

## Unseen extract 8: *The Help*

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Read the extract carefully. It is taken from *The Help* by Kathryn Stockett which was first published in 2009. The novel tells the story of African-American maids working in white Southern households in Jackson, Mississippi during the early 1960s. This extract is narrated by Aibileen who works as a maid for the Leefolt household, cleaning and caring for their young children. Here she is approached at home by Skeeter Phelan, the daughter of a white family, who sees the injustice in her society and is interested in the truth about life as a maid following the mysterious disappearance of her maid Constantine.

### Sample question

Explore the significance of rebellion in this extract.

Remember to include in your answer relevant detailed analysis of the ways that Stockett shapes meanings.

### Extract

Everybody's looking over at us thinking I must be getting fired or something.

'Yes ma'm,' I sigh. 'What can I do for you?'

'I have an idea. Something I want to write about. But I need your help.'

I let all my breath out. I like Miss Skeeter, but come on. Sure, a phone call would have been nice. She never would have just shown up on some white lady's step without calling. But no, she done plopped herself down like she got ever right to barge in on me at home.

'I want to interview you. About what it's like to work as a maid.'

A red ball roll a few feet in my yard. The little Jones boy run across the street to get it. When he see Miss Skeeter, he stop dead. Then he run and snatch it up. He turn and dash off like he scared she gone get him.

'Like the Miss Myrna column?' I say, flat as a pan. 'Bout cleaning?'

'Not like Miss Myrna. I'm talking about a book,' she say and her eyes is big. She excited. 'Stories about what it's like to work for a white family. What it's like to work for, say... Elizabeth.'

I turn and look at her. This what she been trying to ask me the past two weeks in Miss Leefolt kitchen. 'You think Miss Leefolt gone agree to that? Me telling stories about her?'

Miss Skeeter's eyes drop down some. 'Well, no. I was thinking we wouldn't tell her. I'll have to make sure the other maids will agree to keep it secret, too.'

I scrunch up my forehead, just starting to get what she's asking. 'Other maids?'

'I was hoping to get four or five. To really show what it's like to be a maid in Jackson.'

I look around. We out here in the wide open. Don't she know how dangerous this could be, talking about this while the whole world can see us? 'Exactly what kind a stories you think you gone hear?'

'What you get paid, how they treat you, the bathrooms, the babies, all things you've seen, good and bad.'

She looks excited, like this is some kind a game. For a second, I think I might be more mad than I am tired.

'Miss Skeeter,' I whisper, 'do that not sound kind a dangerous to you?'

'Not if we're careful -'

'Shhh, please. Do you not know what would happen to me if Miss Leefolt find out I talked behind her back?'

'We won't tell her, or anyone.' She lowers her voice some, but not enough. 'These will be private interviews.'

I just stare at her. Is she crazy? 'Did you hear about the colored boy this morning? One they beat with a tire iron for *accidentally* using the white bathroom?'

She just look at me, blink a little. 'I know things are unstable but this is -'

'And my cousin Shinelle in Cauter County? They burn up her car cause she went *down* to the voting station.'

'No one's ever written a book like this,' she say, finally whispering, finally starting to understand, I guess. 'We'd be breaking new ground. It's a brand-new perspective.'

I spot a flock of maids in they uniforms walking by my house. They look over, see me setting with a white woman on my front step. I grit my teeth, already know my phone gone be ringing tonight.

'Miss Skeeter,' and I say it slow, try to make it count, 'I do this with you, I might as well burn my *own* house down.'

Miss Skeeter start biting her nail then. 'But I've already...' She shut her eyes closed tight. I think about asking her, *Already what*, but I'm kind a scared to hear what she gone say. She reach in her pocketbook, pull out a scrap a paper and write her telephone number on it.

'Please, will you at least think about it?'

I sigh, stare out at the yard. Gentle as I can, I say 'No ma'am.'

She set the scrap a paper between us on the step, then she get in her Cadillac. I'm too tired to get up. I just stay there, watch while she roll real slow down the road. The boys playing ball clear the street, stand on the side frozen, like it's a funeral car passing by.

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