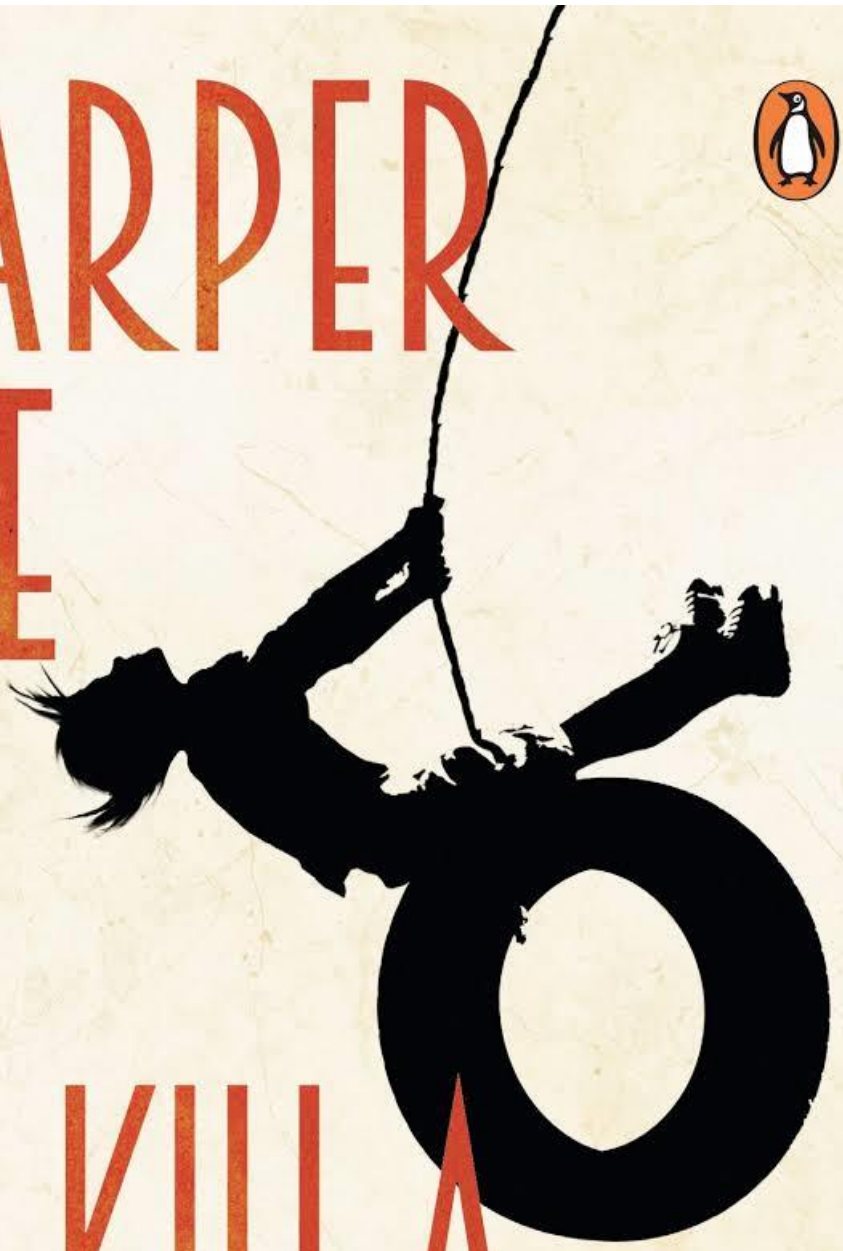
HARPER LEE



TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD

Chapter 4

The remainder of my schooldays were no more auspicious than the first. Indeed, they were an endless Project that slowly evolved into a Unit, in which miles of construction paper and wax crayon were expended by the State of Alabama in its well-meaning but fruitless efforts to teach me Group Dynamics. What Jem called the Dewey Decimal System was school-wide by the end of my first year, so I had no chance to compare it with other teaching techniques. I could only look around me: Atticus and my uncle, who went to school at home, knew everything—at least, what one didn't know the other did. Furthermore, I couldn't help noticing that my father had served for years in the state legislature, elected each time without opposition, innocent of the adjustments my teachers thought essential to the development of Good Citizenship. Jem, educated on a half-Decimal halfDuncecap basis, seemed to function effectively alone or in a group, but Jem was a poor example: no tutorial system devised by man could have stopped him from getting at books. As for me, I knew nothing except what I gathered from Time magazine and reading everything I could lay hands on at home, but as I inched sluggishly along the treadmill of the Maycomb County school system, I could not help receiving the impression that I was being cheated out of something. Out of what I knew not, yet I did not believe that twelve years of unrelieved boredom was exactly what the state had in mind for me. As the year passed,

released from school thirty minutes before Jem, who had to stay until three o'clock, I ran by the Radley Place as fast as I could, not stopping until I reached the safety of our front porch. One afternoon as I raced by, something caught my eye and caught it in such a way that I took a deep breath, a long look around, and went back. Two live oaks stood at the edge of the Radley lot; their roots reached out into the side-road and made it bumpy. Something about one of the trees attracted my attention. Some tinfoil was sticking in a knot-hole just above my eye level, winking at me in the afternoon sun. I stood on tiptoe, hastily looked around once more, reached into the hole, and withdrew two pieces of chewing gum minus their outer wrappers. My first impulse was to get it into my mouth as quickly as possible, but I remembered where I was. I ran home, and on our front porch I examined my loot. The gum looked fresh. I sniffed it and it smelled all right. I licked it and waited for a while. When I did not die I crammed it into my mouth: Wrigley's DoubleMint. When Jem came home he asked me where I got such a wad. I told him I found it. "Don't eat things you find, Scout." "This wasn't on the ground, it was in a tree." Jem growled. "Well it was," I said. "It was sticking in that tree yonder, the one comin' from school." "Spit it out right now!" I spat it out. The tang was fading, anyway. "I've been chewin' it all afternoon and I ain't dead yet, not even sick." Jem stamped his foot. "Don't you know you're not supposed to even touch the trees over there? You'll get killed if you do!" "You touched the house once!" "That was different! You go gargle—right

now, you hear me?" "Ain't neither, it'll take the taste outa my mouth." "You don't 'n' I'll tell Calpurnia on you!" Rather than risk a tangle with Calpurnia, I did as Jem told me. For some reason, my first year of school had wrought a great change in our relationship: Calpurnia's tyranny, unfairness, and meddling in my business had faded to gentle grumblings of general disapproval. On my part, I went to much trouble, sometimes, not to provoke her. Summer was on the way; Jem and I awaited it with impatience. Summer was our best season: it was sleeping on the back screened porch in cots, or trying to sleep in the treehouse; summer was everything good to eat; it was a thousand colors in a parched landscape; but most of all, summer was Dill. The authorities released us early the last day of school, and Jem and I walked home together. "Reckon old Dill'll be coming home tomorrow," I said. "Probably day after," said Jem. "Mis'sippi turns 'em loose a day later." As we came to the live oaks at the Radley Place I raised my finger to point for the hundredth time to the knot-hole where I had found the chewing gum, trying to make Jem believe I had found it there, and found myself pointing at another piece of tinfoil. "I see it, Scout! I see it-" Jem looked around, reached up, and gingerly pocketed a tiny shiny package. We ran home, and on the front porch we looked at a small box patchworked with bits of tinfoil collected from chewing-gum wrappers. It was the kind of box wedding rings came in, purple velvet with a minute catch. Jem flicked open the tiny catch. Inside were two scrubbed and polished pennies, one on top of the other. Jem examined them.

“Indian-heads,” he said. “Nineteen-six and Scout, one of em’s nineteen-hundred. These are real old.” “Nineteen-hundred,” I echoed. “Say-” “Hush a minute, I’m thinkin‘.” “Jem, you reckon that’s somebody’s hidin‘ place?” “Naw, don’t anybody much but us pass by there, unless it’s some grown person’s-” “Grown folks don’t have hidin‘ places. You reckon we ought to keep ’em, Jem?” “I don’t know what we could do, Scout. Who’d we give ‘em back to? I know for a fact don’t anybody go by there—Cecil goes by the back street an’ all the way around by town to get home.” Cecil Jacobs, who lived at the far end of our street next door to the post office, walked a total of one mile per school day to avoid the Radley Place and old Mrs. Henry Lafayette Dubose. Mrs. Dubose lived two doors up the street from us; neighborhood opinion was unanimous that Mrs. Dubose was the meanest old woman who ever lived. Jem wouldn’t go by her place without Atticus beside him. “What you reckon we oughta do, Jem?” Finders were keepers unless title was proven. Plucking an occasional camellia, getting a squirt of hot milk from Miss Maudie Atkinson’s cow on a summer day, helping ourselves to someone’s scuppernongs was part of our ethical culture, but money was different. “Tell you what,” said Jem. “We’ll keep ‘em till school starts, then go around and ask everybody if they’re theirs. They’re some bus child’s, maybe—he was too taken up with gettin’ outa school today an‘ forgot ’em. These are somebody’s, I know that. See how they’ve been slicked up? They’ve been saved.” “Yeah, but why should somebody wanta put away chewing gum like that?

You know it doesn't last." "I don't know, Scout. But these are important to somebody…" "How's that, Jem…?" "Well, Indian-heads—well, they come from the Indians. They're real strong magic, they make you have good luck. Not like fried chicken when you're not lookin' for it, but things like long life 'n' good health, 'n' passin' six-weeks tests… these are real valuable to somebody. I'm gonna put em in my trunk." Before Jem went to his room, he looked for a long time at the Radley Place. He seemed to be thinking again. Two days later Dill arrived in a blaze of glory: he had ridden the train by himself from Meridian to Maycomb Junction (a courtesy title—Maycomb Junction was in Abbott County) where he had been met by Miss Rachel in Maycomb's one taxi; he had eaten dinner in the diner, he had seen two twins hitched together get off the train in Bay St. Louis and stuck to his story regardless of threats. He had discarded the abominable blue shorts that were buttoned to his shirts and wore real short pants with a belt; he was somewhat heavier, no taller, and said he had seen his father. Dill's father was taller than ours, he had a black beard (pointed), and was president of the L & N Railroad. "I helped the engineer for a while," said Dill, yawning. "In a pig's ear you did, Dill. Hush," said Jem. "What'll we play today?" "Tom and Sam and Dick," said Dill. "Let's go in the front yard." Dill wanted the Rover Boys because there were three respectable parts. He was clearly tired of being our character man. "I'm tired of those," I said. I was tired of playing Tom Rover, who suddenly lost his memory in the middle of a picture show and was out of the script until

the end, when he was found in Alaska. “Make us up one, Jem,” I said. “I’m tired of makin‘ ’em up.” Our first days of freedom, and we were tired. I wondered what the summer would bring. We had strolled to the front yard, where Dill stood looking down the street at the dreary face of the Radley Place. “I—smell—death,” he said. “I do, I mean it,” he said, when I told him to shut up. “You mean when somebody’s dyin‘ you can smell it?” “No, I mean I can smell somebody an‘ tell if they’re gonna die. An old lady taught me how.” Dill leaned over and sniffed me. “Jean—Louise—Finch, you are going to die in three days.” “Dill if you don’t hush I’ll knock you bowlegged. I mean it, now-” “Yawl hush,” growled Jem, “you act like you believe in Hot Steams.” “You act like you don’t,” I said. “What’s a Hot Steam?” asked Dill. “Haven’t you ever walked along a lonesome road at night and passed by a hot place?” Jem asked Dill. “A Hot Steam’s somebody who can’t get to heaven, just wallows around on lonesome roads an‘ if you walk through him, when you die you’ll be one too, an’ you’ll go around at night suckin‘ people’s breath-” “How can you keep from passing through one?” “You can’t,” said Jem. “Sometimes they stretch all the way across the road, but if you hafta go through one you say, ‘Angel-bright, life-in-death; get off the road, don’t suck my breath.’ That keeps ‘em from wrapping around you-” “Don’t you believe a word he says, Dill,” I said. “Calpurnia says that’s niggertalk.” Jem scowled darkly at me, but said, “Well, are we gonna play anything or not?” “Let’s roll in the tire,” I suggested. Jem sighed. “You know I’m too big.” “You c’n push.” I ran to the

back yard and pulled an old car tire from under the house. I slapped it up to the front yard. “I’m first,” I said. Dill said he ought to be first, he just got here. Jem arbitrated, awarded me first push with an extra time for Dill, and I folded myself inside the tire. Until it happened I did not realize that Jem was offended by my contradicting him on Hot Steams, and that he was patiently awaiting an opportunity to reward me. He did, by pushing the tire down the sidewalk with all the force in his body. Ground, sky and houses melted into a mad palette, my ears throbbed, I was suffocating. I could not put out my hands to stop, they were wedged between my chest and knees. I could only hope that Jem would outrun the tire and me, or that I would be stopped by a bump in the sidewalk. I heard him behind me, chasing and shouting. The tire bumped on gravel, skeetered across the road, crashed into a barrier and popped me like a cork onto pavement. Dizzy and nauseated, I lay on the cement and shook my head still, pounded my ears to silence, and heard Jem’s voice: “Scout, get away from there, come on!” I raised my head and stared at the Radley Place steps in front of me. I froze. “Come on, Scout, don’t just lie there!” Jem was screaming. “Get up, can’tcha?” I got to my feet, trembling as I thawed. “Get the tire!” Jem hollered. “Bring it with you! Ain’t you got any sense at all?” When I was able to navigate, I ran back to them as fast as my shaking knees would carry me. “Why didn’t you bring it?” Jem yelled. “Why don’t you get it?” I screamed. Jem was silent. “Go on, it ain’t far inside the gate. Why, you even touched the house once, remember?” Jem

looked at me furiously, could not decline, ran down the sidewalk, treaded water at the gate, then dashed in and retrieved the tire. “See there?” Jem was scowling triumphantly. “Nothin‘ to it. I swear, Scout, sometimes you act so much like a girl it’s mortifyin’.” There was more to it than he knew, but I decided not to tell him. Calpurnia appeared in the front door and yelled, “Lemonade time! You all get in outa that hot sun ‘fore you fry alive!” Lemonade in the middle of the morning was a summertime ritual. Calpurnia set a pitcher and three glasses on the porch, then went about her business. Being out of Jem’s good graces did not worry me especially. Lemonade would restore his good humor. Jem gulped down his second glassful and slapped his chest. “I know what we are going to play,” he announced. “Something new, something different.” “What?” asked Dill. “Boo Radley.” Jem’s head at times was transparent: he had thought that up to make me understand he wasn’t afraid of Radleys in any shape or form, to contrast his own fearless heroism with my cowardice. “Boo Radley? How?” asked Dill. Jem said, “Scout, you can be Mrs. Radley-” “I declare if I will. I don’t think-” “‘Smatter?” said Dill. “Still scared?” “He can get out at night when we’re all asleep…” I said. Jem hissed. “Scout, how’s he gonna know what we’re doin‘? Besides, I don’t think he’s still there. He died years ago and they stuffed him up the chimney.” Dill said, “Jem, you and me can play and Scout can watch if she’s scared.” I was fairly sure Boo Radley was inside that house, but I couldn’t prove it, and felt it best to keep my mouth shut or I would be accused of believing in Hot

Steams, phenomena I was immune to in the daytime. Jem parceled out our roles: I was Mrs. Radley, and all I had to do was come out and sweep the porch. Dill was old Mr. Radley: he walked up and down the sidewalk and coughed when Jem spoke to him. Jem, naturally, was Boo: he went under the front steps and shrieked and howled from time to time. As the summer progressed, so did our game. We polished and perfected it, added dialogue and plot until we had manufactured a small play upon which we rang changes every day. Dill was a villain's villain: he could get into any character part assigned him, and appear tall if height was part of the devilry required. He was as good as his worst performance; his worst performance was Gothic. I reluctantly played assorted ladies who entered the script. I never thought it as much fun as Tarzan, and I played that summer with more than vague anxiety despite Jem's assurances that Boo Radley was dead and nothing would get me, with him and Calpurnia there in the daytime and Atticus home at night. Jem was a born hero. It was a melancholy little drama, woven from bits and scraps of gossip and neighborhood legend: Mrs. Radley had been beautiful until she married Mr. Radley and lost all her money. She also lost most of her teeth, her hair, and her right forefinger (Dill's contribution. Boo bit it off one night when he couldn't find any cats and squirrels to eat.); she sat in the livingroom and cried most of the time, while Boo slowly whittled away all the furniture in the house. The three of us were the boys who got into trouble; I was the probate judge, for a change; Dill led Jem

away and crammed him beneath the steps, poking him with the brushbroom. Jem would reappear as needed in the shapes of the sheriff, assorted townsfolk, and Miss Stephanie Crawford, who had more to say about the Radleys than anybody in Maycomb. When it was time to play Boo's big scene, Jem would sneak into the house, steal the scissors from the sewing-machine drawer when Calpurnia's back was turned, then sit in the swing and cut up newspapers. Dill would walk by, cough at Jem, and Jem would fake a plunge into Dill's thigh. From where I stood it looked real. When Mr. Nathan Radley passed us on his daily trip to town, we would stand still and silent until he was out of sight, then wonder what he would do to us if he suspected. Our activities halted when any of the neighbors appeared, and once I saw Miss Maudie Atkinson staring across the street at us, her hedge clippers poised in midair. One day we were so busily playing Chapter XXV, Book II of One Man's Family, we did not see Atticus standing on the sidewalk looking at us, slapping a rolled magazine against his knee. The sun said twelve noon. "What are you all playing?" he asked. "Nothing," said Jem. Jem's evasion told me our game was a secret, so I kept quiet. "What are you doing with those scissors, then? Why are you tearing up that newspaper? If it's today's I'll tan you." "Nothing." "Nothing what?" said Atticus. "Nothing, sir." "Give me those scissors," Atticus said. "They're no things to play with. Does this by any chance have anything to do with the Radleys?" "No sir," said Jem, reddening. "I hope it doesn't," he said shortly, and went inside the house. "Je-m…" "Shut up! He's

gone in the livingroom, he can hear us in there." Safely in the yard, Dill asked Jem if we could play any more. "I don't know. Atticus didn't say we couldn't-" "Jem," I said, "I think Atticus knows it anyway." "No he don't. If he did he'd say he did." I was not so sure, but Jem told me I was being a girl, that girls always imagined things, that's why other people hated them so, and if I started behaving like one I could just go off and find some to play with. "All right, you just keep it up then," I said. "You'll find out." Atticus's arrival was the second reason I wanted to quit the game. The first reason happened the day I rolled into the Radley front yard. Through all the head- shaking, quelling of nausea and Jem-yelling, I had heard another sound, so low I could not have heard it from the sidewalk. Someone inside the house was laughing.