Chapter Sixteen

Willie did not come on Monday, and Mrs. McBee met the blow with idle resignation. After Friday night with the Flemmings nothing seemed to matter very much anyway. Besides, it was just about what she had expected; you could never really count on colored people. So now she knew what she had to do. First she had to spray the plants, then wet down the floors, making sure the walls were at least sprinkled. It was a job usually done by Mrs. Flemming, twice a day.
It was a simple enough procedure but to do it properly took time. The sprayers had to be thoroughly cleaned afterward and all the thermometers checked and re-checked. All just a matter of time. And time she did not have. Customers had to be dealt with, and weeks ago she had promised to arrange flowers for the Rotary Club "Ladies Night" banquet in town.

Time then was the real enemy. And energy. The lack of it. On Saturday, the morning after the night's encounter with the Flemmings, she had cast everything aside, called a taxi and gone in to see Dr. Wilson. She had put off the ordeal all summer, but after the sleepless night and the resulting headache she took up her coat and without further preparation just went.

The visit had been more than an ordeal since she had no appointment and Dr. Wilson saw no patients on Saturday afternoons. Finally she was permitted to be seen but only after the doctor had first met his regular appointments. She sat until one o'clock, four hours, speaking to no one, just going over and over what had happened the night before.

Dr. Wilson said her blood pressure was high, "way up theah." He prescribed pills and admonished her for
not taking the pills he had previously given. He wanted to see her again in two weeks.

She was sure it was the pills that had brought on the fatigue. Dr. Wilson had warned her of this. But she had half-counted on Willie's being there and when she wasn't it meant rearranging the entire day. She needed someone at the greenhouse while she was in town. In a moment's forgetfulness she thought of asking John Bedford. But then, remembering, the odd hollowness came to her chest again and she shook her head nervously as if the very gesture would not allow her to think.

Just as well to be busy, she told herself. Just as well Willie had not come. Work was life's only cure.

When she got to the YMCA where the "Ladies Night" was to be held she found the place cold as stone and in the kitchen where she was to make the flower arrangements there was a damaged water spout. She spent most of the afternoon trying to locate the custodian and the other half waiting for a plumber. She made the table arrangements too hastily and in the waiting the smilax had dried more than she would have liked. But
she didn't care. She had skipped lunch and her head was pounding.

She wanted to feel her best for tonight. That was when she planned to make her announcement to John Bedford. But before she did that there was something else she wanted to do: When she got home she did not go directly to the house. Instead she left the dirt road and made her way to the small clearing among the pines. There she stared straight down on John Bedford, Senior's grave.

John Bedford, Senior had owned a plot in town, at the Ashton Cemetery. He had wanted to be buried there with the rest of the McBees. But Mrs. McBee felt he hadn't thoroughly thought that out and she buried him in the private cemetery among her own family instead.

She had had an Episcopal funeral, even though he was a Presbyterian (when he went). But funerals were mainly for the living, and she didn't want any Presbyterian minister standing up there giving any man-made eulogy over her husband, especially since the minister was new and didn't know John Bedford, Senior anyway. Whatever the man was likely to say would have to be made up.
Looking down at the grave now she remembered that grey April day. She had sat coldly through the service. Afterward she believed she was more in shock than anything else. But at the graveside she was suddenly seized by the pitiableness of his days. John Bedford, Senior had wanted something. He had never got it. He had wanted to be rich. Once he had mused aloud: "And they'll call it the 'J. B. McBee Enterprises'!" He had smiled a sly smile as he dreamed of tax dodges, setting up a corporation for humanitarian purposes, helping the artists of the world, the writers, the struggling musicians. And for it all he would be eternally blessed.

He died a near pauper and his legacy was a soured dream.

Looking down at the headstone all that came back to Mrs. McBee in its tattered truth. John Bedford, Junior was his father's son all right. With all his talk the one thing the boy wanted, too, was money. She had always known it, and it was as if all his resentment went solely against her just because she had not given it to him.

She had seen the look that came over his face when she mentioned someone in town, one of his contemporaries who had done well, made money. It was
the same look she had seen on his father's face. John Bedford, Junior hated being poor. He liked cars, big cars, and he always tried to pass them on the highway, blowing his horn loudly like a stringent curse. But he forced the other life, the life of the recluse pushed into himself by his own "genius."

Mrs. McBee was as sure of all that as Job. Both of them, John Bedford, Senior and Junior, had wanted to be admired, sought after, envied. And when they were not they absented themselves, took in the strays of the world simply because they offered those things, meanwhile secretly cursing the grander world for the sole sin of being left out.

"And you let me do all the work!" she said bitterly to the silent grave. "I couldn't be mother and father, too."

Dreamers! She closed the gate to the fence. When she got to the house she would take a warm bath, fix herself a cup of tea and then she would be able to make her announcement. All last night she had thought of telling John Bedford he must leave the house, that she could not put up with such low ways, that she had worked all her life for him and now he would have to take whatever life gave. Without her.
Tonight, after a rest, she felt she might be ready to tell him. She walked slowly up the road. There was a feel of autumn as she walked, and in the distance she could see the scarlet leaves of the sourwood tree already turned. Another autumn, she was thinking. Another autumn.

But then she saw the officers, and she stopped dead in her tracks. A swarm of uniformed sheriff's deputies were milling about the Flemming's house and one was standing on her side near the portico like a lost member of the flock.

"They've done it," she muttered aloud. They've come to get John Bedford. She felt her legs go weak and she hugged her large pocketbook to her. Then she began to walk at a clipped pace. If anybody thinks they can come and take my son away they've got another think coming!

As she approached she saw the man appeared to be looking for something. A short, red-faced man with a fat face and a stub of a nose, he kept looking downward, wandering in circles as if he were looking for some lost object. He must have heard her approach because he glanced up and then turned, waiting.

"What is the trouble here, officer?" she asked
cautiously, noting his badge flickering in the waning sunset and the pistol heavy as it hung from his side. He had slanted blue eyes and his nose was so small it might have been deformed. But the gun, the badge and the heavy belt seemed to make him look weightier, more substantial.

Nothing but a bully, she thought. Probably doesn't think I'm anybody. But he would know soon enough. If he tried to be smart all she had to do was call John Crutchfield. John Crutchfield was a gentleman. He had done all her father's legal work. John Crutchfield would handle whatever was necessary.

The man surprisingly smiled at her and tipped his hat. "Everthang's gone be all right, ma'm. Just lookin for a limb." He glanced toward the Flemming's house and shook his head sorrowfully.

"A limb?" Mrs. McBee immediately thought of the mimosa tree Mr. Flemming and the Hanes man had cut down. But she didn't see what that had to do with anything.

"Whoever done it strewed the po feller's limbs and parts all over everwhere." He gave his head a jerk. "I been a deputy now on to fifteen year and I aint never saw nothin like this here."
Mrs. McBee stared at him open-mouthed. "What are you talking about?"

"You aint heared?"

Mrs. McBee did not take her eyes from him. "I haven't been here this afternoon."

"Some insane person -- that's all I can figger -- done axed up that feller over there. Done took his limbs and his parts and strewed 'em ever whichaway."

Mrs. McBee put her hand to her mouth.

"Yes'm. Some insane..."

Mrs. McBee gasped. "Mr. Flemming?"

"His wife she's hi-sterical. Can't blame her none." He shook his head. "I been a depity now on..."

Mrs. McBee tried to swallow. She put her hand to her throat. She stood there staring into the man's face, her heart pounding, trying to swallow. Then she was running. "John Bedford! John Bedford!" She remembered going up the steps to the house, tugging at the front door. Then the door appeared to sway, grow larger and then smaller. Her head hit with a blow, and somewhere there was the smell of sulphur..."

When she came to she was lying on the settee in the parlor. John Bedford and the officer were sitting
in two straight chairs regarding her glumly.

Their faces gradually came plainer. Why was John Bedford so pale? He looked almost frightened. And the deputy? With a trembling hand she touched her skirt to see if it was adjusted.

John Bedford was chewing on the nail of his thumb, and his hound's eyes did not move from her face. She tried to sit up, but the back of her head throbbed with pain. She lay back down.

"You guess I better call a doctor, Mama?" asked John Bedford.

His voice sounded far away. "I must have fainted," she murmured.

She turned to the faces. John Bedford was still chewing on his thumb nail.

"I've never fainted before in my life."

"Her color's coming back," said the deputy.

"How did I get here?" she asked.

"We toted you," said the deputy.

Mrs. McBee eyed the round face. He looked like a bull frog sitting there. The idea of being carried by someone like that. She felt for her skirt again.

"Well, I declare," she said.
"You guess I better call a doctor, Mama?" asked John Bedford again.

Men, she thought. Asking me what to do. Just sitting there. Never knew what to do. She needed a woman.

"Just better lie still there for a spell, ma'am," said the deputy. "Your son here can call a doctor if you want him."

"I don't need a doctor," she said. "I didn't have any lunch today. That's probably what caused it."

"I oughtta not told you like I done," said the officer. "I was sure you'd heared."

And then she remembered. Slowly she trained her eyes on John Bedford.

"I wouldn'a just come up on you with no news like that had I knowed," said the deputy.

Mrs. McBee closed her eyes, then opened them, not removing her gaze from John Bedford. "Who did that terrible thing, officer?"

"Some in-sane person's all I can figger. Musta been."

John Bedford was sitting humped over in the chair, his eyes focused on something in the corner of the room.
Mrs. McBee narrowed her eyes. She was having a vision: the courtroom, newspaper headlines, a dark cell, bars and at last John Bedford being led away, taken from her. "Was it because of the spectacles, son?" she was calling pitifully. "Was it because we were poor?"

"I think she's gone be all right now," the deputy said. "Color's good." He stood up, scraping back his chair. "For a while there, lady, I thought you was past gwine." He pressed his cap to his chest as if an imaginary flag were passing by. "Guess I better be gittin' back outside now."

"Thank you, officer," mumbled John Bedford.

"Take kire your mother there now, boy."

Mrs. McBee still did not take her eyes off John Bedford. She heard the officer leave the house. "Do you think I ought to call Dr. Wilson?" asked John Bedford.

Mrs. McBee closed her eyes. "Who did that terrible thing, John Bedford?"

John Bedford rubbed his knuckles over his mouth and shook his head. Mrs. McBee looked at him fiercely. "Tell me." He tilted his chair back. "Damndest thing.
That Hanes man was over here when it happened. Said you wanted him to do some work on the back shed. We were talking out there on the front porch and.

Mrs. McBee tried to lift her head off the pillow.
"You and Mr. Hanes were together?"
"We were out there" -- he cocked his head, indicating the porch -- "when Mrs. Flemming let out the scream."
His eyes were excited. "And Hanes took off."

Mrs. McBee rested her head back on the pillow, feeling the relief of warm blood flow back into her face. "Thank God," she murmured and put both hands to her face.

"The most God awful sight you've ever seen," said John Bedford. "Poor old fellow. He didn't have a chance."

Mrs. McBee's relief was so profound she managed to sit up in spite of the throbbing head. "Thank God," she said again.

"Who could have wanted to do a thing like that?" mumbled John Bedford. "T. J. never hurt anybody."

"We'll probably never know," said Mrs. McBee. "Such a horrible thing."

"I wish it had been I," mumbled John Bedford.
"You wish what?" asked Mrs. McBee, cocking an eye at him, seeing him bent over, his face in his hands.

"Dead," he said into his hands.

"Oh." She relaxed. He didn't mean a word of it. Her utter relief from what might have been was causing a warm glow inside her. "That poor family."


Mrs. McBee said nothing and the room was queerly silent as if in some Doomsday holocaust only they had been saved, had found a patch in the world still untouched, and, finding it, there were no more words. They remained silent for a long while as if they were listening for something.

Finally Mrs. McBee sat up straighter. "I must go to that woman. She needs me now."

John Bedford slowly drew his hands down from his face and looked at her incredulously. "You're not going over there?"

"I certainly am. Moaning around doesn't do anybody any good. There're practical things to be done."
"You're going over there?"


She did not go that night, however. The blow on her head was worse than she had thought. She took two aspirins and went to bed with an ice pack. The next morning the swelling was somewhat eased and right away she began making the pecan pie. When she was finished she sat in the kitchen chair gazing at it. Then she picked it up and started out the door. Outside she paused, came back into the house, put the pie back down on the sink and once again sat in the chair.

She argued with herself that it was the Christian thing to do, to go to the grieving. But what if the woman made a scene, screamed at her, told her to leave the house? The house was full of people and anything like that would be too mortifying. But who could object to a little act of kindness? It was merely neighborliness, Christian neighborliness to go. It wasn't as if she were curious or anything. Nothing like that. All she knew
was she had to go. Something stronger than her own will compelled her. And she picked up the pie, already sensing the gratitude she was positive she would receive.

On the way over she kept pushing away the thought that had tried to nag at her most of the morning. With every step it tried to come back but she willed it away like an evil. For evil it was. Selfish. What she was battling was the rather delicious thought that now Mr. Flemming was "no more" (she preferred to express it that way) Mrs. Flemming certainly would need a job again, perhaps her old job, and in spite of what the woman thought of John Bedford she was sure to come to see the truth of that. The truth would out. The girl Bertha Mae was nothing but trash, as John Bedford had all but admitted that night, and soon enough Mrs. Flemming would see the error of her ways.

But one did not go to the grieving thinking of oneself. And Mrs. McBee tried to remember her own mother's death so she might transfer some of what she herself had felt in case she should see Mrs. Flemming. Actually in an odd sort of way she would miss Mr. Flemming. A little. And whatever her feelings were originally she could never have wished this on anybody.
The house was not as crowded as she had expected. A few women, country people mostly, were sitting in rigid silence about the living room, their hands folded in their laps and their stiff faces appropriately somber. Mrs. Flemming, like a celebrity in grief, was closeted in a back bedroom, her unseen presence hovering about the room.

One of the women made a space on the plastic green sofa for Mrs. McBee. Another woman with large-boned hands and a weathered face had taken her pie unceremoniously and disappeared with it into the kitchen.

Occasional moans sounded from the back of the house, but the women received the sounds without change of expression, as if it were merely a part of what they had come for. Or, by now, had come to expect. On the way over Mrs. McBee had carefully avoided the spot where it all had occurred. And now, sitting with her own hands folded in the overheated room, her line of vision looked straight into a tinted likeness of T. J. Flemming himself. There were the eyes with the curled-up eyelashes, looking straight back at her. He was so whole there, framed in elaborate gilt, never suspecting what fate lay lurking just a year or so away.
She imagined him posing for the picture, a Saturday afternoon's lark. Death's stranger, grinning into the lens. Then, as she gazed, it happened. She was as certain as she was sitting there that his left eye bat into a wink. At her! She twitched her shoulders and immediately looked away.

No one else seemed bothered by the picture. They continued to sit in undisturbed silence. Instinctively Mrs. McBee knew she had to take over. There was no point in their sitting there like corpses. Poor things. They didn't know any better. She inclined her head toward the woman seated beside her in the armchair. A small bird-like woman dressed in brown, she was the most pleasant appearing of the group with a rather sweet face and large brown eyes magnified twice their size behind thick bifocal glasses, all of which gave to the face the rather disturbing look of continuous joy.

"So sad," said Mrs. McBee in hushed tones and shook her head.

"Yes, it is," said the woman, regarding Mrs. McBee with her look of joyousness.
"Such a terrible thing to have happen."

The woman's eyes blinked. "And you just can't help but wonder how they gone get all them parts in the casket. Can you?"

Mrs. McBee looked down at her hands. "Yes, well."

She glanced up and her eyes caught the grinning picture of T. J. Flemming again.

"Say some of em was strewed clear on over to Chinepoo County," joined in the woman across the room, obviously spurred on by Mrs. McBee's initiative. She was the one with the hat, a black felt that sat straight up on her head like a narrow bucket, re-emphasizing somehow a row of even false teeth.

The pleasant-looking lady's eyes twinkled as she looked about the room.

"Who could have done such a thing?" asked Mrs. McBee frowning at the room.

"Said it was a woman what done it," spoke up Mrs. McBee's partner on the sofa.

"A woman?"

The lady with the hat folded her arms in front of her as she cut her eyes sideways and smiled a secret smile. It was as if she were saying she knew everything but she wasn't saying anything.
Mrs. McBee felt a gentle hand on her arm and turned to look square into the huge eyes of the pleasant lady who was bending toward her. "Mrs. Flemming don't know anything about it yet," she confided in an almost child-like whisper.

"Oh?" said Mrs. McBee, bending closer.

"T. J. Flemming was carrying on," she said sweetly. "I see," said Mrs. McBee, raising her eyebrows to indicate rapport.

"Claimed the woman that done it was gone toss that poor man's limbs and things ever-where they'd been together. So they's no telling where they's all at."

"My goodness," said Mrs. McBee, placing her hand to the side of her neck.

"Uh huh," said the woman and leaned back in the chair again, nodding to Mrs. McBee as if she were saying: Now you know. Wasn't it sweet of me to tell you?

The other woman appeared to be smiling at Mrs. McBee, too, as if now that she was properly informed she had become a part of the group, initiated, as it were, into a kind of club. She was one of them.

"I hadn't heard any of that," muttered Mrs. McBee
as if to the room at large. "Does anyone know who the woman is? The police?"

"Don't rightly know yet," said the woman with the hat. "That's just what all we heard this morning."

A moan silenced the group, and Mrs. McBee eased more comfortably back onto the sofa. It was all worse than she had suspected. Of course she might have known a woman was involved. And to think for one crazy moment she might even have accused John Bedford. But that, she reasoned, was only because she was confused from the fainting spell.

"They can't have the funeral until ever-thang's found," volunteered the woman in the hat again. "I guess they won't have no open casket."

The woman beside Mrs. McBee on the sofa started to say something, but a blood-curdling scream from outside froze the room and she sat with her mouth wide open as if the scream had come from her own mouth. The pleasant-looking lady jolted round and the front door burst open. Bertha Mae Flemming, her face purple, bounded heavily through the door. "Mama! Mama! Tilda done it! I knewed it was Tilda." She shot through the living room and into the back hall, her hand clamped over her mouth.
"Tilda?" asked Mrs. McBee.

"Well, I do," said the pleasant-looking lady, her cheeks flushed with a pale pinkness.

The woman with the hat pursed her lips. "She's always been crazy, that Tilda."

"Who?" asked Mrs. McBee again.

The pleasant-looking lady touched her arm. "That's Mr. Flemming's sister. Tilda," she whispered in her child-like voice.

"Oh?"

The huge eyes twinkled as she nodded her head. "The one that was looking for buried treasure." She put two fingers to her lips and gave a surprising little giggle. "Had her whole backyard dug up, thinking she'd find something."

Vaguely Mrs. McBee remembered Mrs. Flemming's telling her something about a sister, that she and Mr. Flemming had had an argument over a chair. But Mrs. Flemming had told so many things. She did remember her telling her about the yard, however, that the sister had two Negro men digging or some such nonsense.

"Tilda was in-sane," said the woman beside Mrs.
McBee on the sofa.

But no one seemed to pay attention to the remark. They all seemed to be listening, waiting for some catastrophic noise to come forth from the back of the house. The woman with the hat was gazing ceiling-ward, her head cocked as if to better hear.

But there was nothing to be heard save the sound of Bertha Mae's muffled sobbing. Then as Mrs. McBee herself listened she began sensing a change in the room itself. It was as if a profound disappointment had settled over the women. The highly charged atmosphere she had felt earlier had now flattened. It was all over and the results were in. It was only Tilda, the mentally deranged sister, who had done this thing. And that made a kind of sense. But the other was exciting, even uplifting: some woman who had bid for the man's affections and been spurned. That was the stuff that made the blood run, something one could tell and re-tell years hence. But Tilda. That was almost normal, something to remember, perhaps a week or so, then forgotten.

"Poor things," muttered Mrs. McBee aloud.

"They ought've put that woman away a long time
ago," said the woman with the hat. She sounded almost angry as she rose from her chair. "Well, I guess I better be gettin myself back on home." She straightened the back of her skirt.

"Yes'm, I guess we done about all we can do around here," said the woman on the sofa, and surprisingly the entire group rose as if in unison.

"Glad to've seen you," said the pleasant woman and twinkled her eyes at Mrs. McBee.

Just like a bunch of barnyard fowls, thought Mrs. McBee, as she watched them file out the front door. She began drumming her fingers on the arm of the sofa. Well, she wasn't going anywhere. Surely there were things to be done. Telephone calls to be made, arrangements. She would see what she could do and if there was nothing she, too, would leave.

The truth of the matter was she was thinking of Mrs. Flemming. She didn't know exactly when it had come over her. She rather thought when she had first entered the room, before she had even said a word to any of the women. Whenever and unexplicably, now, sitting alone in the room surrounded by all of Mrs. Flemming's hard-won possessions, the over-large lamp
with the cellophane still on the shade, the matching chair and footstool, the black and white china dog covered with gay sparkles perched atop the television set -- all of it -- she was touched by a pity for the poor wretch who had wanted these things, put them there and now lay grieving on her bed of terror.

The poor woman had stormed through life, singing her hymns, working and saving and praying, and there were times, rare enough it was true, but there were the times, moments, when her face lightened in a true goodness, even kindness. In her own way she was proud of her husband, her children, this house. Her world. And now it had blown up before her very eyes like a comic horror. Too horrible even for tears.

The pie wasn't enough, Mrs. Mcbee said to herself.

She got up from the sofa, found her way through the dark hall, passed the closed door, silent now, and went into the kitchen.

There leaning up against the mammoth refrigerator, her hand at her hip and clutching a wadded handkerchief, was the woman who earlier had taken her pie. The pie, along with other dishes of food, was resting on a card table.
"I'm Mrs. McBee, from across the way," said Mrs. McBee in hushed tones. "Is there anything I can do to help here?"

For the first time she saw the woman's eyes, similar in color to Mrs. Flemming's but larger, were red with tears. She tried to smile. "Sister's told me a heap about you, Mrs. McBee."

"You're Mrs. Flemming's sister then?"

"Yes'm." She looked about the kitchen. "Just trying to see what all needs to be done."

"I presume the rest of the family has been called, relatives."

"Yes'm. Lojean done that this morning."

"Lojean. I haven't seen her anywhere."

"No'm. She and Buster, Junior done took the kid and went on to the funeral home to make arrange-mints." The woman's eyes gazed sorrowfully at Mrs. McBee and she shook her head.

Mrs. McBee patted her arm. "I know Mrs. Flemming is relieved to have you here."

The woman instantly looked away. "I thank I'm just in a spell, aint able to take none of it in yet a while. I'm not well neither. Just got outta the hospital two weeks ago from a goiter operation."
"Oh dear," sympathized Mrs. McBee. "Well, I think we're all just dazed. "How is--" She meant to ask how Mrs. Flemming was bearing up, but a weak voice interrupted from behind the closed door in the hall. "Annie? Is that Mizz McBee back er with you?"

"Ex-cuse me," said the sister. "Lemme go see what she wants."

Mrs. McBee went over to the kitchen window. Outside she could see the dog pen and several beagle puppies, their white-tipped tails sailing through the air as they trotted about the pen. She was seeing the dogs and yet she wasn't. She could scarcely hear the whispering in the other room, and if there were angry words passing between the two she was unable to make them out. Perhaps she should have left with the other women after all.

The sister reappeared in the kitchen. "Sister says for you to come on in. She aint seen nobody else ceptin the chirrun. I think you'd do her some good."

"Are you sure?" asked Mrs. McBee. She straightened her shoulders.

"She said she wanted to see you. Lordy, Lordy, how come this here thang had to happen?"