Chapter Fourteen

The hammering began at seven o'clock. At first Mrs. McBee thought it was her head. She had gone to bed with the headache and it was her last thought before she finally went to sleep. Prior to that she had tossed and turned, going over and over the scene with John Bedford. Bits and snatches of conversation kept coming back to her, mostly her own.

"That told him. That told him," she cheered herself on. But then she remembered something he had said, the
way he had said it, and the outrage smoldered inside her, and she lay fuming in the darkness, every nerve taut. It was five in the morning before she finally slept.

And now this. She lay in bed listening to the sound of the hammering. It sounded like a hundred hammers all at once, as if they were there solely for her, rudely conniving just to disturb her. The noise would break off, then begin again louder than before. She tried to judge the distance. It was on the Flemming's property. But just how far?

Then she bolted out of bed. She went to the window and, cupping her hands against it, struck her nose on the pane. Angrily she pushed up the window and looked about for her glasses. She took them up from the bedside table and putting them on stared out the screen. The oak tree partially cut off her view but she saw enough to go instantly into action.

She didn't bother with breakfast. Instead she snatched up a jar of pickled tomatoes from the cupboard shelf, glanced once in the hall mirror, patted her hair, and slammed out the back screen door. Outside, she paused momentarily. Now, get yourself together, she
said to herself. Calm down. She took one deep breath and carrying the pickled tomatoes before her walked straight toward the Flemming's house.

Once over the stile she paused again. In back of the house near the chicken yard Buster, Junior, Mr. Hanes and a dark-haired man she had never seen before were kneeling down hammering on joists ready for floor boards. Stacks of raw green lumber were piled at the side.

Satisfied, she took the path to the front of the house. The grass needed cutting and the ragged privet bushes needed trimming. It was like them to be putting up something new when they wouldn't even take care of what they already had. She sniffed at the large silver ball on the side of the yard. It was blinding in the hot sun.

In front of the house she stepped over an abandoned automobile tire and noted the child's red wagon half-hanging off the concrete porch. She cocked an ear for any sound from Mrs. Flemming. There was only the pounding of the hammers, three hammers at once which, when in action, sounded like the discharge of a single machine gun. They'll have that thing up by next week, she thought, and it'll be down before next year.
She made her way up to the porch, which glared back at her with blistered bright green paint. She paused before the screen door, taking note of the aluminum crane shining out from it. Last summer when she had ordered a new screen for her own back door that was what the store had sent.

"Take it right back," she had told the salesman.

"I want just a plain screen."

"That's the most popular thing going," the salesman had argued. "That's all you see nowadays."

"Not on my house," she had said. "It's the ugliest thing I ever saw and twice as expensive."

You might have known the Flemmings would have one. Inside the house she could hear the sound of a radio further back:

"Mack's! Mack's! Mack's! Come to Mack's. The juiciest hamburger this side of heaven!" shouted an excited announcer. Then gospel music followed, accompanied by Mrs. Flemming's voice, loud and one note off:

"...Washed in the Blood of the Lamb I say, Washed, Brother, in the Blood of the..."

Mrs. McBee poked the door bell with a fierce finger. The singing ceased, the radio was hushed. Silence.
When no one came to the door she rang again.

"Go get that, Bertha Mae," came Mrs. Flemming's loud voice. "I can't do everthang round here."

"Who is it?" came Bertha Mae's voice.

"How'm I supposed to know? I aint got eyes in the back of my haid."

The door cracked and a head full of pink curlers peeked out.

"Good morning, Bertha Mae," said Mrs. McBee solemnly. Instantly she wished for John Bedford. For just one second, just one, she wished he could get a glimpse of that.

The girl opened the door a crack further, but far enough for Mrs. McBee to see the black kimono. She frowned back at Mrs. McBee.

"Is your mother about?"

"I think she is."

You think, Mrs. McBee said to herself, regarding the curlers and sultry eyes. They were T. J. Flemming's eyes except they were hazel.

"Would you tell your mother I have something for her, please?"

Bertha Mae eyed the jar of tomatoes and vanished.
inside the house, leaving the door still cracked.

Never heard of manners, never heard of anything decent, fumed Mrs. McBee and turned from the door. Her eyes caught a glimpse of the silver ball once more, momentarily blinding her.

The door flung wide open. "Well, good mornin! Come in, come on in!"

Mrs. McBee could barely make out the outline of Mrs. Flemming so unfocused were her eyes by the glare of the silver ball. But at least Mrs. Flemming knew how to welcome somebody, which was just further proof of what she had always said: Mrs. Flemming was not completely trash.

"I brought you over these," said Mrs. McBee, holding out the jar of tomatoes. "I pickled them last week, thought you might like some."


Bertha Mae came into the room clutching the kimono.
at her neck. This time she had the addition of an orange scarf tied around her head. The girl was pretty in a barmaid ordinary sort of way. Even without make-up her skin was faultless, but there was something about the eyes and the pouting mouth that told other stories. She looked dumbly at the jar and began chewing the side of her mouth.

"Have you ever seen anything so nice?" shouted Mrs. Flemming.

"Uh uh," said the girl.

Mrs. Flemming stepped back, examining the girl.

"You sure don't look fit to be seeing no company."

It was a teasing remark but the look in Mrs. Flemming's eyes was decidedly pride. She turned to Mrs. McBee.

"Bertha Mae was out galavantin last night."

The girl's face grew beet-red and she began shaking her head and clucking her tongue as if to some unheard music, all the while rolling her eyes upward.

Mrs. Flemming laughed loudly. "Don't want us to know she got a boy friend. Who's your boy friend, Bertha Mae?"

Mrs. McBee sat in the chair, picked up a large glass ashtray from the end table and moved it exactly
one inch. Boy friend, indeed.

"Well, looka here," said Mrs. Flemming, clasping her hands together. "Lemme git you something. Want some ice tea? Bertha Mae, go git Mizz McBee a drank of ice tea."

"No, no thank you," said Mrs. McBee.

Bertha Mae stood gazing at Mrs. McBee, her lower lip hung open as if she were inspecting some bizarre exhibit that had been brought into her midst.

"Want some peppers?" shouted Mrs. Flemming.

"T. J. put out some the prettiest peppers you ever seen. Lemme go git you some them thangs."

Mrs. McBee started to protest.

"Naw, now, you just set there. Won't take me no while." She started toward the kitchen. "You just visit there with Bertha Mae while I pick you some."

Visit with Bertha Mae, Mrs. McBee repeated to herself. Who could visit with that?

The girl sat humped over in the opposite green chair, her hand still clutching the kimono at her throat.

Mrs. McBee took a deep breath. "Well, Bertha Mae,
what have you been up to this summer?" As if I don't know, she thought.

The girl's half-closed eyes gazed past Mrs. McBee, out the window. "Nothin. Hadn't been nothin to do."

"Why, I should think a young girl like you would have a summer's full of things to do."

"Wanted to go to secretarial school."

"And you didn't?"

"It was too late when I signed up."

"That's too bad," said Mrs. McBee.

"Uh huh." The girl started chewing on the inside of her lip again.

"Your father seems to be doing a good bit of building this summer," said Mrs. McBee casually. "Didn't I notice something new going up when I came by?"

"Always buildin something," muttered the girl and suddenly moved in the chair, a quick impatient movement like the flop of a shiny black seal. Mrs. McBee narrowed her eyes. "What are they building now?" Her voice was low, and her narrowed gaze was trained on the girl.

"Somethin." The girl shrugged her shoulders.
"Always buildin somethin." She began to gaze morosely out the window again.

There was no point in pursuing the subject. "Where is Lojean this morning? And the baby?"

"Somewhere." 

Mrs. McBee listened for some sign of Mrs. Flemming. The girl, the morose staring, her obvious boredom was irritating. The only reason she had come in the first place was to find out about the building, and the girl had been no help. If John Bedford was interested in that, then he did need a mind doctor. The girl was simple. A simple-minded nitwit. Just like all of them.

"Buster, Junior's goin to college," said Bertha Mae.

"Nights."

That the girl had actually taken the initiative in the conversation was so amazing Mrs. McBee gave a little cough. "Yes, your father told me. Very admirable."

"Uh huh," said the girl and stared down at the floor. "He's smart."

"Would you like to go to college?"

"I kin if I want to, but I don't want to."

"Oh?"
"Lojean's got this friend. Lavene Buzbee? She went to secretarial school. Now she's got this beauty biness, where people reduce to lose weight and they fix your hair right and such as that?" She wet her lips and looked straight at Mrs. McBee for the first time. "It's in town. You ever been there?"

"No, I don't believe I have."

"It's on the radio all the time." She started wagging her head and clucking her tongue again, her eyes gazing upward. The gesture reminded Mrs. McBee of The Last Chance. The girl probably went there often.

"Is that what you would like to do then? Go into the beauty business?"

"If I had my own biness. Lavene's got this new convertible car and this house with white rugs and colyums on the front. She said she wanted me to help her out at the school some, but Mama won't let me."

"Why would your mother object to that?"

"She don't like them black tights you has to wear. You seen 'em?"

"Nooooo," said Mrs. McBee.

"They're cute."

"Well, your mother probably knows best."
Mrs. McBee gazed toward the kitchen. Where was Mrs. Flemming? She had more to do at home than just...

"John Bedford writes thangs, don't he?"


"He told me about it." She began shaking her head again.

"I see," said Mrs. McBee coldly. "And do you see John Bedford often?"

"Sometimes I see him around."

Trying to be innocent, observed Mrs. McBee.

"I wouldn't want to stay in no house doin nothin but writing thangs."

Mrs. McBee felt the color rise to her face. She started to tell her she knew everything, that she had seen them last night and that as far as she was concerned it was better to stay in a house writing than living the life of a .

"Looka here," shouted Mrs. Flemming from the kitchen. She came into the living room, flushed and breathless.

"Ever seen a pepper big as this here? Weights four pound." She was beaming from ear to ear. "It's some kinda freak."
Mrs. McBee got up from the sofa. The large green pepper hung from Mrs. Flemming's fingers.

"Good Gawd," said the girl.

Mrs. Flemming shot a scowl at the girl. "Hush up thet'er." Then she beamed back at the pepper. "Buster, Junior said I oughta take it into the newspaper. They takes pitchers of such as this."

"Well, that is something," said Mrs. McBee. She could feel the heat in her face. The big pepper arriving just when she was ready to give Bertha Mae a piece of her mind had left her with a suspended feeling.

"Here, you take it," said Mrs. Flemming. "You kin have it for supper."

"Why, thank you," said Mrs. McBee, taking it and letting it dangle from her fingertips. "That is very kind of you."

"Uh huh," said Mrs. Flemming. "T. J. he got a green ever-thang, that man could even make chicken shit grow if he'd put half a mind to it."

Mrs. McBee looked away. But she knew the woman had meant nothing vulgar. Some expressions were as everyday to her kind as "get up", though she had never fully accustomed herself to it.
Mrs. Flemming, her arms folded, followed Mrs. Mcabee out onto the porch. "Gone be a scorcher, aint it?" she said, looking up at the sun that shone down on them like an angry boil through a thin haze of cloud.

The banging of a hammer sounded from out back.

"I see you're building something else?" said Mrs. Mcbee as casually as she could.

"Yes, lawdy."

"What is it?" asked Mrs. Mcbee, staring straight into the woman's fox eyes.

"Claim they's makin theyselves a greenhouse."

"I see," said Mrs. Mcbee, her voice completely controlled. "And when will it be finished?"

"Claim they'll be in biness next month."

"In business," repeated Mrs. Mcbee.

"That's what they claim." The eyes twinkled and the large right foot began to tap.

"I see," said Mrs. Mcbee. "Well, good day, then, Mrs. Flemming."

The large green pepper was still dangling from Mrs. Mcbee's fingertips when she first spied the man. She had crossed over the stile and was headed straight
for John Bedford's room to tell him what was happening. We're ruined. We're going to starve to death, she kept muttering to herself. She saw the car first, a cream-colored Plymouth, parked in the drive near the sourwood tree. The man, neatly-dressed, possibly in his middle forties, was standing by the car, writing something on a piece of paper. A salesman, Mrs. McBee thought. Well, she didn't have any time for any salesman. She would get rid of him with one word: No.

He kept smiling at her as she approached. Idiot, she thought. But as she grew closer she decided he was not a salesman. He didn't have the cockiness most of them had. There was something Baptist about his face, and the smile was a preacher's smile.

"Mrs. McBee?" he asked softly and then glanced at the paper in his hand. "Letitia Graham McBee?"

"Yes?"

"I'm Philip Cunningham." He sounded like a Baptist minister, the schooled kind. When he handed her a card she realized the big pepper was still dangling from her finger tips. She felt foolish.
"My neighbor gave me this," she said, resting the pepper on the ground. She did not look at the card. The man was not a gangster. But you never could tell. Men that talked like ministers could be anybody nowadays. She glanced up in the direction of John Bedford's room. He was up there; the light over his typewriter was on.

"I've been looking over your grounds here." He smiled his gentle smile again. "I hope you don't mind."

Mrs. McBee said nothing. She did mind. The smile disappeared. "I understand you would like to sell your land out here."

Mrs. McBee stepped back. "Who in the world ever told you something like that?" She glared up at him. "Oh, these things come to us."

"Well, if it came from over there," she pointed a direct finger straight at the Flemming's house, "you might as well go back where you came from right now."

The man looked dully at the Flemming's property and then at the piece of paper in his hand. "I have here that a Letitia Graham McBee is offering two acres of land for sale. It includes one acre of pine timber, another acre with a greenhouse, tool shed and a caretaker's house."
"There is no caretaker's house here."

"You are Letitia Graham McBee?"

"Yes, I am."

The man shifted his weight. "Well, you see, Mrs. McBee. Your property joins the property..." he pointed toward the back of the house, "belonging to Elias and Annie T. Caruthers."

"That is correct. They have never made use of it."

"And further back there is additional property."

Mrs. McBee nodded. "That belongs to some of my colored friends." She looked fiercely into his eyes.

"Now my company, Mrs. McBee, the Progress Land Company, is interested in this land because..."

"The Caruthers family will never sell those ten acres. I've been interested in..."

"We have talked to the Caruthers family," said Mr. Cunningham. The gentleness had left his face.

"And since we understood you were interested in selling we would like to include what you have here in our operations."

"What operations?"

"I'm not at liberty to say just now."

The smile tried to creep back on his face.
"Liberty or not. You can't have this land, and I don't know who has been spreading rumors but I'll tell you one thing -- not even the United States Government.... Are you from the Government?"

"No." He looked at the card in her hand. "I represent the Progress Land Company."

"Well, you just go back and tell your Progress Company that Letitia Graham McBee has nothing to sell." She started to walk away but remembered the big pepper. She snatched it up. "No sell, Mr. Whateveryournameis."

"Perhaps when you hear our plans...."

She stalked toward the house, cradling the pepper in her arms. At the screen door she paused, looked down at the card again. Plans, she said to herself. Perhaps when you hear my plans. She started into the house, then it came to her, and she swirled around.

"Mister," she called. "You there! Man!"

He was getting in his car. She called again and he turned.

Inside her the rage was boiling like a spring. She tossed the big pepper aside and strode toward him, both her hands fistled. The gentle smile had reappeared. You can just wipe that off, she said to herself. I know
your type. Sneaking. I know...

She stood facing him, her feet firmly planted and both hands on her hips. "If there's one thing I don't like it's a sneak, Mr. Cottingham. And the second thing is a traitor! I want you to know I'm a loyal American. I wave my flag high, and if I catch you around here one more time I'll have you in jail."

The man tried to protest.

"Don't you raise your hand at me, sir."

"I wasn't --" The smile was a grin now.

"Only my son and I live here now, and he's as loyal an American as I am." She lifted her chin. "We don't care for people who don't believe in the church and want to ruin this country. You should be ashamed of yourself. Ashamed!"

The man shrugged his shoulders. "I give up." He got back into his car, shaking his head.

"Yes, you had better give up. And don't you come back here again."

The car sped away. "Don't you come back here again!" she called again, and then she felt her throat closing up, the corners of her lips trembling. Her eyes were blinded with tears. I'm too tired to fight
this alone, she thought, and she stood there barely able to see the car as it turned off onto the highway.

Somewhere, far, she heard the sound of distant hammering. She felt for the handkerchief in her pocket and wiped her eyes. "Too tired. Too tired," she murmured, and then straightening her shoulders glanced once up at John Bedford's room, took a deep breath, then on steady feet made her way into the house and up the stairs.

"John Bedford. John Bedford," she called at the closed door. She didn't wait for an answer but burst into his room.

He was sitting before the typewriter, his arms folded and his mouth lost in one pinched line.

"Now don't. I just can't take one more thing this day."

He glanced round at her and apparently seeing something in her face frowned. "What's the matter with you?"

"Black Muslims, that's what. They're going to carry your father's body across the highway and before you know it they'll be sitting right there where you're sitting this very minute." Her breath came in jerks.

"They don't believe in God or the United States Government
and they want to come down here and make another Africa out of...."

John Bedford turned around in his swivel chair and regarded her with half-closed empty eyes, his mouth fixed in a disgust as natural as breathing.

"Don't just sit there," she said. "Do something. And I'll tell you something else. It's all because of you. You brought that girl here and the Flemmings are building a greenhouse. There are five of them and just one of me. What are you going to do?"

"Apparently I'm going to sit here and listen to you. At least that's what it looks like."

Mrs. McBee plopped down on the bed. "I can't handle everything." She looked blackly at the closet door. "I guess I'll just have to go live in the garage."

"Christ, what is this? Now just calmly tell me what this is all about."

As best she could she tried to explain. When she had finished he sat gazing into space.

"You've been listening to that woman again," he said.

"What woman?"

"Mrs. Flemming."
"I have not been listening to Mrs. Flemming." She did not want to tell him who she had been listening to.

"What an irony," he said. "The Muslims believe in segregation, and so does everybody around here. Seems to me the county should organize a welcoming party, have white children tossing flowers in the street, give a real welcome." He gave a high scratching laugh as if he were enchanted.

Mrs. McBee glowered at him.

"What's wrong with the Muslims wanting to buy land anyway? Perfectly legitimate. They have an operation going further south; no sweat. Provides jobs; even the townspeople get along. Did the man say he was buying the land for the Muslims?"

"No, he didn't have to. That's the way they do: send somebody around who talks like a Methodist minister. He claimed the Caruthers had sold and also that nice colored family, the ones who ride on the bus with me on Sunday. I don't believe a word of it." She began rubbing a spot on her smock. "But that's not what's worrying me the most."

John Bedford yawned. "What is then?" He glanced back at his typewriter.
"The Flemmings. They've started their greenhouse."
She stared straight ahead as if she were seeing through
the wall of the room, through the house, over the hedge
where the hammering intermittently came and went. "I've
taught that woman everything she knows, introduced her
to all my customers. They're raking in money with
that junk they've got out there on the road and they've
spread rumors and now it's too late." She turned to
him. "We're going to starve, John Bedford," she said,
and she spoke the words so quietly that the ring of
truth sent a shiver through her body.

She had never said such a thing aloud, not when
she meant it. The room was quiet and something of her
own fear was written on the pale face she studied so
fiercely now.

"Why?" he asked.
"Why does anybody starve?"
John Bedford dampened his lips. "Haven't you got
anything? Saved anything?" he asked in a strange high
voice.

The thinness of his voice struck her first. She
had wanted, asked for assurance and all she got was
the unsure voice and the frown. Whatever it was she had
asked he was handing right back to her. If the ship was to sink she was the captain; he wanted no part of it.

"People think you're peculiar, John Bedford, and they're lumping me right in there with you. There aren't enough customers for two greenhouses, especially one right next to the other."

His eyes were wide. "You can't blame this on me now." He shook his head. "Oh, no."

"I don't know who else I can blame it on. You brought that girl here. They're all talking. Everybody. Nobody's going to want to buy from peculiar people."

"Look here now. I'm not building any greenhouse; I didn't go into town and say you wanted to sell your land. I didn't put up any antique shop." He leaned forward, his eyes glassy. "Haven't you got anything? All these years haven't you saved anything?"

She had no intention of telling him what she had. "There's social security," she said hollowly. And after a year, she thought, that would be all.

"Is that all?" He examined her face and then apparently satisfied he stood up, glanced out the window, then turned to her. "Then I think you'd better sell." He brushed his hair back with a quick nervous
hand. "I thought you'd saved something. My god, we've got to live."

She gazed at him, pale and agitated, and it was as if for the first time everything had come clear. "I've often thought it," she said aloud, "but I never knew it."

"Knew what?"

She said it calmly: "You're a coward, John Bedford. Is it because of the glasses?"

His face was crimson. "Who's a coward?"

She just sat there, shaking her head.

"I'm working, trying as hard as I know how. Do you think I enjoy this? Living here with you? Every day the same, no one to talk to, listening to all this crap? Working my ass off? Trying to help you. Do you think I enjoy it?" He spun around. "Answer me, do you think I enjoy this kind of life?"

She looked straight at him. "Yes," she said. Then, relieved of something, she started to get up off the bed but before she could he bolted past her and flinging open the door slammed it behind him.

She sat calmly, the fight drawn out of her; there was nothing that could reach her now.
She had been right in her ways. She had been just, fair; nothing could reach her. She rose from the bed, went over to the typewriter, picked up a sheet from the pile of yellow paper she had been noticing all the while they had been talking. She read:

Tonight we had another scene; something about me and the Flemming girl. Read through Kierkegaard practically all night and finally found what I wanted. Must use:

"It has happened frequently that an individual has collided with his contemporaries to the point where it became a catastrophe. But this had been spontaneous. The individual in question has actually had no idea of how far his contemporaries were from being able to understand him, to what extent they lacked the intermediate links, the premises.

This is the catastrophic collision of geniuses. (!!!)

The conscious arranger of catastrophe is altogether different — to be so clear that one can measure with the eyes that the distance must now be so great that it must become a catastrophic collision, consciously to design the whole thing. This consciousness, however, is really only the Christian consciousness, the really Christian concept of being sacrificed, a voluntary sacrifice."

Mrs. McBee replaced the paper. "Nobody's going to want to read that," she murmured and, sighing, left the room.