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.

“Because they don’t bother you,” Jem answered in the darkness. He had turned out his reading light.

“Reckon you’re at the stage now where you don’t kill flies and mosquitoes now, I reckon,” I said. “Lemme know when you change your mind. Tell you one thing, though, I ain’t gonna sit around and not scratch a redbug.”

“Aw dry up,” he answered drowsily.

Jem was the one who was getting more like a girl every day, not I. Comfortable, I lay on my back and waited for sleep, and while waiting I thought of Dill. He had left us the first of the month with firm assurances that he would return the minute school was out—he guessed his folks had got the general idea that he liked to spend his summers in Maycomb. Miss Rachel took us with them in the taxi to Maycomb Junction, and Dill waved to us from the train window until he was out of sight. He was not out of mind: I missed him. The last two days of his time with us, Jem had taught him to swim—

Taught him to swim. I was wide awake, remembering what Dill had told me.

Barker’s Eddy is at the end of a dirt road off the Meridian highway about a mile from town. It is easy to catch a ride down the highway on a cotton wagon or from a passing motorist, and the short walk to the creek is easy, but the prospect of walking all the way back home at dusk, when the traffic is light, is tiresome, and swimmers are careful not to stay too late.
According to Dill, he and Jem had just come to the highway when they saw Atticus driving toward them. He looked like he had not seen them, so they both waved. Atticus finally slowed down; when they caught up with him he said, “You’d better catch a ride back. I won’t be going home for a while.” Calpurnia was in the back seat.

Jem protested, then pleaded, and Atticus said, “All right, you can come with us if you stay in the car.”

On the way to Tom Robinson’s, Atticus told them what had happened.

They turned off the highway, rode slowly by the dump and past the Ewell residence, down the narrow lane to the Negro cabins. Dill said a crowd of black children were playing marbles in Tom’s front yard. Atticus parked the car and got out. Calpurnia followed him through the front gate.

Dill heard him ask one of the children, “Where’s your mother, Sam?” and heard Sam say, “She down at Sis Stevens’s, Mr. Finch. Want me run fetch her?”

Dill said Atticus looked uncertain, then he said yes, and Sam scampered off. “Go on with your game, boys,” Atticus said to the children.

A little girl came to the cabin door and stood looking at Atticus. Dill said her hair was a wad of tiny stiff pigtails, each ending in a bright bow. She grinned from ear to ear and walked toward our father, but she was too small to navigate the steps. Dill said Atticus went to her, took off his hat, and offered her his finger. She grabbed it and he eased her down the steps. Then he gave her to Calpurnia.

Sam was trotting behind his mother when they came up. Dill said Helen said, “‘evenin’, Mr. Finch, won’t you have a seat?” But she didn’t say any more. Neither did Atticus.
“Scout,” said Dill, “she just fell down in the dirt. Just fell down in the dirt, like a giant with a big foot just came along and stepped on her. Just ump—” Dill’s fat foot hit the ground. “Like you’d step on an ant.”

Dill said Calpurnia and Atticus lifted Helen to her feet and half carried, half walked her to the cabin. They stayed inside a long time, and Atticus came out alone. When they drove back by the dump, some of the Ewells hollered at them, but Dill didn’t catch what they said.

Maycomb was interested by the news of Tom’s death for perhaps two days; two days was enough for the information to spread through the county. “Did you hear about?… No? Well, they say he was runnin’ fit to beat lightnin’…” To Maycomb, Tom’s death was typical. Typical of a nigger to cut and run. Typical of a nigger’s mentality to have no plan, no thought for the future, just run blind first chance he saw. Funny thing, Atticus Finch might’ve got him off scot free, but wait—? Hell no. You know how they are. Easy come, easy go. Just shows you, that Robinson boy was legally married, they say he kept himself clean, went to church and all that, but when it comes down to the line the veneer’s mighty thin. Nigger always comes out in ‘em.

A few more details, enabling the listener to repeat his version in turn, then nothing to talk about until The Maycomb Tribune appeared the following Thursday. There was a brief obituary in the Colored News, but there was also an editorial.

Mr. B. B. Underwood was at his most bitter, and he couldn’t have cared less who canceled advertising and subscriptions. (But Maycomb didn’t play that way: Mr. Underwood could holler till he sweated and write whatever he wanted to, he’d still get his advertising and subscriptions.)
If he wanted to make a fool of himself in his paper that was his business.) Mr. Underwood didn’t talk about miscarriages of justice, he was writing so children could understand. Mr. Underwood simply figured it was a sin to kill cripples, be they standing, sitting, or escaping. He likened Tom’s death to the senseless slaughter of songbirds by hunters and children, and Maycomb thought he was trying to write an editorial poetical enough to be reprinted in *The Montgomery Advertiser*.

How could this be so, I wondered, as I read Mr. Underwood’s editorial. Senseless killing—Tom had been given due process of law to the day of his death; he had been tried openly and convicted by twelve good men and true; my father had fought for him all the way. Then Mr. Underwood’s meaning became clear: Atticus had used every tool available to free men to save Tom Robinson, but in the secret courts of men’s hearts Atticus had no case. Tom was a dead man the minute Mayella Ewell opened her mouth and screamed.

The name Ewell gave me a queasy feeling. Maycomb had lost no time in getting Mr. Ewell’s views on Tom’s demise and passing them along through that English Channel of gossip, Miss Stephanie Crawford. Miss Stephanie told Aunt Alexandra in Jem’s presence (“Oh foot, he’s old enough to listen.”) that Mr. Ewell said it made one down and about two more to go. Jem told me not to be afraid, Mr. Ewell was more hot gas than anything. Jem also told me that if I breathed a word to Atticus, if in any way I let Atticus know I knew, Jem would personally never speak to me again.