



A Lonely Boy

LILLIE MAE FAULK WAS A BEAUTIFUL TEENAGE ORPHAN WHO LIVED unhappily in the small, sleepy town of Monroeville, Alabama. Her cousins, the Faulks, had given her and her siblings a home after their mother died. Yet Lillie Mae was blind to the virtues of rural life—the relaxed pace and the familial atmosphere of this convivial southern community. A thrill-seeking teenager, she was eager to put the drawls and the dirt roads of Monroeville behind her. In 1923, escape came in the form of twenty-five-year-old Arch Persons, a fast-talking bachelor with a reputation as a ladies' man. His two biggest assets were his easy charm and a flashy sports car. Dazzled by both, Lillie Mae imagined driving off to the big cities of her dreams with her Prince Charming by her side. Her wish came true when she and Arch married impulsively soon after they met, and they set off on a grand honeymoon.

Before Lillie Mae could congratulate herself on her brilliant escape, she was confronted by some unpleasant realities. Arch was not wealthy, not even comfortable: his finances were so shaky that he ran out of money during their two-week honeymoon and was

forced to send his petulant bride right back to her relatives in Monroeville. Lillie Mae was smart enough to know that she was worse off than before the marriage: when she was single, life still held possibilities. The only sensible course of action was to seek a divorce. Nature intervened, however, and the unhappy bride became an even unhappier expectant mother. She told her relatives she wanted an abortion but never pursued the idea. Instead, she reconciled with Arch and went to live with him in New Orleans. On September 30, 1924, Lillie Mae gave birth to Truman Streckfus Persons, a beautiful, blond, doll-like infant.

She may have hoped their beatific baby boy would transform her troubled marriage into a domestic fairy tale, but Lillie Mae and Arch were not made for each other. He was a con man, always in pursuit of a dollar and another big deal. She was a social climber, propelled by unrealistic aspirations and an uncontrollable libido. Both were far too self-absorbed to make any room in their lives for a child.

Arch and Lillie Mae lived in a series of hotel rooms across America while they pursued their latest fantasies and get-rich-quick schemes. Even as a baby, Truman had been aware of his mother's assignations with other men. He was conscious of the handsome strangers who visited their rooms when Arch was away, images that remained with him for the rest of his life. His parents thought nothing of locking their young son in a hotel room while they went out for the night. Truman suffered this upsetting itinerant life, moving constantly until the age of six. At that point Lillie Mae, replicating her own childhood, deposited him with the Faulks in Monroeville. The town she had been so desperate to leave became her son's first real home.

Monroeville was slow and hot, especially in the summer, when the temperature often shot up to over a hundred degrees. Residents rose in the darkness before dawn to take advantage of the cooler morning hours. By midday, when the heat was unbearable, women put away their aprons, bathed, dressed in freshly pressed frocks,

and assumed their positions on the front porch, ready to visit and share the news of the day. The telephone switchboard was a source of up-to-the-minute information. Three operators alternated shifts, reporting the latest rumors as they connected calls.

Meals, served unfailingly three times a day, were happy occasions. Breakfast, lunch, and dinner consisted of large, varied menus of southern specialties, including fried chicken, catfish, pork chops, grits, biscuits, and pies. On Sundays, the intimate family circle expanded to include others. Relatives, friends, and even newcomers and strangers were invited to partake of steak with brown gravy, always served on the family's best china.

Gossip was everyone's favorite pastime. Gossip was not merely an exchange of information: it was a form of storytelling, a diversion, equivalent to listening to the radio or going to the picture show. The population was so closely knit that there were new dramas every day, with neighbors playing all the lead roles.

When Truman settled into the Faulks' large, wood-framed house on South Alabama Avenue, his life changed completely. He became a member of a community steeped in history and tradition. Jennie Faulk, the forceful matriarch of the family, owned a dry goods store in the town square, the center of the Monroeville universe. Her sister Callie worked in the shop as a bookkeeper, while her other sister, Sook, kept house for the family and was assisted by an outspoken black cook, Aunt Liza. Bud, their brother, was quiet and withdrawn.

Young Truman might have been lonely in this landscape filled primarily with old people, but Sook proved to be an ideal companion. Although she was a grown woman, a childhood illness had left her shy—as people said at the time, “simple.” She liked to stay close to home where she felt secure, and when Truman arrived, she became his devoted playmate. She called him “Buddy” after a childhood friend and took him on excursions through the woods to find herbs for the special dropsy medicine she brewed and sold for pocket money. When the weather was fine, they flew kites in the

nearby fields. On cold days, they played in the attic, where they unpacked boxes of old clothes and mementos. Sook often dressed Truman in antique finery—evening gloves, stoles, and dancing slippers—and told him, “Don’t you look like an elegant lady ready for the ball?”

The other members of the family were not as kind or playful as Sook. Truman described them many years later in his story “A Christmas Memory.” “Other people inhabit the house,” he wrote of the Faulks, “. . . and though they have power over us, and frequently make us cry, we are not, on the whole, too much aware of them.” Together, Truman and Sook created a private world where they never had to feel like misfits or outsiders.

Small, white-blond, and extremely precocious, Truman did not blend in with the children of Monroeville, who eyed him with suspicion. A teacher said he looked like “a bird of paradise in a flock of crows.” Truman was always woefully overdressed, thanks to Lillie Mae’s misguided idea of an appropriate summer wardrobe for a seven-year-old boy on a country vacation. She filled his suitcase with city-slicker ensembles, including linen shorts that buttoned onto tailored shirts and a Hawaiian swimsuit with a matching jacket.

He was lucky to find an accepting friend in the house next door, a tomboy his age named Nelle Harper Lee. Truman made such an impression on Lee, who grew up to write the 1960 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, that she based the character Dill on him. In her book, she described him as a “curiosity” with hair “stuck to his head like duckfluff.” As soon as they started spending time together and discovered their mutual passion for books and spinning fantasies, the young neighbors were inseparable. He was a “pocket Merlin,” Lee wrote, “whose head teemed with eccentric plans, strange longings, and quaint fancies.”

Monroeville offered many diversions during the long, lazy summers they spent together. The pharmacy in the town square had a first-rate soda fountain. Hatter’s Mill, a dilapidated old building

located next to a cool body of water, was a favorite swimming hole. And a giant tree in Lee's yard served as a retreat where the two friends could hide from the world and play their elaborate games of pretend. They would be Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn adrift on the Mississippi until the next book they read dictated their new roles. Spinning tales came naturally to Truman, who, even as a child, recorded his observations and ideas in a journal. He enjoyed writing and was so confident about his early literary efforts that he entered a short story contest sponsored by a local newspaper.

His story, "Mrs. Busybody," was a candid account of the meddling ways of a local gossip. He hoped it would win him a pony from Alabama's *Mobile Press Register*. Instead, the story almost landed him in hot water because it was rumored that he had based his characters on Lee's parents. Truman pretended to be contrite and told people he had given up writing. He lied—he was writing constantly, using words and ideas to explore worlds that were otherwise inaccessible to a young boy.

Far away from their son, Lillie Mae and Arch were busily pursuing their separate lives. Lillie Mae fulfilled a lifelong dream of moving to New York City, where she supported herself by working as a restaurant hostess. Hoping to advance socially and financially, she resumed the search for her real Prince Charming. Arch sought advancement, too, but his improbable schemes were usually derailed by bad luck or his penchant for larceny. He could not resist passing a bad check when he needed cash. Consequently, Arch spent considerable time in jail.

Lillie Mae's prospects improved when she met Joseph Capote, a charming and successful Cuban businessman. They enjoyed a passionate relationship that seemed to have a future; he could provide her with the means to leave her hillbilly self behind. With her new man and her new situation came a new resolve. She asked Arch for a divorce, demanding custody of Truman.

It was an unreasonable request, considering how little time she had spent with her son. But courts were predisposed to keeping

children with their mothers, even if the mother in question had demonstrated little maternal instinct. In September 1931, Lillie Mae won the divorce and custody of Truman. The judge ruled that he would spend nine months a year with his mother and the remaining summer months with his father. Instead of claiming her prize, Lillie Mae deposited Truman in Monroeville while she returned to New York City. Eventually, she promised, she would send for her son.



One year later, Lillie Mae summoned Truman to his new home in New York. He had fantasized about this reunion for a long time and looked forward to living with his mother. Yet the transition from one world to another was quite difficult. Truman wanted to make sure his family and friends in Monroeville would remember him, so he decided to host a farewell party. According to his cousin Jennings Faulk Carter, Truman spent weeks planning the event and had definite, highly unconventional ideas for an eight-year-old boy. He invited his guests to attend a costume party in the evening, even though children in Monroeville did not normally entertain at night. The guest list was eclectic. Nelle, Jennings, and Truman's schoolmates were obvious choices. But Sonny Boular, a young recluse who was almost a man (and who would serve as the inspiration for the character Boo Radley in *To Kill a Mockingbird*), was an unusual addition. Truman even persuaded John White, a black field worker, to dress up in a white suit and oversee the apple-bobbing.

The evening was filled with spectacle and drama. Instead of wearing a mask, Truman painted his face to look like Fu Manchu and pinned a pigtail to his hair. His guests enjoyed the elaborate party games he invented. They consumed treats prepared by Sook and Aunt Liza and listened to music on Jenny Faulk's phonograph.

The most dramatic point of the evening was a surprise raid by the Ku Klux Klan. Local Klan members mistakenly believed that John White was a guest at the party. They took exception to the

notion of a black man socializing with whites and decided to teach him a lesson with a rope. They seized a costumed guest they thought was John White, but it was the wrong person. When they pulled off their prisoner's mask, they found a terrified Sonny Boular. The Klansmen were lambasted by the townspeople for their foolish behavior, and they lost whatever tenuous standing they had in the community.

Truman was delighted. His party had been a success.

Truman soon left for New York as planned. Arch was still smarting over the loss of his son, and he appealed to the courts, testifying that his ex-wife was "fast" and irresponsible. There was mudslinging on each side. Arch's attempts to discredit Lillie Mae backfired when his own sordid state of affairs—his repeated run-ins with the law and his failure to pay child support—came to light. Neither parent was particularly qualified to raise a child, nor had they ever spent much time with their son, but Lillie Mae seemed the lesser of two evils, and the judge ruled against Arch. Lillie Mae married Joe and blocked Arch from any further custody attempts by convincing her new husband to legally adopt her son. At the age of nine, Truman Streckfus Persons became Truman Garcia Capote, a boy with a new name, a new address, and a new life.



Leo Lerman had no use for the lonely-child-in-Monroeville story that had become a stock part of Truman's history and claimed that he knew the exact moment when Truman first decided to host the ball. It was 1942, Lerman said, and he and "Marge" (his pet name for Truman, who playfully called him "Myrt") were fledgling writers taking a train to the artists' colony at Yaddo. Truman was largely unknown but supremely self-confident, and he bragged that when he was rich and famous, he'd entertain all of his rich and famous friends at a fabulous party.

Truman dismissed Lerman's yarn as nonsense. But Lerman was such an entertaining raconteur and his anecdote was so colorful that it was repeated everywhere—at cocktail parties, at dinner tables, and even in newspapers—during the weeks leading up to the ball, and it, too, became a stock part of Truman's legend.

