

NORMA WATKINS

Come Down on the Wicked

Sadie was happy when the Dorgans built on the lot to the east. She and Bertie invited the new neighbors for Thanksgiving that year. Ed Dorgan seemed like a nice man, and so did his awkward teenage son, Eddie. Hard to tell, though, since the wife Ida, didn't leave much room for either of them to speak.

Not that Sadie minded. Everything coming out of Ida's busy mouth was complimentary: "How did Sadie and Aubergine manage to get these biscuits so light? What was Sadie's secret with a turkey? Every time she tried to cook one, it ended up tasting like sawdust. Who knew you could make your own cranberry sauce—she bought hers canned, and it flopped out on the plate like purple Jell-O."

"My Lord," she said when she toured Sadie's big vegetable garden. "I'd have never guessed from peeking over the fence. It's like the Garden of Eden back here."

Sadie tried to look modest.

"You do all this work yourself?" Ida said. "Let me see your hands." She examined both sides. "I can see that you do."

She wanted Sadie's opinion about the sofa she was buying, and Sadie's ideas about wallpaper. Flattery, Sadie thought, but the praise felt like a warm light, illuminating talents her family took for granted. No one had ever asked her for decorating advice.

Ida was a confider: she fretted about Eddie, who was seventeen and never came out of his room. Sadie told her not to worry. All teenagers were that way and Eddie would emerge when he was ready.

To repay them for the invitations, Ed Dorgan brought over steaks for Bertie to grill in the barbeque he'd had made from a fifty-five gallon drum.

"If that isn't the cleverest thing I ever saw in my life?" Ida exclaimed the first time Bertie lifted the hinged lid, revealing a bed of glowing coals. You are a pile of surprises, Bertie Hulen, isn't he, Sadie? I've always admired a man who could get things done."

Bertie rolled his eyes at his wife. He and their cook Aubergine were not as enamored of Ida Dorgan as Sadie was.

"Like owning a parrot," Bertie said that night in bed. "Squawk, squawk, squawk. Don't know how the poor man stands it."

"She's a taker," Aubergine said. She and Sadie were making peach chutney. "I know a taker when I see one. Feeding us that sugar talk. Comes in my kitchen, grabbing the lids off my pots, sniffing around. 'What'd you put in here, Aubergine? What smells so good?' Pinching my cookies. Showing her teeth. 'What kind of cookies are these, Aubergine. I'd love to take a couple home to my Eds.' You know she's eating them her own self soon as she's out the door."

"She's lonely," Sadie said. "Nothing to do but sit over there in that big house all day."

"Allergic to work is what she is," Aubergine said. "I hear her maid talking on the bus. The woman is lazy as she is mean."

Ida kept up the flattery, peering over the fence, watching Sadie work. How did Sadie manage Aubergine so well? She couldn't make her help do a thing.

"I don't manage Aubergine," Sadie spoke without turning around. She wished Ida's voice didn't carry so. "If anything, Aubergine manages me."

A few weeks later, Aubergine told Sadie that Ida's girl had quit. "Said she couldn't take it another day. Rather go hungry than be around that woman."

Sure enough, Ida Dorgan came over the next week wanting to know if Aubergine knew anyone looking for work.

“Sho don’t,” Aubergine said. Sadie saw her trying to look sorry.

Ida approached Sadie the next week. “Ed’s boss is coming for dinner. Do you think Aubergine would help out? He wants to see the new house and I can’t cook worth a lick. Would you ask her? You’d be saving my life.”

Aubergine said, No thank you.

“You’d be saving her life, Aubergine. It’s just for one night.”

“Not this nigger.”

When Aubergine called herself the n-word, Sadie knew she’d crossed a line.

“We can cook the food here,” Sadie said. “You’d only have to go over and serve it.”

“Wait on that woman?” Aubergine shook her head.

Sadie went over and talked to Ida. She came back saying the Dorgans would pay her well for four hours’ work.

“What’s well?” Aubergine said.

“She offered a hundred dollars.”

Aubergine looked thoughtful. “That would be Christmas for my grandbabies.”

She and Sadie cooked. They got a Beef Wellington ready, and the batter for Yorkshire pudding. Sadie picked beans and French cut them. Aubergine made a batch of her yeast rolls. A few hours before the dinner, Sadie picked a mixture of baby lettuces for a salad and pulled up radishes—purple, red and white. She beat together a vinaigrette while Aubergine made the lemon me-ringue pie.

Aubergine went over at four, bearing the Beef Wellington, and wearing a clean, starched uniform. Sadie went with her, carrying the beans, and batter. They made two trips, going in the back door.

Ida fluttered around them like a scared chicken. “It all looks so good. Are you sure that beef is done? I don’t think Ed’s boss eats undercooked meat.

Look at that pie. My, Lord, Aubergine, how do you get your meringue to stand up that way? Salad? I didn't know we were having salad. I'll have to get out more plates. Come tell me what you think of the table, Sadie."

"It's nice, but you don't have any flowers," Sadie said. "I'll pick some and make you a nice centerpiece."

Ida groaned. "Who can think of flowers with everything else in my head."

What did she have in her head, Sadie wondered. They'd done all the work. She picked a mixture of roses and verbena, arranging them in her mother's white soup tureen. Carrying them, she kicked at Ida's back door.

"Putting the big pot in the little one over here." Aubergine took the flowers. "She's already trying to boss me around: 'Hold the dish like this when you serve, Aubergine.' Woman couldn't show a shoe which way to go."

Sadie started giggling. "Keep your voice down."

"If I live through this," Aubergine said, "it'll be the toughest hundred dollars I ever made."

Sadie sat that night, brushing her hair in front of the mirror. Bertie was propped in bed, his striped pajamas buttoned to the top, reading the latest *Field and Stream*. "Hope I haven't made a mistake talking Aubergine into this."

"Worst could happen is she'd drop a dish," Bertie said. "And if she does, I hope it falls into Ida Dorgan's fat lap."

Sadie grinned, wiping off Pond's Cleanser. "You are too mean to live, Bertie Hulen. Ida's not fat, she's plump. Pleasingly plump."

"If that's pleasingly plump," Bertie said, "please don't let me get sat on by fat."

He'd begun wearing reading glasses. Sadie looked at him, peering over his tortoise-shell lens, and decided her husband looked wise and funny. He *was* wise and funny.

When Aubergine didn't show up for work Monday morning, Sadie hoped Saturday night's dinner hadn't made her sick. She called the house. No answer. Maybe she'd slept late and missed her bus. She had a man friend, a preacher named Josiah Lemon, but Sadie didn't have a number for him.

She got in the car and drove to Aubergine's house. No one answered the door when she rang.

Across the street, a woman stuck her head out. "If you're looking for Aubergine Ellis, the police came and took her away."

Sadie felt like she'd been hit in the face. "The police?"

"Yes, Ma'am. Came early this morning. Put her in a car and drove off."

Sadie drove straight to Bertie's office. Interrupted him in the middle of phone call. When he motioned her to wait, she took the receiver out of his hand, said, "He'll call you back," and hung up. "The police have arrested Aubergine. We've got to go get her out."

They drove to the station. A man behind the desk acted like he didn't know which person named Ellis they meant. Sadie suspected they did this to black people—pretending to mix them up.

"How many people named Aubergine Ellis you picked up in the last twenty-four hours?" Bertie spoke in his big voice and the man sat up straighter.

He went through his papers. "Ellis. She's been transferred over to County. You can't get her out 'til she's had a hearing."

"We'll see about that," Bertie said.

They drove to the County jail. *Get her*. Sadie wanted to scream in anger. Like she wasn't a human. Like they'd come to claim their property.

The deputy at the County jail was more respectful. The charge was grand larceny. She would have a hearing after lunch and, if the Hulens wanted to put up her bail, she'd be free awaiting trial.

"What she supposed to have stolen?" Bertie said.

"Says here, coins."

"What kind of coins?"

The deputy read: "Eighteen fifty-cent pieces."

"That's nine dollars," Bertie said.

"According to the owner, these were 1936 Walking Liberty coins, worth more than \$200 each."

"Who made the complaint?" Sadie said.

The deputy looked at his paper. "A Mrs. Edward Dorgan."

She and Bertie looked at each other. "We'll be back for the hearing," Sadie said.

They drove home. "It's got to be some kind of mistake," she said.

Bertie said, "I told you that woman was crazy."

"I talked Aubergine into it." Sadie couldn't hold still. "Should never have let her set foot in that house. She didn't want to go."

"Don't you worry," Bertie said. "We'll straighten this out."

They knocked on the Dorgans' front door. Ida answered.

"You had our maid arrested?" Bertie said.

Ida crossed her arms. "I had no choice. She stole from me."

"Aubergine has never stolen a dime in her life," Sadie said. She was so angry she was afraid she was going to cry.

"I beg to differ," Ida said. "She was the only person in the room with those coins, and the next morning they were gone."

"I hope you know false accusation is also a crime," Bertie said.

Ida looked frightened by the tone of Bertie's voice. "Don't try and threaten me."

"Don't worry," Bertie said. "You'll know when I start threatening."

"I'm afraid I'll have to ask you to leave." Ida closed the door until only her nose showed.

"Aubergine was helping you out," Sadie said. "Doing you a favor. How can you accuse her of stealing?"

"I know what I know," Ida said. The door closed and Sadie heard the dead bolt click into place.

"What an asshole." Bertie stomped home. "We'll go to the hearing. I'll represent her. I doubt they have any proof other than Aubergine being in the house."

Inside the courtroom that afternoon, when they brought Aubergine out, Sadie saw that her eyes were red and her hair askew. They hadn't given her time to get properly dressed. She wore what must be her house clothes, a skirt with the hem dragging on one side and a faded sweater. Sadie had never seen

her friend when she wasn't put together and in charge of her life. It was terrible making her appear in public this way.

Sadie wasn't allowed, but Bertie as Aubergine's lawyer spoke to her quietly. Sadie saw Aubergine straighten and the fire came back into her eyes.

Ida Dorgan walked into the courtroom, looking everywhere but at them.

On the stand, she claimed only Aubergine could have stolen the coins. They had been left to her by her father and were worth thousands. It was too much of a coincidence that they would disappear on the only night this colored maid was in her house.

Colored maid. Sadie was livid. How could she have been friends with this stupid, prejudiced woman?

Aubergine testified that she had been doing the woman a favor, working for her one night only. Had only been in two rooms of the house, the kitchen and dining room. Didn't know there were any coins, and, anyway, was not a thief.

The judge said the evidence looked circumstantial. Was Mrs. Dorgan sure no one else could have taken the coins.

"I'm sure," she said in a proud, positive little voice that made Sadie wanted to jump over the rail and strangle her.

The judge said he was releasing Mrs. Ellis on her own recognizance until a trial.

Driving Aubergine home, Bertie tried to reassure her. "This will blow over. They got nothing."

Aubergine got out of the car at her house, looking tired and old. She thanked Bertie and hugged Sadie. "You're good people," she said. "I will never forget what you did for me today."

"Why did she sound like she's telling us good-bye," Sadie said.

"She wasn't." Bertie turned the car around. "That's just her way."

On Tuesday morning, Aubergine did not come to work. When Sadie called, she said, "I won't be coming in anymore, Miss Sadie. I don't want to be

in the same county with that woman, much less next door. I can't be responsible for what I might do."

Sadie had to sit down. "Aubergine, you can't mean that. We've been together twenty-five years. This will blow over, I promise. Things will go back to the way they were before, just you and me. I won't let Ida Dorgan near this place."

She heard Aubergine sigh. "I've been insulted by a lot of white people in my time, but I never been accused of stealing. I'm sorry to have to do you this way because you've been good to me, but Josiah and I talked it over. He's been offered a church up by Greenville and we decided to take it. Time for new pastures. Time for me to quit working for other folks and take care of myself."

Sadie wept. She hadn't felt this bad since she was twelve and found her kitten flattened and cold on the street outside their house.

"You'll be fine," Aubergine said. "I taught you everything I know."

Sadie heard a click and Aubergine was gone.

"She'll come back," Bertie said that night. "She has to return for the trial. By that time, she'll be ready to come home."

But there was no trial. Three months later, Ed Dorgan went by Bertie's office to apologize. Their son Eddie had been sent to rehab. Free of drugs and repentant, he confessed that he'd stolen the Walking Liberty half-dollars and pawned them. Ed asked Bertie to forgive his wife's behavior.

The news hit Sadie almost as hard as Aubergine's leaving. "What an evil woman." She raged at Bertie. "She destroyed Aubergine. Took away the best friend I ever had. I hope she dies. I wish I had the guts to go over there and strangle her myself."

"Honey, you don't mean that."

"I do, Bertie. I can feel her neck in my hands."

Ida Dorgan came over once, presumably to make her own apologies. Sadie saw her heading up the front walk with what looked like a pie in her hand. She opened an upstairs window and hollered out: "Come round here again and I'll shoot you myself."

Ida scurried back down the walk, looking over her shoulder, trying to run without dropping the pie. Sadie watched with a bitter pleasure. Bertie was right; Ida Dorgan was fat.

The next day, Sadie placed a special order with the nursery. She planted a blackberry hedge between their two houses, from the front lot line to the back, a hedge that would grow so high, thick and thorny, she would never have to set eyes on another Dorgan.

Aubergine wrote: She was happy. Josiah liked the new church. She missed her grandbabies, but was making friends, and glad not to be working after half a century of it. Sadie replied by return mail, three pages, telling Aubergine what was growing, what she planned to put up, and how much she missed her friend. When she didn't hear back, she kept writing. At Christmas and Easter, she sent cards with money. Aubergine responded to these: polite, formal thank you notes written in her beautiful script. In one, she wrote that she gotten herself a dog, a black and white mutt named Spot. Sadie felt irrationally jealous of this unknown dog. There was an Aubergine-shaped hole in her life.

Nine years later, Sadie heard from the woman at the cleaners that Ida Dorgan had cancer. Her heart did not soften, not even when she heard from the same woman that Ida's cancer had spread and Mr. Dorgan was bringing in his own cleaning. Not even when she read Ida's obituary in *The Clarion Ledger*.

"Serves her right." She spoke to Bertie from behind the newspaper.

Bertie said, "You're a hard woman, Sadie Hulen."

"Like God's judgment," Sadie said. "I come down on the wicked."