

HARPER
LEE



TO KILL A
MOCKINGBIRD

Chapter 6

“Yes,” said our father, when Jem asked him if we could go over and sit by Miss Rachel’s fishpool with Dill, as this was his last night in Maycomb. “Tell him so long for me, and we’ll see him next summer.” We leaped over the low

wall that separated Miss Rachel’s yard from our driveway. Jem whistled bob-white and Dill answered in the darkness. “Not a breath blowing,” said Jem. “Looka yonder.” He pointed to the east. A gigantic moon was rising behind Miss Maudie’s pecan trees. “That makes it seem hotter,” he said. “Cross in it tonight?” asked Dill, not looking up. He was constructing a cigarette from newspaper and string. “No, just the lady. Don’t light that thing, Dill, you’ll stink up this whole end of town.” There was a lady in the moon in Maycomb. She sat at a dresser combing her hair. “We’re gonna miss you, boy,” I said.

“Reckon we better watch for Mr. Avery?” Mr. Avery boarded across the street from Mrs. Henry Lafayette Dubose’s house. Besides making change in the collection plate every Sunday, Mr. Avery sat on the porch every night until nine o’clock and sneezed. One evening we were privileged to witness a performance by him which seemed to have been his positively last, for he never did it again so long as we watched. Jem and I were leaving

Miss Rachel's front steps one night when Dill stopped us: "Golly, looka yonder." He pointed across the street. At first we saw nothing but a kudzu-covered front porch, but a closer inspection revealed an arc of water descending from the leaves and splashing in the yellow circle of the street light, some ten feet from source to earth, it seemed to us. Jem said Mr. Avery misfigured, Dill said he must drink a gallon a day, and the ensuing contest to determine relative distances and respective prowess only made me feel left out again, as I was untalented in this area. Dill stretched, yawned, and said altogether too casually. "I know what, let's go for a walk." He sounded fishy to me. Nobody in Maycomb just went for a walk. "Where to, Dill?" Dill jerked his head in a southerly direction. Jem said, "Okay." When I protested, he said sweetly, "You don't have to come along, Angel May." "You don't have to go. Remember-" Jem was not one to dwell on past defeats: it seemed the only message he got from Atticus was insight into the art of cross examination. "Scout, we ain't gonna do anything, we're just goin' to the street light and back." We strolled silently down the sidewalk, listening to porch swings creaking with the weight of the neighborhood, listening to the soft night-murmurs of the grown people on our

street. Occasionally we heard Miss Stephanie Crawford laugh. "Well?" said Dill. "Okay," said Jem. "Why don't you go on home, Scout?" "What are you gonna do?" Dill and Jem were simply going to peep in the window with the loose shutter to see if they could get a look at Boo Radley, and if I didn't want to go with them I could go straight home and keep my fat flopping mouth shut, that was all. "But what in the sam holy hill did you wait till tonight?" Because nobody could see them at night, because Atticus would be so deep in a book he wouldn't hear the Kingdom coming, because if Boo Radley killed them they'd miss school instead of vacation, and because it was easier to see inside a dark house in the dark than in the daytime, did I understand? "Jem, please—" "Scout, I'm tellin' you for the last time, shut your trap or go home—I declare to the Lord you're gettin' more like a girl every day!" With that, I had no option but to join them. We thought it was better to go under the high wire fence at the rear of the Radley lot, we stood less chance of being seen. The fence enclosed a large garden and a narrow wooden outhouse. Jem held up the bottom wire and motioned Dill under it. I followed, and held up the wire for Jem. It was a tight squeeze for him. "Don't make a sound," he whispered. "Don't get in a row of collards

whatever you do, they'll wake the dead." With this thought in mind, I made perhaps one step per minute. I moved faster when I saw Jem far ahead beckoning in the moonlight. We came to the gate that divided the garden from the back yard. Jem touched it. The gate squeaked. "Spit on it," whispered Dill. "You've got us in a box, Jem," I muttered. "We can't get out of here so easy." "Sh-h.

Spit on it, Scout." We spat ourselves dry, and Jem opened the gate slowly, lifting it aside and resting it on the fence. We were in the back yard. The back of the Radley house was less inviting than the front: a ramshackle porch ran the width of the house; there were two doors and two dark windows between the doors. Instead of a column, a rough two-by-four supported one end of the roof. An old Franklin stove sat in a corner of the porch; above it a hat-rack mirror caught the moon and shone eerily. "Ar-r," said Jem softly, lifting his foot. "'Smatter?" "Chickens," he breathed. That we would be obliged to dodge the unseen from all directions was confirmed when Dill ahead of us spelled G-o-d in a whisper. We crept to the side of the house, around to the window with the hanging shutter. The sill was several inches taller than Jem. "Give you a hand up," he muttered to Dill. "Wait, though." Jem grabbed his left

wrist and my right wrist, I grabbed my left wrist and Jem's right wrist, we crouched, and Dill sat on our saddle.

We raised him and he caught the window sill. "Hurry," Jem whispered, "we can't last much longer." Dill punched my shoulder, and we lowered him to the ground.

"What'd you see?" "Nothing. Curtains. There's a little teeny light way off somewhere, though." "Let's get away from here," breathed Jem. "Let's go 'round in back again. Sh-h," he warned me, as I was about to protest. "Let's try the back window." "Dill, no," I said. Dill stopped and let Jem go ahead. When Jem put his foot on the bottom step, the step squeaked. He stood still, then tried his weight by degrees. The step was silent. Jem skipped two steps, put his foot on the porch, heaved himself to it, and teetered a long moment. He regained his balance and dropped to his knees. He crawled to the window, raised his head and looked in. Then I saw the shadow. It was the shadow of a man with a hat on. At first I thought it was a tree, but there was no wind blowing, and tree-trunks never walked. The back porch was bathed in moonlight, and the shadow, crisp as toast, moved across the porch toward Jem. Dill saw it next. He put his hands to his face. When it crossed Jem, Jem saw it. He put his arms over his head and went rigid. The shadow stopped about a foot

beyond Jem. Its arm came out from its side, dropped, and was still. Then it turned and moved back across Jem, walked along the porch and off the side of the house, returning as it had come. Jem leaped off the porch and galloped toward us. He flung open the gate, danced Dill and me through, and shooed us between two rows of swishing collards. Halfway through the collards I tripped; as I tripped the roar of a shotgun shattered the neighborhood. Dill and Jem dived beside me. Jem's breath came in sobs: "Fence by the schoolyard!—hurry, Scout!" Jem held the bottom wire; Dill and I rolled through and were halfway to the shelter of the schoolyard's solitary oak when we sensed that Jem was not with us. We ran back and found him struggling in the fence, kicking his pants off to get loose. He ran to the oak tree in his shorts. Safely behind it, we gave way to numbness, but Jem's mind was racing: "We gotta get home, they'll miss us." We ran across the schoolyard, crawled under the fence to Deer's Pasture behind our house, climbed our back fence and were at the back steps before Jem would let us pause to rest. Respiration normal, the three of us strolled as casually as we could to the front yard. We looked down the street and saw a circle of neighbors at the Radley front gate. "We better

go down there,” said Jem. “They’ll think it’s funny if we don’t show up.” Mr. Nathan Radley was standing inside his gate, a shotgun broken across his arm. Atticus was standing beside Miss Maudie and Miss Stephanie Crawford. Miss Rachel and Mr. Avery were near by. None of them saw us come up. We eased in beside Miss Maudie, who looked around. “Where were you all, didn’t you hear the commotion?” “What happened?” asked Jem. “Mr. Radley shot at a Negro in his collard patch.” “Oh. Did he hit him?” “No,” said Miss Stephanie. “Shot in the air. Scared him pale, though. Says if anybody sees a white nigger around, that’s the one. Says he’s got the other barrel waitin’ for the next sound he hears in that patch, an’ next time he won’t aim high, be it dog, nigger, or—Jem Finch!” “Ma’am?” asked Jem. Atticus spoke. “Where’re your pants, son?” “Pants, sir?” “Pants.” It was no use. In his shorts before God and everybody. I sighed. “Ah—Mr. Finch?” In the glare from the streetlight, I could see Dill hatching one: his eyes widened, his fat cherub face grew rounder. “What is it, Dill?” asked Atticus. “Ah—I won ‘em from him,” he said vaguely. “Won them? How?” Dill’s hand sought the back of his head. He brought it forward and across his forehead. “We were playin’ strip poker up yonder by the fishpool,” he said.

Jem and I relaxed. The neighbors seemed satisfied: they all stiffened. But what was strip poker? We had no chance to find out: Miss Rachel went off like the town fire siren: "Doo-o Jee-sus, Dill Harris! Gamblin' by my fishpool? I'll strip-poker you, sir!" Atticus saved Dill from immediate dismemberment. "Just a minute, Miss Rachel," he said. "I've never heard of 'em doing that before. Were you all playing cards?" Jem fielded Dill's fly with his eyes shut: "No sir, just with matches." I admired my brother. Matches were dangerous, but cards were fatal. "Jem, Scout," said Atticus, "I don't want to hear of poker in any form again. Go by Dill's and get your pants, Jem. Settle it yourselves." "Don't worry, Dill," said Jem, as we trotted up the sidewalk, "she ain't gonna get you. He'll talk her out of it. That was fast thinkin', son. Listen... you hear?" We stopped, and heard Atticus's voice: "...not serious... they all go through it, Miss Rachel..." Dill was comforted, but Jem and I weren't. There was the problem of Jem showing up some pants in the morning. "'d give you some of mine," said Dill, as we came to Miss Rachel's steps. Jem said he couldn't get in them, but thanks anyway. We said good-bye, and Dill went inside the house. He evidently remembered he was engaged to me, for he ran back out and kissed me swiftly in front of

Jem. "Yawl write, hear?" he bawled after us. Had Jem's pants been safely on him, we would not have slept much anyway. Every night-sound I heard from my cot on the back porch was magnified threefold; every scratch of feet on gravel was Boo Radley seeking revenge, every passing Negro laughing in the night was Boo Radley loose and after us; insects splashing against the screen were Boo Radley's insane fingers picking the wire to pieces; the chinaberry trees were malignant, hovering, alive. I lingered between sleep and wakefulness until I heard Jem murmur. "Sleep, Little Three-Eyes?" "Are you crazy?" "Sh-h. Atticus's light's out." In the waning moonlight I saw Jem swing his feet to the floor. "I'm goin' after 'em," he said. I sat upright. "You can't. I won't let you." He was struggling into his shirt. "I've got to." "You do an' I'll wake up Atticus." "You do and I'll kill you." I pulled him down beside me on the cot. I tried to reason with him. "Mr. Nathan's gonna find 'em in the morning, Jem. He knows you lost 'em. When he shows 'em to Atticus it'll be pretty bad, that's all there is to it. Go'n back to bed." "That's what I know," said Jem. "That's why I'm goin' after 'em." I began to feel sick. Going back to that place by himself—I remembered Miss Stephanie: Mr. Nathan had the other barrel waiting for the next

sound he heard, be it nigger, dog... Jem knew that better than I. I was desperate: "Look, it ain't worth it, Jem. A lickin' hurts but it doesn't last. You'll get your head shot off, Jem. Please..." He blew out his breath patiently. "I— it's like this, Scout," he muttered. "Atticus ain't ever whipped me since I can remember. I wanta keep it that way." This was a thought. It seemed that Atticus threatened us every other day. "You mean he's never caught you at anything." "Maybe so, but—I just wanta keep it that way, Scout. We shouldn'a done that tonight, Scout." It was then, I suppose, that Jem and I first began to part company. Sometimes I did not understand him, but my periods of bewilderment were short-lived. This was beyond me. "Please," I pleaded, "can'tcha just think about it for a minute— by yourself on that place—" "Shut up!" "It's not like he'd never speak to you again or somethin'... I'm gonna wake him up, Jem, I swear I am—" Jem grabbed my pajama collar and wrenched it tight. "Then I'm goin' with you —" I choked. "No you ain't, you'll just make noise." It was no use. I unlatched the back door and held it while he crept down the steps. It must have been two o'clock. The moon was setting and the lattice-work shadows were fading into fuzzy nothingness. Jem's white shirt-tail dipped and bobbed

like a small ghost dancing away to escape the coming morning. A faint breeze stirred and cooled the sweat running down my sides. He went the back way, through Deer's Pasture, across the schoolyard and around to the fence, I thought—at least that was the way he was headed. It would take longer, so it was not time to worry yet. I waited until it was time to worry and listened for Mr. Radley's shotgun. Then I thought I heard the back fence squeak. It was wishful thinking. Then I heard Atticus cough. I held my breath. Sometimes when we made a midnight pilgrimage to the bathroom we would find him reading. He said he often woke up during the night, checked on us, and read himself back to sleep. I waited for his light to go on, straining my eyes to see it flood the hall. It stayed off, and I breathed again. The night-crawlers had retired, but ripe chinaberries drummed on the roof when the wind stirred, and the darkness was desolate with the barking of distant dogs. There he was, returning to me. His white shirt bobbed over the back fence and slowly grew larger. He came up the back steps, latched the door behind him, and sat on his cot. Wordlessly, he held up his pants. He lay down, and for a while I heard his cot trembling. Soon he was still. I did not hear him stir again. C