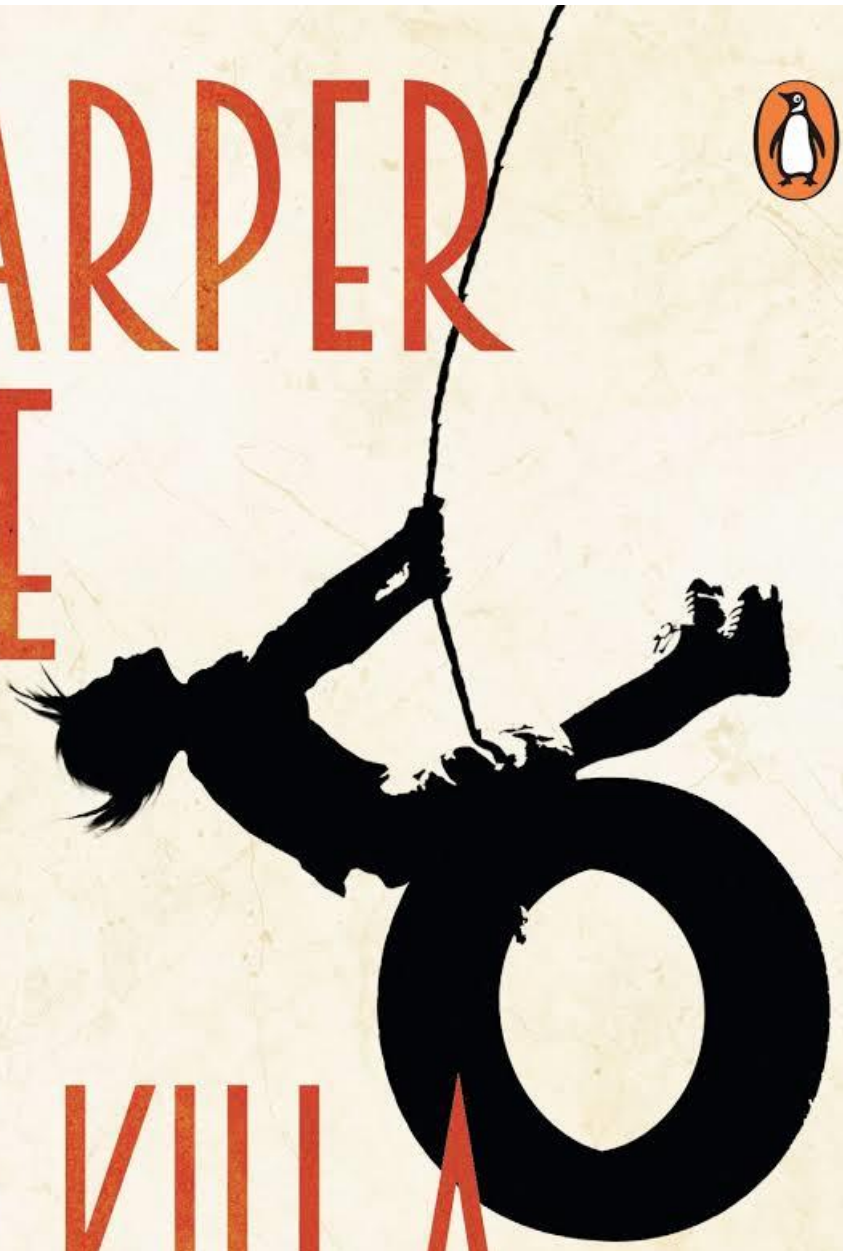
HARPER LEE



TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD

Chapter 7

Jem stayed moody and silent for a week. As Atticus had once advised me to do, I tried to climb into Jem's skin and walk around in it: if I had gone alone to the Radley Place at two in the morning, my funeral would have been held the next afternoon. So I left Jem alone and tried not to bother him. School started. The second grade was as bad as the first, only worse—they still flashed cards at you and wouldn't let you read or write. Miss Caroline's progress next door could be estimated by the frequency of laughter; however, the usual crew had flunked the first grade again, and were helpful in keeping order. The only thing good about the second grade was that this year I had to stay as late as Jem, and we usually walked home together at three o'clock. One afternoon when we were crossing the schoolyard toward home, Jem suddenly said: "There's something I didn't tell you." As this was his first complete sentence in several days, I encouraged him: "About what?" "About that night." "You've never told me anything about that night," I said. Jem waved my words away as if fanning gnats. He was silent for a while, then he said, "When I went back for my breeches—they were all in a tangle when I was gettin' out of 'em, I couldn't get 'em loose. When I went back—"

Jem took a deep breath. “When I went back, they were folded across the fence… like they were expectin’ me.” “Across—” “And something else—” Jem’s voice was flat. “Show you when we get home. They’d been sewed up. Not like a lady sewed ‘em, like somethin’ I’d try to do. All crooked. It’s almost like—” “—somebody knew you were comin‘ back for ’em.” Jem shuddered. “Like somebody was readin‘ my mind… like somebody could tell what I was gonna do. Can’t anybody tell what I’m gonna do lest they know me, can they, Scout?” Jem’s question was an appeal. I reassured him: “Can’t anybody tell what you’re gonna do lest they live in the house with you, and even I can’t tell sometimes.” We were walking past our tree. In its knot-hole rested a ball of gray twine. “Don’t take it, Jem,” I said. “This is somebody’s hidin‘ place.” “I don’t think so, Scout.” “Yes it is. Somebody like Walter Cunningham comes down here every recess and hides his things—and we come along and take ‘em away from him. Listen, let’s leave it and wait a couple of days. If it ain’t gone then, we’ll take it, okay?” “Okay, you might be right,” said Jem. “It must be some little kid’s place—hides his things from the bigger folks. You know it’s only when school’s in that we’ve found things.” “Yeah,” I said, “but we never go by here in the summertime.” We went

home. Next morning the twine was where we had left it. When it was still there on the third day, Jem pocketed it. From then on, we considered everything we found in the knot-hole our property. - The second grade was grim, but Jem assured me that the older I got the better school would be, that he started off the same way, and it was not until one reached the sixth grade that one learned anything of value. The sixth grade seemed to please him from the beginning: he went through a brief Egyptian Period that baffled me—he tried to walk flat a great deal, sticking one arm in front of him and one in back of him, putting one foot behind the other. He declared Egyptians walked that way; I said if they did I didn't see how they got anything done, but Jem said they accomplished more than the Americans ever did, they invented toilet paper and perpetual embalming, and asked where would we be today if they hadn't? Atticus told me to delete the adjectives and I'd have the facts. There are no clearly defined seasons in South Alabama; summer drifts into autumn, and autumn is sometimes never followed by winter, but turns to a daysold spring that melts into summer again. That fall was a long one, hardly cool enough for a light jacket. Jem and I were trotting in our orbit one mild October afternoon when our knot-hole

stopped us again. Something white was inside this time. Jem let me do the honors: I pulled out two small images carved in soap. One was the figure of a boy, the other wore a crude dress. Before I remembered that there was no such thing as hoo-dooing, I shrieked and threw them down. Jem snatched them up. “What’s the matter with you?” he yelled. He rubbed the figures free of red dust. “These are good,” he said. “I’ve never seen any these good.” He held them down to me. They were almost perfect miniatures of two children. The boy had on shorts, and a shock of soapy hair fell to his eyebrows. I looked up at Jem. A point of straight brown hair kicked downwards from his part. I had never noticed it before. Jem looked from the girl-doll to me. The girl-doll wore bangs. So did I. “These are us,” he said. “Who did ‘em, you reckon?” “Who do we know around here who whittles?” he asked. “Mr. Avery.” “Mr. Avery just does like this. I mean carves.” Mr. Avery averaged a stick of stovewood per week; he honed it down to a toothpick and chewed it. “There’s old Miss Stephanie Crawford’s sweetheart,” I said. “He carves all right, but he lives down the country. When would he ever pay any attention to us?” “Maybe he sits on the porch and looks at us instead of Miss Stephanie. If I was him, I would.”

Jem stared at me so long I asked what was the matter, but got Nothing, Scout for an answer. When we went home, Jem put the dolls in his trunk. Less than two weeks later we found a whole package of chewing gum, which we enjoyed, the fact that everything on the Radley Place was poison having slipped Jem's memory. The following week the knot-hole yielded a tarnished medal. Jem showed it to Atticus, who said it was a spelling medal, that before we were born the Maycomb County schools had spelling contests and awarded medals to the winners. Atticus said someone must have lost it, and had we asked around? Jem camel-kicked me when I tried to say where we had found it. Jem asked Atticus if he remembered anybody who ever won one, and Atticus said no. Our biggest prize appeared four days later. It was a pocket watch that wouldn't run, on a chain with an aluminum knife. "You reckon it's white gold, Jem?" "Don't know. I'll show it to Atticus." Atticus said it would probably be worth ten dollars, knife, chain and all, if it were new. "Did you swap with somebody at school?" he asked. "Oh, no sir!" Jem pulled out his grandfather's watch that Atticus let him carry once a week if Jem were careful with it. On the days he carried the watch, Jem walked on eggs. "Atticus, if it's all right with you, I'd

rather have this one instead. Maybe I can fix it." When the new wore off his grandfather's watch, and carrying it became a day's burdensome task, Jem no longer felt the necessity of ascertaining the hour every five minutes. He did a fair job, only one spring and two tiny pieces left over, but the watch would not run. "Oh-h," he sighed, "it'll never go. Scout—?" "Huh?" "You reckon we oughta write a letter to whoever's leaving us these things?" "That'd be right nice, Jem, we can thank 'em—what's wrong?" Jem was holding his ears, shaking his head from side to side. "I don't get it, I just don't get it—I don't know why, Scout…" He looked toward the livingroom. "I've gotta good mind to tell Atticus—no, I reckon not." "I'll tell him for you." "No, don't do that, Scout. Scout?" "Wha-t?" He had been on the verge of telling me something all evening; his face would brighten and he would lean toward me, then he would change his mind. He changed it again. "Oh, nothin'." "Here, let's write a letter." I pushed a tablet and pencil under his nose. "Okay. Dear Mister…" "How do you know it's a man? I bet it's Miss Maudie—been bettin' that for a long time." "Ar-r, Miss Maudie can't chew gum—" Jem broke into a grin. "You know, she can talk real pretty sometimes. One time I asked her to have a chew and she said no thanks,

that—chewing gum cleaved to her palate and rendered her speechless," said Jem carefully. "Doesn't that sound nice?" "Yeah, she can say nice things sometimes. She wouldn't have a watch and chain anyway." "Dear sir," said Jem. "We appreciate the—no, we appreciate everything which you have put into the tree for us. Yours very truly, Jeremy Atticus Finch." "He won't know who you are if you sign it like that, Jem." Jem erased his name and wrote, "Jem Finch." I signed, "Jean Louise Finch (Scout)," beneath it. Jem put the note in an envelope. Next morning on the way to school he ran ahead of me and stopped at the tree. Jem was facing me when he looked up, and I saw him go stark white. "Scout!" I ran to him. Someone had filled our knot-hole with cement. "Don't you cry, now, Scout… don't cry now, don't you worry-" he muttered at me all the way to school. When we went home for dinner Jem bolted his food, ran to the porch and stood on the steps. I followed him. "Hasn't passed by yet," he said. Next day Jem repeated his vigil and was rewarded. "Hidy do, Mr. Nathan," he said. "Morning Jem, Scout," said Mr. Radley, as he went by. "Mr. Radley," said Jem. Mr. Radley turned around. "Mr. Radley, ah—did you put cement in that hole in that tree down yonder?" "Yes," he said. "I filled it up." "Why'd you

do it, sir?" "Tree's dying. You plug 'em with cement when they're sick. You ought to know that, Jem." Jem said nothing more about it until late afternoon. When we passed our tree he gave it a meditative pat on its cement, and remained deep in thought. He seemed to be working himself into a bad humor, so I kept my distance. As usual, we met Atticus coming home from work that evening. When we were at our steps Jem said, "Atticus, look down yonder at that tree, please sir." "What tree, son?" "The one on the corner of the Radley lot comin' from school." "Yes?" "Is that tree dyin'?" "Why no, son, I don't think so. Look at the leaves, they're all green and full, no brown patches anywhere—" "It ain't even sick?" "That tree's as healthy as you are, Jem. Why?" "Mr. Nathan Radley said it was dyin'." "Well maybe it is. I'm sure Mr. Radley knows more about his trees than we do." Atticus left us on the porch. Jem leaned on a pillar, rubbing his shoulders against it. "Do you itch, Jem?" I asked as politely as I could. He did not answer. "Come on in, Jem," I said. "After while." He stood there until nightfall, and I waited for him. When we went in the house I saw he had been crying; his face was dirty in the right places, but I thought it odd that I had not heard him. Contents - Prev /

Next Chapter 8 For reasons unfathomable to the most experienced