

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.

The Attic

Leo Tolstoy, Marilynne Robinson, Wendell Berry, and Walker Percy

The four had been invited to discuss *The Recluse*.

Unfortunately, they discovered the attic first.

The book sat on a dusty workbench beneath a small gable window. It had been placed there deliberately. Four chairs had been arranged around it. Someone had even brought a pitcher of lemonade.

The arrangements suggested a thoughtful discussion.

The attic suggested otherwise.

Boxes lined the rafters.

Trunks stood against the walls.

Shelves sagged under the weight of a century's worth of decisions not to throw something away.

The Farmer stood in the middle of the room with his hands on his hips.

The Pastor had already opened a box.

The Doctor was examining a rusted coffee grinder.

The Conscience was reading a ledger.

Nobody had touched the book.

"This is exactly how civilizations collapse," said the Farmer.

The Doctor looked up.

"Through coffee grinders?"

"Through distraction."

The Pastor smiled.

The Conscience turned a page.

The Farmer pointed toward the workbench.

"We're supposed to be discussing the book."

"We are discussing the book," said the Doctor.

"No we aren't."

The Doctor held up the grinder.

"What is this?"

"A coffee grinder."

"No."

The Farmer closed his eyes.

The Pastor laughed.

The Conscience looked interested.

The Doctor continued.

"That's what it is physically."

"Yes."

"But why is it here?"

The Farmer sighed.

"Because somebody put it here."

"Good."

"That wasn't a serious answer."

"It was a serious question."

The Doctor set the grinder down.

"The book asks why people preserve things."

The Farmer folded his arms.

"Yes."

"So does this."

He pointed around the attic.

The Pastor picked up a framed photograph.

A family stood in front of the Fortress.

The adults looked solemn.

The children did not.

She smiled.

"Because they loved them."

The Conscience looked up from the ledger.

"Perhaps."

The Pastor looked surprised.

"Perhaps?"

"Love preserves many things."

"What else preserves them?"

The Conscience closed the ledger.

"Guilt."

The Doctor nodded slowly.

The Farmer looked thoughtful.

The Pastor studied the photograph.

The Conscience continued.

"Obligation preserves things."

"Yes."

"Fear preserves things."

"Yes."

"Regret preserves things."

The Doctor smiled.

"Now we're getting somewhere."

The Farmer pointed.

"There."

"What?"

"That."

"What?"

"You say that every time the conversation becomes uncomfortable."

The Doctor considered this.

"That is because comfortable conversations rarely discover anything."

The Farmer picked up a wooden toolbox.

The latch was broken.

One hinge was missing.

The box was full of hand tools.

He opened it.

Every tool had been sharpened.

Every handle had been repaired.

Every blade had been cared for.

He ran a thumb along the edge of a drawknife.

Still sharp.

"Now this," he said, "is worth keeping."

The Doctor immediately pounced.

"Why?"

The Farmer stared at him.

"Because someone made it well."

The Doctor smiled.

The Farmer looked annoyed.

"I dislike that smile."

"What smile?" asked the Doctor.

"The one that means you're about to ask another question."

The Doctor pointed toward the drawknife.

"Who repaired the handle?"

The Farmer looked down.

Nobody knew.

The Doctor nodded.

"Who sharpened the blade?"

Nobody knew.

"Who used it?"

Nobody knew.

The Doctor sat on an old trunk.

"And yet you want to keep it."

The Farmer thought for a moment.

Then nodded.

"Yes."

"Why?"

The Farmer looked at the tool.

Longer this time.

Finally he shrugged.

"It feels wrong to throw it away."

The Conscience smiled.

"There."

"What?"

The Conscience pointed at the drawknife.

"That's the book."

The Conscience continued.

"Not the tool."

"Then what?"

"The feeling."

The Pastor nodded slowly.

The Farmer looked thoughtful.

The Doctor leaned back.

The Conscience spoke quietly.

"We inherit obligations before we understand them."

"Or we project them."

The Conscience looked up.

"What do you mean?"

"The feeling you have about throwing away the tool."

The Doctor paused. "Is it obligation, or is it grief? They present themselves the same way."

The Conscience was still.

"The obligation is real whether or not you understand it."

"I don't dispute that," the Doctor said.

"Then what are you disputing?"

"I'm asking what the feeling is made of. That's different from disputing it."

The Conscience did not answer immediately.

The Farmer was still holding the drawknife.

The Pastor had said nothing. She was looking at the photograph in her hands.

Nobody answered.

Outside the small window, sunlight moved through the walnut branches.

Dust drifted in the beams.

The Pastor opened another box.

Inside were letters.

Dozens of them.

Bound with twine.

She untied the bundle carefully.

The Doctor groaned.

"Oh no."

"What?"

"Letters."

The Farmer laughed.

“What is wrong with letters?”

The Doctor looked horrified.

“Nothing.”

“Then why do you sound frightened?”

“Because somebody is about to read one.”

The Pastor smiled.

“I am.”

The Doctor sat down.

The Farmer sat down.

The Conscience removed his glasses.

The letter was ordinary.

Weather.

Family.

Travel.

A delayed train.

A concern about crops.

A reminder not to forget a birthday.

When she finished, nobody spoke.

Finally the Doctor broke the silence.

“I think modern people underestimate ordinary life.”

The Farmer nodded.

The Pastor smiled.

The Conscience looked toward the window.

The Doctor continued.

“Everybody wants a dramatic existence.”

“Yes.”

“They want adventure.”

“Yes.”

“They want significance.”

“Yes.”

He pointed toward the letter.

“That man wanted to be home by Sunday.”

The Pastor folded the letter carefully.

The Farmer looked away.

The Conscience stared at the floorboards.

The Doctor smiled faintly.
"I suspect he may have been wiser than the rest of us."
For a while they actually worked.
Boxes moved.
Shelves were cleared.
Dust rose.
The afternoon passed.
Every object became an argument.
A church bulletin.
A survey marker.
The Farmer held it a long time without setting it down.
"Someone trusted this to last," he said.
Nobody answered.
Footsteps sounded on the stairs.
A young man appeared in the attic doorway.
He looked at the room.
Then at the survey marker in the Farmer's hands.
"That's a Walker marker," he said.
The Farmer held it out.
The young man took it carefully.
Turned it over once.
Set it on the shelf nearest the window.
Then went back down.
The Doctor watched the doorway.
"Relation?"
The Conscience smiled.
"Probably."
A child's sled.
A broken lantern.
A wedding photograph.
The Farmer wanted to keep practical things.
The Pastor wanted to keep personal things.
The Conscience wanted to know what obligations each
object represented.
The Doctor wanted to know why anyone had saved any

of it in the first place.

At one point they spent twenty minutes arguing about a cracked enamel coffee pot.

At another they debated whether an unsigned photograph was history or merely clutter.

By late afternoon the attic looked different.

Not cleaner.

The book still sat untouched on the workbench.

The light through the gable window had gone gold.

The Farmer set down the last toolbox.

"I still think the tool is worth keeping," he said.

Nobody had asked.

The Doctor looked at him.

"Yes."

"You still think I haven't answered your question."

"I think," said the Doctor carefully, "that you've answered it without knowing it. That's different."

The Farmer picked up the book from the workbench.

He looked at it.

He set it under his arm and started for the stairs without comment.

The Conscience looked at the shelf near the window — the survey marker, where the young man had placed it.

"He knew what it was," the Conscience said. "Without being told."

"Yes," said the Doctor.

"That's the kind of thing that can't be taught."

The Doctor considered this.

"Or perhaps," he said, "it's the only thing that can."

The Conscience looked at him.

Neither conceded.

They went down.

The attic settled into the late light. The things that had been moved stayed moved. The things that had been left stayed left.

Nobody had opened the book.
It was already gone.