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The Help



'The other side of *Gone with the Wind* – and just as unputdownable' *Sunday Times*

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The Help
by
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AIBILEEN

CHAPTER I

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MAE MOBLEY was born on a early Sunday morning in August, 1960. A church baby we like to call it. Taking care a white babies, that's what I do, along with all the cooking and the cleaning. I done raised seventeen kids in my lifetime. I know how to get them babies to sleep, stop crying, and go in the toilet bowl before they mamas even get out a bed in the morning.

But I ain't never seen a baby yell like Mae Mobley Leefolt. First day I walk in the door, there she be, red-hot and hollering with the colic, fighting that bottle like it's a rotten turnip. Miss Leefolt, she look terrified a her own child. "What am I doing wrong? Why can't I stop it?"

It? That was my first hint: something is wrong with this situation.

So I took that pink, screaming baby in my arms. Bounced her on my hip to get the gas moving and it didn't take two minutes fore Baby Girl stopped her crying, got to smiling up at me like she do. But Miss Leefolt, she don't pick up her own baby for the rest a the day. I seen plenty a womens get the baby blues after they done birthing. I reckon I thought that's what it was.

Here's something about Miss Leefolt: she not just frowning all the time, she skinny. Her legs is so spindly, she look like she done growed em last week. Twenty-three years old and she lanky as a fourteen-year-old boy. Even her hair is thin, brown, see-through. She try to tease it up, but it only

make it look thinner. Her face be the same shape as that red devil on the redhot candy box, pointy chin and all. Fact, her whole body be so full a sharp knobs and corners, it's no wonder she can't soothe that baby. Babies like fat. Like to bury they face up in you armpit and go to sleep. They like big fat legs too. That I know.

By the time she a year old, Mae Mobley following me around everywhere I go. Five o'clock would come round and she'd be hanging on my Dr. Scholl shoe, dragging over the floor, crying like I weren't never coming back. Miss Leefolt, she'd narrow up her eyes at me like I done something wrong, unhitch that crying baby off my foot. I reckon that's the risk you run, letting somebody else raise you chilluns.

Mae Mobley two years old now. She got big brown eyes and honey-color curls. But the bald spot in the back of her hair kind a throw things off. She get the same wrinkle between her eyebrows when she worried, like her mama. They kind a favor except Mae Mobley so fat. She ain't gone be no beauty queen. I think it bother Miss Leefolt, but Mae Mobley my special baby.

I LOST MY OWN BOY, Treelore, right before I started waiting on Miss Leefolt. He was twenty-four years old. The best part of a person's life. It just wasn't enough time living in this world.

He had him a little apartment over on Foley Street. Seeing a real nice girl name Frances and I spec they was gone get married, but he was slow bout things like that. Not cause he looking for something better, just cause he the thinking kind. Wore big glasses and reading all the time. He even start writing his own book, bout being a colored man living and working in Mississippi. Law, that made me proud. But one night he working late at the Scanlon-Taylor mill, lugging two-by-fours to the truck, splinters slicing all the way through the glove. He too small for that kind a work, too skinny, but he needed the job. He was tired. It was raining. He slip off the loading dock, fell down on the drive. Tractor trailer didn't see him and crushed his lungs fore he could move. By the time I found out, he was dead.

That was the day my whole world went black. Air look black, sun look

black. I laid up in bed and stared at the black walls a my house. Minny came ever day to make sure I was still breathing, feed me food to keep me living. Took three months fore I even look out the window, see if the world still there. I was surprise to see the world didn't stop just cause my boy did.

Five months after the funeral, I lifted myself up out a bed. I put on my white uniform and put my little gold cross back around my neck and I went to wait on Miss Leefolt cause she just have her baby girl. But it weren't too long before I seen something in me had changed. A bitter seed was planted inside a me. And I just didn't feel so accepting anymore.

"GET THE HOUSE straightened up and then go on and fix some of that chicken salad now," say Miss Leefolt.

It's bridge club day. Every fourth Wednesday a the month. A course I already got everthing ready to go—made the chicken salad this morning, ironed the tablecloths yesterday. Miss Leefolt seen me at it too. She ain't but twenty-three years old and she like hearing herself tell me what to do.

She already got the blue dress on I ironed this morning, the one with *sixty-five* pleats on the waist, so tiny I got to squint through my glasses to iron. I don't hate much in life, but me and that dress is *not* on good terms.

"And you make sure Mae Mobley's not coming in on us, now. I tell you, I am so burned up at her—tore up my good stationery into five thousand pieces and I've got fifteen thank-you notes for the Junior League to do..."

I arrange the-this and the-that for her lady friends. Set out the good crystal, put the silver service out. Miss Leefolt don't put up no dinky card table like the other ladies do. We set at the dining room table. Put a cloth on top to cover the big L-shaped crack, move that red flower centerpiece to the sideboard to hide where the wood all scratched. Miss Leefolt, she like it fancy when she do a luncheon. Maybe she trying to make up for her house being small. They ain't rich folk, that I know. Rich folk don't try so hard.

I'm used to working for young couples, but I spec this is the smallest house I ever worked in. It's just the one story. Her and Mister Leefolt's room in the back be a fair size, but Baby Girl's room be tiny. The dining room and the regular living room kind a join up. Only two bathrooms, which is a

relief cause I worked in houses where they was five or six. Take a whole day just to clean toilets. Miss Leefolt don't pay but ninety-five cents an hour, less than I been paid in years. But after Treelore died, I took what I could. Landlord wasn't gone wait much longer. And even though it's small, Miss Leefolt done the house up nice as she can. She pretty good with the sewing machine. Anything she can't buy new of, she just get her some blue material and sew it a cover.

The doorbell ring and I open it up.

"Hey, Aibileen," Miss Skeeter say, cause she the kind that speak to the help. "How you?"

"Hey, Miss Skeeter. I'm alright. Law, it's hot out there."

Miss Skeeter real tall and skinny. Her hair be yellow and cut short above her shoulders cause she get the frizz year round. She twenty-three or so, same as Miss Leefolt and the rest of em. She set her pocketbook on the chair, kind a itch around in her clothes a second. She wearing a white lace blouse buttoned up like a nun, flat shoes so I reckon she don't look any taller. Her blue skirt gaps open in the waist. Miss Skeeter always look like somebody else told her what to wear.

I hear Miss Hilly and her mama, Miss Walter, pull up the driveway and toot the horn. Miss Hilly don't live but ten feet away, but she always drive over. I let her in and she go right past me and I figure it's a good time to get Mae Mobley up from her nap.

Soon as I walk in her nursery, Mae Mobley smile at me, reach out her fat little arms.

"You already up, Baby Girl? Why you didn't holler for me?"

She laugh, dance a little happy jig waiting on me to get her out. I give her a good hug. I reckon she don't get too many good hugs like this after I go home. Ever so often, I come to work and find her bawling in her crib, Miss Leefolt busy on the sewing machine rolling her eyes like it's a stray cat stuck in the screen door. See, Miss Leefolt, she dress up nice ever day. Always got her makeup on, got a carport, double-door Frigidaire with the built-in icebox. You see her in the Jitney 14 grocery, you never think she go and leave her baby crying in her crib like that. But the help always know.

Today is a good day though. That girl just grins.

I say, "Aibileen."

She say, "Aib-ee."

I say, "Love."

She say, "Love."

I say, "Mae Mobley."

She say, "Aib-ee." And then she laugh and laugh. She so tickled she talking and I got to say, it's about time. Treelore didn't say nothing till he two either. By the time he in third grade, though, he get to talking better than the President a the United States, coming home using words like *conjugation* and *parliamentary*. He get in junior high and we play this game where I give him a real simple word and he got to come up with a fancy one like it. I say *housecat*, he say *domesticized feline*, I say *mixer* and he say *motorized rotunda*. One day I say *Crisco*. He scratch his head. He just can't believe I done won the game with something simple as *Crisco*. Came to be a secret joke with us, meaning something you can't dress up no matter how you try. We start calling his daddy *Crisco* cause you can't fancy up a man done run off on his family. Plus he the greasiest no-count you ever known.

I tote Mae Mobley into the kitchen and put her in her high chair, thinking about two chores I need to finish today fore Miss Leefolt have a fit: separate the napkins that started to fray and straighten up the silver service in the cabinet. Law, I'm on have to do it while the ladies is here, I guess.

I take the tray a devil eggs out to the dining room. Miss Leefolt setting at the head and to her left be Miss Hilly Holbrook and Miss Hilly's mama, Miss Walter, who Miss Hilly don't treat with no respect. And then on Miss Leefolt's right be Miss Skeeter.

I make the egg rounds, starting with ole Miss Walter first cause she the elder. It's warm in here, but she got a thick brown sweater drooped around her shoulders. She scoop a egg up and near bout drop it cause she getting the palsy. Then I move over to Miss Hilly and she smile and take two. Miss Hilly got a round face and dark brown hair in the beehive. Her skin be olive color, with freckles and moles. She wear a lot a red plaid. And she getting heavy in the bottom. Today, since it's so hot, she wearing a red sleeveless dress with no waist to it. She one a those grown ladies that still dress like a little girl with big bows and matching hats and such. She ain't my favorite.

I move over to Miss Skeeter, but she wrinkle her nose up at me and say, “No, thanks,” cause she don’t eat no eggs. I tell Miss Leefolt ever time she have the bridge club and she make me do them eggs anyways. She scared Miss Hilly be disappointed.

Finally, I do Miss Leefolt. She the hostess so she got to pick up her eggs last. And soon as I’m done, Miss Hilly say, “Don’t mind if I do,” and snatch herself two more eggs, which don’t surprise me.

“Guess who I ran into at the beauty parlor?” Miss Hilly say to the ladies.

“Who’s that?” ask Miss Leefolt.

“Celia Foote. And do you know what she asked me? If she could help with the Benefit this year.”

“Good,” Miss Skeeter say. “We need it.”

“Not that bad, we don’t. I told her, I said, ‘Celia, you have to be a League member or a sustainer to participate.’ What does she think the Jackson League is? Open rush?”

“Aren’t we taking nonmembers this year? Since the Benefit’s gotten so big?” Miss Skeeter ask.

“Well, yes,” Miss Hilly say. “But I wasn’t about to tell *her* that.”

“I can’t believe Johnny married a girl so tacky like she is,” Miss Leefolt say and Miss Hilly nod. She start dealing out the bridge cards.

I spoon out the congealed salad and the ham sandwiches, can’t help but listen to the chatter. Only three things them ladies talk about: they kids, they clothes, and they friends. I hear the word *Kennedy*, I know they ain’t discussing no politic. They talking about what Miss Jackie done wore on the tee-vee.

When I get around to Miss Walter, she don’t take but one little old half a sandwich for herself.

“Mama,” Miss Hilly yell at Miss Walter, “Take another sandwich. You are skinny as a telephone pole.” Miss Hilly look over at the rest a the table. “I keep telling her, if that Minny can’t cook she needs to just go on and fire her.”

My ears perk up at this. They talking bout the help. I’m best friends with Minny.

“Minnie cooks fine,” say ole Miss Walter. “I’m just not so hungry like I used to be.”

Minnie near bout the best cook in Hinds County, maybe even all a Mississippi. The Junior League Benefit come around ever fall and they be wanting her to make ten caramel cakes to auction off. She ought a be the most sought-after help in the state. Problem is, Minny got a mouth on her. She always talking back. One day it be the white manager a the Jitney Jungle grocery, next day it be her husband, and ever day it’s gone be the white lady she waiting on. The only reason she waiting on Miss Walter so long is Miss Walter be deaf as a doe-nob.

“I think you’re malnourished, Mama,” holler Miss Hilly. “That Minny isn’t feeding you so that she can steal every last heirloom I have left.” Miss Hilly huff out a her chair. “I’m going to the powder room. Y’all watch her in case she collapses dead of hunger.”

When Miss Hilly gone, Miss Walter say real low, “I bet you’d love that.” Everbody act like they didn’t hear. I better call Minny tonight, tell her what Miss Hilly said.

In the kitchen, Baby Girl’s up in her high chair, got purple juice all over her face. Soon as I walk in, she smile. She don’t make no fuss being in here by herself, but I hate to leave her too long. I know she stare at that door real quiet till I come back.

I pat her little soft head and go back out to pour the ice tea. Miss Hilly’s back in her chair looking all bowed up about something else now.

“Oh Hilly, I wish you’d use the guest bathroom,” say Miss Leefolt, rearranging her cards. “Aibileen doesn’t clean in the back until after lunch.”

Hilly raise her chin up. Then she give one a her “ah-hem’s.” She got this way a clearing her throat real delicate-like that get everbody’s attention without they even knowing she made em do it.

“But the guest bathroom’s where the help goes,” Miss Hilly say.

Nobody says anything for a second. Then Miss Walter nod, like she explaining it all. “She’s upset cause the Nigra uses the inside bathroom and so do we.”

Law, not this mess again. They all look over at me straightening the silver drawer in the sideboard and I know it’s time for me to leave. But before

I can get the last spoon in there, Miss Leefolt give me the look, say, “Go get some more tea, Aibileen.”

I go like she tell me to, even though they cups is full to the rim.

I stand around the kitchen a minute but I ain’t got nothing left to do in there. I need to be in the dining room so I can finish my silver straightening. And I still got the napkin cabinet to sort through today but it’s in the hall, right outside where they setting. I don’t want a stay late just cause Miss Leefolt playing cards.

I wait a few minutes, wipe a counter. Give Baby Girl more ham and she gobble it up. Finally, I slip out to the hall, pray nobody see me.

All four of em got a cigarette in one hand, they cards in the other. “Elizabeth, if you had the choice,” I hear Miss Hilly say, “wouldn’t you rather them take their business outside?”

Real quiet, I open the napkin drawer, more concerned about Miss Leefolt seeing me than what they saying. This talk ain’t news to me. Everwhere in town they got a colored bathroom, and most the houses do too. But I look over and Miss Skeeter’s watching me and I freeze, thinking I’m about to get in trouble.

“I bid one heart,” Miss Walter say.

“I don’t know,” Miss Leefolt say, frowning at her cards, “With Raleigh starting his own business and tax season not for six months . . . things are real tight for us right now.”

Miss Hilly talk slow, like she spreading icing on a cake. “You just tell Raleigh every penny he spends on that bathroom he’ll get back when y’all sell this house.” She nod like she agreeing with herself. “All these houses they’re building without maid’s quarters? It’s just plain dangerous. Everybody knows they carry different kinds of diseases than we do. I double.”

I pick up a stack a napkins. I don’t know why, but all a sudden I want a hear what Miss Leefolt gone say to this. She my boss. I guess everbody wonder what they boss think a them.

“It would be nice,” Miss Leefolt say, taking a little puff a her cigarette, “not having her use the one in the house. I bid three spades.”

“That’s exactly why I’ve designed the Home Help Sanitation Initiative,” Miss Hilly say. “As a disease-preventative measure.”

I'm surprised by how tight my throat get. It's a shame I learned to keep down a long time ago.

Miss Skeeter look real confused. "The Home . . . the what?"

"A bill that requires every white home to have a separate bathroom for the colored help. I've even notified the surgeon general of Mississippi to see if he'll endorse the idea. I pass."

Miss Skeeter, she frowning at Miss Hilly. She set her cards down faceup and say real matter-a-fact, "Maybe we ought to just build you a bathroom outside, Hilly."

And Law, do that room get quiet.

Miss Hilly say, "I don't think you ought to be joking around about the colored situation. Not if you want to stay on as editor of the League, Skeeter Phelan."

Miss Skeeter kind a laugh, but I can tell she don't think it's funny. "What, you'd . . . kick me out? For disagreeing with you?"

Miss Hilly raise a eyebrow. "I will do whatever I have to do to protect our town. Your lead, Mama."

I go in the kitchen and don't come out again till I hear the door close after Miss Hilly's behind.

WHEN I KNOW MISS HILLY GONE, I put Mae Mobley in her playpen, drag the garbage bin out to the street cause the truck's coming by today. At the top a the driveway, Miss Hilly and her crazy mama near bout back over me in they car, then yell out all friendly how sorry they is. I walk in the house, glad I ain't got two new broken legs.

When I go in the kitchen, Miss Skeeter's in there. She leaning against the counter, got a serious look on her face, even more serious than usual. "Hey, Miss Skeeter. I get you something?"

She glance out at the drive where Miss Leefolt's talking to Miss Hilly through her car window. "No, I'm just . . . waiting."

I dry a tray with a towel. When I sneak a look over, she's still got her worried eyes on that window. She don't look like other ladies, being she so tall. She got real high cheekbones. Blue eyes that turn down, giving her a

shy way about her. It's quiet, except for the little radio on the counter, playing the gospel station. I wish she'd go on out a here.

"Is that Preacher Green's sermon you're playing on the radio?" she ask.

"Yes ma'am, it is."

Miss Skeeter kind a smile. "That reminds me so much of my maid growing up."

"Oh I knew Constantine," I say.

Miss Skeeter move her eyes from the window to me. "She raised me, did you know that?"

I nod, wishing I hadn't said nothing. I know too much about that situation.

"I've been trying to get an address for her family in Chicago," she say, "but nobody can tell me anything."

"I don't have it either, ma'am."

Miss Skeeter move her eyes back to the window, on Miss Hilly's Buick. She shake her head, just a little. "Aibileen, that talk in there . . . Hilly's talk, I mean . . ."

I pick up a coffee cup, start drying it real good with my cloth.

"Do you ever wish you could . . . change things?" she asks.

And I can't help myself. I look at her head on. Cause that's one a the stupidest questions I ever heard. She got a confused, disgusted look on her face, like she done salted her coffee instead a sugared it.

I turn back to my washing, so she don't see me rolling my eyes. "Oh no, ma'am, everthing's fine."

"But that talk in there, about the *bathroom*—" and smack on that word, Miss Leefolt walk in the kitchen.

"Oh, there you are, Skeeter." She look at us both kind a funny. "I'm sorry, did I . . . interrupt something?" We both stand there, wondering what she might a heard.

"I have to run," Miss Skeeter says. "See you tomorrow, Elizabeth." She open the back door, say, "Thanks, Aibileen, for lunch," and she gone.

I go in the dining room, start clearing the bridge table. And just like I knew she would, Miss Leefolt come in behind me wearing her upset smile. Her neck's sticking out like she fixing to ask me something. She don't like

me talking to her friends when she ain't around, never has. Always wanting to know what we saying. I go right on past her into the kitchen. I put Baby Girl in her high chair and start cleaning the oven.

Miss Leefolt follow me in there, eyeball a bucket a Crisco, put it down. Baby Girl hold her arms out for her mama to pick her up, but Miss Leefolt open a cabinet, act like she don't see. Then she slam it close, open another one. Finally she just stand there. I'm down on my hands and knees. Pretty soon my head's so far in that oven I look like I'm trying to gas myself.

"You and Miss Skeeter looked like you were talking awful serious about something."

"No ma'am, she just . . . asking do I want some old clothes," I say and it sound like I'm down in a well-hole. Grease already working itself up my arms. Smell like a underarm in here. Don't take no time fore sweat's running down my nose and ever time I scratch at it, I get a plug a crud on my face. Got to be the worst place in the world, inside a oven. You in here, you either cleaning or you getting cooked. Tonight I just know I'm on have that dream I'm stuck inside and the gas gets turned on. But I keep my head in that awful place cause I'd rather be anywhere sides answering Miss Leefolt's questions about what Miss Skeeter was trying to say to me. Asking do I want to *change* things.

After while, Miss Leefolt huff and go out to the carport. I figure she looking at where she gone build me my new colored bathroom.

CHAPTER 2

YOU'D NEVER KNOW IT living here, but Jackson, Mississippi, be filled with two hundred thousand peoples. I see them numbers in the paper and I got to wonder, where do them peoples live? Underground? Cause I know just about everybody on my side a the bridge and plenty a white families too, and that sure don't add up to be no two hundred thousand.

Six days a week, I take the bus across the Woodrow Wilson Bridge to where Miss Leefolt and all her white friends live, in a neighborhood call Belhaven. Right next to Belhaven be the downtown and the state capital. Capitol building is real big, pretty on the outside but I never been in it. I wonder what they pay to clean that place.

Down the road from Belhaven is white Woodland Hills, then Sherwood Forest, which is miles a big live oaks with the moss hanging down. Nobody living in it yet, but it's there for when the white folks is ready to move somewhere else new. Then it's the country, out where Miss Skeeter live on the Longleaf cotton plantation. She don't know it, but I picked cotton out there in 1931, during the Depression, when we didn't have nothing to eat but state cheese.

So Jackson's just one white neighborhood after the next and more springing up down the road. But the colored part a town, we one big anthill, surrounded by state land that ain't for sale. As our numbers get bigger, we can't spread out. Our part a town just gets thicker.

I get on the number six bus that afternoon, which goes from Belhaven to Farish Street. The bus today is nothing but maids heading home in our white uniforms. We all chatting and smiling at each other like we own it—not cause we mind if they’s white people on here, we sit anywhere we want to now thanks to Miss Parks—just cause it’s a friendly feeling.

I spot Minny in the back center seat. Minny short and big, got shiny black curls. She setting with her legs splayed, her thick arms crossed. She seventeen years younger than I am. Minny could probably lift this bus up over her head if she wanted to. Old lady like me’s lucky to have her as a friend.

I take the seat in front a her, turn around and listen. Everbody like to listen to Minny.

“... so I said, Miss Walters, the world don’t want a see your naked white behind any more than they want a see my black one. Now, get in this house and put your underpants and some clothes on.”

“On the front porch? Naked?” Kiki Brown ask.

“Her behind hanging to her knees.”

The bus is laughing and chuckling and shaking they heads.

“Law, that woman crazy,” Kiki say. “I don’t know how you always seem to get the crazy ones, Minny.”

“Oh, like your Miss Patterson ain’t?” Minny say to Kiki. “Shoot, she call the roll a the crazy lady club.” The whole bus be laughing now cause Minny don’t like nobody talking bad about her white lady except herself. That’s her job and she own the rights.

The bus cross the bridge and make the first stop in the colored neighborhood. A dozen or so maids get off. I go set in the open seat next to Minny. She smile, bump me hello with her elbow. Then she relax back in her seat cause she don’t have to put on no show for me.

“How you doing? You have to iron pleats this morning?”

I laugh, nod my head. “Took me a hour and a half.”

“What you feed Miss Walters at bridge club today? I worked all morning making that fool a caramel cake and then she wouldn’t eat a crumb.”

That makes me remember what Miss Hilly say at the table today. Any other white lady and no one would care, but we’d all want a know if Miss Hilly after us. I just don’t know how to put it.

I look out the window at the colored hospital go by, the fruit stand. “I think I heard Miss Hilly say something about that, bout her mama getting skinny.” I say this careful as I can. “Say maybe she getting mal-nutritious.”

Minnie look at me. “She did, did she?” Just the name make her eyes narrow. “What else Miss Hilly say?”

I better just go on and say it. “I think she got her eye on you, Minny. Just . . . be extra careful around her.”

“Miss Hilly ought to be extra careful around *me*. What she say, I can’t cook? She say that old bag a bones ain’t eating cause I can’t feed her?” Minny stand up, throw her purse up on her arm.

“I’m sorry, Minny, I only told you so you stay out a her—”

“She ever say that to me, she gone get a piece a Minny for lunch.” She huff down the steps.

I watch her through the window, stomping off toward her house. Miss Hilly ain’t somebody to mess with. Law, maybe I should a just kept it to myself.

A COUPLE MORNINGS LATER, I get off the bus, walk the block to Miss Leefolt’s house. Parked in front is a old lumber truck. They’s two colored mens inside, one drinking a cup a coffee, the other asleep setting straight up. I go on past, into the kitchen.

Mister Raleigh Leefolt still at home this morning, which is rare. Whenever he here, he look like he just counting the minutes till he get to go back to his accounting job. Even on Saturday. But today he carrying on bout something.

“This is my damn house and I pay for what goddamn goes in it!” Mister Leefolt yell.

Miss Leefolt trying to keep up behind him with that smile that mean she ain’t happy. I hide out in the washroom. It’s been two days since the bathroom talk come up and I was hoping it was over. Mister Leefolt opens the back door to look at the truck setting there, slam it back close again.

“I put up with the new clothes, all the damn trips to New Orleans with your sorority sisters, but this takes the goddamn cake.”

“But it’ll increase the value of the house. Hilly said so!” I’m still in the

washroom, but I can almost hear Miss Leefolt trying to keep that smile on her face.

“We can’t afford it! And we do not take orders from the Holbrooks!”

Everything get real quiet for a minute. Then I hear the *pap-pap* a little feetum pajamas.

“Da-dee?”

I come out the washroom and into the kitchen then cause Mae Mobley’s my business.

Mister Leefolt already kneeling down to her. He’s wearing a smile look like it’s made out a rubber. “Guess what, honey?”

She smile back. She waiting for a good surprise.

“You’re not going to college so your mama’s friends don’t have to use the same bathroom as the maid.”

He stomp off and slam the door so hard it make Baby Girl blink.

Miss Leefolt look down at her, start shaking her finger. “Mae Mobley, you know you’re not supposed to climb up out of your crib!”

Baby Girl, she looking at the door her daddy slammed, she looking at her mama frowning down at her. My baby, she swallowing it back, like she trying real hard not to cry.

I rush past Miss Leefolt, pick Baby Girl up. I whisper, “Let’s go on in the living room and play with the talking toy. What that donkey say?”

“She keeps getting up. I put her back in bed three times this morning.”

“Cause somebody needs changing. Whooooooweeee.”

Miss Leefolt tisk, say, “Well I didn’t realize...” but she already staring out the window at the lumber truck.

I go on to the back, so mad I’m stomping. Baby Girl been in that bed since eight o’clock last night, a course she need changing! Miss Leefolt try to sit in twelve hours worth a bathroom mess without getting up!

I lay Baby Girl on the changing table, try to keep my mad inside. Baby Girl stare up at me while I take off her diaper. Then she reach out her little hand. She touch my mouth real soft.

“Mae Mo been bad,” she say.

“No, baby, you ain’t been bad,” I say, smoothing her hair back. “You been good. Real good.”

. . .

I LIVE ON GESSUM AVENUE, where I been renting since 1942. You could say Gessum got a lot a personality. The houses all be small, but every front yard's different—some scrubby and grassless like a bald-headed old man. Others got azalea bushes and roses and thick green grass. My yard, I reckon it be somewhere in between.

I got a few red camellia bushes out front a the house. My grass be kind a spotty and I still got a big yellow mark where Trelore's pickup sat for three months after the accident. I ain't got no trees. But the backyard, now it looks like the Garden of Eden. That's where my next-door neighbor, Ida Peek, got her vegetable patch.

Ida ain't got no backyard to speak of what with all her husband's junk—car engines and old refrigerators and tires. Stuff he say he gone fix but never do. So I tell Ida she come plant on my side. That way I don't have no mowing to tend to and she let me pick whatever I need, save me two or three dollars ever week. She put up what we don't eat, give me jars for the winter season. Good turnip greens, eggplant, okra by the bushel, all kind a gourds. I don't know how she keep them bugs out a her tomatoes, but she do. And they good.

That evening, it's raining hard outside. I pull out a jar a Ida Peek's cabbage and tomato, eat my last slice a leftover cornbread. Then I set down to look over my finances cause two things done happen: the bus gone up to fifteen cents a ride and my rent gone up to twenty-nine dollars a month. I work for Miss Leefolt eight to four, six days a week except Saturdays. I get paid forty-three dollars ever Friday, which come to \$172 a month. That means after I pay the light bill, the water bill, the gas bill, and the telephone bill, I got thirteen dollars and fifty cents a week left for my groceries, my clothes, getting my hair done, and tithing to the church. Not to mention the cost to mail these bills done gone up to a nickel. And my work shoes is so thin, they look like they starving to death. New pair cost seven dollars though, which means I'm on be eating cabbage and tomato till I turn into Br'er Rabbit. Thank the Lord for Ida Peek, else I be eating nothing.

My phone ring, making me jump. Before I can even say hello, I hear Minny. She working late tonight.

“Miss Hilly sending Miss Walters to the old lady home. I got to find myself a new job. And you know when she going? Next *week*.”

“Oh *no*, Minny.”

“I been looking, call ten ladies today. Not even a speck a interest.”

I am sorry to say I ain’t surprised. “I ask Miss Leefolt first thing tomorrow do she know anybody need help.”

“Hang on,” Minny say. I hear old Miss Walter talking and Minny say, “What you think I am? A chauffeur? I ain’t driving you to no country club in the pouring rain.”

Sides stealing, worse thing you’n do for your career as a maid is have a smart mouth. Still, she such a good cook, sometimes it makes up for it.

“Don’t you worry, Minny. We gone find you somebody deaf as a doe-knob, just like Miss Walter.”

“Miss Hilly been hinting around for me to come work for her.”

“What?” I talk stern as I can: “Now you look a here, Minny, I support you myself fore I let you work for that evil lady.”

“Who you think you talking to, Aibileen? A monkey? I might as well go work for the KKK. And you know I never take Yule May’s job away.”

“I’m sorry, Lordy me.” I just get so nervous when it come to Miss Hilly. “I call Miss Caroline over on Honeysuckle, see if she know somebody. And I call Miss Ruth, she so nice it near bout break your heart. Used to clean up the house ever morning so I didn’t have nothing to do but keep her company. Her husband died a the scarlet fever, mm-hmm.”

“Thank you, A. Now come on, Miss Walters, eat up a little green bean for me.” Minny say goodbye and hang up the phone.

THE NEXT MORNING, there that old green lumber truck is again. Banging’s already started but Mister Leefolt ain’t stomping around today. I guess he know he done lost this one before it even started.

Miss Leefolt setting at the kitchen table in her blue-quilt bathrobe talking

on the telephone. Baby Girl's got red sticky all over her face, hanging on to her mama's knees trying to get her look at her.

"Morning, Baby Girl," I say.

"Mama! Mama!" she say, trying to crawl up in Miss Leefolt's lap.

"No, Mae Mobley." Miss Leefolt nudge her down. "Mama's on the telephone. Let Mama talk."

"Mama, pick up," Mae Mobley whine and reach out her arms to her mama. "Pick Mae Mo up."

"Hush," Miss Leefolt whisper.

I scoop Baby Girl up right quick and take her over to the sink, but she keep craning her neck around, whining, "Mama, *Mama*," trying to get her attention.

"Just like you told me to say it." Miss Leefolt nodding into the phone. "Someday when we move, it'll raise the value of the house."

"Come on, Baby Girl. Put your hands here, under the water."

But Baby Girl wriggling hard. I'm trying to get the soap on her fingers but she twisting and turning and she snake right out my arms. She run straight to her mama and stick out her chin and then she jerk the phone cord hard as she can. The receiver clatter out a Miss Leefolt's hand and hit the floor.

"Mae Mobley!" I say.

I rush to get her but Miss Leefolt get there first. Her lips is curled back from her teeth in a scary smile. Miss Leefolt slap Baby Girl on the back a her bare legs so hard I jump from the sting.

Then Miss Leefolt grab Mae Mobley by the arm, jerk it hard with ever word. "Don't you touch this phone again, Mae Mobley!" she say. "Aibileen, how many times do I have to tell you to keep her away from me when I am on the phone!"

"I'm sorry," I say and I pick up Mae Mobley, try to hug her to me, but she bawling and her face is red and she fighting me.

"Come on, Baby Girl, it's all right, everthing—"

Mae Mobley make an ugly face at me and then she rear back and *bowp*! She whack me right on the ear.

Miss Leefolt point at the door, yell, "Aibileen, you both just get *out*."

I carry her out the kitchen. I'm so mad at Miss Leefolt, I'm biting my

tongue. If the fool would just pay her child some attention, this wouldn't happen! When we make it to Mae Mobley's room, I set in the rocking chair. She sob on my shoulder and I rub her back, glad she can't see the mad on my face. I don't want her to think it's at her.

"You okay, Baby Girl?" I whisper. My ear smarting from her little fist. I'm so glad she hit me instead a her mama, cause I don't know what that woman would a done to her. I look down and see red fingermarks on the back a her legs.

"I'm here, baby, Aibee's here," I rock and soothe, rock and soothe.

But Baby Girl, she just cry and cry.

AROUND LUNCHTIME, when my stories come on tee-vee, it gets quiet out in the carport. Mae Mobley's in my lap helping me string the beans. She still kind a fussy from this morning. I reckon I am too, but I done pushed it down to a place where I don't have to worry with it.

We go in the kitchen and I fix her baloney sandwich. In the driveway, the workmen is setting in they truck, eating they own lunches. I'm glad for the peace. I smile over at Baby Girl, give her a strawberry, so grateful I was here during the trouble with her mama. I hate to think what would a happen if I wasn't. She stuff the strawberry in her mouth, smile back. I think she feel it too.

Miss Leefolt ain't here so I think about calling Minny at Miss Walter, see if she found any work yet. But before I get around to it, they's a knock on the back door. I open it to see one a the workmen standing there. He real old. Got coveralls on over a white collar shirt.

"Hidee, ma'am. Trouble you for some water?" he ask. I don't recognize him. Must live somewhere south a town.

"Sho nuff," I say.

I go get a paper cup from the cupboard. It's got happy birthday balloons on it from when Mae Mobley turn two. I know Miss Leefolt don't want me giving him one a the glasses.

He drink it in one long swallow and hand me the cup back. His face be real tired. Kind a lonesome in the eyes.

“How y’all coming along?” I ask.

“It’s work,” he say. “Still ain’t no water to it. Reckon we run a pipe out yonder from the road.”

“Other fella need a drink?” I ask.

“Be mighty nice.” He nod and I go get his friend a little funny-looking cup too, fill it up from the sink.

He don’t take it to his partner right away.

“Beg a pardon,” he say, “but where...” He stand there a minute, look down at his feet. “Where might I go to make water?”

He look up and I look at him and for a minute we just be looking. I mean, it’s one a them funny things. Not the ha-ha funny but the funny where you be thinking: Huh. Here we is with two in the house and one being built and they still ain’t no place for this man to do his business.

“Well...” I ain’t never been in this position before. The young’un, Robert, who do the yard ever two weeks, I guess he go fore he come over. But this fella, he a old man. Got heavy wrinkled hands. Seventy years a worry done put so many lines in his face, he like a roadmap.

“I spec you gone have to go in the bushes, back a the house,” I hear myself say, but I wish it weren’t me. “Dog’s back there, but he won’t bother you.”

“Alright then,” he say. “Thank ya.”

I watch him walk back real slow with the cup a water for his partner.

The banging and the digging go on the rest a the afternoon.

ALL THE NEXT DAY LONG, they’s hammering and digging going on in the front yard. I don’t ask Miss Leefolt no questions about it and Miss Leefolt don’t offer no explanation. She just peer out the back door ever hour to see what’s going on.

Three o’clock the racket stops and the mens get in they truck and leave. Miss Leefolt, she watch em drive off, let out a big sigh. Then she get in her car and go do whatever it is she do when she ain’t nervous bout a couple a colored mens hanging round her house.

After while, the phone ring.

“Miss Leef—”

“She telling everbody in town I’m stealing! That’s why I can’t get no work! That witch done turned me into the Smart-Mouthed Criminal Maid a Hinds County!”

“Hold on, Minny, get your breath—”

“Before work this morning, I go to the Renfroes’ over on Sycamore and Miss Renfroe near bout chase me off the property. Say Miss Hilly told her about me, everbody know I stole a candelabra from Miss Walters!”

I can hear the grip she got on the phone, sound like she trying to crush it in her hand. I hear Kindra holler and I wonder why Minny already home. She usually don’t leave work till four.

“I ain’t done nothing but feed that old woman good food and look after her!”

“Minny, I know you honest. God know you honest.”

Her voice dip down, like bees on a comb. “When I walk into Miss Walters’, Miss Hilly be there and she try to give me twenty dollars. She say, ‘Take it. I know you need it,’ and I bout spit in her face. But I didn’t. No sir.” She start making this panting noise, she say, “I did *worse*.”

“What you did?”

“I ain’t telling. I ain’t telling nobody about that pie. But I give her what she deserve!” She wailing now and I feel a real cold fear. Ain’t no game crossing Miss Hilly. “I ain’t never gone get no work again, Leroy gone kill me...”

Kindra gets to crying in the background. Minny hang up without even saying goodbye. I don’t know what she talking about a pie. But Law, knowing Minny, it could not have been good.

THAT NIGHT, I pick me a poke salad and a tomato out a Ida’s garden. I fry up some ham, make a little gravy for my biscuit. My wig been brushed out and put up, got my pink rollers in, already sprayed the Good Nuff on my hair. I been worried all afternoon, thinking bout Minny. I got to put it out a my mind if I’m on get some sleep tonight.

I set at my table to eat, turn on the kitchen radio. Little Stevie Wonder’s

singing “Fingertips.” Being colored ain’t nothing on that boy. He twelve years old, blind, and got a hit on the radio. When he done, I skip over Pastor Green playing his sermon and stop on WBLA. They play the juke joint blues.

I like them smoky, liquor-drinking sounds when it get dark. Makes me feel like my whole house is full a people. I can almost see em, swaying here in my kitchen, dancing to the blues. When I turn off the ceiling light, I pretend we at The Raven. They’s little tables with red-covered lights. It’s May or June and warm. My man Clyde flash me his white-toothed smile and say *Honey, you want you a drink?* And I say, *Black Mary straight up* and then I get to laughing at myself, setting in my kitchen having this daydream, cause the raciest thing I ever take is the purple Nehi.

Memphis Minny get to singing on the radio how lean meat won’t fry, which is about how the love don’t last. Time to time, I think I might find myself another man, one from my church. Problem is, much as I love the Lord, church-going man never do all that much for me. Kind a man I like ain’t the kind that stays around when he done spending all you money. I made that mistake twenty years ago. When my husband Clyde left me for that no-count hussy up on Farish Street, one they call Cocoa, I figured I better shut the door for good on that kind a business.

A cat get to screeching outside and bring me back to my cold kitchen. I turn the radio off and the light back on, fish my prayer book out my purse. My prayer book is just a blue notepad I pick up at the Ben Franklin store. I use a pencil so I can erase till I get it right. I been writing my prayers since I was in junior high. When I tell my seventh-grade teacher I ain’t coming back to school cause I got to help out my mama, Miss Ross just about cried.

“You’re the smartest one in the class, Aibileen,” she say. “And the only way you’re going to keep sharp is to read *and write* every day.”

So I started writing my prayers down instead a saying em. But nobody’s called me smart since.

I turn the pages a my prayer book to see who I got tonight. A few times this week, I thought about maybe putting Miss Skeeter on my list. I’m not real sure why. She always nice when she come over. It makes me nervous,

but I can't help but wonder what she was gone ask me in Miss Leefolt's kitchen, about do I want to change things. Not to mention her asking me the whereabouts a Constantine, her maid growing up. I know what happen between Constantine and Miss Skeeter's mama and ain't no way I'm on tell her that story.

The thing is though, if I start praying for Miss Skeeter, I know that conversation gone continue the next time I see her. And the next and the next. Cause that's the way prayer do. It's like electricity, it keeps things going. And the bathroom situation, it just ain't something I really want to discuss.

I scan down my prayer list. My Mae Mobley got the number one rung, then they's Fanny Lou at church, ailing from the rheumatism. My sisters Inez and Mable in Port Gibson that got eighteen kids between em and six with the flu. When the list be thin, I slip in that old stinky white fella that live behind the feed store, the one lost his mind from drinking the shoe polish. But the list be pretty full tonight.

And look a there who else I done put on this list. Bertrina Bessemer a all people! Everbody know Bertrina and me don't take to each other ever since she call me a nigga fool for marrying Clyde umpteen years ago.

"Minnie," I say last Sunday, "why Bertrina ask *me* to pray for her?"

We walking home from the one o'clock service. Minny say, "Rumor is you got some kind a power prayer, gets better results than just the regular variety."

"Say what?"

"Eudora Green, when she broke her hip, went on your list, up walking in a week. Isaiah fell off the cotton truck, on your prayer list that night, back to work the next day."

Hearing this made me think about how I didn't even get the chance to pray for Treelore. Maybe that's why God took him so fast. He didn't want a have to argue with me.

"Snuff Washington," Minny say, "Lolly Jackson—heck, Lolly go on your list and two days later she pop up from her wheelchair like she touched Jesus. Everbody in Hinds County know about that one."

"But that ain't me," I say. "That's just prayer."

“But Bertrina—” Minny get to laughing, say, “You know Cocoa, the one Clyde run off with?”

“Phhh. You know I never forget her.”

“Week after Clyde left you, I heard that Cocoa wake up to her cootchie spoilt like a rotten oyster. Didn’t get better for three months. Bertrina, she good friends with Cocoa. She *know* your prayer works.”

My mouth drop open. Why she never tell me this before? “You saying people think I got the black magic?”

“I knew it make you worry if I told you. They just think you got a better connection than most. We all on a party line to God, but you, you setting right in his ear.”

My teapot start fussing on the stove, bringing me back to real life. Law, I reckon I just go ahead and put Miss Skeeter on the list, but how come, I don’t know. Which reminds me a what I don’t want a think about, that Miss Leefolt’s building me a bathroom cause she think I’m diseased. And Miss Skeeter asking don’t I want to change things, like changing Jackson, Mississippi, gone be like changing a lightbulb.

I’M STRINGING BEANS in Miss Leefolt’s kitchen and the phone rings. I’m hoping it’s Minny to say she found something. I done called everybody I ever waited on and they all told me the same thing: “We ain’t hiring.” But what they really mean is: “We ain’t hiring *Minny*.”

Even though Minny already had her last day a work three days ago, Miss Walter call Minny in secret last night, ask her to come in today cause the house feel too empty, what with most the furniture already taken away by Miss Hilly. I still don’t know what happen with Minny and Miss Hilly. I reckon I don’t really want to know.

“Leefolt residence.”

“Um, hi. This is . . .” The lady stop, clear her throat. “Hello. May I . . . may I please speak to Elizabeth Leer-folt?”

“Miss Leefolt ain’t home right now. May I take a message?”

“Oh,” she say, like she got all excited over nothing.

“May I ask who calling?”

"This is... Celia Foote. My husband gave me this number here and I don't know Elizabeth, but... well, he said she knows all about the Children's Benefit and the Ladies League." I know this name, but I can't quite place it. This woman talk like she from so deep in the country she got corn growing in her shoes. Her voice is sweet though, high-pitch. Still, she don't sound like the ladies round here do.

"I give her your message," I say. "What's your number?"

"I'm kind of new here and, well, that's not true, I've been here a pretty good stretch, gosh, over a year now. I just don't really know anybody. I don't... get out too much."

She clear her throat again and I'm wondering why she telling me all this. I'm the maid, she ain't gone win no friends talking to me.

"I was thinking maybe I could help out with the Children's Benefit from home," she say.

I remember then who she is. She the one Miss Hilly and Miss Leefolt always talking trash on cause she marry Miss Hilly's old boyfriend.

"I give her the message. What you say your number is again?"

"Oh, but I'm fixing to scoot off to the grocery store. Oh, maybe I should sit and wait."

"She don't reach you, she leave a message with your help."

"I don't have any help. In fact, I was planning on asking her about that too, if she could pass along the name of somebody good."

"You looking for help?"

"I'm in a stitch trying to find somebody to come all the way out to Madison County."

Well, what do you know. "I know somebody real good. She known for her cooking and she look after you kids too. She even got her own car to drive out to you house."

"Oh, well... I'd still like to talk to Elizabeth about it. Did I already tell you my number?"

"No ma'am," I sigh. "Go head." Miss Leefolt never gone recommend Minny, not with all a Miss Hilly's lies.

She say, "It's Missus Johnny Foote and it's Emerson two-sixty-six-oh-nine."

Just in case I say, "And her name is Minny, she at Lakewood eight-four-four-three-two. You got that?"

Baby Girl tug on my dress, say, "Tum-my hurt," and she rubbing her belly.

I get an idea. I say, "Hold on, what's that Miss Leefolt? Uh-huh, I tell her." I put the phone back to my mouth and say, "Miss Celia, Miss Leefolt just walk in and she say she ain't feeling good but for you to go on and call Minny. She say she call you if she be needing help with the Benefit."

"Oh! Tell her I said thank you. And I sure do hope she gets to feeling better. And to call me up anytime."

"That's Minny Jackson at Lakewood eight-four-four-three-two. Hang on, what's that?" I get a cookie and give it to Mae Mobley, feel nothing but delight at the devil in me. I am lying and I don't even care.

I tell Miss Celia Foote, "She say don't tell nobody bout her tip on Minny, cause all her friends want a hire her and they be real upset if they find out she give her to somebody else."

"I won't tell her secret if she won't tell mine. I don't want my husband to know I'm hiring a maid."

Well, if that ain't perfect then I don't know what is.

Soon as we hang up, I dial Minny quick as I can. But just as I do, Miss Leefolt walk in the door.

This a real predicament, see. I gave this Miss Celia woman Minny's number at home, but Minny working today cause Miss Walter lonely. So when she call, Leroy gone give her Miss Walter number cause he a fool. If Miss Walter answer the phone when Miss Celia call, then the whole jig is up. Miss Walter gone tell this woman everthing Miss Hilly been spreading around. I got to get to Minny or Leroy before all this happen.

Miss Leefolt head back to her bedroom and, just like I figured, the first thing she do is tie up the phone. First she call Miss Hilly. Then she call the hairdresser. Then she call the store about a wedding present, talking, talking, talking. Soon as she hang up, she come out and ask what they having for supper this week. I pull out the notebook and go down the list. No, she don't want pork chops. She trying to get her husband to reduce. She want skillet steak and green salad. And how many calories do I spec them

meringue thingies have? And don't give no more cookies to Mae Mobley cause she too fat and—and—and—

Law! For a woman who ain't said nothing to me but do this and use that bathroom, all a sudden she talking to me like I'm her best friend. Mae Mobley's dancing a hot-foot jig trying to get her mama to notice her. And just when Miss Leefolt about to bend down to pay her some attention, whoops! Miss Leefolt run out the door cause she forgot she got a errand to run and a blooming hour done passed already.

I can't make my fingers go round that dial fast enough.

"Minny! I got a job lined up. But you got to get to the phone—"

"She already call." Minny's voice is flat. "Leroy give her the number."

"So Miss Walter answer it," I say.

"Deaf as doo-doo and all a sudden it's like a miracle from God, she hear the phone ringing. I'm going in and out a the kitchen, not paying attention, but at the end I hear my name. Then Leroy call and I know that's what it was." Minny sound wore out, and she the kind that don't ever get tired.

"Well. Maybe Miss Walter didn't tell her them lies Miss Hilly started. You never know." But even I ain't fool enough to believe this.

"Even if she didn't, Miss Walters know all about how I got back at Miss Hilly. You don't know about the Terrible Awful Thing I did. I don't ever want you to know. I'm sure Miss Walters tell this woman I'm nothing short a the devil hisself." Her voice sound eerie. Like she a record player going too slow.

"I'm sorry. I wish I could a called you earlier so you could pick up that phone."

"You done what you can. Nothing nobody can do for me now."

"I be praying for you."

"Thank you," she say, and then her voice break down. "And I thank you for trying to help me."

We hang up and I go to mopping. The sound a Minny's voice scare me.

She always been a strong woman, always fighting. After Trelore died, she carry supper over to me ever night for three months straight. And ever day she say, "Nuh-uh, you ain't leaving me on this sorry earth without you," but I tell you, I was sure enough thinking about it.

I already had the rope tied when Minny found it. The coil was Treelore's, from back when he doing a science project with pulleys and rings. I don't know if I's gone use it, knowing it's a sin against God, but I wasn't in my right mind. Minny, though, she don't ask no questions about it, just pull it out from under the bed, put it in the can, take it to the street. When she come back in, she brush her hands together like she cleaning things up as usual. She all business, that Minny. But now, she sound bad. I got a mind to check under her bed tonight.

I put down the bucket a Sunshine cleaner them ladies is always smiling about on the tee-vee. I got to set down. Mae Mobley come up holding her tummy, say, "Make it not hurt."

She lay her face on my leg. I smooth her hair down over and over till she practically purring, feeling the love in my hand. And I think about all my friends, what they done for me. What they do ever day for the white women they waiting on. That pain in Minny's voice. Treelore dead in the ground. I look down at Baby Girl, who I know, deep down, I can't keep from turning out like her mama. And all of it together roll on top a me. I close my eyes, say the Lord's prayer to myself. But it don't make me feel any better.

Law help me, but something's gone have to be done.

BABY GIRL HUG ON MY LEGS all afternoon to where I bout fall over a few times. I don't mind. Miss Leefolt ain't said nothing to me or Mae Mobley since this morning. Been working so busy on that sewing machine in her bedroom. Trying to cover up something else she don't like the look of in the house.

After while me and Mae Mobley go in the regular living room. I got a load a Mister Leefolt's shirts to iron and after this I'm on get a pot roast going. I cleaned the bathrooms already, got the sheets changed, the rugs vacuumed. I always try to finish up early so me and Baby Girl can set together and play.

Miss Leefolt come in and watch me ironing. She do that sometimes. Frown and look. Then she smile real quick when I glance up. Pat up the back a her hair, trying to make it puffy.

"Aibileen, I have a surprise for you."

She smiling big now. She don't have no teeth showing, just a lip smile,

kind you got to watch. "Mister Leefolt and I have decided to build you your very own bathroom." She clap her hands together, drop her chin at me. "It's right out there in the garage."

"Yes ma'am." Where she think I been all this time?

"So, from now on, instead of using the guest bathroom, you can use your own right out there. Won't that be nice?"

"Yes ma'am." I keep ironing. Tee-vee's on and my program's fixing to start. She keep standing there looking at me though.

"So you'll use that one out in the garage now, you understand?"

I don't look at her. I'm not trying to make no trouble, but she done made her point.

"Don't you want to get some tissue and go on out there and use it?"

"Miss Leefolt, I don't really have to go right this second."

Mae Mobley point at me from the playpen, say, "Mae Mo juice?"

"I get you some juice, baby," I say.

"Oh." Miss Leefolt lick her lips a few times. "But when you do, you'll go on back there and use that one now, I mean . . . only that one, right?"

Miss Leefolt wear a lot a makeup, creamy-looking stuff, thick. That yellowish makeup's spread across her lips too, so you can barely tell she even got a mouth. I say what I know she want to hear: "I use my colored bathroom from now on. And then I go on and Clorox the white bathroom again real good."

"Well, there's no hurry. Anytime today would be fine."

But by the way she standing there fiddling with her wedding ring, she really mean for me to do it right now.

I put the iron down real slow, feel that bitter seed grow in my chest, the one planted after Treelore died. My face goes hot, my tongue twitchy. I don't know what to say to her. All I know is, I ain't saying it. And I know she ain't saying what she want a say either and it's a strange thing happening here cause nobody saying nothing and we still managing to have us a conversation.