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The three chapters included here are the developmental stage of a novel that explores the effect of man's ancestry upon the various psychological masks that he affects and the gradual erosion and destruction of those masks.

THREE CHAPTERS FROM HUNTING, A NOVEL IN PROGRESS

by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

I

MORNING

Burk saw the hound just before sunup. He had come down out of the warmth of the kitchen, feeling the warning chill of summer-end through his long denim chore coat and faded blue overalls. The mist hung low over the farmyard and he didn't see the hound until he had set down one of the pails he was carrying and reached to open the gate-latch. He clicked his tongue at the dog, then went on through the gate, closing it behind him, and into the little shed that stood up against the barn. He mixed the feed for the hogs in the pails, adding grain and water to the bits of table scraps he had brought with him, then went down to the hogpen and dumped the slop into the wooden trough. He stood for a moment with his short, spade-shaped hands resting on the fencepost to watch the three pigs shoulder at one another, each wanting to eat from the center of the trough. Shivering a little at the cold, he took the empty pails back to the shed, then went around the rear of the barn, rubbing his hands on his thighs to warm them for the milking. He opened the pasture-side doors and went into the barn, his nostrils filling with the rich aroma of the cows and the straw that lined their stalls. He milked the cows in order of their rank, starting with the boss and working down, filling the pails until the thick foam reached the rolled rim. When the last pail had been emptied into the cans and the cans clamped shut he loaded them into the bed of the pickup and started the truck, leaving

it to warm up while he tripped the latch on the front double doors of the barn and swung them open. The sky was bluing up some, but the mist still clung to the yard, thinned only slightly by the growing power of the sun. A crow called somewhere in the middle distance and Burk scanned the treetops, searching for him. He gave up after a moment and started back into the barn. Then he saw the hound again. The dog had not moved. He stood in the path where it emerged from the woods, the thick wattles hanging in double creases against the dark brown bristles on his neck, his black feet planted in the tendrils of honeysuckle that encroached on the packed hardness at the edge of the yard.

"Hey, Bob," Burk said.

The hound's left ear twitched ever so slightly, but his eyes stared straight ahead at Burk, unmoving and expressionless. Burk watched him for a moment, then went back into the barn.

"Fool dog," he muttered to himself.

He started the pickup and pulled it out of the barn, leaving the engine running while he went back to close the doors. He looked again at the hound and again clicked his tongue. The dog remained motionless, staring at Burk.

"Fool dog," he repeated, aloud this time.

The dog remained still, staring. Burk eased the pickup out of the yard and onto the rutted track. As the track rose to meet the asphalt road, the mist began to thin until a hundred yards below the road it disappeared. Burk turned the pickup west on the asphalt and urged the warming engine to a steady forty miles per hour. To his right the land fell away under a double shroud of mist

and kudzu vine. A quarter of a mile from the road a rise in the ground thrust the old Willis house up through the mist. The kudzu had begun to choke and drag down the house and the sun sparkled here and there on the wet leaves and an occasional fragment of window pane. Burk turned his eyes to the front, to the strip of the state road as it followed the ridge line, curving its way among the higher ridges, smooth mounds that humped themselves silently above the mist. The ridge plunged crazily here and there, burying the road in patches of ghostly white, leaving the black paint on the hood of the truck coated with droplets of moisture. Burk caught a glimpse of the house in the mirror.

"Darn fool dog," he cursed, not meaning the hound anymore.

Burk wrestled the spool of barbed wire into the back of the pickup and went back up the steps and into Respass's store, past the old men in their chairs on the porch. The interior of the store was cool and dim, its musty smell cut by the sharp odors of tobacco and cheese. He paid Eb in cash, counting the bills out of an old leather pouch, then shouldered the sack of flour, took the tin of peanut butter under his arm and started out.

"Wonder what <u>is</u> keepin that old dog," said one of the old men. The screen door slammed shut behind Burk. He crossed the porch and started down the steps.

"Yep," said another. "He shoulda put in a good half-day's work by now." Burk stopped at the foot of the steps.

"If you mean old man Willis's coon hound, which I take it you do, him bein the only livin thing I know of can put up with you fellas, I left him watchin my barnyard some time back."

"You mean he's stayin at your place now?"

"I don't know, Tom. He's just standin there, the fool, don't move nothin but his eyes to look at me. I think he's finally took crazy." Burk turned back to the truck and eased the flour sack into the pickup bed.

"Well, I don't reckon he's the only one that's took somethin on that place. Seems to me, ever since the old man passed on that that young Ben done took drunk."

Tom loosed a stream of tobacco juice into the dust below the porch and nudged his neighbor. They both began to giggle, then to heehaw. By the time Burk had the tin of peanut butter set just the way he wanted it in the cab they were coughing and choking. A brown rivulet of tobacco juice was curling through the stubble on Tom's chin.

"Yessir," Tom wheezed. "That old hound's been comin up here every mornin now for...what is it, Frank?"

"I reckon about four years."

"Yep, about four years, ever since the old man got turned out. I reckon he comes up here to get away from whatever meanness it is that comes on that sutt-butt boy when the likker runs low, which must be ever day, considerin the amount of work he does. Don't you reckon?"

"Could be," Burk said. He started the pickup and began easing it away from the store.

"Don't see how that girl stands it...", Tom was saying. Tobacco juice continued to bubble on Frank's lips as he fought half-heartedly to get his hee-haws under control.

"...that sutt-butt boy..."

Burk drove the truck up onto the road and headed home. The mist was gone now and the road cut through fields of browning cornstalks and ripe tobacco, which would soon be strung out to cure in the tobacco barns that dotted the fields, dispersed so that if one caught fire it would not spread destruction to the others. Burk didn't believe in tobacco. He would neither use it nor grow it and for that reason, in a county where a man counted his wealth by tobacco acreage, folks had, for a while, thought him a little soft in the head. But over the years they had come to see that he knew what he was about and they had given a grudging respect to him as a hard-working, level-headed man who bothered no one and expected the same from others. He wouldn't drink or dance, had no call for music or any other kind of levity, but he didn't go to church, either. He was seldom seen about the county except in the truck hauling the milk that made his living up to Flint's dairy or at the store where he always paid cash and where, his sharp tongue aimed at their idleness and gossip, he had made Tom Hall and Frank Flint and the other porch sitters uneasy at first, and even now, sometimes. He was a sort of minor mystery that nobody much wanted to find out about. Doc Transou knew him better than most, but even he didn't know much.

Burk's grandfather had farmed sixty acres of prime tobacco land, making him a wealthy and influential man in the county, cautiously Republican in a time when it paid to be. His son, Burk's father, had been more spirited. One of the first Democrats who admitted publicly to being such, he had plugged away at the farm, but lost it, through politics or bad luck, depending upon who was talking. Rather than quitting, as many would have, he hired himself out and worked the rest of his life on the Flint land, helping to make Lloyd Flint's dairy into the biggest single industry in that part of the county. It was here that Burk learned about cows, working next to his father, who had turned out to have a knack for dealing with those nervous creatures. He would say:

"Now boy, don't you pay no attention to what people say about cows being nervous. They ain't no different from us. They's creatures of habit, just like we are. Now you notice how people act when somebody tries to change the way they've been doin things. They get all hot under the collar and go to stompin their feet somethin fierce. Now ain't that right? Well, that's the way cows are, too. They like everything done the same way every time. An that's all you gotta remember. You just do <u>everything</u> the same way every day an they won't even take no notice of you, an you won't have'em astompin no pails nor dryin up the way they do with some folks. Now you remember that boy."

He had taught Burk other things, too.

"Work, that's the ticket, boy. It don't matter much what kind, so long as you work your hardest at whatever you do. You do that an ain't no man can look down on you. But if you won't work; if you ain't willin to pull your own

load, why then you're lower than the lowest skunk nigger that ever walked this earth. Work's the ticket, boy, just you remember."

That was a sermon delivered at least once a week, but there was a more important one, one that was pronounced sometimes two or three times a day.

"Land, boy. Get it. Keep it. Get more. A man can work like a jack tar all his life, but if he's workin another man's land, he ain't got nothin to show when he's done but the calluses on his hands and his achin back. A man's got land, he's got somethin of value and he don't have to answer to nobody. That's somethin to think on. I know better'n most, I guess. I had land, good land that belonged to my daddy and his daddy before him, an I lost it. I lost it because of the foolishness of politics, because I thought there might be somethin more important than land. I was a fool. Politics is poison. Stay out of that mess and get land. Leave the politics for the likes of the Flints and Willises. Just you get that land and work it til you drop. You hear boy?"

Burk heard. He knew the sermons by heart, and he believed them. When his father died he quit school and went to work for Flint. He worked hard and saved every penny he made. Land was cheap, and on his seventeenth birthday Burk bought a little parcel on the edge of the Willis property. By then he had a second job helping to load railroad cars on the Siloam siding at night. He couldn't afford to give up the extra money, but he needed time to fence his land, so he gave up going to church. He worried about that at first, but when he had finished the fencing, digging the holes with a posthole digger borrowed from Flint, setting in the posts that he hewed out with an ax and stringing the

wire alone on the chilly Sunday mornings, he found that he didn't miss it much. In fact, he discovered that working alone gave a man time to think about things that had never come up before and that one of those things, this church business, wasn't worth bothering with. So he never went back.

He bought a cow from Flint and moved her to his little square of land on the day that Franklin D. Roosevelt took the oath of office as president of the United States for the first time. He had to get up earlier now and run the two miles through the woods to take care of his cow, but that was all right; she was his. He had built a lean-to as a temporary shelter for her and now, on Sundays, he began a barn. By the time his railroad job came under one of Roosevelt's New Deal progams and he lost it, it didn't matter. The barn was up; he had four cows in milk, and had begun a house.

When he reached the old Willis place he eased the truck onto the shoulder of the road and got out. He stood for a long time staring up at the vine-covered house, listening to the bees working through the honeysuckle behind him. Finally he started across the road, angling for the place where the track from the house had intersected the state right-of-way. When his foot hit the first of the kudzu a rabbit jumped up from the ditch not thirty feet away and bounded crazily away across the road. Burk stopped and watched until the rabbit disappeared into the honeysuckle, then turned to continue up the buried road, stepping high to avoid tangling his feet in the vines. Before he could reach the first turning a horn sounded on the road above. Burk turned around in

time to see the mud-flecked sheriff's car bump to a stop at the edge of the ditch. As he started back up the hill Sheriff Transou climbed out of the car and waved, then took a bright red handerchief from his pocket and began wiping at his wide face, leaning his bulk against the door of the cruiser. As Burk came around the front of the car the sheriff stuffed the handkerchief back into his pocket and straightened up.

"Howdy, Burk."

"How you doin, Doc?"

"Tolerable, tolerable. What you doin out here? Somethin wrong?"

"No, nothin wrong. Just started up to take a close look at old man Willis's house, that's all."

"You fixin to buy it?"

"What with? I ain't got that kind of money...no, I was just thinkin what a shame it is..."

"Yeah, I know. It's a downright shame, all right. Used to be one of the finest farms in the county, and now..."

"Yeah, now look at it...that durn fool boy..."

A yellowjacket buzzed around Burk's ears and he swatted at it, sending it zooming out over the road. The sheriff nodded.

"Yep, that boy. He ain't much account, I reckon..."

The yellowjacket had arced around and was hovering near the butt of the sheriff's pistol, which hung in its holster on his right hip. The sheriff brushed unconsciously at the insect, then wiped his hand on his khaki pants. The sun was well up and hot.

"...course he don't never give me no official trouble..."

"Yeah, but..."

"Oh, I know. He buys a lot of corn likker here and there, but no more than some others, and at least he ain't makin it."

"Well, it just riles me, is all. Just lettin that place run down and go to hell like that. Sometimes I just wanta go down there and..."

"And what?"

"Oh, I don't know, just..."

"Bust him one in the head?"

"Yeah, I guess so."

"Well, I know what you mean. But don't do it. He ain't worth it. Besides, I don't want you clutterin up my jail."

The sheriff leaned his elbows on the car and stared up at the house.

"Yeah, he's been like a runnin sore to a lot of people round here, I guess. The thing that always gets me is I never could get around the thought of him settin up there on that porch, just arockin and swattin flies, and you and me settin up there freezin in that snow at Bastogne. You remember, Burk? You remember how you could see them tanks movin like ghosts out in that snow..."

"Yeah, Doc. I sure ain't likely to forget. But not now. I gotta go get some work done."

"Yeah, I guess I better be gettin on too. I just come from Petree's. Somebody broke in his kitchen last night."

"Take anything?"

"Yeah. Bout half a cooked chicken and a box of crackers."

"Somebody bummin."

"Yep, I guess. Cept old man Petree kept his old Springfield in there, and a coupla boxes of ammo for it. They're gone too, and I don't like that."

"Well, what would anybody want with that old rifle? It ain't deer season yet an I don't know anything else it's good for."

"Well, in case you forgot, some folks've been known to use'm for shootin people, an I don't want none of that in my county, so I aim to find out."

"There's always somethin, Doc."

"You still goin up to the house? I believe I'll walk up with you."

"No. I done fooled away enough time. I better get on back. See you."

"Yeah. Come on by the office the next time you're in. Oh, and keep your eyes open. You see anything, you let me know, all right?"

"I will."

The hound was still there when Burk pulled the truck up to the barn. Burk climbed down from the cab and stood watching the dog. The hound stared back at him, unmoving. Burk squatted, snapping his finger.

"Here Bob. Come here boy."

The hound twitched an ear but stayed where he was. Burk stood up.

"What's the matter with you, Bob? Lost your sense?"

He started toward the dog, walking slow. When he was a few feet away the hound turned suddenly and began moving off down the path. Burk stopped.

The hound stopped, turning his head to peer back over his shoulder. Burk noticed a crust of dried blood on the dog's rump that extended in a thin line down the right hind leg. He edged closer for a better look. Near the center of the widest part of the crust was a spot of bright red where fresh blood was still seeping out. Burk took another step forward. The hound took two, still looking back. Burk turned and headed back up toward the house. He stopped at the truck for the peanut butter and the sack of flour. When he reached the back porch he stopped and looked back. The hound had returned to his position at the edge of the yard. Burk went up the steps, across the porch and into the house, letting the screen door slam behind him.

"That you, Burk?"

"Yeah, Eth."

Burk went over to the sink, leaving the flour and peanut butter on the table, and washed his hands under the cold water. He was drying them on the kitchen towel when Ethel came into the room, carrying a turkey-feather duster in her right hand.

"Burk, that old dog of Willis's..."

"I know, Eth. I saw him. He was down there when I went out to milk, first thing."

"Well, he's been standin there like that all mornin. Bertha won't even go out on the porch."

At the mention of her name the big calico cat looked up from under the stove, stretching her front legs out along the planks of the floor. Burk had

no time for dogs anymore, but he kept two cats. Bertha stuck close around the house and Mose, the gray tiger-stripe, slept over the barn. Dogs had to be fed and pampered; cats killed rats and mice and other pests, and they left you alone. Bertha licked at her whiskers and watched Burk.

"I know."

"Well, I don't blame her. It gives me the chills the way he just stands there."

She went over to the stove, laying the feather duster on the table as she passed. She lifted the lid of a pot and stirred with a wooden spoon. The hungry smell of beans and corn bubbled up, filling the room. Through the window Burk could see the hound, standing motionless.

"He's got a cut or somethin on his rear end. It's still bleedin a little."

Ethel put the lid back on the pot and brushed at her already graying hair with a nervous hand. She turned toward the window and stood looking out at the hound, putting her hands under her apron.

"I don't like it. He never done it before. Do you reckon something could be wrong, Burk?"

"Like what?"

"Well, I don't know. It's just that awful boy and such. Maybe somethin's happened down there."

"What happens to him's no concern of mine. Wouldn't bother me none if he fell down that old well and drowned."

"I wasn't thinkin of him. What if he's run off again and somethin's happened to that girl or one of the kids? What if...?"

"Yeah. I hadn't thought of that."

Burk took the flour and peanut butter from the table and went over to the pantry. He set the peanut butter on a shelf and took out the almost empty flour tin.

"Well, somethin might be wrong."

"I know, Eth, I know. Just let me think a minute."

He cut open the sack with the little blade of his pocket knife and began pouring the flour into the tin. Ethel went over to the table and picked up the feather duster. She brushed it across the place where the flour sack had sat, then went over to the pie safe and dabbed at its perforated tin panels. When Burk had finished pouring the flour he rolled the empty sack up and laid it on the shelf. He put the lid back on the tin and stepped out of the pantry, over to the window where he could see the hound. The dog had laid down, resting his head on his front legs, but his eyes were open and watching the house. Burk slid his hands under the bib of his overalls and began slowly massaging his chest. His eyes were focussed beyond the hound, on the path where it disappeared among the trees.

"Burk?"

"Yeah, Eth. You might be right. I hadn't thought about her at all."

"Burk, I've got this real funny feelin. Do you think maybe you oughta go for the sheriff? Do you think..."

"Nah, there ain't no cause to bother him. Besides, when I saw him awhile ago he was headed toward Siloam, an that means he's probably up fishin on the river somewhere. Couldn't find him if I wanted to."

"Well, what about..."

"Don't you worry none. I think I might just take a walk down that way. I'll just take the pump gun with me. Might get a shot at a bob-white or two."

He went into the front room and took down the shotgun from its peg over the mantel. Without thinking he jacked back the slide, checking to make sure the breech was empty. Ethel followed him into the room. Behind her, the grandfather clock ticked in its corner, the long pendulum making graceful sweeps behind the ornate etchings on the glass panel of its door.

"What was the sheriff doing up this way so early? Doesn't he usually come in the afternoon?"

"He was up at Petree's. Seems somebody broke in the house last night. Figured it for a tramp."

"Broke in?"

"Yeah. Just took some food."

"You think it might've been a convict or such?"

"Dunno. Seems like the sheriff would've knowed if one was runnin around loose."

He lifted the lid of the sewing stand and took out a box of shells, slipping them into his overall pocket, then went back into the kitchen, carrying the shotgun in his left hand. He took two pieces of cornbread from the pan on the back of the iron stove and put them in his other front pocket, then turned to go.

"Burk!"

He stopped with his fingers resting lightly on the frame of the screen door.

"Yeah, Eth?"

"Oh, nothin. Just be careful's all."

"I will."

He went through the door, let it slam behind him. He stopped and looked back at her through the screen.

"I'll be all right."

Her narrow face was calm, but a glitter in among the brown of her irises showed him that she was afraid.

"I know. You just might want to stay inside. I'll be back directly."

Burk went down the steps and across the yard, feeling Ethel's eyes on his back. He knew she was afraid, but he didn't worry. She had the double barrelled twelve-guage, his father's old gun, and knew how to use it. Besides, it probably had been a tramp, just passing through, who would pawn or sell the rifle as soon as he reached a big enough town. When he reached the truck he stopped to fish his denim jacket from the front seat. He transferred the box of shells and the cornbread to the pockets of the jacket and slung it over his shoulder. With the shotgun still in his left hand he turned and started toward the dog.

"Okay, Bob. Take me where you want to go."

The hound had stood up as soon as Burk came out the door. Now he quickly turned and started down the path, looking back every few steps to make sure Burk was following. When they were around the first bend and out of sight of the house Burk stopped. He broke open the box of shells and took out three,

sliding two into the tubular magazine. The third went into the chamber and was locked in when he slid the pump action shut. He took the remaining shells from the box, their red paper waxy in his fingers, and dropped them into the jacket pocket. He flattened the box and put it in his back pocket, then started on down the path, stepping carefully over the vines and the jutting underbrush. The hound settled into a steady jog-trot twenty feet ahead, limping slightly, no longer bothering to look back.

II

WILLIS

When Burk came out of the trees the sun was almost directly overhead. The hound trotted on ahead and stopped near the house, looking back to where Burk had halted. The house was old, built sometime after the Civil War for a second or third son who had married and taken his part of the land to work. Later it had passed through the hands of a series of tenants, becoming less and less what it had been with each exchange of temporary ownership until the progression ended a few months after the death of the last Willis to live in the big house, the one everybody had called old man Willis, or simply, the old man. It was not really the old man's death that ended it, but rather the fiat of the old man's son, Ben.

Ben was Harley Willis' only son. The first three children, all girls, had been stillborn, and when the last of these had almost taken her with it, it had taken the old man nearly twenty-five years to persuade his wife to try again. With "time running out," as he put it, she acceded to his frenzied demands and the spirit of the time. The community, through the offices of the rural gossip-vine, watched and commented.

"Hear the old man's put hisself out to stud agin."

"Yep, I reckon so. He shore is a determined old cuss."

"What Harley Willis wants, Harley Willis gits."

"Well, he'd sooner go after a woods colt than try to pump up that skinny little thing agin."

The jawboning idlers seemed to know their stuff. One morning as the old man entered Respass's store one of the porch sitters accosted him.

"Morning, Harley. How's the missus?"

"Well, Charlie Frank, to give the truth of the matter, right poorly."

And he passed by, not seeing the knowing looks that passed among the assemblage. That was the first hint, and the gossip-vine soon brought further word. A doctor down in Winston-Salem had suggested a rest cure and the old man had shipped her out to a health resort. The porch sitters nodded sagely.

"Twer a filly, he'd of had'er shot."

"Reckon this is most the same thing."

Imagine the astonishment of the gallery when, less than a year later, the old man was seen passing through the Bend at the wheel of his Buick town car. At his side sat a very large woman, clutching what was unmistakeably a very small baby. The wife was nowhere in evidence.

The gossip-vine was forced to sprout anew before the story could begin to trickle in. The wife had been pregnant when she left, pregnant but quite ill. The old man had sent her to Georgia, where she was staying at South End, the Sapelo Island retreat of Winston-Salem's biggest tobacco tycoon, reputed to be one of the old man's best friends. A less widely held, but insistent branch of rumor had her at Warm Springs, hobnobbing with the Roosevelts

and warming her body in the mineral waters. One could believe either way. The main thing was that the semi-tropical sea island winds or the marvelous healing baths had restored her health sufficiently that she had given birth to a living baby, and, moments after her son drew his first breath, she had died on the delivery room table. That is the way the community got it, never quite agreeing upon the details, but gradually accepting the central events as fact. There was one among them who knew otherwise, but he was no longer of them and so kept his knowledge to himself.

The only certainty was that the large woman was the first in a string of nurses who paraded in at the front door of the Willis house and out at the back. By the time young Ben reached puberty, no nurses had been coming for some time.

As recompense for growing up without a mother, the old man forgave Ben a multitude of sins. He even forgave him when two Virginia boarding schools sent him home with requests that he not return. When he finally graduated from Oak Ridge the old man bought him a mint condition prewar LaSalle roadster and packed him off to Raleigh to study the latest in agricultural techniques. But the forgiving stopped a few months later on Christmas Eve as the German shells fell on Burk and Doc and the rest of the 101st Airborne Division in their frozen bunkers at Bastogne.

Ben stood staring down into the fire and announced that he would not return to school. The old man poured himself four ounces of bourbon and carried it over to one of the big bay windows. He pulled back the gauze curtain with

his left hand and remained, looking out at the snow, taking fast little sips of the whiskey. The two of them stood for a long time, neither able to look at the other. Finally the old man finished his drink in one gulp.

"Well, Ben, I won't try to make you go back. I won't even ask you the reason. I guess I know that better than anyone else, that you've never liked school, and maybe it's not the place for you. But I don't need you here; I can still run this farm without you, so there's only one other thing to do. You know that as long as you were under age, or in college, as long as there was any excuse at all available I could see nothing wrong with keeping you out of this war, never mind that I went over when I was forty-one because I wanted to. Now this German push in the Ardennes may be, as the War Department says it is, merely the dying gasp of the Nazis, but then again, it may not. It may be that we've underestimated them again, that the Hun is going to take a lot more killing. I hope not, but we can't afford to take the chance of being wrong again. We've got to be prepared for an even longer war. You've been pretty much a disappointment to me, I don't have to tell you that, but you've got the brains and, I think, the guts to be a leader and I've got the pull, the influence to get you a commission. If you won't go back to school, I don't see any other choice."

Ben continued to stare into the flames. The old man went over to the table and poured himself another tumbler of bourbon, then paced the room, from one window to another, his shoe heels tapping on the polished wood. Ben stood motionless. When the silence became more than he could bear the old man walked around the heavy sofa that sat in front of the fireplace. His feet made

scuffing sounds on the hooked rug that lay in concentric ovals of color before the hearth. He set the glass of whiskey next to the ship's clock on the mantlepiece and looked carefully at his son. Ben did not raise his head. The clock ticked between them.

"Now look, son...I know that war doesn't appeal to everybody; it's a terrible experience, but this one's with us and there's nothing we can do about it except to drive those Nazis right back into Berlin and shovel the rubble in on top of them. I know them. I saw how they were at Chateau Thierry. I..."

Ben exploded.

"I don't want to hear that story again. I know you loved the war, your war, just like all these hicks around here love this one. I'm not going back to school, that's final. And I'm not going off to any goddamned war, not to save the bloody English, or those damned Frogs across the channel, either."

Then he took a tack that he knew his father agreed with him on.

"And the Jews! You want me to save them? Well, the hell with them! They should have stayed in their damned promised land and minded their own business. You want me to go spill my guts for a bunch of kikes?"

"No, you know very well how I feel about Jews. And it has nothing to do with the French, or even the English. We're talking about America, and what America stands for. Democracy, equality, the ideals of a free nation. We have to stop the enemies of those ideals over there, the way we did the last time."

"Well, excuse me," Ben interjected with elaborate sarcasm. "But bullshit! That's what I say to your democracy, Bullshit!"

The heat blossomed in the old man. He paced the room, swinging his heavy body like the bears that sometimes, when food was scarce in the mountains, came down to raid somebody's smokehouse or beegum. Ben stood his ground before the fire, his face and neck aglow with anger.

"'Bullshit' you say. 'Bullshit' is it? Well, let me tell you something, you insolent whelpling. It's America that put you where you are. If it hadn't been for the American system, your great grandfather couldn't have walked into these hills penniless, only six months from starving in Ireland and, by back-breaking labor and pure mule stubbornness lived to die and be buried in a fine silk suit in the middle of three hundred acres of the best tobacco land in this county. Where would you be now, with your flashy car and fancy clothes, if not for the American way?"

"I don't care about that, I don't want his...your...money, house, land, any of it. I don't intend to be a dirt farmer like you, not even a rich one, for the rest of my life."

Ben spoke the words coldly, controlling his anger to enhance the impact of the delivery.

"So now I'm a dirt farmer, huh? Just another one of the local hicks."

He set his glass on the mantel and turned, suddenly calm, his face a mask of normalcy, to face Ben.

"Let me tell you want you are, Ben," he said, his voice stiff, yet not harsh.

He uttered the word, the two syllables pronounced as distinctly as he could get them. Ben laughed. The old man's mouth held firm.

"It's nothing to laugh about," he said.

"Of course it is. How ridiculous!"

"It's true. My wife was crazy, as crazy as that old woman who lives in the shack down by the river. She wasn't in Sapelo or Warm Springs or anywhere else like that. I had her in an institution in Atlanta, at four hundred a month. And she didn't die until you were almost six years old. I bought you, just like I'd go out and buy a hunting dog, except in this case I wasn't as careful of the pedigree. That was a mistake, the same kind of mistake I made when I married her. Sometimes the dog you buy will suck eggs, or even bite you. The pedigree just isn't right. And now I'll pay for it, just as she did, just as you must. I'm sorry. I made a mistake."

"Liar!" Ben screamed.

He came at the old man, his hands fixed before him, intent on strangulation. The old man pushed him away and Ben stumbled over a table. He was amazed at the old man's strength.

"Liar!" he repeated.

He steadied himself, then came again, this time with his fists balled, swinging. The old man parried, dodged, then swung himself, a looping right that, stricking flush upon his Adam's apple, sent Ben skidding to the floor. The old man followed, stood over him.

"Now get out," he said. His voice was toneless, as cool as the frost that tinged the windowpane behind him.

Ben scrambled to his feet and, taking his coat and bag from the hall where he had left them, slammed the front door of the house behind him for the last

time. His throat ached. He could not speak. But all the way to the car he whispered, beating a counterpoint to the squeaking of his shoes in the snow.

"Liar! Liar! Liar! Liar!"

The old man stood at the bay window, almost enfeebled with anger and frustration, watching Ben's roadster bump down the rutted drive and onto the snowswept road, heading eastward toward the Christmas sunrise. Already Patton's tanks were breaking through to relieve Bastogne, and although the battle would continue for three more weeks in the shattered forest of the Ardennes, the Germans had lost the war. The old man never knew that.

After Ben had gone, he paced the living room, carrying on a bitter monologue with himself, ignoring the fire as it died on the hearth. When he had finished the bottle of bourbon and found no more in the corner cupboard he kicked a hole in the carefully handcarved panel of one door, smashing his foot again and again against the polished wood until it splintered. Then, panting with the effort of his assault, he staggered up the stairs, supporting his bulk on the smooth oak bannister and collapsed, fully clothed, on the bed.

At ten in the morning he awoke suddenly from a nightmare, the sweat like freezing creek water on his body. The winter sun barely lit the room, tinting the sheets on the old fourposter bed a grimy yellow. He had dreamed of the bridge over the Marne, remembering precisely a certain scene in which, replacing one of his gunners wounded in the fighting, he had sprawled in the mud behind the machine gun pouring fire into the ever oncoming Hun. He squinted through the sight, squeezed off a burst, saw the rounds strike a

German soldier in the head, ripping away his helmet. The soldier stopped and turned slightly, looking directly at the old man. It was Ben, the top of his skull shot into splinters. He grinned at the old man in recognition, the blood bright on his pale face.

Sitting up on the bed with the light filtered through the curtains the old man thought he was awake, was almost dead certain, but his eyelids were gummy, blurring his vision. Something moved in the corner of the room, in the chair where his wife had sat rocking and sewing, or, occasionally, reading a book or a magazine, for almost thirty years. The old man rubbed at his eyes, blinked. Whatever was there cleared up very little. It was not his wife.

"Ben? Is that you, Ben?"

Ben sat in the black maple rocker, in motion to and fro, but the chair swayed as if empty and driven by a sudden breeze, lightly, not with the heavy, certain motion as when occupied. The old man blinked again, and again. Ben was wearing a German corporal's uniform. The blood had clotted dark and thick around the fractures in his skull, but it was the color of light rust where it had crusted on the translucent skin of his face. His mouth was fixed in an idiotic leer. Between the big uneven teeth his tongue protruded, swollen and black. The old man stuttered, then shut his eyes and began to whimper. All along his right arm came the sensation of heat rash, cold, rippling the flesh as a small mole would a garden. He made a gargling sound of protest in his throat, shook the arm violently, or tried to, the response

being a feeble twitch. Where he had been sopping a moment before his skin was now dry and very hot. He opened his eyes. An instantaneous pinpoint of light mushroomed to engulf his vision. He fell back on the bed, the force of his fall sending undulations through his body and the feather mattress.

"Ben...you sonofabitch...you sonofabitch!"

It took the lawyers less than two weeks to find him. Four thousand dollar roadsters were not so common in that part of the country. People remembered such cars. Ben wanted nothing to do with the farm or his father's estate, but when they pressed him for instructions with what seemed to him unnecessary energy, he obliged. He ordered the house sealed, the farm shut down, all tenants evicted. He signed the power of attorney to that effect, then disappeared. Pay the debts; pay the taxes; let the money pile up in somebody's bank vault. I don't want it. And he was gone.

But not for long. Less than three months later the lawyers received a letter asking that a drawing account be set up in Ben's name. It was done, and the bank drafts began coming in, first from Raleigh and Wilmington, with a few from Richmond and one from Philadelphia. Soon they took a turn south past Charleston and Atlanta, increasing in a rush from Birmingham and Mobile and Memphis and New Orleans. The lawyers were powerless. They could only shake their heads and mutter among themselves. They were friends and political allies of the old man, local boys made good, and now they watched the foundation upon which power had been based wash away and from one day

to the next did not even know where the flood was coming from nor what its direction would be.

When the change came it was almost imperceptible. The drafts did not stop coming altogether, they just steadied down on one bank in the town of Florence, Alabama. When they had come without variation at biweekly intervals for several months, the lawyers took the liberty of writing Ben in care of the Farmer's Progressive Trust in Florence, reminding him that without income from the farm his father's money was far from limitless. There was no reply. The lawyers, over many glasses of whiskey, pledged themselves not to worry about the matter any further. A year later when the money ran out they so informed the Florence bank. There was nothing left but the house and the land.

The hound was the first to discover that he was back. When the lawyers had set about shutting down the farm they sold all the dogs in the kennels. But Bob, the old man's favorite, was different. He had never been a kennel dog and had been given free run of the house, but he preferred the outdoors, sleeping near wherever the old man was during the day, spending the nights roaming the farm. His patrol, the old man called it. And when the lawyers had come with a dog handler to take the hounds away he would not go. When the man approached, calling gently to him and making clucking sounds with his tongue, the soft ruff around Bob's neck and shoulders rose and stiffened like the quills of a porcupine. He backed up slowly, giving ground as the

man approached until he was under the porch, and when the man bent down to peer after him he backed still further until he crouched in the shallow depression where he had lain on many hot August afternoons while the old man sat above him in the caneback rocker cooling himself with a paper fan borrowed from the church and sipping bourbon while he talked business with a farm implement salesman from Winston-Salem or a tobacco buyer from Danville. The man got down on all-fours and began crawling under the porch. Bob whirled and made a dash for the other end, having spotted the trap at the last moment. As he burst into the weak January sunlight one of the lawyers made a grab for him, but he twisted away and darted around the barn, in full stride now, headed for the woods. The men shrugged and let him go. Nobody could catch him now anyway.

In less than a month the hound began showing up at Respass's store. He had found it hard going grubbing for food in the woods and in the course of circling farther and farther afield had eventually hit upon the store. The old men loafing and talking around the stove had recognized him, everybody knowing the best coon hounds in the county on sight, and had taken notice of the hungry stare in his eyes. They fed him. Soon he had established a routine. He spent his days at the store where he would eat his handout, then sleep away the sunlit hours behind the stove or on the planks of the porch within sound of the men's voices, returning each night to resume his patrol of the farm. For him it was a ritual of necessity, giving him the sustenance he needed to watch over the farm and the companionship of men, the

touch of their rough hands, the smell of their bodies. For the men it became a diversion. They were old men who could no longer rouse their bodies to the labor of the farm; their children were grown with families of their own; their wives either dead or gone shrewish. The old men no longer dreamed of some ill defined future happiness; their minds started in the present and worked backward into ever more fragmented memories of the past. The hound was good for them. He gave them something to look forward to each day, a predictable disturbance in their old routine. By the time they moved the bench and chairs onto the porch to catch the warmth of the spring sun it was as if the hound had always come there and it did not occur to anyone that there might be a time when he would not. One cold December morning two years later, he failed to show up.

The hound came down the ridge line walking easily, his head down. When he came to the break where the ridge veered away into Davis property he stopped, raised his muzzle to sniff the night air, swinging his head from side to side, his eyes searching the moonlit night. When he was certain that nothing was moving or about to move anywhere near him he started down the east slope of the ridge toward the creek bottom, moving warily, his head up now as he entered the creek, lifting his feet carefully clear of the water at each step. He stopped on the east bank to shake the water from his paws and legs, then turned south, following the course of the stream, walking against the current. His nose and ears filled with the smells and sounds of numerous tiny animals in the

vicinity of the stream bed, but these he ignored, even a large frog that croaked at him from the opposite bank drawing only a glance. Where the creek began a general turning to the east he found rabbit scent in the grass but it was not fresh and he continued after a brief sniff or two. When he reached the point exactly due south of the old tenant house he turned away from the creek and started up the grown-over path to the house.

A hundred yards from the creek he moved off into the undergrowth to check a racoon scent he had found the night before but it was just a day colder and he continued, zigzagging through the trees in search of something fresh. He had not chased a racoon for a long time and the old urge of puppyhood was upon him, calling for the satisfaction of the chase. When the old man was alive the hound had never hunted anything but coons, a rule laid down by the old man himself, and Bob was never one to displease his master. As a young dog he had often been sorely tempted by some foolish rabbit or an occasional fox, but the threat of the old man's tempter, or even worse, his wounded displeasure had kept him from indulging such whims. Now he caught anything that was edible, shying away only from skunks and porcupines. Coons were a luxury he could no longer afford, for once a coon found his tree there was no way that Bob could get him down, and therefore no food, at the cost of an enormous expenditure of time and energy. So, pretending to search for coon, but hoping to find something more catchable, the hound continued his zigzag until he came back to the path just below the tenant house. As soon as he had cleared the underbrush he froze, head up, nostrils flared.

The eastern breeze brought the smell of man, faint but clear. It was not an unfamiliar scent. He often came across the goundsmell of a hunter where one had stood soaking the earth with his odor while waiting for a target, but this smell was different, not a groundsmell at all, drifting down on the wind from somewhere near the house. Whoever it was he was present, now, and such a thing being unusual, the hackles began to rise along Bob's neck. He moved forward slowly on stiff legs, a few yards nearer the house. The scent was familiar, but still uncertain. The hound continued to move cautiously toward the rear of the house, with the scent growing in his nostrils at each step. Before he reached the shadow line cast by the porch roof he turned, easing up along the side of the house, his progress becoming slower and more wary. Then he was certain.

He stopped at the front corner of the house and peered over the edge of the porch. Ben sat on the sagging top step wrapped in a heavy coat, a woolen watchcap on his head, his back set against a paintless column, a glass in his right hand and a bottle resting in the weeds at his feet. The hound made a tentative movement into the open and as soon as Ben recognized him, having been startled for an instant, the meeting was joyous. Before, even when Ben had been in his most evil moods, they had been good friends, a fact looked upon with disapproval by the old man, and each was now glad in his loneliness to find an old comrade. Ben put down his glass and played with the dog, gently at first, then as the familiarity returned they began to rough-house as they had done so many times in the yard at the big house until the old man would come

onto the porch to stop them with a glare or a few words of remonstrance. Dogs were for hunting, not playing, he said, again and again. When they had tired of their play Ben returned to the porch and his whiskey glass and the hound curled at his feet and fell asleep. He awoke sometime before dawn to find Ben still in the same position, snoring gently, his fingers entwined in the hound's brushy coat. The hound stretched and licked at one foreleg for a moment, then lapsed back into sleep, the hand welcome on his back.

Over the next few days they settled into an easy routine. The hound continued his nightly patrol but now stayed away from the store, preferring instead to laze away the morning hours in the kitchen in the space between the iron stove and the wall, waiting for Ben to get up. The afternoons were spent in what Ben called the parlor or, if the weather was right, on the porch, Ben sipping at glass after glass of whiskey, the hound curled at his feet, dozing. After sundown Ben would put on his heavy coat and take the bottle, clucking to Bob to follow, and they would go out into the night to tramp the land, the only thing left, besides the big house, that had been a part of the old man. The hound would trot a little ahead, trying to figure out which way Ben wanted to go. Ben would stop frequently to pull at the bottle and during these pauses he would deliver long orations addressed to Bob. Ben always called him by name and would then get into his speech, interjecting Bob's name every now and then to keep his attention. The hound would prick his ears and listen carefully, but he was never able to understand what it was Ben wanted. He would wait patiently until the man was through, then resume his jogtrot, keeping a few feet ahead until the next stop.

These excursions took different directions at Ben's whim and together they covered nearly all of the Willis land, all, that is, but the big house and its outbuildings. The hound sometimes found himself leading toward the house but always before it was actually in sight Ben would cluck to him with his tongue and turn away. Sometime in the middle of the night they would find themselves back at the old tenant house and Ben would stagger in to bed, leaving the hound to finish the patrol alone, and he never failed to check the big house last thing before returning to hop through the broken out window at the end of the porch and find his place behind the stove. The routine was only infrequently broken when Ben would take the battered roadster up the road and the hound would follow as far as the highway, then doze in a tangle of weeds for an hour or two until the roar of the gutted muffler returning woke him.

In this rustic routine Ben and the hound flourished for two months. Then the woman came. The hound heard her from his post behind the stove and went immediately to investigate. He could see her from the porch, she in a floppy hat and dress that whipped in the wind, dragging a large suitcase, and behind her, stumbling over the bumps and clumps of grass, a tiny boy in a blue sailor suit. The hound cranked up his best coon-hunting voice and the woman stopped abruptly in the road, causing the child to bump against her legs, where he threw both arms around one of her knees and begain wailing, the full effect of his cries muffled by her thigh. She stood for a moment staring down at the hound on the porch, then she set the suitcase carefully on the gound and reached down, twisting her body, to lift the child into her arms. When she straightened her

gaze swept past the dog to the figure of Ben leaning against the door jamb, the fingers of one hand scratching idly under the opposite armpit, his jaw working against a wad of chewing gum.

The change came fast then. For the first time Ben began to abuse the hound. His voice took on a meanness and a cold bite that snapped like creek ice in the dog's ears. And the kicks. No matter where he went, the dog was always in the wrong place and the throbbing in his muscles and bones where Ben's foot had found its mark soon taught him to keep a wary distance. During the daylight hours Ben became intolerable to the dog and before spring could begin to thaw the frozen ground he had returned to his post at the store, to be greeted by knowing nods from the old men. By then everybody knew that Ben was back, that there was a pregnant woman and a child, and that maybe Ben was even worse than most had thought he was. But at night nothing had changed. Once the woman and child were in their bed and enough whiskey had been consumed, Ben became as before. The hound welcomed this and they continued their midnight rambles together, except that now the hound, after checking the big house left the Willis land and spent his days at the store, there to wait patiently for darkness before venturing near the son of his former master, the son who was now his new master.

III

AFTERNOON

The hound looked over his shoulder and whined impatiently. Burk shifted the shotgun slightly in his hand and walked slowly down the slope, watching the doors and windows for signs of Willis or the woman or one of the kids. He went past the hound and stopped with one leg pressing against the boards of the porch.

"Yo, the house! Anybody home?"

He leaned the shotgun against the porch and, propping one foot on the second step, took out his handkerchief to wipe his face. A fly zoomed down the length of the porch and disappeared through a tear in the screen door. The hound sat on his haunches, watching Burk intently.

"Yo, the house! Willis! You in there?"

He stuffed the handkerchief back in his overall pocket, took up the shotgun and stepped up onto the porch. At the door he could hear the buzz of flies coming from the dark interior of the house. He rapped on the door frame with the knuckles of his right hand and pressed his face against the screen but there was not enough light inside for him to see.

"Miz Willis!...Angie!...Dub!...Anybody in there?"

Except for the buzz of the flies and the creaking of the porch boards as he shifted his weight there was no sound. Burk turned and went down the steps.

"Well, Bob, where are they?"

The dog immediately started for the rear of the house, watching Burk over his shoulder. Burk followed him down the side of the house and around the corner. Forty feet from the back porch Dubose Willis, barefooted and wearing blue jeans and a white tee shirt, lay face down in the stubble of weeds and grass that served as a yard. Burk went directly to him, his fingers tightening their grip on the shotgun. When he reached the boy he knelt beside him, laying the shotgun carefully on the ground at his knee. A swarm of gnats rose from the boy's head, scattering across the yard, then circling at a respectable distance, well out of Burk's reach. Burk touched the back of the boy's neck, feeling the coolness of the skin through the tips of his fingers. Almost immediately he found the wound, just up under the hairline, a neat round hole no bigger around than the head of a ten penny nail, the edges crusted lightly with blood. He knelt there for some time, his index finger on the wound, the sun hot on his back, soaking his blue workshirt with dark sweatstains. Later he would not be able to remember how long he had stayed like that, would not be able to recall how he had held his finger on that little hole, would remember only the heat of the sun and the whining of the hound, the hum of the flies as they waited for him to go.

God damn, he thought. God damn that Willis. God damn his soul, he thought. God damn.

He would not remember thinking that either, later. Just the sun and the flies and the dog, whining. It was that, the dog's whining, that finally brought

him back. He looked up and saw the hound standing near the back door, peering into the darkness of the house. He took his hand from the boy's neck, scrubbed his fingers against the denim that stretched taut over his knee, remembering the sound of the flies in the house, realizing what he had not wanted to before, what that buzzing behind the screen meant. He wiped at his forehead with the back of his hand, took the shotgun and stood up slowly, not bothering to turn the boy over, not needing to see what his memory told him would be there if he did, not wanting to see what he had already seen in his mind's eye too many times. He thought of the flies in the house, seeing as he turned the flies coming back to the boy and trying not to see them, trying to think of nothing, make his mind blank as he had done so many times when it had been necessary, fighting for the blankness and succeeding finally as he stepped away from the boy sprawled in the dust and approached the rear entrance to the house. He succeeded, but he would not be able to remember later how his mind blanked out, traveling back to the things that he should have forgotten, wanted to forget but could not erase from some black hole in the center of his brain. Now he moved on instinct, the same instinct that had served him, and Doc, had kept them alive to come home at the end of that period of almost always being blanked out, going into the old crouch, pushing the barrel of the shotgun out ahead of him, noticing every detail, the screen door ripped away from its frame, hanging by one hinge, the splintered wood gleaming white and clean out of the weathered grayness around it, and beneath the screen in a crack between two boards, the brass cartridge case with the dent in its rim where the firing pin had struck.

Moving and thinking in that way, thinking without having to think, he checked the house quickly but thoroughly, found the woman, and inches from her fingertips, the little girl, just as the flies had told him he would. He did not stop to count the wounds, kneeling briefly only to feel for the coldness of the flesh, the confirmation, going on to look for the man. When he was certain that the man was not still in the house he shooed away the flies and covered the woman and the girl with blankets, took a third into the back yard for the boy. When the bodies were covered he went to the porch and dipped his handkerchief in a bucket of water that sat next to the doorway, wiped his face and the back of his hands. He began to reconstruct the scene as it had been the night before, trying to put everything in just the place it belonged. It was the woman first, most likely, it would have to be because it was her that set him off, nagging about money or the liquor or maybe something less significant, the holes in the screen or the busted water pump that meant hauling water from the creek in buckets. In any case it would have been her first, then the little girl, Angie, who probably never even knew what happened, at least it looked so from the way she was laying, so, the little girl second and the boy ran, scared and running to save his life, out the back door and down the steps into the yard, running, maybe falling down the steps and getting up and his father coming behind, kicking the door off its hinges, his rage not giving him the time nor the care to simply open it, smashing through the door and then, with an inexplicable coolness belying the rage, shooting from the porch just once, placing the shot almost perfectly, nice shooting

on such a small moving target, even at only fifteen yards. Then he would have gone back in to find the woman crawling, she having heard the second and third shots and knowing what they meant, trying to reach the girl, her baby, before she could die motherless, and finding her there on the floor, crawling, her passage clearly marked with little splotches of fresh blood, he would have finished the job, taking more care now, emptying the magazine into her brain, the reports very loud in the enclosed space of the house, the brass casings tinkling on the floor.

Burk retraced his steps through the house and was satisfied that he had it right, the single cartridge case in the bedroom, another in the far corner of the parlor, the third on the back porch and the rest scattered around near the kitchen door. Burk touched nothing in the house, went out the front door and across the yard to where the old roadster sat, chunks of its body eaten away by rust, one side of the hood propped up and the door on the driver's side standing open. Burk slid in behind the wheel and turned the ignition on, pressed the starter button to the floor. The battery had been run all the way down. When he got out the hound was standing at the rear of the car, and as soon as Burk was erect the dog started away, down toward the trees. When Burk did not follow, he stopped, looking back and whining, took a few more steps, watching Burk, stopped again.

"Wait, Bob. I got to think."

So the car wouldn't start and Willis had set out on foot. The thing to do was to go for the sheriff right away, but that would take a long time. At

least a half hour back to home, even with running some and then no use in telephoning because Doc would be fishing the river somewhere above Siloam, far from his car parked at the end of one of the old logging trails that wound down through wild tangles of brush and vines and close-ranked trees. He would have to go hunt for him in the truck and that might take hours and then another hour or so getting the hunt started, maybe four or five hours in all and Willis was on foot and drunk, or at least had been when he left the house. If he had a bottle with him when he left he had probably stopped to drink it and might be laying up now somewhere nearby, asleep or too drunk to move, or care, and in those four or five hours he just might come to his senses enough to get away. If Burk could find him quickly, with the hound tracking it wouldn't take long, Willis would never get that chance.

The rifle was not in the house nor in the car, so he must have it with him, but the little .22 would be no match for Burk's shotgun in thick woods even if Willis saw him first and tried to shoot it out. More likely he had lost the rifle somewhere in the dark and would be so drunk or scared or both that Burk would have no trouble bringing him back. To Burk's way of thinking the chance of Willis's getting away was too great a one to take. He would remember that reasoning later on and think of better, certainly truer, less superficial ones. After all, none of the Willis's people were his kin, and law enforcement was not his business, but Ben Willis might get away, had a good chance if there was enough delay, for the time what he had would do. He took the shotgun up from where he had leaned it against the car and went down to the

house. In the kitchen he found an old vinegar bottle. He took the dipper from its nail and filled the bottle with water from the bucket, rinsed it, holding his thumb over the opening at the top, then refilled it, screwing on the cap. In the shed behind the house he rummaged in the semidarkess until he pulled a length of rope from among a heap of rags and boxes. The rope was beginning to unravel at both ends but it would do. Burk sat down on an empty nail keg and ate one piece of the cornbread, washing it down with a few swallows from the bottle. He put on his jacket, slipping the bottle into one of the pockets, slung the coiled rope over his shoulder and took up the shotgun. Out in the sunlight again he called to the hound.

"All right, Bob. Now find him."

The hound put his head to the front and went eagerly into the woods, not pausing again to look back, his neck extended, tracking. As Burk reached the first of the trees he stopped for a moment, sliding his finger down along the trigger guard of the shotgun to flick off the safety. The metallic snap seemed very loud in the quiet yard. Burk glanced back at the house one time, seeing only details, the crumbling chimney, broken slates on the roof, a wasps nest high under the eaves, the broken screen door. In the corner of his vision the blanket covered body in the yard was a dark blur against the stubble, but he did not look directly at it. He turned and followed the hound down into the coolness of the woods, his body automatically tensing, his feet feeling for the silent places without being told.

HUNTING

The hound stepped out briskly, at last in the woods and on the scent again, an hours old scent to be sure, but he had run down coons on colder trails than this, many times. For that matter, he was not even needed at first. The track was clearly visible, a swath of broken twigs and branches, trampled vines, dislodged stones that even a weekend hunter from the city could follow. But even following the track was, for the moment, not that important. It was good simply to be back among the trees, to have come from the warmth of the sun down into the coolness of the forest.

The hound steadied into an easy jogtrot, holding his head up a little from the ground, swinging his eyes and muzzle in a regular arc, checking without thinking the little sounds, flickers of movement that meant the presence of birds, lizards, squirrels, beetles. Rabbit scent was everywhere, mostly cold, but he passed, and noted for a later time, a place where a rabbit had slept the night before, could smell his bed and, nearby, his droppings. Ahead a thick limb, fallen from some dying tree, lay squarely across the track. A long time before, when he was young and careless, he had stepped daintily over such a piece of wood to be greeted by the startled buzz of a small brown and black snake. Frightened, he had leaped away, stopping at a distance of some yards to watch the angry creature burn away its fear with deadly darting feints before it tired and wriggled away into the brush. Now he was more cautious, and although he sniffed carefully and scented nothing

hostile, he left the track well short of the log and went around it, pushing his way through the tangle of briars and twisted vines. When he was back to the track he stopped and watched the man come up, check without thinking for the hidden serpent, and step carefully over, his feet cushioned silently by the running cedar. Then the hound turned and went ahead, hunting, getting his stride back in the first few steps.

Less than a mile from the house Burk found the Ball jar. It lay in a little alcove in the underbrush, and when he picked it up the smell told him all he needed to know. A quick reading of the broken twigs and crushed leaves gave confirmation. Willis, running all the way from the house had finally winded, had stopped here, burrowing back into the undergrowth. For a time he had laid in the cradle of brush, a time long enough to get under control the hysterical convulsions of his lungs, the too fast beat of his heart. That done, he had sat up to finish whatever was left of the corn whiskey.

Burk knew little about alcohol. He had tasted it only once, in his hole in the Ardennes Forest, with the sound of the German tanks in his ears, drinking in an attempt to take the edge from his fear. They had drunk French wine, he and Doc and a nervous farm implement salesman from Macon, splitting the bottle evenly until the sergeant had come and chased the others back to their holes. When they were gone Burk vomited, getting his head up just in time to let the thick stream of bile spill over the edge of his hole, where it melted darkly into the snow. The next morning, when the first German attack had been

repulsed, he found the bottle under the salesman's freezing body. When the stretcher bearers had gone, he picked up the bottle and tilted it, spilling the last few drops of wine onto the gound where they mingled indistinguishably with the frozen blood at the bottom of the hole.

He had learned the only two things he ever wanted to know about alcohol. The first was not of consequence to him now, the fact that alcohol made normally sane men act unreasonable. He had spent, already, too many minutes, days, years reflecting upon that facet, remembering time and time again Doc's craziness that night, a craziness so nearly fatal to both of them that it would haunt him, seemingly, forever. It was the second effect of alcohol that he had leanred there in that crusty Belgian snow that he had counted upon now, had prayed would bring him an early triumph. When he left Burk's hole that night, the salesman had finished the rest of the bottle and sometime before the attack had fallen peacefully asleep, sliding down into the mud. Chance had brought the first German probe to his position and his throat had been neatly cut while he slept, at just the moment that the clank of approaching tanks had brought the parachute flares arching over the trees, catching the German soldier as he crawled out of the foxhole, his bayonet already wiped clean and ready for further use.

It was this effect, the sleep inducing power of alcohol, that Burk had hoped for to bring him his prey in one lucky plunge. But the signs told him otherwise. Willis had stopped here only long enough to rest and finish the liquor, then pushed on. Already the hound was ten or twelve yards farther along,

waiting patiently for once, glad of the chance to rest a bit. It might now be prudent to go back, take the truck and find Doc on the river, let the law take its course. Willis was probably miles away by now, had gone on across Piddling Creek, making for the mountains where the scent would be difficult to follow along the icy streams, or had swerved away to the highway and caught a ride, heading east or west or north or south. If so, the hunt was too much for one man afoot and an aging hound with a wound that would stiffen and give pain every time they stopped to rest. Logic told him to go back now, so that Doc and the state police could begin their search before dark. That was the reasonable thing to do.

But there was more than logic involved. Something in the farthest recesses of Burk's mind nagged at him, partly the old hunting instinct and partly something more abstract than even that, a memory that took voice, a voice of hope saying Go on, he is near. Go on. Burk argued for reason, for the sensible move, but the memory persisted, drove him Go on, you must find him. Go on. Burk laid the jar carefully on the gound, back in the exact spot where he had found it. When he stood up the hound rose immediatley and turned to the scent. Burk found himself moving forward, not wanting to, but following the hound, his mind in the grip of a memory that he could not pin down, define. He dreamed, prayed, rationalized. Willis left here, but he did not get far, maybe less than a hundred yards, maybe only a mile or so. With his brain in the grip of the alcohol he fell asleep, went out on his feet and plunged to the ground. He is lying out there now, somewhere in

the tangle of the forest, helpless and waiting. The memory drove him, Go. And Burk stepped silently behind the hound, thrusting the shotgun, cold and ready, before him. He followed the hound, his eyes automatically sweeping the trees, the undergrowth, watching for the something out of kilter that might be his quarry. But he was not thinking of that, not of the hunt, but of the memory, pushing at him from within, and now he knew what the memory was, of his father, his father dying and talking fast to get it in before he went, delivering his final sermon to his son, making revelations. Burk fought it. He did not want it, did not want to remember revelations.