

Chapter 25

“Don’t do that, Scout. Set him out on the back steps.”
“Jem, are you crazy?...”
“I said set him out on the back steps.”

Sighing, I scooped up the small creature, placed him on the bottom step and went back to my cot. September had come, but not a trace of cool weather with it, and we were still sleeping on the back screen porch. Lightning bugs were still about, the night crawlers and flying insects that beat against the screen the summer long had not gone wherever they go when autumn comes.

A roly-poly had found his way inside the house; I reasoned that the tiny varmint had crawled up the steps and under the door. I was putting my book on the floor beside my cot when I saw him. The creatures are no more than an inch long, and when you touch them they roll themselves into a tight gray ball.

I lay on my stomach, reached down and poked him. He rolled up. Then, feeling safe, I suppose, he slowly unrolled. He traveled a few inches on his hundred legs and I touched him again. He rolled up. Feeling sleepy, I decided to end things. My hand was going down on him when Jem spoke.

Jem was scowling. It was probably a part of the stage he was going through, and I wished he would hurry up and get through it. He was certainly never cruel to animals, but I had never known his charity to embrace the insect world.

“Why couldn’t I mash him?” I asked.

said not much of one, at most one that he could always figure out, and not to worry my head a second about botherin’ him. Naw, it was Walter—that boy’s not trash, Jem. He ain’t like the Ewells.”

Jem kicked off his shoes and swung his feet to the bed. He propped himself against a pillow and switched on the reading light. “You know something, Scout? I’ve got it all figured out, now. I’ve thought about it a lot lately and I’ve got it figured out. There’s four kinds of folks in the world. There’s the ordinary kind like us and the neighbors, there’s the kind like the Cunninghams out in the woods, the kind like the Ewells down at the dump, and the Negroes.”

“What about the Chinese, and the Cajuns down yonder in Baldwin County?”

“I mean in Maycomb County. The thing about it is, our kind of folks don’t like the Cunninghams, the Cunninghams don’t like the Ewells, and the Ewells hate and despise the colored folks.”

I told Jem if that was so, then why didn’t Tom’s jury, made up of folks like the Cunninghams, acquit Tom to spite the Ewells?”

Jem waved my question away as being infantile.

“You know,” he said, “I’ve seen Atticus pat his foot when there’s fiddlin’ on the radio, and he loves pot liquor better’n any man I ever saw—”

“Then that makes us like the Cunninghams,” I said. “I can’t see why Aunty—”

“No, lemme finish—it does, but we’re still different somehow. Atticus said one time the reason Aunty’s so hip on the family is because all we’ve got’s background and not a dime to our names.”

“Well Jem, I don’t know—Atticus told me one time that most of this Old Family stuff’s foolishness because everybody’s family’s just as old as everybody else’s. I said did that include the colored folks and Englishmen and he said yes.”

“Background doesn’t mean Old Family,” said Jem. “I think it’s how long your family’s been readin’ and writin’. Scout, I’ve studied this real hard and that’s the only reason I can think of. Somewhere along when the Finches were in Egypt one of ‘em must have learned a hieroglyphic or two and he taught his boy.” Jem laughed. “Imagine Aunty being proud her great-granddaddy could read an’ write— ladies pick funny things to be proud of.”

“Well I’m glad he could, or who’d da taught Atticus and them, and if Atticus couldn’t read, you and me’d be in a fix. I don’t think that’s what background is, Jem.”

“Well then, how do you explain why the Cunninghams are different? Mr. Walter can hardly sign his name, I’ve seen him. We’ve just been readin’ and writin’ longer’n they have.”

“No, everybody’s gotta learn, nobody’s born knowin’. That Walter’s as smart as he can be, he just gets held back sometimes because he has to stay out and help his daddy. Nothin’s wrong with him. Naw, Jem, I think there’s just one kind of folks. Folks.”

Jem turned around and punched his pillow. When he settled back his face was cloudy. He was going into one of his declines, and I grew wary. His brows came together; his mouth became a thin line. He was silent for a while.

“That’s what I thought, too,” he said at last, “when I was your age. If there’s just one kind of folks, why can’t they get along with each other? If they’re all alike, why do they go out of their way to despise each other? Scout, I think I’m beginning to understand something. I think I’m beginning to understand why Boo Radley’s stayed shut up in the house all this time... it’s because he *wants* to stay inside.”

“Calpurnia’s on an errand for a few minutes, Grace,” said Miss Maudie. “Let me pass you some more of those dewberry tarts. ‘dyou hear what that cousin of mine did the other day, the one who likes to go fishing?...”

And so they went, down the row of laughing women, around the diningroom, refilling coffee cups, dishing out goodies as though their only regret was the temporary domestic disaster of losing Calpurnia. The gentle hum began again. “Yes sir, Mrs. Perkins, that J. Grimes Everett is a martyred saint, he... needed to get married so they ran... to the beauty parlor every Saturday afternoon... soon as the sun goes down. He goes to bed with the... chickens, a crate full of sick chickens, Fred says that’s what started it all. Fred says...”

Aunt Alexandra looked across the room at me and smiled. She looked at a tray of cookies on the table and nodded at them. I carefully picked up the tray and watched myself walk to Mrs. Merriweather. With my best company manners, I asked her if she would have some.

After all, if Aunty could be a lady at a time like this, so could I.

him to do right. It's that simple."

"Who?" Aunt Alexandra never knew she was echoing her twelve-year-old nephew.

"The handful of people in this town who say that fair play is not marked White Only; the handful of people who say a fair trial is for everybody, not just us; the handful of people with enough humility to think, when they look at a Negro, there but for the Lord's kindness am I." Miss Maudie's old crispness was returning: "The handful of people in this town with background, that's who they are."

Had I been attentive, I would have had another scrap to add to Jem's definition of background, but I found myself shaking and couldn't stop. I had seen Enfield Prison Farm, and Atticus had pointed out the exercise yard to me. It was the size of a football field.

"Stop that shaking," commanded Miss Maudie, and I stopped. "Get up, Alexandra, we've left 'em long enough."

Aunt Alexandra rose and smoothed the various whalebone ridges along her hips.

She took her handkerchief from her belt and wiped her nose. She patted her hair and said, "Do I show it?"

"Not a sign," said Miss Maudie. "Are you together again, Jean Louise?"

"Yes ma'am."

"Then let's join the ladies," she said grimly.

Their voices swelled when Miss Maudie opened the door to the diningroom. Aunt Alexandra was ahead of me, and I saw her head go up as she went through the door.

"Oh, Mrs. Perkins," she said, "you need some more coffee. Let me get it."

Chapter 24

Calpurnia wore her stiffest starched apron. She carried a tray of charlotte. She backed up to the swinging door and pressed gently. I admired the ease and grace with which she handled heavy loads of dainty things. So did Aunt Alexandra, I guess, because she had let Calpurnia serve today.

August was on the brink of September. Dill would be leaving for Meridian tomorrow; today he was off with Jem at Barker's Eddy. Jem had discovered with angry amazement that nobody had ever bothered to teach Dill how to swim, a skill Jem considered necessary as walking. They had spent two afternoons at the creek, they said they were going in naked and I couldn't come, so I divided the lonely hours between Calpurnia and Miss Maudie.

Today Aunt Alexandra and her missionary circle were fighting the good fight all over the house. From the kitchen, I heard Mrs. Grace Merriweather giving a report in the livingroom on the squalid lives of the Mrunas, it sounded like to me. They put the women out in huts when their time came, whatever that was; they had no sense of family—I knew that'd distress Aunty—they subjected children to terrible ordeals when they were thirteen; they were crawling with yaws and earworms, they chewed up and spat out the bark of a tree into a communal pot and then got drunk on it.

Immediately thereafter, the ladies adjourned for refreshments.

I didn't know whether to go into the diningroom or stay out. Aunt Alexandra told me to join them for refreshments; it was not necessary that I attend the business part of the meeting, she said it'd

bore me. I was wearing my pink Sunday dress, shoes, and a petticoat, and reflected that if I spilled anything Calpurnia would have to wash my dress again for tomorrow. This had been a busy day for her. I decided to stay out.

“Can I help you, Cal?” I asked, wishing to be of some service.

Calpurnia paused in the doorway. “You be still as a mouse in that corner,” she said, “an‘ you can help me load up the trays when I come back.”

The gentle hum of ladies’ voices grew louder as she opened the door: “Why, Alexandra, I never saw such charlotte... just lovely... I never can get my crust like this, never can... who’d’ve thought of little dewberry tarts... Calpurnia?... who’d’a thought it... anybody tell you that the preacher’s wife’s... nooo, well she is, and that other one not walkin’ yet...”

They became quiet, and I knew they had all been served. Calpurnia returned and put my mother’s heavy silver pitcher on a tray. “This coffee pitcher’s a curiosity,” she murmured, “they don’t make ‘em these days.”

“Can I carry it in?”

“If you be careful and don’t drop it. Set it down at the end of the table by Miss Alexandra. Down there by the cups’n things. She’s gonna pour.”

I tried pressing my behind against the door as Calpurnia had done, but the door didn’t budge. Grinning, she held it open for me. “Careful now, it’s heavy. Don’t look at it and you won’t spill it.”

My journey was successful: Aunt Alexandra smiled brilliantly. “Stay with us, Jean Louise,” she said. This was a part of her campaign to teach me to be a lady.

It was customary for every circle hostess to invite her neighbors in for refreshments, be they Baptists or Presbyterians,

“Depends on how you look at it,” he said. “What was one Negro, more or less, among two hundred of ‘em? He wasn’t Tom to them, he was an escaping prisoner.”

Atticus leaned against the refrigerator, pushed up his glasses, and rubbed his eyes. “We had such a good chance,” he said. “I told him what I thought, but I couldn’t in truth say that we had more than a good chance. I guess Tom was tired of white men’s chances and preferred to take his own. Ready, Cal?”

“Yessir, Mr. Finch.”

“Then let’s go.”

Aunt Alexandra sat down in Calpurnia’s chair and put her hands to her face. She sat quite still; she was so quiet I wondered if she would faint. I heard Miss Maudie breathing as if she had just climbed the steps, and in the diningroom the ladies chattered happily.

I thought Aunt Alexandra was crying, but when she took her hands away from her face, she was not. She looked weary. She spoke, and her voice was flat.

“I can’t say I approve of everything he does, Maudie, but he’s my brother, and I just want to know when this will ever end.” Her voice rose: “It tears him to pieces. He doesn’t show it much, but it tears him to pieces. I’ve seen him when— what else do they want from him, Maudie, what else?”

“What does who want, Alexandra?” Miss Maudie asked.

“I mean this town. They’re perfectly willing to let him do what they’re too afraid to do themselves—it might lose ‘em a nickel. They’re perfectly willing to let him wreck his health doing what they’re afraid to do, they’re—”

“Be quiet, they’ll hear you,” said Miss Maudie. “Have you ever thought of it this way, Alexandra? Whether Maycomb knows it or not, we’re paying the highest tribute we can pay a man. We trust

"Excuse me, ladies," he said. "Go right ahead with your meeting, don't let me disturb you. Alexandra, could you come to the kitchen a minute? I want to borrow Calpurnia for a while."

He didn't go through the diningroom, but went down the back hallway and entered the kitchen from the rear door. Aunt Alexandra and I met him. The diningroom door opened again and Miss Maudie joined us. Calpurnia had half risen from her chair.

"Cal," Atticus said, "I want you to go with me out to Helen Robinson's house—"

"What's the matter?" Aunt Alexandra asked, alarmed by the look on my father's face.

"Tom's dead."

Aunt Alexandra put her hands to her mouth.

"They shot him," said Atticus. "He was running. It was during their exercise period. They said he just broke into a blind raving charge at the fence and started climbing over. Right in front of them —"

"Didn't they try to stop him? Didn't they give him any warning?" Aunt Alexandra's voice shook.

"Oh yes, the guards called to him to stop. They fired a few shots in the air, then to kill. They got him just as he went over the fence. They said if he'd had two good arms he'd have made it, he was moving that fast. Seventeen bullet holes in him.

They didn't have to shoot him that much. Cal, I want you to come out with me and help me tell Helen."

"Yes sir," she murmured, fumbling at her apron. Miss Maudie went to Calpurnia and untied it.

"This is the last straw, Atticus," Aunt Alexandra said.

which accounted for the presence of Miss Rachel (sober as a judge), Miss Maudie and Miss Stephanie Crawford.

Rather nervous, I took a seat beside Miss Maudie and wondered why ladies put on their hats to go across the street. Ladies in bunches always filled me with vague apprehension and a firm desire to be elsewhere, but this feeling was what Aunt Alexandra called being "spoiled."

The ladies were cool in fragile pastel prints: most of them were heavily powdered but unrouged; the only lipstick in the room was Tangee Natural. Cutex Natural sparkled on their fingernails, but some of the younger ladies wore Rose. They smelled heavenly. I sat quietly, having conquered my hands by tightly gripping the arms of the chair, and waited for someone to speak to me.

Miss Maudie's gold bridgework twinkled. "You're mighty dressed up, Miss Jean Louise," she said, "Where are your britches today?"

"Under my dress."

I hadn't meant to be funny, but the ladies laughed. My cheeks grew hot as I realized my mistake, but Miss Maudie looked gravely down at me. She never laughed at me unless I meant to be funny.

In the sudden silence that followed, Miss Stephanie Crawford called from across the room, "Whatcha going to be when you grow up, Jean Louise? A lawyer?"

"Nome, I hadn't thought about it..." I answered, grateful that Miss Stephanie was kind enough to change the subject. Hurriedly I began choosing my vocation.

Nurse? Aviator? "Well..."

"Why shoot, I thought you wanted to be a lawyer, you've already commenced going to court."

The ladies laughed again. “That Stephanie’s a card,” somebody said. Miss Stephanie was encouraged to pursue the subject: “Don’t you want to grow up to be a lawyer?”

Miss Maudie’s hand touched mine and I answered mildly enough, “Nome, just a lady.”

Miss Stephanie eyed me suspiciously, decided that I meant no impertinence, and contented herself with, “Well, you won’t get very far until you start wearing dresses more often.”

Miss Maudie’s hand closed tightly on mine, and I said nothing. Its warmth was enough.

Mrs. Grace Merriweather sat on my left, and I felt it would be polite to talk to her. Mr. Merriweather, a faithful Methodist under duress, apparently saw nothing personal in singing, “Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me...” It was the general opinion of Maycomb, however, that Mrs.

Merriweather had sobered him up and made a reasonably useful citizen of him. For certainly Mrs. Merriweather was the most devout lady in Maycomb. I searched for a topic of interest to her. “What did you all study this afternoon?” I asked.

“Oh child, those poor Mrunas,” she said, and was off. Few other questions would be necessary.

Mrs. Merriweather’s large brown eyes always filled with tears when she considered the oppressed. “Living in that jungle with nobody but J. Grimes Everett,” she said. “Not a white person’ll go near ‘em but that saintly J. Grimes Everett.”

Mrs. Merriweather played her voice like an organ; every word she said received its full measure: “The poverty... the darkness... the immorality—nobody but J. Grimes Everett knows. You know, when the church gave me that trip to the camp grounds J. Grimes Everett said to me—”

say to ‘em yes you’re as good as we are but stay away from us. Down here we just say you live your way and we’ll live ours. I think that woman, that Mrs. Roosevelt’s lost her mind—just plain lost her mind coming down to Birmingham and tryin’ to sit with ‘em. If I was the Mayor of Birmingham I’d—”

Well, neither of us was the Mayor of Birmingham, but I wished I was the Governor of Alabama for one day: I’d let Tom Robinson go so quick the Missionary Society wouldn’t have time to catch its breath. Calpurnia was telling Miss Rachel’s cook the other day how bad Tom was taking things and she didn’t stop talking when I came into the kitchen. She said there wasn’t a thing Atticus could do to make being shut up easier for him, that the last thing he said to Atticus before they took him down to the prison camp was, “Good-bye, Mr. Finch, there ain’t nothin’ you can do now, so there ain’t no use tryin’.” Calpurnia said Atticus told her that the day they took Tom to prison he just gave up hope.

She said Atticus tried to explain things to him, and that he must do his best not to lose hope because Atticus was doing his best to get him free. Miss Rachel’s cook asked Calpurnia why didn’t Atticus just say yes, you’ll go free, and leave it at that—seemed like that’d be a big comfort to Tom. Calpurnia said, “Because you ain’t familiar with the law. First thing you learn when you’re in a lawin’ family is that there ain’t any definite answers to anything. Mr. Finch couldn’t say somethin’s so when he doesn’t know for sure it’s so.”

The front door slammed and I heard Atticus’s footsteps in the hall. Automatically I wondered what time it was. Not nearly time for him to be home, and on Missionary Society days he usually stayed downtown until black dark.

He stopped in the doorway. His hat was in his hand, and his face was white.

the meeting was blood-curdling, the social hour was dreary.

“Maudie, I’m sure I don’t know what you mean,” said Mrs. Merriweather. “I’m sure you do,” Miss Maudie said shortly.

She said no more. When Miss Maudie was angry her brevity was icy. Something had made her deeply angry, and her gray eyes were as cold as her voice. Mrs. Merriweather reddened, glanced at me, and looked away. I could not see Mrs. Farrow.

Aunt Alexandra got up from the table and swiftly passed more refreshments, neatly engaging Mrs. Merriweather and Mrs. Gates in brisk conversation. When she had them well on the road with Mrs. Perkins, Aunt Alexandra stepped back. She gave Miss Maudie a look of pure gratitude, and I wondered at the world of women. Miss Maudie and Aunt Alexandra had never been especially close, and here was Auntie silently thanking her for something. For what, I knew not. I was content to learn that Aunt Alexandra could be pierced sufficiently to feel gratitude for help given. There was no doubt about it, I must soon enter this world, where on its surface fragrant ladies rocked slowly, fanned gently, and drank cool water.

But I was more at home in my father’s world. People like Mr. Heck Tate did not trap you with innocent questions to make fun of you; even Jem was not highly critical unless you said something stupid. Ladies seemed to live in faint horror of men, seemed unwilling to approve wholeheartedly of them. But I liked them.

There was something about them, no matter how much they cussed and drank and gambled and chewed; no matter how undelectable they were, there was something about them that I instinctively liked... they weren’t—

“Hypocrites, Mrs. Perkins, born hypocrites,” Mrs. Merriweather was saying. “At least we don’t have that sin on our shoulders down here. People up there set ‘em free, but you don’t see ‘em settin’ at the table with ‘em. At least we don’t have the deceit to

“Was he there, ma’am? I thought—”

“Home on leave. J. Grimes Everett said to me, he said, ‘Mrs. Merriweather, you have no conception, no conception of what we are fighting over there.’ That’s what he said to me.”

“Yes ma’am.”

“I said to him, ‘Mr. Everett,’ I said, ‘the ladies of the Maycomb Alabama Methodist Episcopal Church South are behind you one hundred percent.’ That’s what I said to him. And you know, right then and there I made a pledge in my heart. I said to myself, when I go home I’m going to give a course on the Mrunas and bring J. Grimes Everett’s message to Maycomb and that’s just what I’m doing.”

“Yes ma’am.”

When Mrs. Merriweather shook her head, her black curls jiggled. “Jean Louise,” she said, “you are a fortunate girl. You live in a Christian home with Christian folks in a Christian town. Out there in J. Grimes Everett’s land there’s nothing but sin and squalor.”

“Yes ma’am.”

“Sin and squalor—what was that, Gertrude?” Mrs. Merriweather turned on her chimes for the lady sitting beside her. “Oh that. Well, I always say forgive and forget, forgive and forget. Thing that church ought to do is help her lead a Christian life for those children from here on out. Some of the men ought to go out there and tell that preacher to encourage her.”

“Excuse me, Mrs. Merriweather,” I interrupted, “are you all talking about Mayella Ewell?”

“May—? No, child. That darky’s wife. Tom’s wife, Tom—”
“Robinson, ma’am.”

Mrs. Merriweather turned back to her neighbor. “There’s one

thing I truly believe, Gertrude,” she continued, “but some people just don’t see it my way. If we just let them know we forgive ‘em, that we’ve forgotten it, then this whole thing’ll blow over.”

“Ah—Mrs. Merriweather,” I interrupted once more, “what’ll blow over?”

Again, she turned to me. Mrs. Merriweather was one of those childless adults who find it necessary to assume a different tone of voice when speaking to children. “Nothing, Jean Louise,” she said, in stately largo, “the cooks and field hands are just dissatisfied, but they’re settling down now—they grumbled all next day after that trial.”

Mrs. Merriweather faced Mrs. Farrow: “Gertrude, I tell you there’s nothing more distracting than a sulky ducky. Their mouths go down to here. Just ruins your day to have one of ‘em in the kitchen. You know what I said to my Sophy, Gertrude? I said, ‘Sophy,’ I said, ‘you simply are not being a Christian today. Jesus Christ never went around grumbling and complaining,’ and you know, it did her good.

She took her eyes off that floor and said, ‘Nome, Miz Merriweather, Jesus never went around grumblin’.’ I tell you, Gertrude, you never ought to let an opportunity go by to witness for the Lord.”

I was reminded of the ancient little organ in the chapel at Finch’s Landing. When I was very small, and if I had been very good during the day, Atticus would let me pump its bellows while he picked out a tune with one finger. The last note would linger as long as there was air to sustain it. Mrs. Merriweather had run out of air, I judged, and was replenishing her supply while Mrs. Farrow composed herself to speak.

Mrs. Farrow was a splendidly built woman with pale eyes and narrow feet. She had a fresh permanent wave, and her hair was a mass of tight gray ringlets. She was the second most devout lady in

Maycomb. She had a curious habit of prefacing everything she said with a soft sibilant sound.

“S-s-s Grace,” she said, “it’s just like I was telling Brother Hutson the other day. ‘S-s-s Brother Hutson,’ I said, ‘looks like we’re fighting a losing battle, a losing battle.’ I said, ‘S-s-s it doesn’t matter to ‘em one bit. We can educate ‘em till we’re blue in the face, we can try till we drop to make Christians out of ‘em, but there’s no lady safe in her bed these nights.’ He said to me, ‘Mrs. Farrow, I don’t know what we’re coming to down here.’ S-s-s I told him that was certainly a fact.”

Mrs. Merriweather nodded wisely. Her voice soared over the clink of coffee cups and the soft bovine sounds of the ladies munching their dainties. “Gertrude,” she said, “I tell you there are some good but misguided people in this town. Good, but misguided. Folks in this town who think they’re doing right, I mean. Now far be it from me to say who, but some of ‘em in this town thought they were doing the right thing a while back, but all they did was stir ‘em up. That’s all they did.

Might’ve looked like the right thing to do at the time, I’m sure I don’t know, I’m not read in that field, but sulky... dissatisfied... I tell you if my Sophy’d kept it up another day I’d have let her go. It’s never entered that wool of hers that the only reason I keep her is because this depression’s on and she needs her dollar and a quarter every week she can get it.”

“His food doesn’t stick going down, does it?”

Miss Maudie said it. Two tight lines had appeared at the corners of her mouth. She had been sitting silently beside me, her coffee cup balanced on one knee. I had lost the thread of conversation long ago, when they quit talking about Tom Robinson’s wife, and had contented myself with thinking of Finch’s Landing and the river. Aunt Alexandra had got it backwards: the business part of