

The Road by Cormac McCarthy

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

17 With the first grey light he rose and left the boy sleeping and walked out to the road and squatted
18 and studied the country to the south. Barren, silent, godless. He thought the month was October but
19 he wasn't sure. He hadn't kept a calendar for years. They were moving south. There'd be no
20 surviving another winter here.

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

28 When he got back the boy was still asleep. He pulled the blue plastic tarp off of him and folded it and
29 carried it out to the grocery cart and packed it and came back with their plates and some cornmeal
30 cakes in a plastic bag and a plastic bottle of syrup. He spread the small tarp they used for a table on
31 the ground and laid everything out and he took the pistol from his belt and laid it on the cloth and
32 then he just sat watching the boy sleep. He'd pulled away his mask in the night and it was buried
33 somewhere in the blankets. He watched the boy and he looked out through the trees toward the
34 road. This was not a safe place. They could be seen from the road now it was day. The boy turned in
35 the blankets. Then he opened his eyes. Hi, Papa, he said.

36 I'm right here.

37 I know.

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