

## ON ATTICUS

When I am eight years old I am absolutely, positively, one hundred percent in love with Atticus Finch. My mother, a teacher of seventh grade English, has just finished reading *To Kill a Mockingbird* to me, thirty minutes each night for what has felt like months, and I am obsessed. It has been so many months, in fact, that the next night I ask her to start it again, convinced that I cannot fall asleep without the gentle lull of Harper Lee. My mother humors for me and reads for another two nights, but even though we begin *Matilda* afterwards, I remain completely devoted to Atticus.

Teaching myself to climb trees and desperate for an older brother, I affect a Southern twang that I hope will fill up the house that I've begun to find empty, too big. My mother, although she stays New England, buys me secondhand overalls and fixes my kinky hair when I cut it in jagged hunks at my chin, then takes me to a real salon to fix her own attempt. Ever a tomboy, I protest the shampoo and introduce myself as Scout. I become indignant when the buxom white hairdresser asks if I'm selling cookies.

Five chapters into *Matilda* my mother picks up my framed picture of Atticus and asks if this is about my father. I remind her that I don't have a father and crinkle me nose, and she nods and places it back on my nightstand, kisses my forehead and it's light out, five minutes early, but she slumps as she leaves so I don't complain.

When September comes and I write my "What I Did on My Summer Vacation" essay on my dad helping Tom Robinson, my mother sits me down at our speckled kitchen table and tells me all about where babies comes from. "See," she says, elbows on our counter. "You do have a father."

"Well Scout and Jem had a mother. She's just dead. So what's the big deal?" I remind her, shrugging. By now I am reading *To Kill a Mockingbird* to myself under the covers after my mother leaves the room each night, flashlight poised, trying to puzzle over Tom Robinson's case and wishing for Atticus to explain to me why he was guilty.

“Right, but your father isn’t dead,” she snaps suddenly, and she inhales sharply before staring at her hands until I wander out of the room to pore over Scout and Jem’s first encounter with the illusive Boo Radley.

The next week after the night’s chapter of *The Wind and the Willows* I ask, “So where is he?”

She kisses my hair, her mouth dry and stinking of medicated lip balm. “He’s somewhere in Arizona, honey.”

“Why isn’t he here?”

“He wasn’t ready for you, and I wanted you so, so bad that I had to keep you all for myself.”

“Was he like Atticus?”

“No baby, he was nothing like Atticus,” she says, laughing and laughing at me with her mouth wide and broken, and so I pick up her hand and bite down on it hard without thinking about it twice, and even when she takes away Halloween I still don’t say sorry.

When October 31<sup>st</sup> comes I hand my mother six postcards I have written for my father. She reads the first one (“did you know that it’s a sin to kill a mockingbird?”), tucks them into her purse and asks how would I like to go trick-or-treating. I say what about my punishment and stare at her hand checking for teeth marks, and she says you were just sad and that’s okay, just don’t bite me next time sweetheart and anyway every kid should get to go out on Halloween, especially one that likes dress up as much as you do. In the fading six o’clock light, she uses shoe polish to slick her hair into a curve, and pulls a pair of round glasses out of her desk drawer. “Your grandpa’s,” she explains, slipping them on and squinting before heading to her room to ruffle through her pantsuits. I stare at the prints her hands are leaving all over the counter, the banister, the doorknobs and for some reason I almost cry, but instead I run and get my overalls and beloved battered paperback. My mother, fixing a tie her brother left behind last Christmas, hands me a pillowcase.

“What are you looking at?” she asks, furrowing her brow, and we march out the front door, sticking of oil and old, parting the sea of ghosts and ghouls with our heads high.

“Mom?” I say, peering up at her, at Atticus. “Is he gonna write back?”

She smooths my hair, not looking at me. “Probably not, baby. He doesn’t talk much to anyone who doesn’t have something for him to drink. I guess that’s why I quit writing him. What was the point?”

“Well, I wanna write him anyway. Just so he can read it and know I’m thinking about him. And if he doesn’t write back that’s okay.” She doesn’t reply. I twitch my mouth and peer up at her. “Mom?”

“Yes baby?”

I bite my lip. “Never mind.”

“No, what?”

“It’s dumb.”

“It’s not dumb.”

I shift and shove my hands into my pockets, looking down at my shoes. “Do you think I’m as brave as Scout?”

She lifts her chin. “I think you’re the bravest person I know, May.”

I consider that. We walk in silence for a little bit. “Hey Mom?”

“Yes?”

“Tonight, could you put me to bed like Atticus?”

“Sure, sweetheart.”

I am eight years old and my mother carries me to my bed when we are home, my Halloween candy glistening like gems on my dresser. “Mom?”

“Yeah?”

“Did you love him?”

She pauses. “Maybe, but I’ve always loved you more.”

I stare up at her brown eyes and for a moment I have the strangest sensation in my stomach, warm and nauseous all at the same time, like something in me is golden and humming. I watch her hands as they fiddle with the edges of my bedspread and think of how much I’d like to have hands like hers when I’m all grown up, hands that always know how to make things right again even when it seems like they’ll always be broken, that rise and fall in creases and map out everything there is to know.

“Mom?”

“Yeah?”

“If it were you, you would’ve saved Tom Robinson.”

“But May—”

“You would’ve,” I say, and press up against her under my covers, knowing it isn’t Atticus I’ll need to help me through age nine.