

# A COMMON ANGUISH

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## *COMMON ANGUISH*

*“One fire burns out another’s burning,  
One pain is lessen’d by another’s anguish”  
Romeo and Juliet  
Act I, Scene II*

Traveling on Interstate 65 through south Alabama, midway between Montgomery and Mobile, if you exit to the west, you begin a slow journey, back in time, down a straight and narrow two lane highway.

The trappings of modern America quickly fall away and are replaced by cotton fields, cotton gins, cotton shanties, an occasional “big house,” and often, a chain gang working on the side of the road.

Forty-five miles into the journey you arrive at the small community of Monroeville, Alabama, the self-proclaimed “Literary Capital of the South.” The center of the town is the courthouse square and at the center of the square, and dominating everything by its size, is the Monroe County Courthouse – a citadel of brick, four stories high and capped by a white clock tower shaped like a bishop’s miter.

The square is bustling and surrounded by shops such as the “For Heaven’s Sake Bookstore” and the “Sweet Tooth Bakery”, where the proprietor greets each customer with a hearty “Y’all come on in and help Y’selves!”



There are 7,000 residents and 28 churches in Monroeville, Alabama.

Located in the midst of the Bible belt, the citizens are identified as much by where they attend church as by their family's name.

But the Bible is not the only book that is revered there. Throughout the town are murals of scenes from the book that made the town and its citizens famous – To Kill a Mockingbird -- Perhaps the most important literary work of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, according to some critics.

Folks in Monroeville, Alabama, quote lines from To Kill a Mockingbird like most folks quote verses from the Bible.

Each year over 30,000 people leave the interstate to travel to Monroeville. Many come in May when the townsfolk put on a two act production based on the Pulitzer Prize winning novel. The production takes place in the old courthouse, where visitors from throughout the world marvel at its stately second floor courtroom, its majestic double windows, curved balcony railings and punched-tin ceiling tiles, accented with dogwood blossoms.

Two blocks west of the courthouse square on South Alabama Avenue, stands a prominent historical marker, noting the former location of the homes of Monroeville's two most famous residents, Nelle Harper Lee and Truman Garcia Capote, born Truman Streckfus Persons.

Monroeville's remote location and slow easy pace might seem an unlikely home for two of the world's most distinguished authors. But during their early childhood here, distractions were few, money was scarce, daily visits and conversation with neighbors were the norm, and a vivid imagination was necessary for entertainment, nourishing the creative minds of Nelle and Truman.

Nelle Harper Lee was born on April 28, 1925. and was named for her grandmother, Ellen -- spelled backwards.

Nelle's father, Amasa Coleman Lee, known as A.C. Lee, was born in 1890 to a humble family of 8 children and came to Monroe County in 1910 to be the bookkeeper at the law firm of Bugg and Barrett. He studied the law, was admitted to the bar in 1916 and became a partner in Bugg, Barrett and Lee.

Nelle's mother, Frances Cunningham Finch Lee was a member of a Virginia family who founded Finchburg, Alabama. She attended Miss Tutweiler's Alabama Girls Industrial School, where she became an accomplished pianist.

Nelle was the youngest of four children.

Alice Finch Lee was born in 1911, 14 years before the birth of Nelle.

Frances Louise Lee, the beauty of the family, was born in 1916.

Edward Coleman Lee, the only son, was born in 1920 and was Nelle's closest sibling and friend.

By the time of Nelle's birth in 1925, her father was a successful attorney and community leader, but her mother's mental health had deteriorated and almost from the beginning, Frances Lee was emotionally absent from Nelle's life. It was rumored that she twice tried to drown Nelle in the bathtub. Both times the older sisters intervened. Friends of Alice Finch Lee said they frequently visited the Lee home, but never saw Frances Lee speak to any of her children.

A.C. Lee tried to fill the emotional void of Nelle's mother, as best he could, by sharing his newspaper at night, teaching Nelle to read and work the crossword puzzle and word games.

Truman Streckfus Persons, was born September 30, 1924 to Lillie Mae Faulk and Archulus "Arch" Persons.

Lillie Mae's widowed mother had died when Lillie Mae was 12, leaving a comfortable estate for her 5 children, but sending them off to live on South Alabama Avenue in Monroeville, with their Faulk cousins, three old maids, Sook, Jennie and Callie Faulk and their bachelor brother Seabon Faulk. Lillie Mae was petite and strikingly beautiful. With dark blonde hair and eyes the color of fine bourbon whiskey. She was 16 years old when she

caught the eye of a fast talking, 24 year old traveling salesman, Arch Persons.

After a whirlwind romance and many grand promises by Arch, they were married on August 23, 1923, in Monroeville, at the Faulk home on South Alabama Avenue. Their next door neighbor, Frances Lee, played the piano for the wedding.

Lillie Mae and Arch left for New Orleans for what was to be a grand honeymoon. But the honeymoon was cut short when Arch announced that he had run out of funds. Lillie Mae returned to Monroeville in disgrace. The first year of their marriage was spent between Monroeville and New Orleans. By the time Lillie Mae learned that she was expecting Arch's child, she had come to realize that her knight's armor was less than shining and she begged her husband to allow her to have an abortion.

But Arch was eager to have a son, and Truman Streckfus Persons was born on September 30, 1924.

Thus began the life of the child who was never wanted by his mother and who spent a lifetime seeking her love and acceptance.

From the time of his birth, Truman was an encumbrance to Lillie Mae. She was still a beautiful girl and she loved excitement -- and men.

Arch is said to have counted 29 affairs that Lillie Mae had during their marriage.

Later in his life, Truman recounted the story of his mother leaving him locked in hotel rooms while she went out for a night of fun, giving instructions to the staff to ignore Truman's cries.

Many were the nights that Truman cried himself to sleep, lying by a locked hotel room door.

While Lillie Mae pursued men, Arch pursued his pipe dreams and neither had little time for Truman.

In the winter of 1929, Lillie Mae moved to Bowling Green, Ky. with Truman where she spent a few weeks in business school.

After five tumultuous years of living between Monroeville and various cities in the south, in the summer of 1930 Lillie Mae took Truman back to the Faulk home on South Alabama Avenue and left him.

Truman was 5 years old and Nelle, who lived next door, was 4 in the summer of 1930. Both were precocious children, out of step with their peers, each having a slippery grip on gender and both having emotionally absent mothers. They became fast friends and their symbiotic relationship lasted a lifetime.

They were bound together, as Nelle would express it later, by

“A COMMON ANGUISH.”

In To Kill a Mockingbird, Nelle wrote of Dill, the character she readily admitted was drawn from Truman:

“He wore blue linen shorts that buttoned to his shirt, his hair was snow white and stuck to his head like duck fluff; he was a year my senior, but I towered over him. As he told us an old tale his blue eyes would lighten and darken; his laugh was sudden and happy; he habitually pulled at a cowlick in the center of his forehead... We came to know him as a pocket Merlin, whose head teemed with eccentric plans, strange longings, and quaint fancies.”

Nelle and Truman were often seen climbing into their tree house, where they would read Sherlock Holmes or write stories about the neighbors.

Recognizing that Nelle read better than any of her classmates and hearing that Truman had been whacked on the palm the first day of school for reciting the alphabet, A.C. Lee gave them a rugged, steel cased, black Underwood No. 5 typewriter to occupy their time and their minds.

It became their prized possession and they could be seen carrying it from one house to another. Friends recounted watching as Nelle and Truman would take turns dictating a paragraph of a story while the other typed.



As they grew, both Nelle and Truman became less and less of the children that their mother's wanted. Truman far too effeminate and Nelle too rough and tumble, not at all interested in the things her mother valued. In his first novel, Other Voices, Other Rooms (1948), Truman used Nelle as the model for the character, Idabel Tompkins. When the main character of the book, Joel, expresses embarrassment about undressing in front of Idabel, she retorts,

“Son,” she said, and spat between her fingers, “what you got in your britches is no news to me, and no concern of mine: hell, I’ve fooled around with nobody but boys since I was in the first grade. I never think like I’m a girl; you’ve got to remember that or we can’t be friends.”

During his years in Monroeville, Truman continued to yearn for his parents who would make sporadic and brief visits to see him. But in July of 1931, Lillie Mae returned to Monroeville to take her son to New York where the Elizabeth Arden School of Beauty had offered her a scholarship. Upon arriving in New York, Lillie Mae met one of her earlier “affairs,” a successful Cuban businessman named Joseph Garcia Capote. After a contentious divorce from Arch, Lillie Mae married Capote.

In an effort to leave behind her Alabama roots, Lillie Mae changed her name to Nina and Capote adopted Truman and changed his name to Truman Garcia Capote.

While, by all accounts, Joe Capote was a good father to Truman, the adjustment to life in New York was devastating for the young lad accustomed to the slow pace of Alabama. His grades in school plummeted as classmates made fun of his strange voice and his effeminate manner. Before entering high school, Truman was required to take an IQ test, it is reported that his score on the test was 215; one of the highest IQ's recorded. For a while Truman attended the Trinity School. Nina even resorted to sending Truman to military school for a year, a move that had disastrous results.

Nina took Truman to a series of psychiatrists in an effort to "fix him"; until one of them told her that his problems were probably a result of her neglect. Finally Nina accepted the fact that she could not change Truman, but would embarrass him in front of her friends by stating, "Well, my boy is a fairy." After the failed attempt at military school, the Capotes moved to Greenwich, Connecticut, and it was there that Truman came into his own. With his intellect, his ability to tell a bawdy story and his quick and biting wit, Truman began to make friends and in fact drew both boys and girls to him.



His senior year Nina and Joe moved back to New York and enrolled Truman in the Franklin School, a private school on the west side.

Truman had never paid more than passing attention to school or grades, but even if he had, how could he study when everything he wanted was at his doorstep? One of his friends said “Truman was happy and free for the first time in his life.” The little boy from Monroeville, who had been terrified of sidewalks and tall buildings when he arrived ten years before, had grown into a young man who had a romantic attachment to the city, “this island, floating in river water like a diamond iceberg,” as he was soon to write of New York.

Back in Alabama Nelle entered the Monroe County High School in the fall of 1940, the year before the United States’ entry into World War II.

There she continued to find herself out of step with her peers. When the other girls were experimenting with latest make up and hair styles, Nelle was more interested in joining a boy’s pick up football game.

On one such occasion she begged a male friend to let her play. On the first snap, Nelle was given the ball and began a drive down the field. When an opposing team member came in her path, she strong-armed him and sent him to the ground. After Nelle has scored a touchdown, the wounded player

complained to Nelle that they were playing touch. She laughed at his complaint, and replied that she was playing tackle, “Touch is for sissies!” During high school Nelle had two idols, her English teacher, Gladys Watson, and her sister Alice Finch Lee.

Miss Watson was demanding and interesting and it was said that teachers at the University of Alabama could readily identify a Gladys Watson student. It was Miss Watson who sparked Nelle’s interest in English literature and gave her the skills she would later use in life.

Nelle’s sister, Alice Finch Lee was more a mother than a sister to Nelle. By the time Nelle reached high school her father had developed a flourishing law practice, was serving in the Alabama legislature and had bought, and was editor of, the *Monroe Journal*, Monroeville’s only newspaper. Alice, Nelle’s senior by 14 years, had attended the Women’s College of Alabama, a Methodist institute in Montgomery in the fall of 1928. But after one year, her mother’s mental health had deteriorated to the point that it became necessary for Alice to return to Monroeville to help her father. For the next 7 years Alice worked with her father at the *Monroe Journal* and helped to run the household in her mother’s stead.

Alice later studied the law, and in 1943, Alice and three 4-Fs – men who had failed the physical for active duty in the armed forces – took the

Alabama law exams. To A.C. Lee's delight his daughter came home to become the first female partner of the law firm of Bugg, Barnett and Lee in Monroeville, where she still practices today.

Emulating her sister and hoping to win the approval of her mother, Nelle enrolled in the Women's College of Alabama, now Huntington College in the fall of 1944.

It is hard to imagine a setting that would have been less appropriate for a young woman like Nelle Lee.

Huntington was a finishing school, and hopefully, with the scores of officers at nearby Maxwell Air Force Base, a place to obtain your MRS Degree! None of this interested Nelle.

Nelle's roommates objected to her use of salty language, a trait of hers since childhood and not untypical of precocious children. Another aberration was Nelle's smoking- or rather the way she smoked. While smoking was equated with sophistication, Nelle's meditative pipe smoking was not.

At the end of the first semester, Nelle's roommates kicked her out.

Although Nelle was sometimes sidelined socially at Huntington, it was here that she enjoyed her first literary success. She contributed to both the *Huntress*, the campus newspaper and the *Prelude*, the school's literary

magazine and in April was one of seven other girls to be inducted into the national literary society, Chi Delta Phi.

But, by the end of the year Nelle had made the decision to transfer to the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa.

Once again Nelle's lack of makeup, her flyaway hair and dun colored outfits set her apart from the other girls, especially those of the Chi Omega Sorority, which by some fluke she had become a member.

But she found her niche and flourished in the literary world of the university, becoming the editor of *Rammer-Jammer*, the school's humor magazine.

In her junior year, in great part to satisfy her father's dream, Nelle entered Alabama's School of Law. It did not take Nelle long to realize that the law was not what she wanted and by that spring she told her father that she wanted to return home.

Thinking that a change of scenery might renew her interest, A.C. Lee sent his daughter to Oxford, England, for the summer. But while there, it was her interest in English literature that was renewed. For a young girl raised in rural America, this was a feast for the mind.

After this experience, Nelle lasted only one more semester in law. Nelle returned to Monroeville to tell her father what her plans were: to drop out of

law school, go to New York, find a job and write. Her father was devastated and made it clear that he had no intention of funding her daydreams.

Nelle withdrew from school without taking a degree.

A few months later, in 1949, at the age of 23, she moved to New York to join her friend Truman Capote, and to write.

Truman had never taken a college course; he had known from the age of 11 that he wanted to be a writer and immediately after high school took a job with the *New Yorker*. Within a few years he was writing regularly for an assortment of publications. These writings attracted the attention of publisher, Bennett Cerf, who signed Truman to a contract with Random House.

His first book, Other Voices, Other Rooms, received instant notoriety, in part because of its frank discussion of homosexuality and its erotically suggestive cover photograph of Truman Capote.

With literary success came social celebrity. The young writer was lionized by the high society elite, and with the publication of Breakfast at Tiffany's and the subsequent film, starring Audrey Hepburn, his popularity and place among the upper crust was assured.

Upon her arrival in New York, Nelle Lee took a cold water flat in Manhattan, a job in a bookstore and began to write.

Her lifelong friend, Truman Capote tried to interject her into his social circle, but once again her frumpy dress and quiet ways made her acceptance very difficult.

Nelle struggled to find time to write and to make a living in New York, until Christmas of 1952, when her friends gave her a gift, a check which allowed her to take time off and do nothing but write.

Nelle threw herself into the novel she was writing and by late 1957 had her first draft. She submitted it, first entitled, *Atticus*, to the editors at Lippincott. While they were complimentary of her characters, they felt that the story was more a series of anecdotes than a full novel and sent her off to begin rewriting.

By the fall of 1959, her novel, now entitled, To Kill a Mockingbird, was finished to the satisfaction of the editors. All Nelle could do now was wait. In mid November, as Nelle was biding her time, waiting for the novel to arrive, Truman called.

An item in the *New York Times* had caught his attention, headlined

“Wealthy Farmer, 3 of Family Slain.” It read in part:

*Holcomb, Kan., Nov. 15(UPI) – A wealthy wheat farmer, his wife and their two young children were found shot to death today in their home. They had been killed by shotgun blasts at close range after being bound and gagged.*



*The father, 42 year old Herbert W. Clutter, was found in the basement with his son, Kenyon, 15. His wife Bonnie, 45 and a daughter, Nancy, 16 were in their beds.*

*There were no signs of a struggle and nothing had been stolen. The telephone lines had been cut.*

*This is apparently the case of a psychopathic killer”, Sheriff Earl Robinson said.*

Truman, who had been toying with the idea of writing a “nonfiction novel,” saw this as his chance.

With the backing of the *New Yorker* magazine and the intention of writing a series of short stories that he would combine into a novel, Truman asked Nelle to accompany him to Holcomb, Kansas, to assist him with his research.

The second week of December, 1959, the two old friends embarked on another literary adventure. They boarded a train at Grand Central Terminal and began a three day journey to Kansas.

Holcomb, a small town of several hundred people was not ready for Truman Capote, his flashy clothes, his flamboyant mannerisms and his high pitched voice.

Nelle later recalled “We were given the cold shoulder. Those people had never seen anyone like Truman – he was like someone coming off the moon.”

Over the next month, as they attempted to obtain interviews and gain the trust of the townspeople, who were still in shock and paralyzed with fear, Truman found Nelle’s presence invaluable. Not only did she act as a buffer and provide an entree for Truman, her gift for creating character sketches turned out to complement Truman’s uncanny ability to recall verbatim conversations.

On New Years Eve night, as Truman and Nelle were dining with the lead detective, Alvin Dewey and his family, Dewey received a call informing him that the suspected killers had been apprehended in Las Vegas.

Six days later, after obtaining signed confessions during the drive back from Las Vegas, a silent crowd watched as the killers, Perry Smith and Richard Hickock were escorted up the Holcomb courthouse steps.

That week, Nelle and Truman obtained interviews with both Smith and Hickock, the first of many that would occur over the next five years, by paying each of them \$50.

On January 15, laden with boxes of notes and photographs, Lee and Capote returned to New York. While back east, Nelle made final revisions



to her book. The second week of March, the two journeyed back to Kansas for the trial of Smith and Hickock.

In the spring of 1960, Nelle presented Truman with 150 pages of typed notes. Organized by topics including the Landscape, the Crime, Other Members of the Clutter Family, and so on.

Shortly after, To Kill a Mockingbird was released. It was immediately chosen by the *Literary Guild* as one of its selections and by the *Reader's Digest* as one of its Condensed Books.

Within a few weeks, it had hit both the *New York Times* and *Chicago Tribune's* list of top ten sellers.

The book was selling hundreds of thousands of copies and brought instant notoriety and demand to Nelle, now known as Harper Lee. At the age of 34 she was at last a celebrity.

To someone like Nelle who preferred solitude to parties, this celebrity imposed a tremendous strain.

Unlike Capote, who said "I always knew that I wanted to be a writer and that I wanted to be rich and famous," Nelle didn't regard herself as an important person and the attention being paid to her almost seemed to be happening to someone else.

On May 2, 1961, with Mockingbird in its forty-first week on the best seller list, Nelle received word that her book had won the Pulitzer Prize! It was the honor that Truman had always craved and it had come to Nelle. Truman tried to hide his jealousy, but the success of To Kill a Mockingbird put a strain on their relationship.

In 1962, the movie rights to the book were sold, and the making of the film, for which Gregory Peck won an Oscar for his portrayal of Atticus, began.

But the person upon whom the character of Atticus was based was never to see the film. On April 15, 1962, Nelle's beloved father, A.C. Lee, passed away.

While Nelle was achieving undreamed of acclaim for her novel, Truman was spending the majority of his time in Kansas, developing a relationship with Smith and Hickock, and unraveling the stories of their tragic lives. It was the sensitive Perry Smith with whom Truman most identified. Both were only five foot four inches tall, and both had grown up in emotionally detached families.

At one point Truman said of Smith, "It is as if we both grew up in the same house, and one day I got up and went out the front door, and Perry got up and went out the back."

On April 14, 1965, Perry Smith and Richard Hickock were hanged in Kansas for the murders of Herbert, Bonnie, Nancy and Kenyon Clutter. After five long years of research, in 1966, Truman Capote, published his “nonfiction novel,” In Cold Blood.

“The writing of the book wasn’t as difficult as living with it all the time,” Capote wrote, “The whole damn thing, day by day by day by day. It was *just* excruciating, so anxiety making, so wearing, so debilitating, and so....sad.” But In Cold Blood sold out instantly, and became one of the most talked about books of its time, an instant classic. The book brought Capote millions of dollars and unparalleled fame, but did not bring him the award he most coveted, the Pulitzer Prize.

To celebrate the success of his book, Capote threw what many called the “Party of the Century,” his famous Black and White Ball.” Its 420 invitations were the most coveted, not only in New York, but around the world.

This masked ball, at New York’s Plaza Hotel was to be both the pinnacle of Truman Capote’s literary endeavors and his popularity.

Overwhelmed by the lifestyles of the rich and famous, Capote began to work on a project exploring the intimate details of his friends, a book called Answered Prayers, a mostly factual and glittering account of the world in

which he lived. The publication of the first few chapters in *Esquire* magazine caused a major scandal.

“He wrote what he knew, but just didn’t wait till they were dead to do it,” wrote Columnist Liz Smith.

Following these short publications, Capote found that many of his close friends and acquaintances had shut him off completely. The shock of these negative reactions sent him into a spiral of drug and alcohol use from which he never recovered.

Nelle Harper Lee quickly withdrew from the fame that caught her by surprise. She had hoped that her book would meet a “quick and merciful death” and instead it achieved immortality. To Kill a Mockingbird is still read by over 1,000,000 people a year.

Nelle Harper Lee has not granted an interview since 1964. She has received numerous awards, some she has publicly accepted, some she has not. She spends her time between New York and Monroeville where she lives with her sister, Alice Finch. The people of the hometown that she made famous are very protective of her and her privacy.

In 1984, Truman Garcia Capote, born Truman Streckfus Persons, died of the complications of drug abuse and alcoholism.

At his memorial, Nelle Harper Lee was heard to say that she had not seen Truman for fifteen years.