

In the excerpt from *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Jean Louise “Scout” Finch speaks to her teacher, Miss Caroline, and her father, Atticus, about their neighbors, the Cunninghams.

from *To Kill a Mockingbird*

by Harper Lee

- 1 “Everybody who brings his lunch put it on top of his desk.”
- 2 Molasses buckets appeared from nowhere, and the ceiling danced with metallic light. Miss Caroline walked up and down the rows peering and poking into lunch containers, nodding if the contents pleased her, frowning a little at others. She stopped at Walter Cunningham’s desk. “Where’s yours?” she asked.
- 3 Walter Cunningham’s face told everybody in the first grade he had hookworms.¹ His absence of shoes told us how he got them. People caught hookworms going barefooted in barnyards and hog wallows. If Walter had owned any shoes he would have worn them the first day of school and then discarded them until mid-winter. He did have on a clean shirt and neatly mended overalls.
- 4 “Did you forget your lunch this morning?” asked Miss Caroline.
- 5 Walter looked straight ahead. I saw a muscle jump in his skinny jaw.
- 6 “Did you forget it this morning?” asked Miss Caroline. Walter’s jaw twitched again.
- 7 “Yeb’m,” he finally mumbled.
- 8 Miss Caroline went to her desk and opened her purse. “Here’s a quarter,” she said to Walter. “Go and eat downtown today. You can pay me back tomorrow.”
- 9 Walter shook his head. “Nome thank you ma’am,” he drawled softly.
- 10 Impatience crept into Miss Caroline’s voice: “Here Walter, come get it.”
- 11 Walter shook his head again.

¹hookworms—a parasitic intestinal worm that causes paleness from loss of blood

- 12 When Walter shook his head a third time someone whispered, "Go on and tell her, Scout."
- 13 I turned around and saw most of the town people and the entire bus delegation looking at me. Miss Caroline and I had conferred twice already, and they were looking at me in the innocent assurance that familiarity breeds understanding.
- 14 I rose graciously on Walter's behalf: "Ah—Miss Caroline?"
- 15 "What is it, Jean Louise?"
- 16 "Miss Caroline, he's a Cunningham."
- 17 I sat back down.
- 18 "What, Jean Louise?"
- 19 I thought I had made things sufficiently clear. It was clear enough to the rest of us: Walter Cunningham was sitting there lying his head off. He didn't forget his lunch, he didn't have any. He had none today nor would he have any tomorrow or the next day. He had probably never seen three quarters together at the same time in his life.
- 20 I tried again: "Walter's one of the Cunninghams, Miss Caroline."
- 21 "I beg your pardon, Jean Louise?"
- 22 "That's okay, ma'am, you'll get to know all the county folks after a while. The Cunninghams never took anything they can't pay back—no church baskets and no scrip stamps.² They never took anything off of anybody, they get along on what they have. They don't have much, but they get along on it."
- 23 My special knowledge of the Cunningham tribe—one branch, that is—was gained from events of last winter. Walter's father was one of Atticus's clients. After a dreary conversation in our livingroom one night about his entailment,³ before Mr. Cunningham left he said, "Mr. Finch, I don't know when I'll ever be able to pay you."
- 24 "Let that be the least of your worries, Walter," Atticus said.
- 25 When I asked Jem⁴ what entailment was, and Jem described it as a condition of having your tail in a crack, I asked Atticus if Mr. Cunningham would ever pay us.
- 26 "Not in money," Atticus said, "but before the year's out I'll have been paid. You watch."

²scrip stamps—temporary paper money issued to the needy

³entailment—to restrict property by limiting the inheritance to the owner's descendants

⁴Jem—nickname for Scout's brother Jeremy

- 27 We watched. One morning Jem and I found a load of stovewood in the back yard. Later, a sack of hickory nuts appeared on the back steps. With Christmas came a crate of smilax and holly. That spring when we found a crokersack full of turnip greens, Atticus said Mr. Cunningham had more than paid him.
- 28 “Why does he pay you like that?” I asked.
- 29 “Because that’s the only way he can pay me. He has no money.”
- 30 “Are we poor, Atticus?”
- 31 Atticus nodded. “We are indeed.”
- 32 Jem’s nose wrinkled. “Are we as poor as the Cunninghams?”
- 33 “Not exactly. The Cunninghams are country folks, farmers, and the crash⁵ hit them hardest.”
- 34 Atticus said professional people were poor because the farmers were poor. As Maycomb County was farm country, nickels and dimes were hard to come by for doctors and dentists and lawyers. Entailment was only a part of Mr. Cunningham’s vexations.⁶ The acres not entailed were mortgaged to the hilt, and the little cash he made went to interest. If he held his mouth right, Mr. Cunningham could get a WPA⁷ job, but his land would go to ruin if he left it, and he was willing to go hungry to keep his land and vote as he pleased. Mr. Cunningham, said Atticus, came from a set breed of men.

⁵crash—the collapse of the stock market in 1929

⁶vexations—irritations

⁷WPA—Works Progress Administration, a federal program to provide jobs to the unemployed

In this excerpt from *A Part of the Sky*, author Robert Newton Peck remembers being 13 years old in Vermont during the Great Depression.

from *A Part of the Sky*

by Robert Newton Peck

- 1 It was September.
- 2 There wasn't a second cut of hay. And very little of our field corn could I cut or try to sell for silage.¹ The ears were few and stunted, yet I collected every one to shuck for our chickens.
- 3 During warm weather, our hens roamed free, surviving by pecking at every bug and beetle. Winter was another story. The snow and cold demanded that our chickens would stay cooped. Corn had to be provided. An animal, even a hen, burns more fuel in winter. So do people. This meant that our teapot money² drained away to vacant.
- 4 Mama and Carrie canned every vegetable that I could dig up from our little backyard garden. Not much to can. In better years, my mother and aunt would spend weeks by the stove, paring, slicing, and processing all their jars on our Acme American stove.
- 5 One time, sweaty with boiling beets, Mama said to her sister, "There be only two seasons in Vermont. Winter and canning." Mama had a wit.
- 6 At least I kept my job at Ferguson's Feed & Seed. During my noon hour, on the first day of September, I made a trip to the Town Clerk's office. A lady was there. The only person.
- 7 "How do," I said, taking off my hat. "My name is Robert Peck. Me and my family, we're uphillers. Is this where people pay taxes?"
- 8 "You're here for that purpose?"
- 9 "Yes'm." I swallowed. "No, because I don't have the thirty-five dollars. Not a penny of it. My father died, and . . ."
- 10 "What's your name again?"
- 11 "Peck."
- 12 She searched through her records, then stopped. "Haven Peck?"
- 13 "No, I'm his son. He's dead. Please, tell me what happens if I can't pay."

¹silage—coarse food fed to farm animals

²teapot money—savings

- 14 "Then your property is placed in jeopardy.³ Perhaps you ought to consult a lawyer. My brother-in-law happens to be . . ."
- 15 "Excuse me. I want to be polite, but we don't have a lot to spend, on anything."
- 16 "Are you employed?"
- 17 I nodded. "Yes, a regular job at the feedstore, right here in Learning. If you doubt it, you can ask Mr. Porter Ferguson."
- 18 "How old are you, young man?"
- 19 "Thirteen. Does that make a difference?"
- 20 "Not usual. I was just curious. You'll have to register for school in two days. And attend. You won't be working any longer. By the way, what was your stipend at the feedstore?"
- 21 "My what?"
- 22 "Pay. What do you earn?"
- 23 I smiled at her. "Well, I started there at fifty cents a day, but because I come early and stayed late, Mr. Ferguson upped my wage to seventy-five cents."
- 24 "Six days a week for Mr. Ferguson?"
- 25 "Yup. I mean yes'm."
- 26 "Do you own your farm outright, or is there some sort of a lien or mortgage on it?"
- 27 "It's mortgaged. But we've been paying it off pretty steady. Only four years to go and it's all ours. Free and clear."
- 28 The lady made a note on our paper.
- 29 "Your property will not be free and clear if you haven't settled your annual tax. How do you propose to raise thirty-five dollars? Or do you expect to become a burden to the township?"
- 30 "No, I don't."
- 31 "By statute, there is a fiduciary obligation on indebted real property. Legally, no continuant can be considered in our jurisdiction without further proof of viable assets. An attorney, for a reasonable fee, can explain all this to you and then represent you in court, at which time you can opt for a judicial review."

³jeopardy—danger

- 32 My knees started to wobble. Inside my brain, all she'd said was starting to mill around, and I didn't savvy⁴ a word. "We want to pay our taxes. But can't right now. By next growing season, in a year, I'll be able to settle whatever we owe."
- 33 The woman smirked. "If I had a dime for every deadbeat that gives me that story, I'd be rolling rich."
- 34 "Thank you," I told her, even though she hadn't given me much of a cheering.
- 35 When I returned to the feedstore, Mr. Ferguson was messing through a pile of papers. He sat with his ledger book before him.
- 36 "Few of the people who trade here are paying me any cash. What they owe's on the cuff." Mr. Ferguson shook his head. "And my cuff isn't big enough."
- 37 "I'm sorry, Mr. Ferguson. It would be nifty if you'd prosper. You're a honest merchant."
- 38 "Rob," he said, looking up at me over his half-moon glasses, "I can't afford to keep you on. You're a worker. But we're all into tough times. If business takes a healthier turn, I'll hire you again."
- 39 I felt stunned.
- 40 "Then I'm all through here?"
- 41 "Yup. I'm sorry. Hope you know it." He pointed at a ten-pound burlap sack. "So we'll part as friends, there's a bag of cracked corn. Take it. Before spring, your chickens might get hungry."
- 42 Thanking him, I left uproad for home.

⁴savvy—understand