

Chapter 8

For reasons unfathomable to the most experienced prophets in Maycomb County, autumn turned to winter that year. We had two weeks of the coldest weather since 1885, Atticus said. Mr. Avery said it was written on the Rosetta Stone that when children disobeyed their parents, smoked cigarettes and made war on each other, the seasons would change: Jem and I were burdened with the guilt of contributing to the aberrations of nature, thereby causing unhappiness to our neighbors and discomfort to ourselves.

Old Mrs. Radley died that winter, but her death caused hardly a ripple—the neighborhood seldom saw her, except when she watered her cannas. Jem and I decided that Boo had got her at last, but when Atticus returned from the Radley house he said she died of natural causes, to our disappointment.

“Ask him,” Jem whispered.

“You ask him, you’re the oldest.”

“That’s why you oughta ask him.”

“Atticus,” I said, “did you see Mr. Arthur?”

Atticus looked sternly around his newspaper at me: “I did not.”

Jem restrained me from further questions. He said Atticus

was still touchous about us and the Radleys and it wouldn't do to push him any. Jem had a notion that Atticus thought our activities that night last summer were not solely confined to strip poker. Jem had no firm basis for his ideas, he said it was merely a twitch.

Next morning I awoke, looked out the window and nearly died of fright. My screams brought Atticus from his bathroom half-shaven.

"The *world's* endin', Atticus! Please do something—!" I dragged him to the window and pointed.

"No it's not," he said. "It's snowing."

Jem asked Atticus would it keep up. Jem had never seen snow either, but he knew what it was. Atticus said he didn't know any more about snow than Jem did. "I think, though, if it's watery like that, it'll turn to rain."

The telephone rang and Atticus left the breakfast table to answer it. "That was Eula May," he said when he returned. "I quote—'As it has not snowed in Maycomb County since 1885, there will be no school today.'"

Eula May was Maycomb's leading telephone operator. She was entrusted with issuing public announcements, wedding invitations, setting off the fire siren, and giving first-aid instructions when Dr. Reynolds was away.

When Atticus finally called us to order and bade us look at our plates instead of out the windows, Jem asked, "How do you make a snowman?"

"I haven't the slightest idea," said Atticus. "I don't want you all to be disappointed, but I doubt if there'll be enough snow for a snowball, even."

Calpurnia came in and said she thought it was sticking. When we ran to the back yard, it was covered with a feeble layer of soggy snow.

“We shouldn’t walk about in it,” said Jem. “Look, every step you take’s wasting it.”

I looked back at my mushy footprints. Jem said if we waited until it snowed some more we could scrape it all up for a snowman. I stuck out my tongue and caught a fat flake. It burned.

“Jem, it’s hot!”

“No it ain’t, it’s so cold it burns. Now don’t eat it, Scout, you’re wasting it. Let it come down.”

“But I want to walk in it.”

“I know what, we can go walk over at Miss Maudie’s.”

Jem hopped across the front yard. I followed in his tracks. When we were on the sidewalk in front of Miss Maudie’s, Mr. Avery accosted us. He had a pink face and a big stomach below his belt.

“See what you’ve done?” he said. “Hasn’t snowed in Maycomb since Appomattox. It’s bad children like you makes the seasons change.”

I wondered if Mr. Avery knew how hopefully we had watched last summer for him to repeat his performance, and reflected that if this was our reward, there was something to say for sin. I did not wonder where Mr. Avery gathered his meteorological statistics: they came straight from the Rosetta Stone.

“Jem Finch, you Jem Finch!”

“Miss Maudie’s callin’ you, Jem.”

“You all stay in the middle of the yard. There’s some thrift buried under the snow near the porch. Don’t step on it!”

“Yessum!” called Jem. “It’s beautiful, ain’t it, Miss Maudie?”

“Beautiful my hind foot! If it freezes tonight it’ll carry off all my azaleas!”

Miss Maudie's old sunhat glistened with snow crystals. She was bending over some small bushes, wrapping them in burlap bags. Jem asked her what she was doing that for.

"Keep 'em warm," she said.

"How can flowers keep warm? They don't circulate."

"I cannot answer that question, Jem Finch. All I know is if it freezes tonight these plants'll freeze, so you cover 'em up. Is that clear?"

"Yessum. Miss Maudie?"

"What, sir?"

"Could Scout and me borrow some of your snow?"

"Heavens alive, take it all! There's an old peach basket under the house, haul it off in that." Miss Maudie's eyes narrowed. "Jem Finch, what are you going to do with my snow?"

"You'll see," said Jem, and we transferred as much snow as we could from Miss Maudie's yard to ours, a slushy operation.

"What are we gonna do, Jem?" I asked.

"You'll see," he said. "Now get the basket and haul all the snow you can rake up from the back yard to the front. Walk back in your tracks, though," he cautioned.

"Are we gonna have a snow baby, Jem?"

"No, a real snowman. Gotta work hard, now."

Jem ran to the back yard, produced the garden hoe and began digging quickly behind the woodpile, placing any worms he found to one side. He went in the house, returned with the laundry hamper, filled it with earth and carried it to the front yard.

When we had five baskets of earth and two baskets of snow, Jem said we were ready to begin.

"Don't you think this is kind of a mess?" I asked.

“Looks messy now, but it won’t later,” he said.

Jem scooped up an armful of dirt, patted it into a mound on which he added another load, and another until he had constructed a torso.

“Jem, I ain’t ever heard of a nigger snowman,” I said.

“He won’t be black long,” he grunted.

Jem procured some peachtree switches from the back yard, plaited them, and bent them into bones to be covered with dirt.

“He looks like Stephanie Crawford with her hands on her hips,” I said. “Fat in the middle and little-bitty arms.”

“I’ll make ‘em bigger.” Jem sloshed water over the mud man and added more dirt. He looked thoughtfully at it for a moment, then he molded a big stomach below the figure’s waistline. Jem glanced at me, his eyes twinkling: “Mr. Avery’s sort of shaped like a snowman, ain’t he?”

Jem scooped up some snow and began plastering it on. He permitted me to cover only the back, saving the public parts for himself. Gradually Mr. Avery turned white.

Using bits of wood for eyes, nose, mouth, and buttons, Jem succeeded in making Mr. Avery look cross. A stick of stovewood completed the picture. Jem stepped back and viewed his creation.

“It’s lovely, Jem,” I said. “Looks almost like he’d talk to you.”

“It is, ain’t it?” he said shyly.

We could not wait for Atticus to come home for dinner, but called and said we had a big surprise for him. He seemed surprised when he saw most of the back yard in the front yard, but he said we had done a jim-dandy job. “I didn’t know how you were going to do it,” he said to

Jem, “but from now on I’ll never worry about what’ll become of you, son, you’ll always have an idea.”

Jem’s ears reddened from Atticus’s compliment, but he looked up sharply when he saw Atticus stepping back. Atticus squinted at the snowman a while. He grinned, then laughed. “Son, I can’t tell what you’re going to be—an engineer, a lawyer, or a portrait painter. You’ve perpetrated a near libel here in the front yard. We’ve got to disguise this fellow.”

Atticus suggested that Jem hone down his creation’s front a little, swap a broom for the stovewood, and put an apron on him.

Jem explained that if he did, the snowman would become muddy and cease to be a snowman.

“I don’t care what you do, so long as you do something,” said Atticus. “You can’t go around making caricatures of the neighbors.”

“Ain’t a characterture,” said Jem. “It looks just like him.”

“Mr. Avery might not think so.”

“I know what!” said Jem. He raced across the street, disappeared into Miss Maudie’s back yard and returned triumphant. He stuck her sunhat on the snowman’s head and jammed her hedge-clippers into the crook of his arm. Atticus said that would be fine.

Miss Maudie opened her front door and came out on the porch. She looked across the street at us. Suddenly she grinned. “Jem Finch,” she called. “You devil, bring me back my hat, sir!”

Jem looked up at Atticus, who shook his head. “She’s just fussing,” he said. “She’s really impressed with your—accomplishments.”

Atticus strolled over to Miss Maudie’s sidewalk,

where they engaged in an arm-waving conversation, the only phrase of which I caught was "...erected an absolute morphodite in that yard! Atticus, you'll never raise 'em!"

The snow stopped in the afternoon, the temperature dropped, and by nightfall Mr. Avery's direst predictions came true: Calpurnia kept every fireplace in the house blazing, but we were cold. When Atticus came home that evening he said we were in for it, and asked Calpurnia if she wanted to stay with us for the night. Calpurnia glanced up at the high ceilings and long windows and said she thought she'd be warmer at her house. Atticus drove her home in the car.

Before I went to sleep Atticus put more coal on the fire in my room. He said the thermometer registered sixteen, that it was the coldest night in his memory, and that our snowman outside was frozen solid.

Minutes later, it seemed, I was awakened by someone shaking me. Atticus's overcoat was spread across me. "Is it morning already?"

"Baby, get up."

Atticus was holding out my bathrobe and coat. "Put your robe on first," he said.

Jem was standing beside Atticus, groggy and tousled. He was holding his overcoat closed at the neck, his other hand was jammed into his pocket. He looked strangely overweight.

"Hurry, hon," said Atticus. "Here're your shoes and socks."

Stupidly, I put them on. "Is it morning?"

"No, it's a little after one. Hurry now."

That something was wrong finally got through to me. "What's the matter?"

By then he did not have to tell me. Just as the birds know where to go when it rains, I knew when there was trouble in our street. Soft taffeta-like sounds and muffled scurrying sounds filled me with helpless dread.

“Whose is it?”

“Miss Maudie’s, hon,” said Atticus gently.

At the front door, we saw fire spewing from Miss Maudie’s diningroom windows. As if to confirm what we saw, the town fire siren wailed up the scale to a treble pitch and remained there, screaming.

“It’s gone, ain’t it?” moaned Jem.

“I expect so,” said Atticus. “Now listen, both of you. Go down and stand in front of the Radley Place. Keep out of the way, do you hear? See which way the wind’s blowing?”

“Oh,” said Jem. “Atticus, reckon we oughta start moving the furniture out?”

“Not yet, son. Do as I tell you. Run now. Take care of Scout, you hear? Don’t let her out of your sight.”

With a push, Atticus started us toward the Radley front gate. We stood watching the street fill with men and cars while fire silently devoured Miss Maudie’s house. “Why don’t they hurry, why don’t they hurry...” muttered Jem.

We saw why. The old fire truck, killed by the cold, was being pushed from town by a crowd of men. When the men attached its hose to a hydrant, the hose burst and water shot up, tinkling down on the pavement.

“Oh-h Lord, Jem...”

Jem put his arm around me. “Hush, Scout,” he said. “It ain’t time to worry yet. I’ll let you know when.”

The men of Maycomb, in all degrees of dress and undress, took furniture from Miss Maudie’s house to a yard

across the street. I saw Atticus carrying Miss Maudie's heavy oak rocking chair, and thought it sensible of him to save what she valued most.

Sometimes we heard shouts. Then Mr. Avery's face appeared in an upstairs window. He pushed a mattress out the window into the street and threw down furniture until men shouted, "Come down from there, Dick! The stairs are going! Get outta there, Mr. Avery!"

Mr. Avery began climbing through the window.

"Scout, he's stuck..." breathed Jem. "Oh God..."

Mr. Avery was wedged tightly. I buried my head under Jem's arm and didn't look again until Jem cried, "He's got loose, Scout! He's all right!"

I looked up to see Mr. Avery cross the upstairs porch. He swung his legs over the railing and was sliding down a pillar when he slipped. He fell, yelled, and hit Miss Maudie's shrubbery.

Suddenly I noticed that the men were backing away from Miss Maudie's house, moving down the street toward us. They were no longer carrying furniture. The fire was well into the second floor and had eaten its way to the roof: window frames were black against a vivid orange center.

"Jem, it looks like a pumpkin—"

"Scout, look!"

Smoke was rolling off our house and Miss Rachel's house like fog off a riverbank, and men were pulling hoses toward them. Behind us, the fire truck from Abbottsville screamed around the curve and stopped in front of our house.

"That book..." I said.

"What?" said Jem.

"That Tom Swift book, it ain't mine, it's Dill's..."

“Don’t worry, Scout, it ain’t time to worry yet,” said Jem. He pointed. “Looka yonder.”

In a group of neighbors, Atticus was standing with his hands in his overcoat pockets. He might have been watching a football game. Miss Maudie was beside him.

“See there, he’s not worried yet,” said Jem.

“Why ain’t he on top of one of the houses?”

“He’s too old, he’d break his neck.”

“You think we oughta make him get our stuff out?”

“Let’s don’t pester him, he’ll know when it’s time,” said Jem.

The Abbottsville fire truck began pumping water on our house; a man on the roof pointed to places that needed it most. I watched our Absolute Morphodite go black and crumble; Miss Maudie’s sunhat settled on top of the heap. I could not see her hedge-clippers. In the heat between our house, Miss Rachel’s and Miss Maudie’s, the men had long ago shed coats and bathrobes. They worked in pajama tops and nightshirts stuffed into their pants, but I became aware that I was slowly freezing where I stood. Jem tried to keep me warm, but his arm was not enough. I pulled free of it and clutched my shoulders. By dancing a little, I could feel my feet.

Another fire truck appeared and stopped in front of Miss Stephanie Crawford’s. There was no hydrant for another hose, and the men tried to soak her house with hand extinguishers.

Miss Maudie’s tin roof quelled the flames. Roaring, the house collapsed; fire gushed everywhere, followed by a flurry of blankets from men on top of the adjacent houses, beating out sparks and burning chunks of wood.

It was dawn before the men began to leave, first one by one, then in groups. They pushed the Maycomb fire

truck back to town, the Abbottsville truck departed, the third one remained. We found out next day it had come from Clark's Ferry, sixty miles away.

Jem and I slid across the street. Miss Maudie was staring at the smoking black hole in her yard, and Atticus shook his head to tell us she did not want to talk. He led us home, holding onto our shoulders to cross the icy street. He said Miss Maudie would stay with Miss Stephanie for the time being.

"Anybody want some hot chocolate?" he asked. I shuddered when Atticus started a fire in the kitchen stove.

As we drank our cocoa I noticed Atticus looking at me, first with curiosity, then with sternness. "I thought I told you and Jem to stay put," he said.

"Why, we did. We stayed—"

"Then whose blanket is that?"

"Blanket?"

"Yes ma'am, blanket. It isn't ours."

I looked down and found myself clutching a brown woolen blanket I was wearing around my shoulders, squaw-fashion.

"Atticus, I don't know, sir... I—"

I turned to Jem for an answer, but Jem was even more bewildered than I. He said he didn't know how it got there, we did exactly as Atticus had told us, we stood down by the Radley gate away from everybody, we didn't move an inch—Jem stopped.

"Mr. Nathan was at the fire," he babbled, "I saw him, I saw him, he was tuggin' that mattress—Atticus, I swear..."

"That's all right, son." Atticus grinned slowly. "Looks like all of Maycomb was out tonight, in one way or another. Jem, there's some wrapping paper in the pantry, I think. Go get it and we'll—"

“Atticus, no sir!”

Jem seemed to have lost his mind. He began pouring out our secrets right and left in total disregard for my safety if not for his own, omitting nothing, knot-hole, pants and all.

“...Mr. Nathan put cement in that tree, Atticus, an’ he did it to stop us findin’ things—he’s crazy, I reckon, like they say, but Atticus, I swear to God he ain’t ever harmed us, he ain’t ever hurt us, he coulda cut my throat from ear to ear that night but he tried to mend my pants instead... he ain’t ever hurt us, Atticus—”

Atticus said, “Whoa, son,” so gently that I was greatly heartened. It was obvious that he had not followed a word Jem said, for all Atticus said was, “You’re right. We’d better keep this and the blanket to ourselves. Someday, maybe, Scout can thank him for covering her up.”

“Thank who?” I asked.

“Boo Radley. You were so busy looking at the fire you didn’t know it when he put the blanket around you.”

My stomach turned to water and I nearly threw up when Jem held out the blanket and crept toward me. “He sneaked out of the house—turn ‘round—sneaked up, an’ went like this!”

Atticus said dryly, “Do not let this inspire you to further glory, Jeremy.”

Jem scowled, “I ain’t gonna do anything to him,” but I watched the spark of fresh adventure leave his eyes. “Just think, Scout,” he said, “if you’d just turned around, you’d see him.”

Calpurnia woke us at noon. Atticus had said we need not go to school that day, we’d learn nothing after no sleep. Calpurnia said for us to try and clean up the front yard.

Miss Maudie’s sunhat was suspended in a thin layer of ice, like a fly in amber, and we had to dig under the

dirt for her hedge-clippers. We found her in her back yard, gazing at her frozen charred azaleas.

“We’re bringing back your things, Miss Maudie,” said Jem. “We’re awful sorry.”

Miss Maudie looked around, and the shadow of her old grin crossed her face. “Always wanted a smaller house, Jem Finch. Gives me more yard. Just think, I’ll have more room for my azaleas now!”

“You ain’t grievin’, Miss Maudie?” I asked, surprised. Atticus said her house was nearly all she had.

“Grieving, child? Why, I hated that old cow barn. Thought of settin’ fire to it a hundred times myself, except they’d lock me up.”

“But—”

“Don’t you worry about me, Jean Louise Finch. There are ways of doing things you don’t know about. Why, I’ll build me a little house and take me a couple of roomers and—gracious, I’ll have the finest yard in Alabama. Those Bellingraths’ll look plain puny when I get started!”

Jem and I looked at each other. “How’d it catch, Miss Maudie?” he asked.

“I don’t know, Jem. Probably the flue in the kitchen. I kept a fire in there last night for my potted plants. Hear you had some unexpected company last night, Miss Jean Louise.”

“How’d you know?”

“Atticus told me on his way to town this morning. Tell you the truth, I’d like to’ve been with you. And I’d’ve had sense enough to turn around, too.”

Miss Maudie puzzled me. With most of her possessions gone and her beloved yard a shambles, she still took a lively and cordial interest in Jem’s and my affairs.

She must have seen my perplexity. She said, “Only

thing I worried about last night was all the danger and commotion it caused. This whole neighborhood could have gone up. Mr. Avery'll be in bed for a week—he's right stove up. He's too old to do things like that and I told him so. Soon as I can get my hands clean and when Stephanie Crawford's not looking, I'll make him a Lane cake. That Stephanie's been after my recipe for thirty years, and if she thinks I'll give it to her just because I'm staying with her she's got another think coming."

I reflected that if Miss Maudie broke down and gave it to her, Miss Stephanie couldn't follow it anyway. Miss Maudie had once let me see it: among other things, the recipe called for one large cup of sugar.

It was a still day. The air was so cold and clear we heard the courthouse clock clank, rattle and strain before it struck the hour. Miss Maudie's nose was a color I had never seen before, and I inquired about it.

"I've been out here since six o'clock," she said. "Should be frozen by now." She held up her hands. A network of tiny lines crisscrossed her palms, brown with dirt and dried blood.

"You've ruined 'em," said Jem. "Why don't you get a colored man?" There was no note of sacrifice in his voice when he added, "Or Scout'n'me, we can help you."

Miss Maudie said, "Thank you sir, but you've got a job of your own over there." She pointed to our yard.

"You mean the Morphodite?" I asked. "Shoot, we can rake him up in a jiffy."

Miss Maudie stared down at me, her lips moving silently. Suddenly she put her hands to her head and whooped. When we left her, she was still chuckling.

Jem said he didn't know what was the matter with her—that was just Miss Maudie.