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**Opening Extract from...**

# The Road

Written by Cormac McCarthy

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When he woke in the woods in the dark and the cold of the night he'd reach out to touch the child sleeping beside him. Nights dark beyond darkness and the days more gray each one than what had gone before. Like the onset of some cold glaucoma dimming away the world. His hand rose and fell softly with each precious breath. He pushed away the plastic tarpaulin and raised himself in the stinking robes and blankets and looked toward the east for any light but there was none. In the dream from which he'd wakened he had wandered in a cave where the child led him by the hand. Their light playing over the wet flowstone walls. Like pilgrims in a fable swallowed up and lost among the inward parts of some granitic beast. Deep stone flues where the water dripped and sang. Tolling in the silence the minutes of the earth and the hours and the days of it and the years without cease. Until they stood in a great stone room where lay a black and ancient lake. And on the far shore a creature that raised its dripping mouth from the rimstone pool and stared into the light with eyes dead white and sightless as the eggs of spiders. It swung its head low over the water as if to take the scent of what it could not see. Crouching there pale and naked and translucent, its alabaster bones cast up in shadow on the rocks behind it. Its bowels, its beating heart. The brain that pulsed in a dull glass bell. It

swung its head from side to side and then gave out a low moan and turned and lurched away and loped soundlessly into the dark.

With the first gray light he rose and left the boy sleeping and walked out to the road and squatted and studied the country to the south. Barren, silent, godless. He thought the month was October but he wasnt sure. He hadnt kept a calendar for years. They were moving south. There'd be no surviving another winter here.

When it was light enough to use the binoculars he glassed the valley below. Everything paling away into the murk. The soft ash blowing in loose swirls over the blacktop. He studied what he could see. The segments of road down there among the dead trees. Looking for anything of color. Any movement. Any trace of standing smoke. He lowered the glasses and pulled down the cotton mask from his face and wiped his nose on the back of his wrist and then glassed the country again. Then he just sat there holding the binoculars and watching the ashen daylight congeal over the land. He knew only that the child was his warrant. He said: If he is not the word of God God never spoke.

When he got back the boy was still asleep. He pulled the blue plastic tarp off of him and folded it and carried it out to the grocery cart and packed it and came back with their plates and some cornmeal cakes in a plastic bag and a plas-

tic bottle of syrup. He spread the small tarp they used for a table on the ground and laid everything out and he took the pistol from his belt and laid it on the cloth and then he just sat watching the boy sleep. He'd pulled away his mask in the night and it was buried somewhere in the blankets. He watched the boy and he looked out through the trees toward the road. This was not a safe place. They could be seen from the road now it was day. The boy turned in the blankets. Then he opened his eyes. Hi, Papa, he said.

I'm right here.

I know.

An hour later they were on the road. He pushed the cart and both he and the boy carried knapsacks. In the knapsacks were essential things. In case they had to abandon the cart and make a run for it. Clamped to the handle of the cart was a chrome motorcycle mirror that he used to watch the road behind them. He shifted the pack higher on his shoulders and looked out over the wasted country. The road was empty. Below in the little valley the still gray serpentine of a river. Motionless and precise. Along the shore a burden of dead reeds. Are you okay? he said. The boy nodded. Then they set out along the blacktop in the gunmetal light, shuffling through the ash, each the other's world entire.

They crossed the river by an old concrete bridge and a few miles on they came upon a roadside gas station. They stood in the road and studied it. I think we should check it

out, the man said. Take a look. The weeds they forded fell to dust about them. They crossed the broken asphalt apron and found the tank for the pumps. The cap was gone and the man dropped to his elbows to smell the pipe but the odor of gas was only a rumor, faint and stale. He stood and looked over the building. The pumps standing with their hoses oddly still in place. The windows intact. The door to the service bay was open and he went in. A standing metal toolbox against one wall. He went through the drawers but there was nothing there that he could use. Good half-inch drive sockets. A ratchet. He stood looking around the garage. A metal barrel full of trash. He went into the office. Dust and ash everywhere. The boy stood in the door. A metal desk, a cashregister. Some old automotive manuals, swollen and sodden. The linoleum was stained and curling from the leaking roof. He crossed to the desk and stood there. Then he picked up the phone and dialed the number of his father's house in that long ago. The boy watched him. What are you doing? he said.

A quarter mile down the road he stopped and looked back. We're not thinking, he said. We have to go back. He pushed the cart off the road and tilted it over where it could not be seen and they left their packs and went back to the station. In the service bay he dragged out the steel trashdrum and tipped it over and pawed out all the quart plastic oilbottles. Then they sat in the floor decanting them of their dregs one by one, leaving the bottles to stand upside down draining into a pan until at the end they had almost a half quart of motor oil. He screwed down the

plastic cap and wiped the bottle off with a rag and hefted it in his hand. Oil for their little slutlamp to light the long gray dusks, the long gray dawns. You can read me a story, the boy said. Cant you, Papa? Yes, he said. I can.

On the far side of the river valley the road passed through a stark black burn. Charred and limbless trunks of trees stretching away on every side. Ash moving over the road and the sagging hands of blind wire strung from the blackened lightpoles whining thinly in the wind. A burned house in a clearing and beyond that a reach of meadowlands stark and gray and a raw red mudbank where a roadworks lay abandoned. Farther along were billboards advertising motels. Everything as it once had been save faded and weathered. At the top of the hill they stood in the cold and the wind, getting their breath. He looked at the boy. I'm all right, the boy said. The man put his hand on his shoulder and nodded toward the open country below them. He got the binoculars out of the cart and stood in the road and glassed the plain down there where the shape of a city stood in the grayness like a charcoal drawing sketched across the waste. Nothing to see. No smoke. Can I see? the boy said. Yes. Of course you can. The boy leaned on the cart and adjusted the wheel. What do you see? the man said. Nothing. He lowered the glasses. It's raining. Yes, the man said. I know.

They left the cart in a gully covered with the tarp and made their way up the slope through the dark poles of the

standing trees to where he'd seen a running ledge of rock and they sat under the rock overhang and watched the gray sheets of rain blow across the valley. It was very cold. They sat huddled together wrapped each in a blanket over their coats and after a while the rain stopped and there was just the dripping in the woods.

When it had cleared they went down to the cart and pulled away the tarp and got their blankets and the things they would need for the night. They went back up the hill and made their camp in the dry dirt under the rocks and the man sat with his arms around the boy trying to warm him. Wrapped in the blankets, watching the nameless dark come to enshroud them. The gray shape of the city vanished in the night's onset like an apparition and he lit the little lamp and set it back out of the wind. Then they walked out to the road and he took the boy's hand and they went to the top of the hill where the road crested and where they could see out over the darkening country to the south, standing there in the wind, wrapped in their blankets, watching for any sign of a fire or a lamp. There was nothing. The lamp in the rocks on the side of the hill was little more than a mote of light and after a while they walked back. Everything too wet to make a fire. They ate their poor meal cold and lay down in their bedding with the lamp between them. He'd brought the boy's book but the boy was too tired for reading. Can we leave the lamp on till I'm asleep? he said. Yes. Of course we can.

. . .

He was a long time going to sleep. After a while he turned and looked at the man. His face in the small light streaked with black from the rain like some old world thespian. Can I ask you something? he said.

Yes. Of course.

Are we going to die?

Sometime. Not now.

And we're still going south.

Yes.

So we'll be warm.

Yes.

Okay.

Okay what?

Nothing. Just okay.

Go to sleep.

Okay.

I'm going to blow out the lamp. Is that okay?

Yes. That's okay.

And then later in the darkness: Can I ask you something?

Yes. Of course you can.

What would you do if I died?

If you died I would want to die too.

So you could be with me?

Yes. So I could be with you.

Okay.

He lay listening to the water drip in the woods. Bedrock, this. The cold and the silence. The ashes of the late world carried on the bleak and temporal winds to and fro in the

void. Carried forth and scattered and carried forth again. Everything uncoupled from its shoring. Unsupported in the ashen air. Sustained by a breath, trembling and brief. If only my heart were stone.

He woke before dawn and watched the gray day break. Slow and half opaque. He rose while the boy slept and pulled on his shoes and wrapped in his blanket he walked out through the trees. He descended into a gryke in the stone and there he crouched coughing and he coughed for a long time. Then he just knelt in the ashes. He raised his face to the paling day. Are you there? he whispered. Will I see you at the last? Have you a neck by which to throttle you? Have you a heart? Damn you eternally have you a soul? Oh God, he whispered. Oh God.

They passed through the city at noon of the day following. He kept the pistol to hand on the folded tarp on top of the cart. He kept the boy close to his side. The city was mostly burned. No sign of life. Cars in the street caked with ash, everything covered with ash and dust. Fossil tracks in the dried sludge. A corpse in a doorway dried to leather. Grimacing at the day. He pulled the boy closer. Just remember that the things you put into your head are there forever, he said. You might want to think about that.

You forget some things, dont you?

Yes. You forget what you want to remember and you remember what you want to forget.

. . .

There was a lake a mile from his uncle's farm where he and his uncle used to go in the fall for firewood. He sat in the back of the rowboat trailing his hand in the cold wake while his uncle bent to the oars. The old man's feet in their black kid shoes braced against the uprights. His straw hat. His cob pipe in his teeth and a thin drool swinging from the pipebowl. He turned to take a sight on the far shore, cradling the oarhandles, taking the pipe from his mouth to wipe his chin with the back of his hand. The shore was lined with birchtrees that stood bone pale against the dark of the evergreens beyond. The edge of the lake a riprap of twisted stumps, gray and weathered, the windfall trees of a hurricane years past. The trees themselves had long been sawed for firewood and carried away. His uncle turned the boat and shipped the oars and they drifted over the sandy shallows until the transom grated in the sand. A dead perch lolling belly up in the clear water. Yellow leaves. They left their shoes on the warm painted boards and dragged the boat up onto the beach and set out the anchor at the end of its rope. A lardcan poured with concrete with an eyebolt in the center. They walked along the shore while his uncle studied the treestumps, puffing at his pipe, a manila rope coiled over his shoulder. He picked one out and they turned it over, using the roots for leverage, until they got it half floating in the water. Trousers rolled to the knee but still they got wet. They tied the rope to a cleat at the rear of the boat and rowed back across the lake, jerking the stump slowly behind them. By then it was already evening. Just

the slow periodic rack and shuffle of the oarlocks. The lake dark glass and windowlights coming on along the shore. A radio somewhere. Neither of them had spoken a word. This was the perfect day of his childhood. This the day to shape the days upon.

They bore on south in the days and weeks to follow. Solitary and dogged. A raw hill country. Aluminum houses. At times they could see stretches of the interstate highway below them through the bare stands of secondgrowth timber. Cold and growing colder. Just beyond the high gap in the mountains they stood and looked out over the great gulf to the south where the country as far as they could see was burned away, the blackened shapes of rock standing out of the shoals of ash and billows of ash rising up and blowing downcountry through the waste. The track of the dull sun moving unseen beyond the murk.

They were days fording that cauterized terrain. The boy had found some crayons and painted his facemask with fangs and he trudged on uncomplaining. One of the front wheels of the cart had gone wonky. What to do about it? Nothing. Where all was burnt to ash before them no fires were to be had and the nights were long and dark and cold beyond anything they'd yet encountered. Cold to crack the stones. To take your life. He held the boy shivering against him and counted each frail breath in the blackness.

. . .

He woke to the sound of distant thunder and sat up. The faint light all about, quivering and sourceless, refracted in the rain of drifting soot. He pulled the tarp about them and he lay awake a long time listening. If they got wet there'd be no fires to dry by. If they got wet they would probably die.

The blackness he woke to on those nights was sightless and impenetrable. A blackness to hurt your ears with listening. Often he had to get up. No sound but the wind in the bare and blackened trees. He rose and stood tottering in that cold autistic dark with his arms outheld for balance while the vestibular calculations in his skull cranked out their reckonings. An old chronicle. To seek out the upright. No fall but preceded by a declination. He took great marching steps into the nothingness, counting them against his return. Eyes closed, arms oaring. Upright to what? Something nameless in the night, lode or matrix. To which he and the stars were common satellite. Like the great pendulum in its rotunda scribing through the long day movements of the universe of which you may say it knows nothing and yet know it must.

It took two days to cross that ashen scabland. The road beyond ran along the crest of a ridge where the barren woodland fell away on every side. It's snowing, the boy said. He looked at the sky. A single gray flake sifting down. He caught it in his hand and watched it expire there like the last host of christendom.

. . .

They pushed on together with the tarp pulled over them. The wet gray flakes twisting and falling out of nothing. Gray slush by the roadside. Black water running from under the sodden drifts of ash. No more balefires on the distant ridges. He thought the bloodcults must have all consumed one another. No one traveled this road. No road-agents, no marauders. After a while they came to a roadside garage and they stood within the open door and looked out at the gray sleet gusting down out of the high country.

They collected some old boxes and built a fire in the floor and he found some tools and emptied out the cart and sat working on the wheel. He pulled the bolt and bored out the collet with a hand drill and resleeved it with a section of pipe he'd cut to length with a hacksaw. Then he bolted it all back together and stood the cart upright and wheeled it around the floor. It ran fairly true. The boy sat watching everything.

In the morning they went on. Desolate country. A boarhide nailed to a barndoor. Ratty. Wisp of a tail. Inside the barn three bodies hanging from the rafters, dried and dusty among the wan slats of light. There could be something here, the boy said. There could be some corn or something. Let's go, the man said.

. . .

Mostly he worried about their shoes. That and food. Always food. In an old batboard smokehouse they found a ham gambreled up in a high corner. It looked like something fetched from a tomb, so dried and drawn. He cut into it with his knife. Deep red and salty meat inside. Rich and good. They fried it that night over their fire, thick slices of it, and put the slices to simmer with a tin of beans. Later he woke in the dark and he thought that he'd heard bulldrums beating somewhere in the low dark hills. Then the wind shifted and there was just the silence.

In dreams his pale bride came to him out of a green and leafy canopy. Her nipples pipeclayed and her rib bones painted white. She wore a dress of gauze and her dark hair was carried up in combs of ivory, combs of shell. Her smile, her downturned eyes. In the morning it was snowing again. Beads of small gray ice strung along the lightwires overhead.

He mistrusted all of that. He said the right dreams for a man in peril were dreams of peril and all else was the call of languor and of death. He slept little and he slept poorly. He dreamt of walking in a flowering wood where birds flew before them he and the child and the sky was aching blue but he was learning how to wake himself from just such siren worlds. Lying there in the dark with the uncanny

taste of a peach from some phantom orchard fading in his mouth. He thought if he lived long enough the world at last would all be lost. Like the dying world the newly blind inhabit, all of it slowly fading from memory.

From daydreams on the road there was no waking. He plodded on. He could remember everything of her save her scent. Seated in a theatre with her beside him leaning forward listening to the music. Gold scrollwork and sconces and the tall columnar folds of the drapes at either side of the stage. She held his hand in her lap and he could feel the tops of her stockings through the thin stuff of her summer dress. Freeze this frame. Now call down your dark and your cold and be damned.

He fashioned sweeps from two old brooms he'd found and wired them to the cart to clear the limbs from the road in front of the wheels and he put the boy in the basket and stood on the rear rail like a dogmusher and they set off down the hills, guiding the cart on the curves with their bodies in the manner of bobsledders. It was the first that he'd seen the boy smile in a long time.

At the crest of the hill was a curve and a pullout in the road. An old trail that led off through the woods. They walked out and sat on a bench and looked out over the valley where the land rolled away into the gritty fog. A lake

down there. Cold and gray and heavy in the scavenged bowl of the countryside.

What is that, Papa?

It's a dam.

What's it for?

It made the lake. Before they built the dam that was just a river down there. The dam used the water that ran through it to turn big fans called turbines that would generate electricity.

To make lights.

Yes. To make lights.

Can we go down there and see it?

I think it's too far.

Will the dam be there for a long time?

I think so. It's made out of concrete. It will probably be there for hundreds of years. Thousands, even.

Do you think there could be fish in the lake?

No. There's nothing in the lake.

In that long ago somewhere very near this place he'd watched a falcon fall down the long blue wall of the mountain and break with the keel of its breastbone the midmost from a flight of cranes and take it to the river below all gangly and wrecked and trailing its loose and blowsy plumage in the still autumn air.

The grainy air. The taste of it never left your mouth. They stood in the rain like farm animals. Then they went on,

holding the tarp over them in the dull drizzle. Their feet were wet and cold and their shoes were being ruined. On the hillsides old crops dead and flattened. The barren ridgeline trees raw and black in the rain.

And the dreams so rich in color. How else would death call you? Waking in the cold dawn it all turned to ash instantly. Like certain ancient frescoes entombed for centuries suddenly exposed to the day.

The weather lifted and the cold and they came at last into the broad lowland river valley, the pieced farmland still visible, everything dead to the root along the barren bottomlands. They trucked on along the blacktop. Tall clapboard houses. Machinerolled metal roofs. A log barn in a field with an advertisement in faded ten-foot letters across the roofslope. See Rock City.

The roadside hedges were gone to rows of black and twisted brambles. No sign of life. He left the boy standing in the road holding the pistol while he climbed an old set of limestone steps and walked down the porch of the farmhouse shading his eyes and peering in the windows. He let himself in through the kitchen. Trash in the floor, old newsprint. China in a breakfront, cups hanging from their hooks. He went down the hallway and stood in the door to the parlor. There was an antique pumporgan in the corner. A television set. Cheap stuffed furniture together with an

old handmade cherrywood chifforobe. He climbed the stairs and walked through the bedrooms. Everything covered with ash. A child's room with a stuffed dog on the windowsill looking out at the garden. He went through the closets. He stripped back the beds and came away with two good woolen blankets and went back down the stairs. In the pantry were three jars of homecanned tomatoes. He blew the dust from the lids and studied them. Someone before him had not trusted them and in the end neither did he and he walked out with the blankets over his shoulder and they set off along the road again.

On the outskirts of the city they came to a supermarket. A few old cars in the trashstrewn parking lot. They left the cart in the lot and walked the littered aisles. In the produce section in the bottom of the bins they found a few ancient runner beans and what looked to have once been apricots, long dried to wrinkled effigies of themselves. The boy followed behind. They pushed out through the rear door. In the alleyway behind the store a few shopping carts, all badly rusted. They went back through the store again looking for another cart but there were none. By the door were two softdrink machines that had been tilted over into the floor and opened with a prybar. Coins everywhere in the ash. He sat and ran his hand around in the works of the gutted machines and in the second one it closed over a cold metal cylinder. He withdrew his hand slowly and sat looking at a Coca Cola.

What is it, Papa?

It's a treat. For you.