

Jem opened the box. Inside, surrounded by wads of damp cotton, was a white, waxy, perfect camellia. It was a Snow-on-the-Mountain.

Jem's eyes nearly popped out of his head. "Old hell-devil, old hell-devil!" he screamed, flinging it down. "Why can't she leave me alone?"

In a flash Atticus was up and standing over him. Jem buried his face in Atticus's shirt front. "Sh-h," he said. "I think that was her way of telling you—everything's all right now, Jem, everything's all right. You know, she was a great lady."

"A lady?" Jem raised his head. His face was scarlet. "After all those things she said about you, a lady?"

"She was. She had her own views about things, a lot different from mine, maybe... son, I told you that if you hadn't lost your head I'd have made you go read to her. I wanted you to see something about her—I wanted you to see what real courage is, instead of getting the idea that courage is a man with a gun in his hand. It's when you know you're licked before you begin but you begin anyway and you see it through no matter what. You rarely win, but sometimes you do. Mrs. Dubose won, all ninety-eight pounds of her. According to her views, she died beholden to nothing and nobody. She was the bravest person I ever knew."

Jem picked up the candy box and threw it in the fire. He picked up the camellia, and when I went off to bed I saw him fingering the wide petals. Atticus was reading the paper

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Dubose!"

She was vicious. Once she heard Jem refer to our father as "Atticus" and her reaction was apoplectic. Besides being the sassiest, most disrespectful mutts who ever passed her way, we were told that it was quite a pity our father had not remarried after our mother's death. A lovelier lady than our mother never lived, she said, and it was heartbreaking the way Atticus Finch let her children run wild. I did not remember our mother, but Jem did—he would tell me about her sometimes—and he went livid when Mrs. Dubose shot us this message.

Jem, having survived Boo Radley, a mad dog and other terrors, had concluded that it was cowardly to stop at Miss Rachel's front steps and wait, and had decreed that we must run as far as the post office corner each evening to meet Atticus coming from work. Countless evenings Atticus would find Jem furious at something Mrs. Dubose had said when we went by.

"Easy does it, son," Atticus would say. "She's an old lady and she's ill. You just hold your head high and be a gentleman. Whatever she says to you, it's your job not to let her make you mad." Jem would say she must not be very sick, she hollered so. When the three of us came to her house, Atticus would sweep off his hat, wave gallantly to her and say, "Good evening, Mrs. Dubose! You look like a picture this evening."

I never heard Atticus say like a picture of what. He would tell her the courthouse news, and would say he hoped with all his heart she'd have a good day tomorrow. He would return his hat to his head, swing me to his shoulders in her very presence, and we would go home in the twilight. It was times like these when I thought my father, who hated guns and had never been to any wars, was the bravest man who ever lived.

The day after Jem's twelfth birthday his money was burning up

his pockets, so we headed for town in the early afternoon. Jem thought he had enough to buy a miniature steam engine for himself and a twirling baton for me.

I had long had my eye on that baton: it was at V. J. Elmore's, it was bedecked with sequins and tinsel, it cost seventeen cents. It was then my burning ambition to grow up and twirl with the Maycomb County High School band. Having developed my talent to where I could throw up a stick and almost catch it coming down, I had caused Calpurnia to deny me entrance to the house every time she saw me with a stick in my hand. I felt that I could overcome this defect with a real baton, and I thought it generous of Jem to buy one for me.

Mrs. Dubose was stationed on her porch when we went by.

"Where are you two going at this time of day?" she shouted. "Playing hooky, I suppose. I'll just call up the principal and tell him!" She put her hands on the wheels of her chair and executed a perfect right face.

"Aw, it's Saturday, Mrs. Dubose," said Jem.

"Makes no difference if it's Saturday," she said obscurely. "I wonder if your father knows where you are?"

"Mrs. Dubose, we've been goin' to town by ourselves since we were this high." Jem placed his hand palm down about two feet above the sidewalk.

"Don't you lie to me!" she yelled. "Jeremy Finch, Maudie Atkinson told me you broke down her scuppernong arbor this morning. She's going to tell your father and then you'll wish you never saw the light of day! If you aren't sent to the reform school before next week, my name's not Dubose!"

Jem, who hadn't been near Miss Maudie's scuppernong arbor since last summer, and who knew Miss Maudie wouldn't tell Atticus

"Mrs. Dubose was a morphine addict," said Atticus. "She took it as a pain-killer for years. The doctor put her on it. She'd have spent the rest of her life on it and died without so much agony, but she was too contrary—"

"Sir?" said Jem.

Atticus said, "Just before your escapade she called me to make her will. Dr. Reynolds told her she had only a few months left. Her business affairs were in perfect order but she said, 'There's still one thing out of order.'"

"What was that?" Jem was perplexed.

"She said she was going to leave this world beholden to nothing and nobody. Jem, when you're sick as she was, it's all right to take anything to make it easier, but it wasn't all right for her. She said she meant to break herself of it before she died, and that's what she did."

Jem said, "You mean that's what her fits were?"

"Yes, that's what they were. Most of the time you were reading to her I doubt if she heard a word you said. Her whole mind and body were concentrated on that alarm clock. If you hadn't fallen into her hands, I'd have made you go read to her anyway. It may have been some distraction. There was another reason—"

"Did she die free?" asked Jem.

"As the mountain air," said Atticus. "She was conscious to the last, almost. Conscious," he smiled, "and cantankerous. She still disapproved heartily of my doings, and said I'd probably spend the rest of my life bailing you out of jail. She had Jessie fix you this box —"

Atticus reached down and picked up the candy box. He handed it to Jem.

inventions.

At last the day came. When Mrs. Dubose said, “That’ll do,” one afternoon, she added, “And that’s all. Good-day to you.”

It was over. We bounded down the sidewalk on a spree of sheer relief, leaping and howling.

That spring was a good one: the days grew longer and gave us more playing time. Jem’s mind was occupied mostly with the vital statistics of every college football player in the nation. Every night Atticus would read us the sports pages of the newspapers. Alabama might go to the Rose Bowl again this year, judging from its prospects, not one of whose names we could pronounce. Atticus was in the middle of Windy Seaton’s column one evening when the telephone rang.

He answered it, then went to the hat rack in the hall. “I’m going down to Mrs. Dubose’s for a while,” he said. “I won’t be long.”

But Atticus stayed away until long past my bedtime. When he returned he was carrying a candy box. Atticus sat down in the livingroom and put the box on the floor beside his chair.

“What’d she want?” asked Jem.

We had not seen Mrs. Dubose for over a month. She was never on the porch any more when we passed.

“She’s dead, son,” said Atticus. “She died a few minutes ago.”

“Oh,” said Jem. “Well.”

“Well is right,” said Atticus. “She’s not suffering any more. She was sick for a long time. Son, didn’t you know what her fits were?”

Jem shook his head.

if he had, issued a general denial.

“Don’t you contradict me!” Mrs. Dubose bawled. “And you —” she pointed an arthritic finger at me—“what are you doing in those overalls? You should be in a dress and camisole, young lady! You’ll grow up waiting on tables if somebody doesn’t change your ways—a Finch waiting on tables at the O.K. Café—hah!”

I was terrified. The O.K. Café was a dim organization on the north side of the square. I grabbed Jem’s hand but he shook me loose.

“Come on, Scout,” he whispered. “Don’t pay any attention to her, just hold your head high and be a gentleman.”

But Mrs. Dubose held us: “Not only a Finch waiting on tables but one in the courthouse lawing for niggers!”

Jem stiffened. Mrs. Dubose’s shot had gone home and she knew it:

“Yes indeed, what has this world come to when a Finch goes against his raising? I’ll tell you!” She put her hand to her mouth. When she drew it away, it trailed a long silver thread of saliva. “Your father’s no better than the niggers and trash he works for!”

Jem was scarlet. I pulled at his sleeve, and we were followed up the sidewalk by a philippic on our family’s moral degeneration, the major premise of which was that half the Finches were in the asylum anyway, but if our mother were living we would not have come to such a state.

I wasn’t sure what Jem resented most, but I took umbrage at Mrs. Dubose’s assessment of the family’s mental hygiene. I had become almost accustomed to hearing insults aimed at Atticus. But this was the first one coming from an adult. Except for her remarks about Atticus, Mrs. Dubose’s attack was only routine.

There was a hint of summer in the air—in the shadows it was cool, but the sun was warm, which meant good times coming: no

school and Dill.

Jem bought his steam engine and we went by Elmore's for my baton. Jem took no pleasure in his acquisition; he jammed it in his pocket and walked silently beside me toward home. On the way home I nearly hit Mr. Link Deas, who said, "Look out now, Scout!" when I missed a toss, and when we approached Mrs. Dubose's house my baton was grimy from having picked it up out of the dirt so many times. She was not on the porch.

In later years, I sometimes wondered exactly what made Jem do it, what made him break the bonds of "You just be a gentleman, son," and the phase of self-conscious rectitude he had recently entered. Jem had probably stood as much guff about Atticus lawing for niggers as had I, and I took it for granted that he kept his temper—he had a naturally tranquil disposition and a slow fuse. At the time, however, I thought the only explanation for what he did was that for a few minutes he simply went mad.

What Jem did was something I'd do as a matter of course had I not been under Atticus's interdict, which I assumed included not fighting horrible old ladies. We had just come to her gate when Jem snatched my baton and ran flailing wildly up the steps into Mrs. Dubose's front yard, forgetting everything Atticus had said, forgetting that she packed a pistol under her shawls, forgetting that if Mrs. Dubose missed, her girl Jessie probably wouldn't.

He did not begin to calm down until he had cut the tops off every camellia bush Mrs. Dubose owned, until the ground was littered with green buds and leaves. He bent my baton against his knee, snapped it in two and threw it down.

By that time I was shrieking. Jem yanked my hair, said he didn't care, he'd do it again if he got a chance, and if I didn't shut up he'd pull every hair out of my head. I didn't shut up and he kicked me. I lost my balance and fell on my face. Jem picked me up roughly

sure..."

Jem rose. "But—"

Atticus put out his hand and Jem was silent. On the way home, Jem said he had to do it just for a month and the month was up and it wasn't fair.

"Just one more week, son," said Atticus. "No," said Jem. "Yes," said Atticus.

The following week found us back at Mrs. Dubose's. The alarm clock had ceased sounding, but Mrs. Dubose would release us with, "That'll do," so late in the afternoon Atticus would be home reading the paper when we returned. Although her fits had passed off, she was in every other way her old self: when Sir Walter Scott became involved in lengthy descriptions of moats and castles, Mrs. Dubose would become bored and pick on us:

"Jeremy Finch, I told you you'd live to regret tearing up my camellias. You regret it now, don't you?"

Jem would say he certainly did.

"Thought you could kill my Snow-on-the-Mountain, did you? Well, Jessie says the top's growing back out. Next time you'll know how to do it right, won't you? You'll pull it up by the roots, won't you?"

Jem would say he certainly would.

"Don't you mutter at me, boy! You hold up your head and say yes ma'am. Don't guess you feel like holding it up, though, with your father what he is."

Jem's chin would come up, and he would gaze at Mrs. Dubose with a face devoid of resentment. Through the weeks he had cultivated an expression of polite and detached interest, which he would present to her in answer to her most blood-curdling

Negroes over and above themselves. It's slipped into usage with some people like ourselves, when they want a common, ugly term to label somebody."

"You aren't really a nigger-lover, then, are you?"

"I certainly am. I do my best to love everybody... I'm hard put, sometimes— baby, it's never an insult to be called what somebody thinks is a bad name. It just shows you how poor that person is, it doesn't hurt you. So don't let Mrs. Dubose get you down. She has enough troubles of her own."

One afternoon a month later Jem was ploughing his way through Sir Walter Scout, as Jem called him, and Mrs. Dubose was correcting him at every turn, when there was a knock on the door. "Come in!" she screamed.

Atticus came in. He went to the bed and took Mrs. Dubose's hand. "I was coming from the office and didn't see the children," he said. "I thought they might still be here."

Mrs. Dubose smiled at him. For the life of me I could not figure out how she could bring herself to speak to him when she seemed to hate him so. "Do you know what time it is, Atticus?" she said. "Exactly fourteen minutes past five. The alarm clock's set for five-thirty. I want you to know that."

It suddenly came to me that each day we had been staying a little longer at Mrs. Dubose's, that the alarm clock went off a few minutes later every day, and that she was well into one of her fits by the time it sounded. Today she had antagonized Jem for nearly two hours with no intention of having a fit, and I felt hopelessly trapped. The alarm clock was the signal for our release; if one day it did not ring, what would we do?

"I have a feeling that Jem's reading days are numbered," said Atticus. "Only a week longer, I think," she said, "just to make

but looked like he was sorry. There was nothing to say.

We did not choose to meet Atticus coming home that evening. We skulked around the kitchen until Calpurnia threw us out. By some voo-doo system Calpurnia seemed to know all about it. She was a less than satisfactory source of palliation, but she did give Jem a hot biscuit-and-butter which he tore in half and shared with me. It tasted like cotton.

We went to the livingroom. I picked up a football magazine, found a picture of Dixie Howell, showed it to Jem and said, "This looks like you." That was the nicest thing I could think to say to him, but it was no help. He sat by the windows, hunched down in a rocking chair, scowling, waiting. Daylight faded.

Two geological ages later, we heard the soles of Atticus's shoes scrape the front steps. The screen door slammed, there was a pause—Atticus was at the hat rack in the hall—and we heard him call, "Jem!" His voice was like the winter wind.

Atticus switched on the ceiling light in the livingroom and found us there, frozen still. He carried my baton in one hand; its filthy yellow tassel trailed on the rug. He held out his other hand; it contained fat camellia buds.

"Jem," he said, "are you responsible for this?"

"Yes sir."

"Why'd you do it?"

Jem said softly, "She said you lawed for niggers and trash."

"You did this because she said that?"

Jem's lips moved, but his, "Yes sir," was inaudible.

"Son, I have no doubt that you've been annoyed by your contemporaries about me lawing for niggers, as you say, but to do something like this to a sick old lady is inexcusable. I strongly advise

you to go down and have a talk with Mrs. Dubose,” said Atticus. “Come straight home afterward.” Jem did not move.

“Go on, I said.”

I followed Jem out of the livingroom. “Come back here,” Atticus said to me. I came back.

Atticus picked up the *Mobile Press* and sat down in the rocking chair Jem had vacated. For the life of me, I did not understand how he could sit there in cold blood and read a newspaper when his only son stood an excellent chance of being murdered with a Confederate Army relic. Of course Jem antagonized me sometimes until I could kill him, but when it came down to it he was all I had.

Atticus did not seem to realize this, or if he did he didn’t care.

I hated him for that, but when you are in trouble you become easily tired: soon I was hiding in his lap and his arms were around me.

“You’re mighty big to be rocked,” he said.

“You don’t care what happens to him,” I said. “You just send him on to get shot at when all he was doin’ was standin’ up for you.”

Atticus pushed my head under his chin. “It’s not time to worry yet,” he said. “I never thought Jem’d be the one to lose his head over this—thought I’d have more trouble with you.”

I said I didn’t see why we had to keep our heads anyway, that nobody I knew at school had to keep his head about anything.

“Scout,” said Atticus, “when summer comes you’ll have to keep your head about far worse things... it’s not fair for you and Jem, I know that, but sometimes we have to make the best of things, and the way we conduct ourselves when the chips are down—well, all I can say is, when you and Jem are grown, maybe you’ll look

“Did she frighten you?” asked Atticus.

“No sir,” said Jem, “but she’s so nasty. She has fits or somethin’. She spits a lot.” “She can’t help that. When people are sick they don’t look nice sometimes.”

“She scared me,” I said.

Atticus looked at me over his glasses. “You don’t have to go with Jem, you know.”

The next afternoon at Mrs. Dubose’s was the same as the first, and so was the next, until gradually a pattern emerged: everything would begin normally—that is, Mrs. Dubose would hound Jem for a while on her favorite subjects, her camellias and our father’s nigger-loving propensities; she would grow increasingly silent, then go away from us. The alarm clock would ring, Jessie would shoo us out, and the rest of the day was ours.

“Atticus,” I said one evening, “what exactly is a nigger-lover?” Atticus’s face was grave. “Has somebody been calling you that?”

“No sir, Mrs. Dubose calls you that. She warms up every afternoon calling you that. Francis called me that last Christmas, that’s where I first heard it.”

“Is that the reason you jumped on him?” asked Atticus. “Yes sir...”

“Then why are you asking me what it means?”

I tried to explain to Atticus that it wasn’t so much what Francis said that had infuriated me as the way he had said it. “It was like he’d said snot-nose or somethin’.”

“Scout,” said Atticus, “nigger-lover is just one of those terms that don’t mean anything—like snot-nose. It’s hard to explain—ignorant, trashy people use it when they think somebody’s favoring

at her. As he read along, I noticed that Mrs. Dubose's corrections grew fewer and farther between, that Jem had even left one sentence dangling in mid-air. She was not listening.

I looked toward the bed.

Something had happened to her. She lay on her back, with the quilts up to her chin. Only her head and shoulders were visible. Her head moved slowly from side to side. From time to time she would open her mouth wide, and I could see her tongue undulate faintly. Cords of saliva would collect on her lips; she would draw them in, then open her mouth again. Her mouth seemed to have a private existence of its own. It worked separate and apart from the rest of her, out and in, like a clam hole at low tide. Occasionally it would say, "Pt," like some viscous substance coming to a boil.

I pulled Jem's sleeve.

He looked at me, then at the bed. Her head made its regular sweep toward us, and Jem said, "Mrs. Dubose, are you all right?" She did not hear him.

The alarm clock went off and scared us stiff. A minute later, nerves still tingling, Jem and I were on the sidewalk headed for home. We did not run away, Jessie sent us: before the clock wound down she was in the room pushing Jem and me out of it.

"Shoo," she said, "you all go home." Jem hesitated at the door.

"It's time for her medicine," Jessie said. As the door swung shut behind us I saw Jessie walking quickly toward Mrs. Dubose's bed.

It was only three forty-five when we got home, so Jem and I drop-kicked in the back yard until it was time to meet Atticus. Atticus had two yellow pencils for me and a football magazine for Jem, which I suppose was a silent reward for our first day's session with Mrs. Dubose. Jem told him what happened.

back on this with some compassion and some feeling that I didn't let you down.

This case, Tom Robinson's case, is something that goes to the essence of a man's conscience—Scout, I couldn't go to church and worship God if I didn't try to help that man."

"Atticus, you must be wrong..."

"How's that?"

"Well, most folks seem to think they're right and you're wrong..."

"They're certainly entitled to think that, and they're entitled to full respect for their opinions," said Atticus, "but before I can live with other folks I've got to live with myself. The one thing that doesn't abide by majority rule is a person's conscience."

When Jem returned, he found me still in Atticus's lap, "Well, son?" said Atticus. He set me on my feet, and I made a secret reconnaissance of Jem. He seemed to be all in one piece, but he had a queer look on his face. Perhaps she had given him a dose of calomel.

"I cleaned it up for her and said I was sorry, but I ain't, and that I'd work on 'em ever Saturday and try to make 'em grow back out."

"There was no point in saying you were sorry if you aren't," said Atticus. "Jem, she's old and ill. You can't hold her responsible for what she says and does. Of course, I'd rather she'd have said it to me than to either of you, but we can't always have our 'druthers."

Jem seemed fascinated by a rose in the carpet. "Atticus," he said, "she wants me to read to her."

"Read to her?"

"Yes sir. She wants me to come every afternoon after school and Saturdays and read to her out loud for two hours. Atticus, do I

have to?”

“Certainly.”

“But she wants me to do it for a month.”

“Then you’ll do it for a month.”

Jem planted his big toe delicately in the center of the rose and pressed it in. Finally he said, “Atticus, it’s all right on the sidewalk but inside it’s—it’s all dark and creepy. There’s shadows and things on the ceiling...”

Atticus smiled grimly. “That should appeal to your imagination. Just pretend you’re inside the Radley house.”

The following Monday afternoon Jem and I climbed the steep front steps to Mrs. Dubose’s house and padded down the open hallway. Jem, armed with *Ivanhoe* and full of superior knowledge, knocked at the second door on the left.

“Mrs. Dubose?” he called.

Jessie opened the wood door and unlatched the screen door.

“Is that you, Jem Finch?” she said. “You got your sister with you. I don’t know—”

“Let ‘em both in, Jessie,” said Mrs. Dubose. Jessie admitted us and went off to the kitchen.

An oppressive odor met us when we crossed the threshold, an odor I had met many times in rain-rotted gray houses where there are coal-oil lamps, water dippers, and unbleached domestic sheets. It always made me afraid, expectant, watchful.

In the corner of the room was a brass bed, and in the bed was Mrs. Dubose. I wondered if Jem’s activities had put her there, and for a moment I felt sorry for her. She was lying under a pile of quilts and looked almost friendly.

There was a marble-topped washstand by her bed; on it were a glass with a teaspoon in it, a red ear syringe, a box of absorbent cotton, and a steel alarm clock standing on three tiny legs.

“So you brought that dirty little sister of yours, did you?” was her greeting.

Jem said quietly, “My sister ain’t dirty and I ain’t scared of you,” although I noticed his knees shaking.

I was expecting a tirade, but all she said was, “You may commence reading, Jeremy.”

Jem sat down in a cane-bottom chair and opened *Ivanhoe*. I pulled up another one and sat beside him.

“Come closer,” said Mrs. Dubose. “Come to the side of the bed.”

We moved our chairs forward. This was the nearest I had ever been to her, and the thing I wanted most to do was move my chair back again.

She was horrible. Her face was the color of a dirty pillowcase, and the corners of her mouth glistened with wet, which inched like a glacier down the deep grooves enclosing her chin. Old-age liver spots dotted her cheeks, and her pale eyes had black pinpoint pupils. Her hands were knobby, and the cuticles were grown up over her fingernails. Her bottom plate was not in, and her upper lip protruded; from time to time she would draw her nether lip to her upper plate and carry her chin with it. This made the wet move faster.

I didn’t look any more than I had to. Jem reopened *Ivanhoe* and began reading. I tried to keep up with him, but he read too fast. When Jem came to a word he didn’t know, he skipped it, but Mrs. Dubose would catch him and make him spell it out. Jem read for perhaps twenty minutes, during which time I looked at the soot-stained mantelpiece, out the window, anywhere to keep from looking