PURSUIT

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I

ALTHOUGH he didn't ask himself what time it was, Ned Ingles must have driven in to the place about five in the afternoon. The sky was still bright and summery, but the birds on the lawn, swooping in and out of the sweet olive bushes, were sounding the peculiar closed-in way they did toward evening. Laurance would be home from the Convent and working on his pieces. Good. Even out here in the driveway he could hear the piano from the hall.

The old Ingleside house, as he looked up at it, gave the impression of a jumble of chimneys and high shuttered windows, now settling into late afternoon. As he opened the car door to get out, a last glance of light faded suddenly from the steep slope of the roof. This meant the sun had gone down into the cut, causing a darkening and cooling of everything. By the time he had carried his suitcases up the front steps and walked across the gallery to the door, a light had come on in the hall beside the piano.

2

Once inside, Ned sought his reflection in the pier mirror to try to re-establish himself in his own mind. He still looked young, at forty-seven, big-boned and red-haired. Nothing in his appearance gave him grounds for feeling, as he had just now, vagrant and fragmented. He had been in New Orleans too long, that was all.

Setting the suitcases inside the front bedroom, he walked down the hall to put a hand on Laurance's shoulder. "Well, I'm home."

"That's good," was all that Laurance had to say.

God, but the boy was unprepossessing looking, thin and sallow. His eyes were something else, though, dark blue and happy, a jot off, somehow. "I mean to *stay*, Laurance. I'm not going back to the University this time. I've quit teaching."

Laurance looked up now and nodded, as if the matter was of very little interest one way or the other, then continued with the fugue's difficulties.

Well after all, there was no logical reason for the boy to get up and jump for joy. Bemused by the Bach, Ned went on into the dining room, where his Grandfather Dana's smile was the same as of old from his spot above the sideboard. This would be the first drink of the day. He wiped out a glass with a damask napkin and unlocked the liquor compartment.

The timeworn quiet of the house, underwritten now by the piano, seemed to be seeping into him with the smell and then the taste of the whiskey. This was best, perhaps, this was home. It might have been what he had longed for all the time without sense enough to know it. He walked over to the window and looked out toward the cemetery and the river. There they were, just as he had left them. The pastures in this direction swept all the way back. The land, with its familiar rises and falls, the remembered contours of the trees, gave him the impression that he had never left off looking at it, but was coming back, as from

an illness or a coma, to an original and authentic viewpoint. The land's authority, he told himself, that's what it was, a mute and stern thing, giving you the illusion that you possessed it until the day coming when it would possess you. But wasn't this a sure way to keep down confusion, in itself a way of life? After his time there would be the skinny one in the hall, now so oblivious to the importance of his father's return.

Ned had fallen into the habit of talking to himself rather soothingly these past few years. You will even get fond of the boy. He can be cleaned up and trimmed, fattened. The dark complexion had to have come from the Delta grandmother. She was the only relative Laurance had who wasn't kin to all the rest. Well, the next generation would breed her back out. Laurance might even turn out to be a blessing instead of a disgrace. Here, on these four thousand acres of Mississippi, all the forged and fluxing viewpoints that had been so troublesome in the city would disappear. There would be only this land, common to them all, this boy, and (he crossed himself hastily) this whiskey. For the whiskey alone infused everything else with relevance, something life consistently lacked. Yes, here and only here was everything countersunk into the past, half belonging to it.

Laurance was not intentionally rude, just indifferent. And a good thing, maybe, out here alone so long with the Negroes. He could be cleaned up, polished. What gave him those strange eyes? Cousinship, probably, not so much himself and Ellen as all sorts of crossed kinships behind, twists of misalliance throwing up forgotten oddities.

What sense would all this make to anyone else, Ned wondered, pouring another drink. He was startled by the old fear of having become too subjective, all this thought of self, of the place. It was unacceptable in the twentieth century. But unacceptable to whom? Who had to accept it? And what did a

man have, after all, but his own little dalliances? Nothing for sure. Out here on the land there would be no jealous colleagues to trip him up about what century somebody wrote in. No women were here to contest his freedom by jumping up and declaring they loved him. Having finally come home, he would likely be knitted back into the secure "I" of whom his father had spoken, knowing who he was and what he intended.

Back in the hall where the music had drawn him, he ignored Laurance, walking past him to the end of the hall and turning right into the kitchen. Dear God, all the old lard and mouse smells, the wide floor boards with their mop-splintered cracks. It was all too good to be true. The stove was still giving out a little warmth, and lifting the lid he saw the embers, a fragile red hull, still holding together. On top of the warming oven was a sweet potato pie and the remains of a roast. Where was the cook this time of day? She should be putting Laurance's supper on.

The music had stopped and he went back into the hall, where he found Laurance sorting through the mussy sheets of music looking for something.

"If I may ask a question, where's the cook?"

"They've gone to a drowning," said Laurance. "Somebody got drowned."

"Damn. This time of day? Who was it?"

Laurence said he didn't know and by the looks of him he didn't care.

"Well, white or colored?"

"Colored. Wait. It was that boy of that Aunt Hattie Mae that comes to pick cotton. You know, the one that likes to see light bulbs come on."

"I know of no such person."

There was no getting around it, Laurance did talk like a Negro.

And why shouldn't he, for heaven's sake, he'd been brought up like one. He even rode the colored school bus because he said the children didn't tease him. Ned laughed at the absurdity of this. It would serve high-handed Ellen Ingles right, conceiving him and then leaving him without a tear or a thought in seventeen years. Ned wished she could hear her illegitimate child talk and see his fingernails and long, bedraggled hair. But what did she care, over on the Italiar Riviera at last report, drinking and chasing amusing men. She had probably thrown all his letters out, unopened.

Coming back to the business at hand, the drowning, he was searching his mind for some recollection of a cotton picker named Hattie Mae. Just when he had given up, she began moving forward in his memory, an old someone looking up to see the miraculous flash. Too bad about the little boy, but of all things to have happen at this time of evening, the cook rambling around to look at dead bodies! Wait, there was the muffled rattle of the pickup on the gravel of the driveway. Running to the front door to look out the side lights, he caught sight of the truck rushing back in with all aboard, Roosevelt at the wheel. It would do them a world of good to see his car.

He had a third drink and then a fourth while he waited for Roosevelt's guilty knock on the back door. Then, when it came, he found himself having to clench his teeth to keep from smiling as he opened the door. "Well, what have you got to say for yourself?"

Roosevelt had been running the place so long now he was of the opinion that he could do no wrong. His pockmarked face was heavy with melancholy. "Was just wading out to get his trot line," he said, "Charley boy." He snapped his fingers to show how quickly death had come.

"Well I'm sure this is all very tragic but you are here on this

place supposed to be attending to the work. I come in tired, hungry, no cook in the house, you off with the whole bunch of them. It's outrageous."

"He was adopted," Roosevelt continued, as if that made a material difference in the matter, "but still and all Miss Hattie Mae glorified that child."

"Can you talk with me, Roosevelt, or must *I* talk with you? Now let's get this straight. You are not to set foot off this place again without my permission. I'm going to have to resign from the University and stay here just to watch you, the way you're acting."

"You said on the phone the other night you'd already quit."

"I was just drunk and didn't know what I was saying. But I have to now, there are no two ways about it. You are not reliable."

"Sister had to stay," Roosevelt went on amiably. "She's a member of Miss Hattie Mae's turning-out group and no way around it unless she wanted to pay a fine."

"Well you know what anybody else in King County would have done, coming home and finding their son alone in a house after paying a cook all these years. They'd have sent for the Sheriff."

Roosevelt didn't like this. He was crazy about his no-good sisters. And Laurance, who was coming in at the kitchen door, looked equally disapproving. The boy walked across to the stove in his peculiar slouch and ate a piece of the sweet potato pie, holding it in his grubby hand.

"For God's sake, Laurance! Haven't you ever heard of a plate?"

"That was all I wanted." Laurance didn't even have Roosevelt's defiance, just a monumental indifference to his own shortcomings and other people's feelings.

"I've caught you all running wild, that's all. In the very act. But that's over now. You can make up your minds to it, I'm home." Then quickly Ned turned away, feeling their eyes on his back. They should have a good scare, both of them, without his being present to be further bothered. As far as the cook was concerned, he had news for her tomorrow. The turning-out custom might be inviolate, indeed he knew it was, but she could have got somebody in her place to fix Laurance's supper.

Meanwhile, because he wanted to laugh and cry all at the same time, he went into the front bedroom and locked the door. There, after standing around a little, staring at the rosewood bed and dresser and the washstand that had been his mother's and father's, he fell on his knees and began to run through the Rosary. Although he no longer believed, it didn't seem right to just walk in and start living here without repeating the familiar words. The dead inspired it. And the living. How funny and innocent they were. If Roosevelt ever realized how indispensable he was they would have to get rid of him for he would be an unbearable tyrant. Yes, what little laxness they had could be pulled out of them in no time at all.

In the bottom of the big wardrobe he found the bottle of Bourbon that he had put there Christmas. He didn't want to go back now into the hall or the dining room, and so used his father's old bedside glass, etched by his daily dose of hydrochloric acid. Now in the rocking chair, he rocked back and forth, sipping the whiskey and hearing the familiar creak of the old chair.

There was no way, he told himself, from this vantage point, that he could feel shaky or unsure. He was surrounded by attestations of himself, the land, Laurance, the Negroes, the dead, the yard oaks, even the furniture. He remembered seeing the hot poker that burned that hole in the washstand yonder. It had fallen while his mother was giving his father a hot footbath

and done the harm. The wood had been smoking when they had called him to come and set it upright. It was all true. This is all true, he said to himself, it can't be any other way than this way, even though it is nineteen thirty-seven and except for Laurance they are all gone.

Morning surprised him, the first morning of his return, for he had not realized that he had ever gone to sleep. The sun was already halfway down the old fleur-de-lis wallpaper, already losing intensity as it was shaded out by the limbs of the sweet olive. A mocker from somewhere near the window was trying out its variety of songs. He got up hastily, feeling good. What more, if anything, had happened last night? He had undressed, because he was in a pair of paisley pajamas he hazily remembered getting out of the wardrobe. There was the rest of his luggage beside the dresser so he must have unlocked for Roosevelt, who must have been charitable enough to bring it in. The cook — this touched off a worry — would have to be fired. A change of them every so often was beneficial to everyone, his mother had used to say. If he wasn't mistaken the present incumbent was Dorothy but the older Frank girls, Roosevelt's sisters, were so look-a-like from their Chinese mother that it was hard to tell. He would put on his robe and go to the kitchen to make her distinct. Oh yes, and the important business of the day, Laurance. He must be caught and cleaned up. He laughed aloud at the challenge this presented, rather like catching and combing one of the scrawny wildcats that roamed Fornika Creek at the wilderness end of the place near the big river.

Dorothy, or maybe it was the other one, had coffee and fluffy biscuits buttered hot. She was pretty in the morning sun and her eyes were becomingly downcast to regret her part in the drowning. It was hard to intrude on her, for she came and went from the dining room so quietly and kindly.

"Where is Laurance?" he asked finally. "I want to get his hair cut."

"He's about at the Convent," said the cook. "The Sisters are getting up trash today. Today's their trash day."

"Damn. Those nuns will turn anybody into common labor."

"That jelly right there is wild plum," suggested the cook. "If you still like it."

"Once you've liked anything you'll always like it." He tried some on one of the biscuits. "Less sugar next year, but still it's mighty good."

He could delay no longer and still fire her, for she was plainly getting the upper hand. "Now look. I hate to mention this, with breakfast so good and all, but I was shocked, really shocked, to get here at suppertime last night and not a sign of you on the place."

Calmer than Roosevelt, the cook merely folded her hands across her apron and looked down at a spot of sun on the Aubusson rug.

"I've heard all the extenuating circumstances, that you are a member of whatever it is, and I know the rules are ironclad, but you should have got somebody to take your place. You can't leave a boy alone in a house to fend for himself."

She began to explain in a soft, low tone just how and why she hadn't done what was right, but his mind wandered off her story soon after she had begun it. His eye had just caught a headline in the *Times Picayune*. So they were going their way, another prominent New Orleans businessman had died. He read the various organizations the poor fellow had belonged to and meantime the cook's version of last night's affair faded.

"Well, we can try it again. I want to be fair. But mealtime is to my mind the one time a cook can't wander."

Of all things to have the son of the only well-to-do Catholic family in King County raking up trash. Another topsy-turvy

arrangement that would have to be remedied. He rose from the table and went into the office. There at least the ledgers should talk straight.

It was in this tiny cubbyhole that he remembered his father best, calling for hot tea while he stared at the ledger as if it might take flight, or fooled with his tie and tried to get somebody interested in the major or minor transgressions of his stomach. God, these ledgers had gotten mildewed. He wiped off the neglect with his handkerchief, smelling the mold that the dampness from under the house had caused to form. It was good to see his father's handwriting, his grandfather's copper plate, but sad too, to read their notations in the margin:

> *bay gelding died on Christmas day, just before dinner, 27 years old.*

Then a few pages further on:

> *April 14, 1894. Caught 10 inches by measure of rain, a little hail. Unseasonably cold.*

Of how pitifully little consequence these events were, especially one in his mother's self-conscious, spidery hand:

> *November 16, 1909. Found two early blooms on flowering quince.*

Two blooms indeed, she herself now rotted and forgotten. Of course, he told himself, he wouldn't forget, especially now that he was back here where everything made him remember. But Laurance wouldn't recall much about her. He had been only seven when Laura died. And Laurance's children wouldn't even know what you were talking about if you mentioned the way she pursed her mouth when she put her rings in the clock or

the way she lifted her shawl out of its tissue paper from the top drawer of the washstand on cool mornings. Her last years here had been lonely and sad, he was afraid. She had been deserted by old friends in the County for allowing Laurance to happen in the first place and then for keeping him. When he had driven up from New Orleans occasionally to see her, she had complained about little things, that she could not find out the time for the DAR tea, for instance. And to think of all her years of sorrow and contrition for not having the proper love for Papa's other children, who had died of diptheria. What folly that had been, since it had never mattered in the scheme of things.

Now that this meaningless sequence of words had come up, he had to admit there was no scheme. That was why he was here. One found it out eventually and so just went on and did what one felt like doing, returning to old beginnings where the lull and sweetness of things still lingered, where people had vanished with their attitudes still fixed.

"Why don't you go on and eat your turnips, dear. I thought you liked them."

He had used to live in his mother's faded sentences. "I do," his mind echoed now, "but it's just you've helped me to too much." He wiped his eyes. There was no way to return to her now. Instead he would get hold of himself and read Roosevelt's posting in the ledger:

Sold 100 bales hay, Miss Deedie Pinkston, 25¢ a bale	*$25*
(She returned one bale, sour, her word) paid back	*.25*
Jackson truck came for heifers, took off 18	
check already in bank with their charge off	*1242.50*

Page after page appeared in good order. Roosevelt should be congratulated on having become such a book man. With a limp

green blotter to guide his pen, Ned made a horizontal line across the ledger and wrote:

> *Resigned from the University and returned home from New Orleans September 3, 1937, N.E.D.I.*

Already, in his own mind, Neville Edward Dana Ingles had merged with the hail and the gelding, the two blooms on the flowering quince. Looking down at what he had written he made an interpolating mark after the word home and wrote in "to Laurance" after it. There — as irritating as the boy was, and embarrassing, eating out of pans and looking doltish, he was secretly glad to have him. There was an intransigent quality about him that dogged one's mind. Maybe it was family smell, he was getting middle-aged, but whatever it might be, he assured himself, it *was*. He thought he would go on now and find Roosevelt to talk about the work, as his father had done with Wheeler in their day. If there was to be continuity here, if it was not already too late, he must take charge with a firm hand and brook no nonsense.

2

THIS LITTLE WORLD, Ned thought, the first winter of his return, already has what it needs from the outside and is set to go well. Every morning throughout the fall he had worked with Roosevelt. The fence system had been roughly doubled, so that bred cows could go about their portly business without being bothered by fractious or frolicsome calves. New equipment had been added, a tractor and other machinery, bought with some of the idle funds that had built up while he was receiving a salary in New Orleans. The fall hay crop, as if to praise his attentions, had almost tripled what it usually was — over three thousand bales under cover and another thousand stacks in the field, standing around like patient benefactors.

A pleasing way of doing things had developed once he had made it clear who was running things. Roosevelt came up to the house in the early morning, they talked over the most urgent work for the day, and then rode out together and started the hands. This was a great deal more than his father had ever done

for Wheeler, Ned recalled. Why, his last twenty years Edward had seldom been able to mount a horse to look over the work after it was finished but had waited in the comfort of his hall or office for Wheeler's report. So now Roosevelt was well off indeed, to have a full morning's attention. Quitting at noon, Ned bathed and dressed and after dinner had the afternoon free to read and listen to the recordings of operas and symphonies he had brought home from the city. Drinking was the danger when one lived at home, not for a man like his father, who had stared whiskey down, calling on it as a servant, but for the less confident modern like himself, who heard so much dither about alcoholism. So he made a practice of not touching a drop until Laurance came in from school and threw his books down on the piano. Even then he went out into the hall and asked the boy how his day had been, for he realized it was time Laurance had some regular paternal attention. The question, however, always seemed to sit strangely with Laurance, as if he hadn't known he had a day. He didn't care to talk, that was it.

But as far as appearances went, Laurance was greatly improved. He was still too thin and did not carry himself well, his shoulders and head hunched forward, but the violent objections he had put up against having his fingernails cleaned and his teeth brushed had subsided and he did these things for himself, without being reminded. Once a week he was forced into King's Town to get his hair trimmed, the barber having been warned never under any circumstances to put the usual sweet-smelling stuff on him.

"You'll let the dogs in the house when they stink of skunking," Ned told him. "I thought I'd never air that smell out of the hall. Why do you object to *good* smells?"

"That hair stuff smells bad to me," argued Laurance, "and skunks smell good."

Ned had smiled because it was unusual to hear a complete sen-