. "Like I said, dyin from the heid down."

"Never has been no count," said Mr. Flemming. "Wonder how come it was still tryin to bloom?"

"They'll do that. Like everthang else, try to keep on bloomin even with rotted-out insides. I known plenty folks like that. Don't wanna give up. Wanta keep on bloomin."

"Yessir," said Mr. Hanes. "They say them Black Muslims'll buy up any land anybody wants to sell. Where they come from, niggers like that?"

"Up yonder," said Mr. Flemming. "They got everthang up there -- Eye-talien gangsters, communists and niggers screamin ever kind of filth you can think of."

"Wonder how come folks put up with such as that?"
"Gone away from Gawd, that's how come. Don't nobody up thataway believe in Gawd no more."

"I heared a man on the radio one day last week, said thangs was in sucha mess Gawd was gone blow up the whole world."

"He aint pleased, I kin tell you that right off."

"Naw, sir, He aint pleased," echoed Mr. Hanes.

"And I'll tell ya sumpin else -- aint nobody gone kitch T. J. Flemming living next door to no niggers."

Mr. Hanes let out a cackle. "I spect you won't be findin nobody out this here way sellin land to nobody like that -- foreigners and such as that."

"I know somebody's son what will, soon's his old lady pops off."

That did it. Mrs. McBee stood straight up, her face purple. "Mr. Flemming!" She scowled over the hedge.

The two men were standing back from the tree tugging at a rope wrapped around the trunk. Both pair of eyes looked back at her startled. She saw Mr. Flemming try to speak. But before he could say anything she heard the cracking. It sounded as if
the whole countryside were cracking. She jumped back, and the tree thundered to the ground, crashing through the hedge.

She stood transfixed, her eyes fastened in a blind stare. It was as if a friend had suddenly been stricken, lying in the split hedge with the look of wild astonishment still on his face. And then it came to her: it might have been she lying there. She could have been killed. The tree could have struck her and instantly killed her. Immediately she saw the headlines in the newspaper:

PROMINENT WOMAN FATALLY WOUNDED BY ROTTEN TREE

Her knees weakened and the three stood regarding each other in fear and wonder.

When she returned to the house she was still clutching a trailing blue morning-glory vine in her clenched fist. She stared at it as if it were something left over from a past life. Gradually she relaxed her fingers and the vine fell to the kitchen floor. She stood looking at the wilting leaves, and then it seemed she heard the crashing of the tree once more, smelled the odor of freshly cut wood and
a voice calling: "Look out. Look out. Mizz Tish...ahhhh...."

A shiver went through her body. "John Bedford! John Bedford!" she began to call in a half-sobbing voice. But there was no answer; no answer anywhere. She held on to the kitchen table. "I was nearly killed. I was nearly killed," she said as if somebody were there. Only the dripping faucet at the sink made a response. She heard the emptiness of the house, a vague creaking upstairs, the ticking of the clock in the living room.

"Now just get a hold of yourself," she murmured. "Just take hold here now."

She went straight to the living room and sat bolt upright on the settee. Her eyes were wide as she glanced about the room, conscious now of the fluttering of her heart and a slight difficulty in swallowing. She desperately wished John Bedford were here. John Bedford or anybody for that matter. She thought once of calling Mrs. Flemming. But by now she would have heard, and if she had any sympathy, any sympathy at all, she would be here, asking what she could do, if she were all right. Nobody cared that she was almost killed. That was the truth of the matter.

"Get busy," some interior voice said to her. But
with what? She supposed she could begin getting dinner together, even though eating was the furthest thing from her mind. If she knew John Bedford would be here she wouldn't mind so much. Unthinking. Just like all young people. The least John Bedford could do was let her know when he was coming back. He didn't have to tell her where he was going. But coming back was another thing entirely.

"We live on a schedule in this house," she had informed him time and time again. She might as well have said it to a wall.

Then she thought of the phonograph record. "Why, of course," she muttered and instantly rose from the settee. She went into the back room and knelt beside the cabinet below the bookcases. The records were stacked one on top of the other. For years she had been meaning to label them, make some order. She could never find what she wanted. John Bedford never put records back in their jackets, and the empty jackets were piled in with the records, one on top of another.

All of John Bedford, Senior's records were still there, too: Bach, Brahms, Mozart. Wide heavy records that played only on one side. In all the years she
herself had bought only one record. That was when John Bedford, Senior was living, and she had played it and played it until one day John Bedford, Junior had announced he was going to leave the house if he heard that "drivel" one more time.

It was not drivel. Not as far as she was concerned. The record had brought her through many a bad time, lonesome times and those other times when she didn't know where the next dollar was coming from. She stacked all of John Bedford, Senior's heavy records on the small sofa beside the bookcases and one by one went through the others. Her record was a small one with a chip on the outer edge. She found it, as she had been telling herself she would, on the bottom of the stack.

She tenderly took it up and wiped it on the edge of her smock. Then she took it over to the victrola, an elaborately carved cabinet-style player that John Bedford, Senior had bought only a year before he died. As far as she could tell it sounded just as good now as it had then. John Bedford, Junior had asked her to get a new needle for it only last year.

She placed the record and quickly went over to sit in the rocker -- waiting for the tenor's voice.
Jan Pearce, with his soulful notes that went straight through her. Now. She moved her head slightly to the left and listened in almost disbelief as the man seemed to be singing just for her. If was as if he were a friend, knew all her difficulties and now was giving his all--for her. It was so moving that she lifted her eyes and shook her head in wonderment.

Toward the last she silently mouthed the words along with the record:

...So...-
Hold your head up high Until you fly-inv
The Blue Bird of Happ-i-ness..."

The record ended, and she got straight up and played it again. She played it three times, and when it was all over her nerves were eased and she sat gazing softly at the portrait of her mother, a delicious sadness warming her body. For she had never found the Blue Bird. But her head was high. She was inspired by her own image.

Tenderly she picked up the record and with both hands replaced it in the cabinet with the others. On top. Then she went back to the living room and sat on the settee once more. She sat for almost an hour,
thinking of nothing in particular. She was listening mostly, listening for the sound of the station wagon. When the clock chimed six-thirty she knew John Bedford was not coming and she rose and went into the kitchen. She poured herself a glass of milk and set out two crackers on a plate.

When she finished the crackers she turned out the lights downstairs, all except the one in the hall, and made her way up the stairway, humming as she went. She pretended she was some lofty queen, ruling in loneliness but with an iron will. History would know her greatness. A lonely, great woman, never bending, never giving in. In her heart of hearts she knew it was true, and she slept easily.

At two-thirty she was awakened by the sound of voices and distant laughter outside. She started to turn on the bed lamp. But instead she lay there, her eyes wide. Her window was open and she went to it standing away from it slightly. The moon was still bright, and the top of the greenhouse shone like tinsel. Even the leaves of the oaks glistened over their thick black trunks.
There was only silence as she looked, and she wondered if she had been dreaming. But then came the faint sound of a giggle and she jutted her head further toward the screen. The sound came from near the stile. Or at least she thought it had. Silence again. But she had distinctly heard something. The giggle had been a girl's, high and teasing.

Then she saw them. John Bedford and... She left the window, took up her wrap, but one sleeve was turned inside out and she heard a rip as she plunged her arm into it.

She didn't remember going down the stairs. All her blood seemed to be in her head as she stood there in the kitchen, her arms crossed and her lips moving as she silently repeated John Bedford's name over and over.

The key turned in the back door and John Bedford stood there, his face flushed and his hound's eyes wide. "What is all this?" he said and the two regarded each other, all the while John Bedford's eyes changing from astonishment into realization, into contempt. And at last resignation.

"What were you doing out there with that girl?"
asked Mrs. McBee, not caring about the contempt nor even the resignation. There was a tightening in her chest and the rage was in her head.

John Bedford walked past her, his mouth clamped shut.

"You come back here," shouted Mrs. McBee, coming after him. "Now you tell me right this minute what you were doing out there with that Flemming trash!" She started to take hold of his arm.

John Bedford turned to her in fury, and then as if something in the other woman's face struck him he seemed to go suddenly limp and in a much quieter voice said: "I was coming home; that is, if you want to call it a home."

"How long has this been going on?"

"How long has what been going on?"

"You and that — Bertha Mae!"

"Oh, for godsakes." He spat out the words. "I'm going to leave this place. If it kills me."

"You didn't answer my question."

He was gazing at the twisted brown curlers in her hair, and, seeing the gaze, Mrs. McBee slowly put her hand to one of the curlers. "Well?" She didn't care how she looked.
"The girl wanted a ride home. I gave her a ride home. Are you going to have a stroke over that?"
"Drinking. You've been drinking." And then an image of the Last Chance came to her. She saw him drunk and Bertha Mae Flemming stomping toward him with her sullen trashy eyes. "Have you been at that place?"
"Uh huh," he said.
"That's disgusting, John Bedford." She tugged at her wrap which had slipped off one shoulder. "Sometimes I think you're doing all this on purpose."
"What?"
"Trying to..." Something caught in her throat.
"Trying to kill me." The words were frightening in the unreal light of night. "But don't you mind. Don't you mind. Your future father-in-law nearly did that for you this afternoon."
"Jeeees-sus." The word came out like a hiss.
"I said I was nearly killed this afternoon."
"You're bearing up beautifully, I see."
"It wouldn't concern you, but your future father-in-law nearly killed me with a tree."

John Bedford started toward the dining room door, then spun completely around. "What is this father-in-
law thing? Try to do somebody a simple favor and suddenly you've got a father-in-law. You're crazy, woman."

"You weren't brought up to wallow with Negroes and white trash." Her voice was shaking. "And let me tell you something else. Those Flemmings think you're a communist and the Black Muslims are going to buy up all the land around here — and something else -- You had that Negro girl here and everybody knew it and when you don't have any bread to eat it'll be that very girl that took it out of your mouth because she wanted to and..."

He was gone, through the dining room door like a black cloud. She stood there, still muttering to herself. "They'll ruin us. Ruin us. And all because of..." All at once she became conscious of the weakness in her legs. She started to go after him, though more from help now than anger. She was dizzy and the pounding in her head was so fast she felt as if something might explode there.

She took hold of the kitchen table and eased herself into the chair. With her right hand she slowly drew her fingers across her forehead. Then, as if the gesture were not enough, she buried her face in her hands. She
sat that way for sometime. Then slowly she lifted her head.

"Lord," she murmured. "If you're up there. If you're up there at all, now's the time to come down. Save us, Lord. Save us from..." She started to say the word "trash", but something held her back. It was not seemly. So she said "ourselves" instead.