

Excerpt from *The Help* by Kathryn Stockett

“Sit down on your behind, Minny, because I’m about to tell you the rules for working in a White Lady’s house.”

I was fourteen years old to the day. I sat at the little wooden table in my mam’s kitchen eyeing that caramel cake on the cooling rack, waiting to be iced. Birthdays were the only day of the year I was allowed to eat as much as I wanted.

I was about to quit school and start my first real job. Mama wanted me to stay on and go to ninth grade—she’d always wanted to be a schoolteacher instead of working in Miss Woodra’s house. But with my sister’s heart problem and my no-good drunk daddy, it was up to me and Mama. I already knew about housework. After school, I did most of the cooking and the cleaning. But if I was going off to work in somebody else’s house, who’d be looking after ours?

Mama turned me by the shoulders so I’d look at her instead of the cake. Mama was a crack-whip. She was proper. She took nothing from nobody. She shook her finger so close to my face, it made me cross-eyed.

Rule Number One for working for a white lady, Minny: it is nobody’s business. You keep your nose out of your White Lady’s problems, you don’t go crying to her with yours—you can’t pay the light bill? Your feet are too sore? Remember one thing: white people are not your friends. They don’t want to hear about it. And when Miss White Lady catches her man with the lady next door, you keep out of it, you head me?

“Rule Number Two: don’t you *ever* let that White Lady find you sitting on her toilet. I don’t care if you’ve got to go so bad it’s coming out of your hairbraids. If there’s not one out back for the help, you find yourself a time when she’s not there in a bathroom she doesn’t use.

“Rule Number Three—” Mama jerked my chin back around to face her because that cake had lured me in again. “Rule Number Three: when you’re cooking white people’s good, you taste it with a different spoon. You put that spoon to your mouth, think nobody’s looking, put it back in the pot, might as well throw it out.

“Rule Number Four: You use the same cup, same fork, same plate every day. Keep it in a separate cupboard and tell that white woman that’s the one you’ll use from here on out.

“Rule Number Five: you eat in the kitchen.

“Rule Number Six: you don’t hit on her children. White people like to do their own spanking.

“Rule Number Seven: this is the last one, Minny. Are you listening to me? No sass-mouthing.”

“Mama, I know how—”

Oh, I hear you when you think I can't, muttering about having to clean the stovepipe, about the last little pieces of chicken left for poor Minny. You sass a white woman in the morning, you'll be sassing out on the street in the afternoon."

I was the way my mama acted when Miss Woodra brought her home, all Yes Ma'aming, No Ma'aming, I sure do thank you Ma'aming. *Why I got to be like that? I know how to stand up to people.*

"Now come here and give your mama a hug on your birthday—Lord, you are heavy as a house, Minny."

"I ain't eaten all day, when can I have my cake?"

"Don't say ain't, you speak properly now. I didn't raise you to talk like a mule."

First day at my White Lady's house, I ate my ham sandwich in the kitchen, put my plate up in my spot in the cupboard. When that little brat stole my pocketbook and hid it in the over, I didn't whoop her on the behind.

But when the White Lady said: "Not I want you to be sure and handwash all the clothes first, then put them in the electric machine to finish up."

I said: "Why I got to handwash when the power washer gone do the job> That's the biggest waste a time I ever heard of."

That White Lady smiled at me, and five minutes later, I was out on the street.