

Back in Chicago, Terrence and I were surprised when photos of Nelle being inducted into the Alabama Academy of Honor went out on the wire. He had suggested staying on to photograph her at that Montgomery ceremony, since she did not want him to photograph her in Monroeville, as he had done with Alice and the other interviewees. It was no surprise she would not want to be photographed for my story; our meeting was off the record for newspaper purposes, after all. But now Terrence had missed his chance.

I mustered what gumption I could and faxed the author. The letter, addressed “Dear Ms. Lee,” said,

*I'm writing with a request: Would you consider letting Terrence pay you a very brief visit in the next few days? He stayed away from Monday's Montgomery ceremony at your request, but then was chagrined to see the Montgomery newspaper publish that photo of you that went out on the news wires. That happens; and we, of course, are most grateful for the help you and the others have been in our research . . .*

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I went on to tell her about the next steps in the One Book, One Chicago program, including a story I was writing about the staff of a children's hospital reading the novel to their patients.

Lee's sense of fairness, and her distinctive style, were abundantly clear in her reply. It arrived the same day. The one-page, handwritten letter began with high praise for Terence, whom she called "a latter-day Alfred Stieglitz" and whose portraits she and Alice thought were "unfailingly wonderful." She was certain that they were taken through cheesecloth.

She consented to be photographed and noted that she and Alice didn't wish to be photographed together. I learned later that they didn't want their ailing other sister, Louise, to feel excluded.

She signed the letter with her full name and in parentheses added, "And call me Nelle—for goodness' sake."

Terrence flew down soon after, and spent a day with her. "She was actually a lot of fun," Terrence said. "She knew I had a job to do and we drove a number of places." She teasingly gave him the nickname "Terrible T."

For my part, it looked like the second week in September might work out for a return trip. Before then, Alice and Nelle Harper would be with their sister Louise. She lived in Eufaula, two hundred miles away. We agreed that a return flight on September 12 would work.

But on Tuesday, September 11, as the horrifying footage of the World Trade Center played nonstop on television, I faxed the Lees. It would be all hands on deck at the paper for a while. With planes grounded I wasn't sure when I'd be able to reschedule the visit.

Nelle called Tom the following day, September 12, when she and Alice returned from Eufaula. Nelle wanted to seek her solace at the catfish ponds on the rural property of their mutual friends Ernie and Angie Hanks. The following day, the preacher and the writer cast their

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lines in those tranquil waters. Their bobbers left only small ripples in the surface. Neither could think about much except the horror in New York, but they did not discuss it at any length.

“She didn’t really want to talk about it,” Tom said. “She just wanted some peace. That’s how she deals with those things.”

The first week of October, I made the return trip to Alabama. I would interview Alice again and do more reporting in Monroeville. Tom suggested another form of research: fishing with Nelle. If she was up for it.

As research goes, I decided that fishing with Harper Lee would beat an afternoon in the library.

Tom invited me to join him at their usual spot. If Nelle wanted to join Tom and me, the three of us would go. If she preferred to do her fishing without the likes of me, understandably enough, I’d still see their favorite spot and she and Tom would go another time.

“Nelle is in her element there,” Tom had told me. “I’d like you to see that if it works out. And if not, you’ll still have a good afternoon.”

I waited in the glass-front entryway to the Best Western. A gray Buick made a left turn off Alabama Avenue, or Highway 21, as it was considered here on the outskirts of town. The Buick crossed the large parking lot and pulled under the portico. Nelle was in the passenger seat. She had on faded blue jeans and a T-shirt. Behind the wheel, Tom was in overalls and a white T-shirt.

I raised my hand in greeting and slid into the backseat. “Hey, girl,” Tom said. From Nelle: “Hello, child.” I was excited she was joining us but wanted to be low-key. She might be skittish, liable to dart away if she felt crowded. “Hi, there,” I said.

“You ready to catch some fish?” Tom asked.

He turned and looked at me over his shoulder for a moment. I could see he was pleased, proud he had been able to make this happen.

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“You bet,” I said, as casually as I could, but with a look that telegraphed “Thank you, thank you, thank you.”

Nelle asked what I had been up to the last couple of days.

I began to tell her about my interviews, leaning forward in my seat a bit and raising my voice to be heard.

She was chatting, in good humor, but she also was gathering intelligence. What had I heard lately from the people at the Old Courthouse?

She also didn't want our fishing trip to be in the story in a way that revealed I was there with her. We worked it out later that I could describe the outing by attributing the description to the friends and not spelling out that I was there, too. She also asked me not to identify the friends hosting us that day. “I don't want people showing up there, looking for me or bothering Ernie and Angie.” Long after the newspaper story ran, she gave me permission to include outings such as this one in the book.

Not that many out-of-towners would be able to find Nelle's fishing hole anyway. It was well off the main road to the nearby town of Lenox. A wooden sign nailed between two trees formed a rustic entrance to the property. Emblazed on the wood was Swampy Acres. It wasn't swampy, though. A couple of large ponds were surrounded by large oak trees. Beyond were Ernie and Angie's carefully tended rows of corn, watermelon, and tomatoes.

Before we arrived, Tom told me that Ernie's left leg had been amputated below the knee, a complication of his diabetes. With the help of his prosthesis, and a beat-up golf cart, he still spent long hours puttering around the gentle slopes of the property. He grew up near here, played in these woods as a boy, searching out enemy soldiers lurking behind the tree trunks. He met Angie, the woman who would be his Yankee bride, when he was in the service. She was a fun-loving,

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petite, dark-haired girl from a big Italian family. They both liked to laugh.

“Do they still have figs?” Nelle wondered aloud as we drove the final stretch of dirt road to the Hanks’ home. They did, Tom said, and some days they could be eaten warm off the tree.

Tom pulled up to the gravel area by the house, a one-story ranch with brown and beige bricks. Ernie was waiting for us, ready to fish. He was tall and wearing denim overalls like Tom’s. A large straw hat shielded his reddened face from the sun. We made our way down a small slope to one of the two large catfish ponds. The oak trees around the ponds were reflected in their placid, dark surfaces. “Do you know what we use for bait?” Tom asked me. Nelle waited for my answer, looking mischievous. Tom pulled out several small plastic Baggies.

“Hot dogs!” he said. He doled out the small chunks of wieners from the Baggies and we slipped them on the fishing hooks.

I stated the obvious. “It’s beautiful here.”

“I never get tired of this,” Nelle murmured.

They both caught a few fish. My casts were falling short. I tried again, casting more energetically, and caught my line in the branches of an oak.

As dusk fell, we trudged back up the gentle slope for dinner around the kitchen table. Ernie took the fish we’d placed in a white bucket and put some on ice. The rest he gave to Angie. She coated the fish in bread crumbs and lightly fried it, along with a pile of sweet potato rounds. We feasted that night.

“Delicious,” Nelle pronounced.

Tom took his glass to the sink and dumped out the ice cubes. He hesitated, then retrieved them and rinsed them off.

“Angie, do you want me to . . . ?”

Angie laughed. “Sure.”

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Tom put the cubes back in the freezer. “Old habits die hard.” He looked sheepish, then amused.

Ernie was chuckling. “I catch myself doing the same thing.”

Nelle tipped her head back and laughed. “Oh, Tom.”

He explained. When they were children in the 1930s, getting ice, and keeping it, was a lot of work. And it cost money. The rolling store came through town twice a week, selling its wares, and so did the ice truck. It was out of Evergreen, the Conecuh County seat and home to the railroad station from which Nelle later set out for New York. The iceman hauled big blocks of ice in the back of the truck. He stretched a canvas tarp over the top to keep them cool, or as cool as they could stay under the Alabama sun. Air-conditioning didn't come in until the 1960s, and even then it was enough of a novelty that businesses that had it advertised the fact.

So used ice was something to rinse off and keep, not toss in a sink to melt. Tom's mother washed off any ice that remained in a glass and put it in a sawdust-lined hole in the ground. Then she covered it with cloth. She would no more let ice melt down a drain than she would throw away the scraps of cloth she stitched into quilts.

On hot days, which were most days, nothing was as refreshing as a chip of ice dissolving on your tongue and running cool down your throat. Just the sound of it clinking in a glass of sweet tea made you feel cooler. It was civilized.

This was the first of many times I would find myself around a kitchen table with Nelle, enjoying the sound of laughter and old friends trading stories of the way things used to be.

It was pitch-black outside now, and time to go home.

“Angie, you are a marvel,” Nelle said, pushing back from the table. “I don't know when I've enjoyed a meal more.”

“You come back quick, Nelle,” Angie said.

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Ernie walked us to the car and opened the passenger door for Nelle. “Don’t be getting into any trouble now,” he said.

“Heavens, no,” she said, laughing.

“I can’t make any promises,” Tom said.

It was their usual give-and-take. Nelle fumbled to fasten her seat belt by the car’s interior light. She feigned indignation. “Tom, what in the world?”

He reached over and guided the seat belt into the buckle.

Nelle rolled her window the rest of the way down and reached over to put her hand on Ernie’s sleeve. “You take care of yourself, Ernie. Thank you for a wonderful time.”

Ernie nodded and glanced at the backseat. “You find your way back here now, you hear?”

Nelle and Tom chatted the whole way home about people they had in common with Ernie: who had been feuding with a neighbor, who had remarried, who had come into a small inheritance, and whatever happened to his cousin?

The names didn’t mean anything to me. But I listened to the easy banter between the two, even as I got sleepy in the backseat. Tom was right. Nelle was in her element here.

We followed our headlights through the dark back to Monroeville.

**O**n that trip, I was able to spend more time with Alice and Nelle. Once they passed, Tom pointed out, the tangle of myths and half-truths that have flourished amid Nelle’s decades-long silence would only grow. He worried about that.

“When she and Alice go, people are going to start ‘remembering’ things as they didn’t happen, or outright making things up, and they won’t be here to set the record straight. So keep taking notes, girl.”

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One afternoon, I had a message from Nelle. Since I would be in town awhile longer, would I like to go for breakfast? If so, she would swing by the motel the next morning and get me. Once again, I found myself waiting in the glass vestibule of the Best Western, not sure what to expect.

She was right on time. She pulled up in a dark blue Buick sedan and motioned for me to get in.

“Good morning.”

“Morning,” she said. “Have you been to Wanda’s?”

I hadn’t. We made a left onto Highway 21 and, a short distance later, just past the intersection with 84, turned into a large gas station parking lot. Behind it was Wanda’s Kountry Kitchen, a low-slung diner painted yellow. Nelle glided into a parking spot and glanced over at me.

“It’s not fancy. But it’s good food. More or less.” She gave a wry smile. “You’ve discovered Monroeville’s dining options are limited?” This was a statement more than a question.

A sign posted near the front door had the silhouette of a video camera and a warning: These premises protected against burglary, holdup and vandalism.

Nelle opened the door for me. “Proceed.”

I proceeded. Cigarette smoke greeted us, and the din of regular customers at their usual tables. A gentleman with an enormously round belly and scraggly beard was holding court, loudly, at a table of several men. In one corner, a group of older women was deep in conversation, flicking cigarettes in a couple of ashtrays in the middle of the table. Half of the other tables were occupied. To our left, the woman behind the counter looked up.

“Anywhere,” she told us.

Nelle and I slid into two empty places along the far wall. Our wait-



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ress was a slim woman in her fifties or sixties with a tanned, lined face. She set two large plastic menus in the middle of the table.

“Hi, hon,” Nelle said.

“How y’all doing this morning?”

“Tolerable.”

“Coffee?”

“Please,” Nelle said.

I studied the menu. It was standard fare: eggs and hash browns and hotcakes, along with that Southern staple, grits. Nelle barely glanced at the menu and set it aside. The waitress returned with the coffee carafe and filled our cups, the thick white mugs of diners everywhere. Small curls of steam rose from the mugs.

“Bless you, hon,” Nelle said. She wrapped her hands around the mug.

Now Nelle was spooning a couple of ice cubes from her water glass into her coffee. She looked over at me. “Do you need a minute?”

“No. That’s all right. You go ahead and I’ll be ready.”

The waitress pulled out her pad.

“I’ll have two eggs, over easy,” Nelle said. “And a side of sausage. And a biscuit.”

“Gravy?”

“Yes, ma’am!”

I was pretty sure ordering my trying-to-be-healthy usual—scrambled egg whites, a piece of wheat toast, and a side of fruit—violated the spirit of this place. It could mark me as a city girl or a granola head, neither a popular demographic around here. I set down my menu.

“I’ll have the same, please. But with bacon instead of sausage, please.”

I wondered if Nelle had invited me to breakfast to ask me some-

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thing specific or just to continue our conversation. Those eyes of hers, brown and penetrating, could be unnerving but at the moment they were sparkling. She smiled broadly.

“Have you had sawmill gravy?”

“No, I haven’t.” Sawmill gravy . . . sawmill gravy. I should know what this was. Was it mentioned in *To Kill a Mockingbird*? This was lumber country, after all, sawmill country.

“You’re in for a treat.”

Nelle was draining her cup as we spoke. When the waitress stopped by, Nelle tapped lightly on the side of her mug. “Keep it coming, would you, hon?”

I’d studied Nelle, subtly, I hoped, at the Best Western, at the catfish pond, and now here at Wanda’s. Each time her humor and her down-to-earth demeanor struck me.

There was an edge there, too, though, of suspicion or impatience, and I didn’t want to set it off. Tom had warned me she had a temper. When something set her off she could get creative with her cursing, her salty “Conecuh County English,” in Tom’s words.

“Have you been back to the courthouse?”

“Yes, I was there and I stopped in the history room in the library. I spent some time with Dale Welch.”

Nelle’s expression softened.

“Dale’s a good egg. She was a librarian, you know. And she taught. She’s a reader, unlike most of the people around here.”

As I was recounting my conversation with Dale, our food arrived, and I had my first look at sawmill gravy, poured over my biscuit. It was thick and white with bits of sausage. I had never learned to like gravy of any kind. At holiday time, my family knew not to pass the gravy boat my way. But if this was part of local culture, and possibly a test of

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my willingness to partake, I was going to eat it all and look like I was enjoying it, no matter what.

It was viscous stuff. I swallowed hard.

Nelle dug into her own biscuit and eggs with gusto. That surprised me a bit, because I'd read so much about her reserve. But that was at public events, I suppose. In person, her heartiness was appealing: her relish of the food and coffee; that big laugh; her obvious affection for Alice and Julia and Dale and Tom. I had assumed I would have to keep my distance from the famously private Harper Lee but I couldn't help but enjoy her company. She might have been prickly but she was a delightful companion.

I did some more reporting around town for a couple of days. As I was walking from the car to my motel room one afternoon, I felt a lupus flare taking hold, worse than usual. I didn't know if I'd be able to make the long drive to the airport the next day. It meant a trip to the local emergency room.

I knew this sensation. It was mounting. I'd been pushing through the fatigue. I recognized the characteristic shooting pains in my fingers and toes

I'd been more tired the last few days but now it was what the doctors call wipe-out fatigue. Walking to and from the rental car felt like trudging through molasses. Even lying in bed I felt slammed.

I faxed the Lees that I would have to cut my stay short and thanked them for the time they'd spent with me. Because of their failing hearing, faxing was our most reliable mode of communication. I apologized for rushing off—this was a standard-issue lupus flare, for me, and once I got treatment at the ER I'd be fine and on my way. I'd fax them once I was in Chicago, and keep them posted as I put together the stories.

I drove the short distance to the hospital and filled out the paper-

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work to be evaluated in the emergency room. A nurse took me to one of the private areas and drew blood. I conferred with the white-smocked doctor making his way from one curtained area to the next. We agreed this was probably a flare that could be treated. I'd get home and then deal with my doctors there if needed.

The nurse started an IV and I started figuring whether it would be realistic to try to drive to the airport later that day. I was resting on a gurney when I heard a voice.

“Child, what have you done to yourself? Heavens.”

I knew that husky voice. Nelle had materialized by the gurney.

I was stunned, and embarrassed. I didn't want her to go to this trouble or to see me like this. I stood up to greet her and blushed on the spot.

She gave me a quick hug and then stood back, taking the measure of how I looked.

I was hoping the hospital's tile floor would open up and swallow me. Knowing how the Lees felt about journalists, I had taken extra care not to impose on their time and goodwill. For their sake, and mine, it was best I be professional, together, and outa here. This had no place in that picture.

Instead, here I was, a pale-faced girl in a hospital gown, shaky and embarrassed that Nelle had gone to the time and trouble of driving to the emergency room.

“You're so kind to come out here. But really, this is just standard stuff. I've dealt with it before.”

She looked at me skeptically.

“They'll do some labs, see where things are. They'll probably give me a little bit of IV steroids and I'll be fine.”

She glanced over at the nurses. She lowered her voice and leaned in

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closer. “If anyone asks, I’m your mother-in-law. Otherwise they won’t let me stay back here with you. Only relatives. Rules.” She spit out the last word. I smiled.

Before long, Nelle was on her way, and I was on the mend.

In Chicago, I faxed the Lees on my first day back at work to let them know I was feeling better. As it turned out, ongoing health problems and other assignments conspired to delay the publication of the stories even longer. Finally, in September 2002, I began final fact-checking on the articles we were preparing to publish.

I wanted to spell out in the story that Nelle consented to be photographed. Otherwise, I thought, readers would wonder why a story in which she had no comment, as usual, was accompanied by *Tribune* photos clearly taken with her permission. Not at all usual.

Nelle questioned if that explanation was necessary but gave her consent in a one-page, typewritten letter spit out of a *Tribune* fax machine.

In the letter, she did two seemingly contradictory things. She made clear her low regard for newspaper reporters. She also indicated she might be open to talking with me some more.

I sat at my desk and read the fax. As would happen many times in the years to come, I was unsure, and anxious, about what Nelle would have to say this time around. I needed to honor my agreement with her and Alice. At the same time, I had to write a journalistically sound article, not a puff piece.

She began with kind words. I had returned to work after a short stay in the hospital. She and Alice were endlessly patient as my health problems slowed the process of getting the story ready to be published.

She wrote that she was “appalled by the viciousness of lupus” and was encouraging about the way I’d dealt with setbacks. “You are a

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most remarkable young lady. Bless you” I was to make it “Quaker plain” that she declined to comment for the story.

For my edification, she outlined the decline, as she saw it, of journalistic standards. “The files on one Harper Lee,” in fact, were a useful case study of the fall. She had no patience for New Journalism. She lamented the passing of an era she said I was too young to remember, one in which a reporter’s first and only job was to get the facts right, not to inject personal opinion. After reflecting on her treatment in the press, she began the next paragraph, “Therein you should see the possibilities of another story.”

I remembered the case in general in which the U.S. Supreme Court widened freedom of the press, making it more difficult for public officials to win libel or defamation cases against news organizations. I looked up the specifics. The *Sullivan* case focused on civil rights coverage in the segregated South, but its ruling applied more broadly to what some perceived as a lowering of standards regarding both accuracy and malicious reporting. Plaintiffs had to prove “actual malice” by reporters and editors, the hard-to-prove action of setting out, deliberately and knowingly, to publish inaccurate reports in an effort to defame public officials.

I didn’t agree entirely with her view of my “once reputable profession” but I knew what she meant. And as a practical matter, I was hugely encouraged that she was bothering to teach me what she saw as the relevant history of my career. I read the letter a second time. I appreciated the comments about dealing with lupus. More important, in the story soon to go to press, I could state that she had consented to be photographed and thereby resolve that issue.

And those magic words, unlikely as they were coming from Harper Lee: “You should see the possibilities of another story.”

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The main article, with a few sidebars, was to run Friday, September 13, 2002. I flew to Montgomery Thursday afternoon, as planned, with the preprinted feature section in hand. After so much time, theirs and mine, spent reporting the story, I wanted to face them after they read it, whatever their reaction. And I didn't need to be asked twice when they encouraged me to come back when I could.

Friday, at Barnett, Bugg & Lee, I found Nelle slouched in a chair in Alice's office after a morning running errands. Alice sat, as always, facing the doorway, her deeply veined hands folded on her desk's little return table. We exchanged greetings and the usual catch-up on weather, travels, health. Nelle nodded at the copies of the *Tribune* I held in my hands.

"You are a brave woman," Nelle said. "You have come to face your accusers."

The way she phrased that, I thought, sounded like something out of the British histories they read. I pictured the two sisters in the white wigs worn by British jurists.

I wasn't feeling all that brave. Would they think the story was fair? I thought so, but I couldn't be sure. Accurate? Better be. But so much conflicting information had been published about Nelle Harper over the years. I was wary that an incorrect date or a long-exaggerated anecdote could survive the fact-checking I had done, somewhat awkwardly, by fax.

I figured a few things in the story might bother Nelle. But they came from Alice and their preacher friend, Tom Butts, speaking on the record. Already, I was feeling the uneasy tug between inquisitive journalist and protective friend.

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The story, “A Life Apart: Harper Lee, the Complex Woman Behind ‘a Delicious Mystery,’” took up the front page of the section and another two full pages inside. The section front included a large, close-up photo of Nelle, gazing with those penetrating eyes, arthritic hands folded in front of her on an unseen restaurant table at Radley’s.

The story traced Harper Lee’s path to being such a famously private author and gave details of her day-to-day life in Monroeville with Alice, from feeding the ducks to collecting mail at the post office. It described the toll the press of attention had taken on both sisters. One sidebar story described the fishing outing, another Nelle’s long friendship with Gregory Peck. Per our agreement, I did not include my meeting with Nelle.

While they read it, I left to photocopy an essay about local history that Alice wanted me to read. Not everything in the story was flattering, though much of it was. I didn’t know how Nelle would feel about all Alice had said on the record. I dallied by the photocopier so they could read the piece without my standing there.

When I returned to Alice’s office, Nelle looked up from the newspaper. She read quietly for a few more minutes. “B plus,” she said when she finished. From Alice, “Good job.” They seemed generally pleased, perhaps relieved.

Nelle did have one complaint, about the way I described Alice’s accent in this sentence: “‘Nelle Harper is very independent. She always was,’ says Alice Lee, who, with her Alabama inflections, pronounces the name ‘Nail Hah-puh.’”

Wrong. “Nail Hah-puh” was closer to the way some people I interviewed pronounced her name, but not Alice. There was something soft, something Southern, in her pronunciation, but it was more subtle than I had been able to capture phonetically. I’d seen her name spelled phonetically like this in other stories and remembered the moment I





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sat at my desk quietly repeating aloud the name as I remembered Alice saying it. Not quite it, I thought to myself at the time. But as close as I'm going to get. Now I regretted it.

"You dropped her two social classes with one syllable," Nelle said.

I was chagrined. Even so, I had to admire her admonishment. It was succinct and delivered its sting with a dash of wit. Classic Nelle.

I tried to imagine the correction the *Tribune* could run. "An article in the September 13 *Chicago Tribune* mischaracterized the way Alice Lee pronounces the name of her sister Nelle Harper Lee. Alice Lee says 'Nelle Harper,' not 'Nail Hah-puh.' The *Tribune* regrets the error."

Absurd? Maybe I could come up with a better way to word it. Maybe not.

Don't bother, Nelle said. She'd rather leave it be. I let it go. But I made note, ever after, of the myriad accents freighted with meaning within the 1,035 square miles of Monroe County, Alabama.