

The Reader's Companion to
THE RECLUSE

The Siege of the Fortress

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The Conversations

A Note on These Conversations

On two separate occasions, a group of distinguished writers were invited to the VanDeusen Fortress to discuss *The Recluse*. The arrangements were considered: comfortable chairs, coffee, and a copy of the novel placed somewhere visible.

On both occasions, the novel went largely undiscussed.

This was not a failure of hospitality. It was the fault of the house. An old building lived in seriously is not a passive setting for a literary conversation. It keeps interrupting. The attic is full of objects that require decisions. The porch is a different room than the parlor, and the south yard is different again. Something is always happening in the next room, or coming down the road, or about to rain.

And *The Recluse* — it turned out — makes this kind of interruption inevitable. A novel about preservation and memory and the stubborn moral weight of place cannot really be discussed in the abstract. The argument is always already underway. You find it in a toolbox left in the rafters. You find it in a dispute about a coffee grinder. You find it in a man passing down the road without stopping, or in a woman bringing cookies and saying something devastating about books that are easy to solve.

The two groups eventually noticed what had happened. Some of them found it funny. Some of them found it illuminating. The Farmer picked up the book on his way out the door. He didn't say why.

The following are records of those conversations. Each

conversation names its participants in the heading. In the text, they appear by their role — the Farmer, the River Pilot, the Professor — because that is how they occupied the room.

The novel, in each case, was available. Nobody needed it.

An Evening in the Fortress

Mark Twain, John Gardner, G.K. Chesterton, and William Faulkner

The storm arrived before the guests.

It moved over the ridge after sunset and spent the evening testing the windows, the chimneys, and the walnut trees. The house seemed unconcerned. It had heard worse.

The visitors arrived one at a time.

The River Pilot came in wearing a white suit entirely unsuitable for the weather and immediately asked whether there was pie.

The Professor paused in the library doorway and spent so long examining the shelves that everyone else had already chosen a seat before he entered the room.

The Enthusiast arrived laughing.

No one knew why.

The Southerner selected the chair nearest the fire and sat down. He had been carrying something heavy for a very long time.

Coffee appeared.

Pie disappeared.

The book sat quietly on the table.

Nobody mentioned it.

The River Pilot accepted a second slice and looked around the room.

"You know what I've always distrusted?"

The Enthusiast smiled.

"We're going to need a category."

"Old houses."

The Professor looked up.

"Then why are you here?"

"Professional curiosity."

"You distrust them but seek them out?"

"I distrust rivers too."

The Enthusiast laughed.
The Southerner stared into the fire.
The River Pilot continued.
“An old house can do something dangerous to a person.”
“What?” asked the Enthusiast.
“It can convince him that the past had better manners.”
The Enthusiast burst out laughing.
The Professor smiled.
The Southerner took a sip of coffee.
“Sometimes it did.”
The River Pilot pointed at him.
“There you go.”
“What?”
“You spend twenty minutes saying nothing and then ruin everybody else’s joke.”
The Southerner shrugged.
The Enthusiast leaned forward.
“I disagree entirely.”
“About which part?”
“The past having better manners.”
“It didn’t?”
“No.”
“It certainly seemed to.”
The Enthusiast spread his hands.
“That’s because all the rude people are dead.”
The River Pilot slapped the table.
“There! That’s exactly the kind of observation I trust.”
The Professor laughed.
The storm rattled the north windows.
For a while they listened to it.
Then the Professor spoke.
“Why does every modern town look temporary?”
The River Pilot groaned.
“We’ve changed subjects already?”
“We never had a subject.”

The Enthusiast nodded.

“Fair.”

The Professor continued.

“I drove through three of them on the way here.”

“And?”

“They looked unfinished.”

The River Pilot frowned.

“Unfinished?”

“Not physically.”

“Then what?”

The Professor searched for the word.

“They didn’t appear to believe in themselves.”

The Enthusiast nodded slowly.

“Ah.”

The River Pilot looked irritated.

“Don’t do that.”

“What?”

“Immediately understand what he means.”

“But I do.”

“So do I. That’s the annoying part.”

The Professor settled deeper into his chair.

“Buildings used to expect to survive.”

The River Pilot pointed with his fork.

“Every generation says that.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“No.”

“Absolutely yes.”

The Professor folded his arms.

“Did older generations build things to last longer?”

The River Pilot paused.

The Enthusiast started laughing before the answer arrived.

The Southerner smiled into his coffee.

Finally the River Pilot sighed.

"Annoyingly, sometimes."

The Professor nodded.

"Thank you."

"But only sometimes."

"Agreed."

The River Pilot gestured around the room.

"This place, for example."

"What about it?"

"It expects to be here in a hundred years."

Outside, wind moved through the trees.

Inside, nobody rushed to fill the silence.

Some buildings hope.

Others assume.

The conversation drifted.

Eventually it arrived at progress.

The River Pilot started that argument too.

"I don't trust the word."

The Professor looked up.

"Progress?"

"Yes."

"Why not?"

"Because nobody ever defines it."

The Enthusiast laughed.

"That's actually true."

"It is true."

The River Pilot pointed his fork at the room.

"Everything becomes progress."

"New equals progress."

"Faster equals progress."

The Professor interrupted.

"Surely some things improve."

"Of course they do."

"Then what are you objecting to?"

The River Pilot thought for a moment.

Finally he nodded.

"I know."

"What?"

"The word isn't progress."

"What is it?"

He took another bite of pie.

"Replacement."

The Professor looked down at his cup.

The Enthusiast stopped smiling.

The Southerner lifted his eyes.

For several seconds nobody spoke.

Then the Professor nodded.

"That's nearly right."

The River Pilot frowned.

"Nearly?"

"Replacement isn't the problem."

"What is?"

"Forgetting."

"A thing can be replaced."

"Yes."

"A thing can be improved."

"Yes."

"A thing can even disappear."

"Yes."

"But once people forget what it was for, they're lost."

The Enthusiast slapped the table.

"There!"

"What?"

"That's the whole argument."

The River Pilot sighed.

"We weren't having a whole argument."

"We always are."

The River Pilot rubbed his forehead.

"This conversation started with pie."

"And now concerns civilization."

The Southerner smiled faintly.

The storm had begun moving east.

Rain tapped softly against the windows.

The fire settled lower.

The Southerner stared into the flames for so long that the others assumed he had stopped listening.

Then he spoke.

"People spend half their lives trying to leave where they came from."

Nobody interrupted.

"And the other half trying to understand why they miss it."

The River Pilot looked toward the window.

The Professor studied the floor.

The Enthusiast stopped smiling.

Outside, the darkness pressed gently against the glass.

Finally the River Pilot pointed.

"There you go again."

"What?"

"That."

"What?"

"That thing."

The Southerner looked genuinely puzzled.

"You sit there quietly for half an hour and then say something that sounds like it took forty years to write."

The Enthusiast laughed.

The Professor nodded.

"Fair criticism."

The Southerner shrugged.

"I had forty years."

The Enthusiast nearly spilled his coffee.

The argument resumed.

It wandered through family.

Then inheritance.

Then memory.

Then whether memory was a blessing or a burden.

The Professor argued that memory gave shape to a life.
The River Pilot argued that memory frequently ruined one.

The Enthusiast insisted both were true simultaneously.
The Southerner claimed neither position mattered because memory didn't ask permission.

That argument lasted nearly an hour.

At one point the River Pilot accused the Enthusiast of turning every object in the world into a sermon.

At another point the Professor accused the River Pilot of believing irony was a substitute for philosophy.

The River Pilot replied that philosophy was often a substitute for common sense.

The Enthusiast laughed so hard he had to set down his coffee.

Near the middle of the evening a door opened somewhere in the house.

Footsteps moved through the hallway.

A man appeared briefly in the doorway carrying a satchel and a lantern.

He paused.

Looked at the room.

Then moved on.

The River Pilot watched him go.

"Who's that?"

"Someone going through the records," said the Southerner.

The River Pilot nodded.

Nobody asked which records.

At some point the book on the table was finally mentioned.

Only once.

The Professor tapped the cover.

"I like the old man."

The River Pilot nodded.

"So do I."

The Enthusiast nodded.

"So do I."

The Southerner stared into the fire.

"So do I."

That was the entire review.

The conversation immediately wandered away again.

Toward roads.

Toward trees.

Toward churches.

Toward the strange human tendency to confuse ownership with belonging.

The storm ended.

The fire burned low.

The coffee went cold.

The pie vanished.

Near midnight the River Pilot looked around the room.

"You know something?"

"What?" asked the Enthusiast.

"We've spent four hours talking."

"Yes."

"About houses."

"Yes."

"Roads."

"Yes."

"Memory."

"Yes."

"Family."

"Yes."

"Trees."

"Yes."

"Progress."

"Yes."

The River Pilot looked at the book.

Then at the room.

Then at the house.

A slow smile appeared.

“Oh.”

The Enthusiast smiled too.

The Professor understood immediately.

The Southerner never looked up from the fire.

“What?” asked the Enthusiast.

The River Pilot pointed toward the book.

“We thought we were discussing it.”

Wind moved softly through the walnut branches outside.

The old house settled around them.

The Professor smiled.

The Enthusiast smiled.

The Southerner smiled.

The River Pilot shook his head.

“No.”

He looked around the room one last time.

“It was discussing us.”