I looked at each other, surprised, then laughed at her unplanned play on words.

However, the Soul Brothers won the competition.

At present, Cathy is finding there are no really definitive answers. Perhaps her Yearbook best reflects the times. It's filled with the same syrupy phrases I remember from the past, but interspersed here and there are some unique additions like "To a dear Soul Sister" or "Man, are you cool."

VILLA MAE

Vivian H. Olsen

When I saw Villa Mae Ferguson for the first time, standing gaunt and forlorn in the wind, my impulse was to keep on driving. I recognized her from Louise's description: tall, plain, grayheaded. But she had not mentioned the mournful protruding eyes that looked without hope for the stranger who was to be her employer for the day. I did not want to become involved. She was too old to be doing housework and, after all, it was not the right bus stop. I could drive home without anyone's knowing I had gone as far as Lee and Glebe, and she could hardly expect me to meet the ten o'clock bus at our stop. Even while I bolstered my arguments, though, I knew I would stop. I rolled down the window. "Are you Villa Mae Ferguson?" The smile was like lights turned on in a dark room.

"They're getting so high-hat they won't do windows or floors or anything."

What does one do for $1.25 an hour plus bus fare?

On a cup of coffee and a slice of unbuttered bread ("No ma'am, I never eat butter") Villa Mae begins the day's work swiftly and deftly in spite of her sixty-eight years. She ignores my instructions to use the mop and gets down on hands and knees to scrub the floors. She works steadily and hard, giving herself no respite except lunchtime. Sometimes I have wished she could get telephone messages straight, and I have wondered about the eighth grade education she claims to have had in South Carolina. Once when I asked her to follow the instructions on a can of floor wax, she said, "I left my glasses home today. Will you read it?"

At lunchtime she makes excuses not to sit at the table with the family, but I discovered that instead of taking her tray to the recreation room to eat, she was going into our cluttered unfinished laundry room and eating off the top of the washing machine.

"Please, Villa Mae, sit where it's attractive and comfortable."

She laughed, "Oh, I like it here."

She kept correcting me when I called her "Mrs. Ferguson" — "Just call me Villa Mae." But, I have not given up on the meals and we often eat together and talk.

"Of course, you can't depend on them. Sometimes they just don't show up."

One Thursday when I was expecting Villa Mae, she did not appear, but two weeks later stood as usual on the front porch, clutching the paper bag that held apron and work shoes, smiling broadly, "Good mornin', Miz Olsen!" When I asked her why she had not come two weeks earlier she said she hadn't had money for bus fare.

"Surely you could borrow fifty cents from a neighbor," I said.

"No, ma'am, I don't know them."

"Couldn't you even borrow a dime to phone me?"

"No, ma'am."

I was annoyed but let it pass. I felt it was a poor excuse for inconveniencing me. I did not really believe that she had no money. Nevertheless I asked her if she would like additional work. Emphatically *yes*. And I found two neighbors who wished to have her come.

I also asked about breakfast. No, she didn't eat breakfast because there wasn't time. "Miz Olsen, I have to catch that 6:00 o'clock bus way out in Maryland to be here by 9:00."

"Why do you live in Maryland when you work in Virginia?"

"We used to live in the District – we lived in the same neighborhood in the Bottoms for forty years, and then they tore it down."

"Forty years!" I exclaimed. "And didn't they build apartments for the people who'd been living there all that time?"

Villa Mae was rather indignant that I could suggest such a thing. "My land, no! They're expensive, big apartments. They're beautiful!"

"Well, surely they made arrangements for your housing when you had to move?"

"No. We just had to go find a place. We did the best we could. We've got this room over in Maryland, but we don't know anybody over there."

"Where does your husband work?"

"He works over here in Virginia. We worked for the same company twenty-five years but then Mr. Smith died and his wife sold the company, and Dan, he been out of a job, but now he's working on construction."

Forty years in one neighborhood and then uprooted. Twenty-five years working for one company and then jobless. I shut Villa Mae's problems from my mind. Even at my age they would be traumatic, but what is it like to have such things happen when one is sixty-eight?

"You should try to find a house nearer your work," was all I could say.

In the autumn she happily announced that they had found a room in Northwest Washington, not far from their old neighborhood. I thought some day I would go visit her and see where they lived, but I was too busy. Holiday time came, and bitter cold weather, and flu. In February Villa Mae missed a week or two of work.

"Have you been sick, Villa Mae?" I asked when she came.

"No, ma'am. I had to be in court. I asked a man to phone you. Didn't he call you?"

"Not that I know of. Why were you in court?"

"Well, we got no heat or electricity for two months."

"Two months!" I gasped.

The manager of their rooming house, who collected the rent for the owner, had pocketed the money he was supposed to use to pay gas and electric bills, and hence the companies had turned off the utilities. Finally the owner, a hero in Villa Mae's eyes, had come to investigate and said, "Why, it's so cold it's a wonder you poor people aren't dead." And by going to court the tenants were able to establish that they had paid their full rent and were not to blame for the non-payment of utility bills.

My head buzzed with questions. Was the manager the villain or the scapegoat for the owner? What kind of people would not or could not take action to get the utilities back on in less than two months? I was driving Villa Mae to the bus stop, however, and had time only to ask, "How did you keep warm?" She laughed tolerantly at my ignorance as to how the poor must live. "We just go to bed to keep warm," she said.

About that time Helen Gagon, a Mormon long active in civil rights work and related fields, suggested I attend a Laubach Literacy Workshop, where volunteers are trained to teach literacy classes for adults. At the first session I was met by three warm, enthusiastic teachers, ready to handle a class of forty. Sadly, there were only three of us who came to hear them; we were rather suspicious and on guard at first. But for me the words the teacher was speaking took on special significance, and Villa Mae came more and more into focus. "Illiterates are usually sensitive and proud. They don't want anyone to know they can't read or write . . . If you know someone who asks, 'Will you read this for me? I left my glasses home,' or someone who says he went only to seventh or eighth grade, maybe he is one of the eight million illiterates in the United States."

Holding up a large chart with strange characters printed on it, he continued. "What do these mean to you?" Blank. I could not even see similarities among the various characters at first. Little black designs, black lines, black shapes and squiggles. We were told they were Hebrew words. "Remember as you begin teaching: this is what the alphabet looks like to someone who is illiterate." Slowly the idea of what it means to be illiterate began to sift into my well-protected awareness. A thousand acts, so simple for one who reads could be a morass of obstacles: getting off the bus at the right stop, learning streets without names for guides, looking up an unknown number in a phone book, coping with realtors and utilities, even buying groceries, reading labels, following recipes.

How should I approach Villa Mae about lessons? The workshop teachers said she was probably too old, although one man had succeeded in teaching his foreign-born grandfather by the Laubach method. "The sweat poured down his face," he remembered. "It's hard to realize the effort that's needed to concentrate that much." I wanted badly to begin lessons with Villa Mae.

But she did not come to our cul-de-sac for several weeks and did not phone. I felt particularly frustrated because of my plans and because I had arranged

for her to work for two other neighbors. April fourth was the day I expected her at my house. That was the day Dr. Martin Luther King was slain.

We sat transfixed before the television and watched stores that we had shopped in a few years ago on 14th Street turned into smoking rubble. In the evening we could see the glow of fire in the sky to the east of us.

"There'll be a Cadillac parked in front and a color TV inside."

On Monday, when traffic was permitted to move freely in the District, I drove to 25th Street near Pennsylvania Avenue and at last made the visit to Villa Mae's home. It was an old red brick row house, with rusty steps and railing that led to a front door lumpy with many coats of paint now fissured by weathering. I knocked for a long time before a stout woman answered the door and let me into the bare foyer. It seemed a long time, too, before she conceded that maybe a woman named Villa Mae Ferguson lived there. "She might be that woman on third floor. I only lived here two weeks and I never seen her. She been sick ever since I come. Hasn't been downstairs for two weeks."

I called out at the bottom of the stairs, "Villa Mae, it's Mrs. Olsen." She did not ask me to come up. She came slowly down the stairway, looking tired and old, rubbing her arm in its thin sweater. No, she hadn't had the flu. It was just the rheumatism.

"Is there anything I can do?" I asked. "I've been worried about you because of these riots. Do you have friends over on 14th Street? I'm driving over there and I'll take you if you'd care to go."

She responded with fear. "Oh, no! No, ma'am! I don't know nobody there."

"Oh, I didn't know," I apologized. "I just thought you might have a friend you were worried about. . . Wouldn't you just come for a ride in the park? The forsythia's in bloom and the lady said you haven't been out."

"No, ma'am. No, thank you." She was firm. Everything I am doing, I thought, is probably the wrong thing. But I did have the presence of mind to ask if her husband was working. No. He'd been out of work since January. And how many jobs did she have? Only the three in our cul-de-sac. I left an advance on her next week's wages, and she promised to come the following Thursday. I told her she would not have to do housework if she did not feel well.

"They'd rather be on welfare than work for a living."

Villa Mae did come the next Thursday. I asked her if she had thought of getting public assistance. "No, ma'am, we've never taken anything we didn't earn." I told her she *had* earned some help by working hard all her life and urged her to go to the District Welfare Office. (How foolish I had been to advise her to move to Virginia, near her work — a move which made her ineligible for welfare.) Two weeks later she came again and reported that she and Dan had gone to the office and stayed in the long waiting lines for the day and arranged for Dan to receive a medical examination. Villa Mae would

need a birth certificate to establish her age. "But they didn't have them in South Carolina when I was born," she said.

"The letter says you can get a substitute for a birth certificate from the school records. We can write the school you went to," I encouraged her.

"I never went to school," said Villa Mae. "The white lady my mother worked for taught me to read along with her little girl. But they didn't have no schools for Negro children."

The first step toward literacy had been taken. I told Villa Mae I was sure there would be some way to prove her age, and then asked if I could help her brush up on her reading. Two weeks later we settled down at the kitchen table with the Laubach beginner's book and started the lesson.

She seemed to drink in the words, and carefully said the sounds after me.

"This is a bird. . . . This is the word '*bird.*' Read '*bird.*' Bird begins with *buh.* Say *buh.* The sound of this letter is *buh,* the name of this letter is *b.* Say *b.*" But she could not seem to remember the first line after we tried another. We went over the chart several times, slowly, reviewing each time, but Villa Mae could not identify the letters or words without prompting, and I thought sadly that we would have to give up before we had started. But we would go on with the rest of the first lesson anyhow to avoid the unpleasantness of saying "can't" until later. The second page contains a story in simple sentences: "This is a girl. This is a bird. . . . The girl has a bird. . . ." Villa Mae concentrated on those words with an awesome intensity. Her whole being seemed involved in her desire to read a sentence. She studied the first sentence, breathing heavily, and then went back to the chart; she was oblivious to me now and I was afraid to make a sound. And suddenly it came. She saw the point of the picture: *b* looks like a bird with a long tail and a round body; *c* looks like a cup on its side. She began to recognize the individual letters as well as the words. In a few minutes she had mastered the key nouns and as quickly was able to identify the unfamiliar articles and verbs. She made a rocking motion in her chair, eyes shining. "This is reading!" she exulted. "This is reading!"

I wish I could report that we have rapidly advanced through successive lessons, but housing problems again disrupted the Fergusons' lives. Villa Mae had told me that the new man who collected their rent in April had not been seen since, and the tenants had been notified they would have to move out. I tried to learn more from the realty firm of the owner without giving names. The firm had not received the April rent. From what I could piece together the house should have been rented to one family only, but the in-between operator — who collected rent money and gave no receipts — rented in a false name and then leased to as many families as could be squeezed into the decaying rooms, sharing the kitchen and bathroom. "Us poor folks got to live somewhere, Miz Olsen," said Villa Mae. I typed a letter "To whom it may concern" requesting that I be contacted before any steps were taken to evict the Fergusons, and she took it home along with her sack full of outgrown clothes and shoes I had been giving her regularly. However, they and the other tenants moved out without asking help from me, frightened by a letter they received

threatening court action unless back rent was paid. The Fergusons moved to another old house in a block being torn down by expanding George Washington University. I visited Villa Mae there a short time ago. Most of the houses are boarded up, but Villa Mae's, next to a parking lot, had the door ajar. She invited me to see their room, which has three large windows looking down on F Street. The paint was peeling and the bathroom floor at the end of the hall was rotting and smelly, but their room was airy and as clean as hard work could make it.

Shortly after they moved, Villa Mae's husband fell while working on one of his "odd jobs." It is hard to say whether this is a misfortune because in the hospital he is fed three meals a day, which is more than Villa Mae gets. The day I visited her I drove her to the hospital to see Dan, and we passed Resurrection City near the Lincoln Memorial. She was fascinated to see the wooden tent-like structures among the trees. "I understand they are getting a hot meal every day," I said, half jokingly. "Do you?"

"Land, no!" she laughed. It was a warm day.

"How much do you spend on food a week?" I persisted.

"Oh, now I'm alone, I can do on two dollars."

"What can you buy for two dollars!" I was trying to divide our food bill by six.

"I buy potatoes and beans mostly."

On the day I visited her, she carefully took her Laubach beginner's book from the broken dresser drawer and showed me the letters she has been practicing. I hope at least this path we can pursue longer together.