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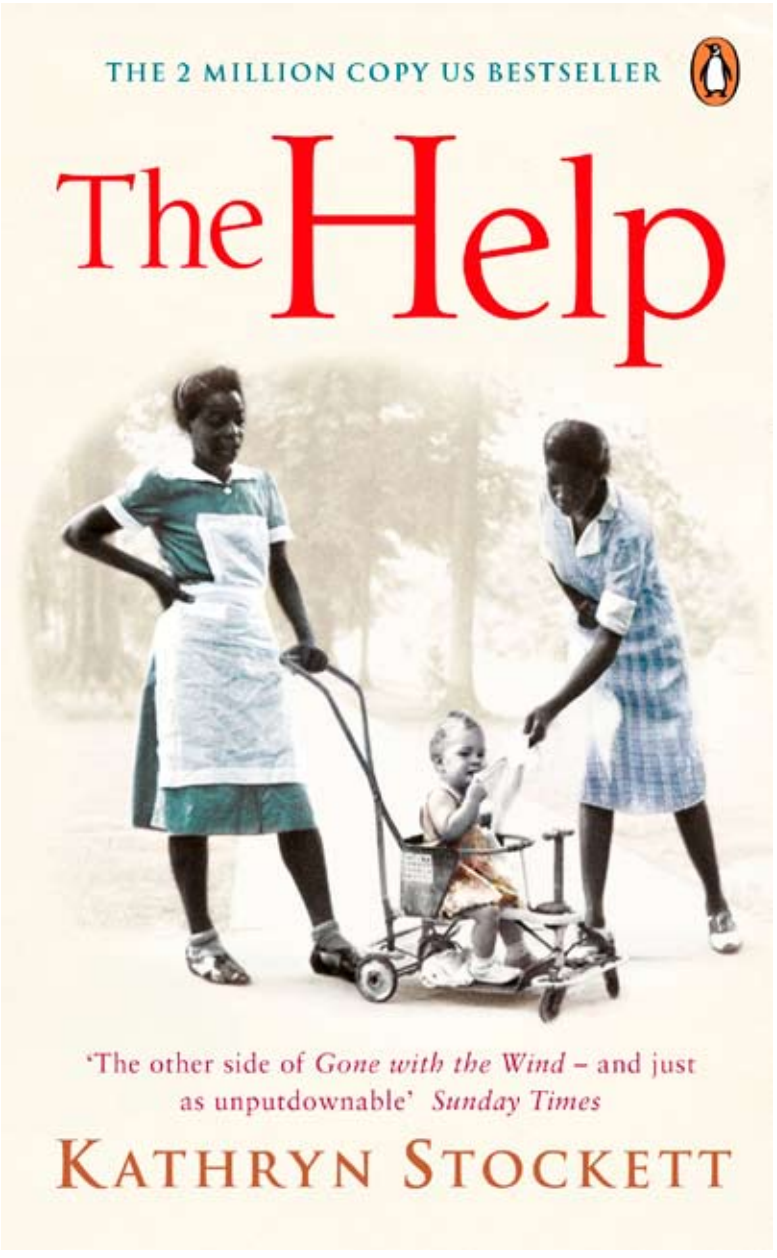
The Help

Written by Kathryn Stockett

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by
Katheryn Stockett

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Aibileen

CHAPTER 1

August 1962

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 everwhere 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.

"Minny cooks fine," say ole Miss Walter. "I'm just not so hungry like I used to be."

Minny 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 malnutritioned, 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 everbody 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."

Minny 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!"

Everthing 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. Whoooooweeee."

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 Treelore'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.