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Cities of the Plain

CORMAC McCARTHY

C I T I E S
O F T H E
P L A I N

Cormac McCarthy

Volume Three
The Border Trilogy



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DEDICATION

*I will be your child to hold
And you be me when I am old
The world grows cold
The heathen rage
The story's told
Turn the page.*

THEY STOOD in the doorway and stomped the rain from their boots and swung their hats and wiped the water from their faces. Out in the street the rain slashed through the standing water driving the gaudy red and green colors of the neon signs to wander and seethe and rained danced on the steel tops of the cars parked along the curb.

Damned if I aint half drowned, Billy said. He swung his dripping hat. Where's the american cowboy at?

He's done inside.

Let's go. He'll have all them good fat ones picked out for hisself.

The whores in their shabby deshabelle looked up from the shabby sofas where they sat. The place was all but empty. They stomped their boots again and crossed to the bar and stood and thumbed back their hats and propped their boots on the rail above the tiled drainway while the barman poured their whiskies. In the bloodred barlight and the drifting smoke they raised their glasses briefly and nodded as if to salute some fourth companion now lost to them and they tilted back the shots and set the empty glasses on the bar again and wiped their mouths with the backs of their hands. Troy jutted his chin at the barman and made a circling gesture with one finger at the empty glasses. The barman nodded.

John Grady you look like a goddamned wharf rat.

I feel like one.

The barman poured their whiskies.

I never seen it rain no harder. You want a beer back? Give us three beers.

You got one of them little darlins picked out?

The boy shook his head.

Which one you like, Troy?

I'm like you. I come down here for a fat woman and that's what I'm havin. I'm goin to tell you right now cousin, when the mood comes on you for a fat woman they just wont nothing else satisfy.

I know the feelin well. You better pick you one out, John Grady.

The boy turned and looked across the room at the whores.

How about that old big'n in the green pajamas?

Dont be puttin him on my gal, said Troy. You'll be the cause of a fight breakin out here in a minute.

Go on. She's lookin over here.

They're all lookin over here.

Go on. I can tell she likes you.

She'd bounce John Grady off the ceilin.

Not the all-american cowboy she wouldnt. The cowboy'd stick like a cocklebur. What about the one with the blue windercurtain wrapped around her?

Dont pay no attention to him, John Grady. She looks like her face caught fire and they be it out with a rake. I'm goin to say that blond on the end is more your style.

Billy shook his head and reached for his whiskey. They aint no reasonin with the man. He just aint got no taste in women and that's a mathematical fact.

You stick with your old dad, said Troy. He'll get you onto somethin with some substance. Parham yonder actually claimed that a man ought not to date anything he couldnt lift. Say what if the house caught fire.

Or the barn.

Or the barn.

You remember the time we brought Clyde Stapp down here?

I do and he was a man of judgment. Picked him out a gal with some genuine heft to her.

JC and them slipped the old woman a couple of dollars to let em go back there and pee. They was goin to take his picture but they got to laughin and blew the deal.

We told Clyde he looked like a monkey fuckin a football. I thought we was goin to have him to whip. What about that one in the red yonder?

Dont listen to him, John Grady.

Value per pound on a dollar basis. He dont even want to consider a thing like that.

You all go on, said John Grady.

Pick you one out.

That's all right.

You see there Troy? All you done is got the boy confused.

JC told everbody that Clyde fell in love with the old gal and wanted to take her back with him but all they had was the pickup and they'd of had to send for the flatbed. By then Clyde had done sobered up and fell out of love and JC said he wasnt takin him to no more whores. Said he hadnt acted in a manly and responsible fashion.

You all go on, said John Grady.

From the rear of the premises he could hear the rain rattling on a metal roof. He ordered another shot of whiskey and stood turning the glass slowly on the polished wood and watching the room behind him in the yellowing glass of the old Brunswick backbar. One of the whores crossed the room and took him by the arm and asked him to buy her a drink but he said he was only waiting for his friends. After a while Troy came back and sat on the barstool and ordered another whiskey. He sat with his hands folded on the bar before him like a man at church. He took a cigarette from his shirtpocket.

I dont know, John Grady.

What dont you know?

I dont know.

The barman poured his whiskey.

Pour him another.

The barman poured.

Another whore had come up to take John Grady's arm. The powder on her face had cracked like sizing.

Tell her you got the clap, said Troy.

John Grady was speaking to her in spanish. She tugged at his arm.

Billy told that to one down here one time. She said that was all right she had it too.

He lit the cigarette with a Third Infantry Zippo lighter and laid the lighter on top of his cigarettes and blew smoke down along the polished wood and looked at John Grady. The whore had gone back to the sofa and John Grady was studying something in the backboard glass. Troy turned and followed his gaze. A young girl of no more than seventeen and perhaps younger was sitting on the arm of the sofa with her hands cupped in her lap and her eyes cast down. She fussed with the hem of her gaudy dress like a schoolgirl. She looked up and looked toward them. Her long black hair fell across her shoulder and she swept it slowly away with the back of her hand.

She's a goodlookin thing, aint she? Troy said.

John Grady nodded.

Go on and get her.

That's all right.

Hell, go on.

Here he comes.

Billy stepped up to the bar and adjusted his hat.

You want me to go get her? said Troy.

I can get her if I want her.

Otra vez, said Billy. He turned and looked across the room.

Go on, said Troy. Hell, we'll wait on you.

That little girl the one you're lookin at? I bet she aint fifteen.

I bet she aint either, said Troy.

Get that one I had. She's five gaited or I never rode.

The barman poured their whiskies.

She'll be back over there directly.

That's all right.

Billy looked at Troy. He turned and picked up his glass and contemplated the reddish liquid welling at the brim and raised and drank it and took his money from his shirtpocket and jerked his chin at the watching barkeep.

You all ready? he said.

Yeah.

Let's go get somethin to eat. I think it's fixin to quit rainin. I dont hear it no more.

They walked up Ignacio Mejía to Juárez Avenue. The gutters ran with a grayish water and the lights of the bars and cafes and curioshops bled slowly in the wet black street. Shopowners called to them and streetvendors with jewelry and serapes sallied forth to attend them at either side. They crossed Juárez Avenue and went up Mejía to the Napoleón and sat at a table by the front window. A liveried waiter came and swept the stained white tablecloth with a handbroom.

Caballeros, he said.

They ate steaks and drank coffee and listened to Troy's war stories and smoked and watched the ancient yellow taxicabs ford the water in the streets. They walked up Juárez Avenue to the bridge.

The trolleys had quit running and the streets were all but empty of trade and traffic. The tracks shining in the wet lamplight ran on toward the gateshock and beyond to where they lay embedded in the bridge like great surgical clamps binding those disparate and fragile worlds and the cloudcover had moved off down from the Franklins and south toward the dark shapes of the mountains of Mexico standing against the starlit sky. They crossed the bridge and pushed through the turnstile each in turn, their hats cocked slightly, slightly drunk, and walked up south El Paso Street.

IT WAS STILL DARK when John Grady woke him. He was up and dressed and had already been in the kitchen and back and had spoken to the horses and he stood in the doorway of Billy's bunkroom with the canvas curtain pushed back against the jamb and a cup of coffee in one hand. Hey cowboy, he said.

Billy groaned.

Let's go. You can sleep in the winter.

Damn.

Let's go. You been layin there damn near four hours.

Billy sat up and swung his feet onto the floor and sat with his head in his hands.

I dont see how you can lay there like that.

Damn if you aint a cheerful son of a bitch in the mornin. Where's my by god coffee at?

I aint carryin you no coffee. Get your ass up from there. Grub's on the table.

Billy reached up and took his hat from a wallpeg over the bed and put the hat on and squared it. Okay, he said. I'm up.

John Grady walked back out up the barn bay toward the house. The horses nickered at him from their stalls as he passed. I know what time it is, he told them. At the end of the barn a length of hayrope hung from the loft overhead and he drained the last of his coffee and slurped the dregs from the cup and leaped up and batted the rope and set it swinging and went out.

They were all at the table eating when Billy pushed open the door and came in. Socorro came and took the plate of biscuits and carried them to the oven and dumped them into a pan and put the pan in the warmer and took hot biscuits from the warmer and put them on the plate and carried the plate back to the table. On the table was a bowl of scrambled eggs and

one of grits and there was a plate of sausage and a boat of gravy and bowls of preserves and pico de gallo and butter and honey. Billy washed his face at the sink and Socorro handed him the towel and he dried his face and laid the towel on the counter and came to the table and stepped over the back of the empty chair and sat and reached for the eggs. Oren glanced at him over the top of his paper and continued reading.

Billy spooned the eggs and set the bowl down and reached for the sausage. Mornin Oren he said. Mornin JC.

JC looked up from his plate. I guess you been fightin that bear all night too.

Fightin that bear, said Billy. He reached and took a biscuit and refolded the cloth back over the plate and reached for the butter.

Let's see them eyes again, said JC.

Aint nothin wrong with these eyes. Pass the salsa yonder.

He spooned the hot sauce over his eggs. Fight fire with fire. Aint that right John Grady?

An old man had come into the kitchen with his braces hanging. He wore an oldfashioned shirt of the kind the collar buttoned to and it was open at the neck and no collar to it. He had just shaved and there was shaving cream on his neck and on the lobe of one ear. John Grady pushed back his chair.

Here Mr Johnson, he said. Set here. I'm all done.

He rose with his plate to take it to the sink but the old man waved him down and went out toward the stove. Set down, he said, set down. I'm just gettin me some coffee.

Socorro unhooked one of the white porcelain mugs from the underside of the cabinet she had and poured it and turned the handle facing out and handed it to the old man and he took it and nodded and went back across the kitchen. He stopped at the table and spooned two huge scoops of sugar out of the bowl into his cup and left the room taking the sugarspoon with him. John Grady put his cup and plate on the sideboard and got his lunchbucket off the counter and went out.

What's wrong with him? said JC.

Aint nothin wrong with him, said Billy.

I meant John Grady.

I know who you meant.

Oren folded the paper and laid it on the table. Dont you all even start, he said. Troy, you ready?

I'm ready.

They pushed back from the table and rose and went out. Billy sat picking his teeth. He looked at JC. What are you doin this mornin?

I'm goin into town with the old man.

He nodded. Out in the yard the truck started. Well, he said. It's light enough to see, reckon.

He rose and crossed the kitchen and got his lunchpail from the counter and went out. J

reached across the table and got the paper.

John Grady was sitting behind the wheel of the idling truck. Billy got in and set the lunchpail on the floor and shut the door and looked at him.

Well, he said. You ready to put in a day's work for a day's wages?

John Grady put the truck in gear and they pulled away down the drive.

Daybreak to backbreak for a godgiven dollar, said Billy. I love this life. You love this life son? I love this life. You do love this life dont you? Cause by god I love it. Just love it.

He reached into his shirtpocket and shook out a cigarette from the pack there and lit it with his lighter and sat smoking while they rolled down the drive through the long morning shadows of fence and post and oaktree. The sun was blinding white on the dusty windshield glass. Cattle standing along the fence called after the truck and Billy studied them. Cows, he said.

They nooned on a grassy rise on the red clay ranges ten miles south of the ranch house. Billy lay with his rolled jacket under his head and his hat over his eyes. He squinted out at the gray headlands of the Guadalupe eighty miles to the west. I hate comin out here, he said. Goddamn ground wont even hold a fencepost.

John Grady sat crosslegged chewing a weedstem. Twenty miles to the south a live belt of green ran down the Rio Grande valley. In the foreground fenced gray fields. Gray dust following a tractor and cultivator down the gray furrows of a fall cottonfield.

Mr Johnson says the army sent people out here with orders to survey seven states in the southwest and find the sorriest land they could find and report back. And Mac's ranch was settin right in the middle of it.

Billy looked at John Grady and looked back at the mountains.

You think that's true? said John Grady.

Hell, who knows.

JC says the old man is gettin crazier and crazier.

Well he's still got more sense crazy than JC's got sane so what does that make JC?

I dont know.

There aint nothin wrong with him. He's just old is all.

JC says he aint been right since his daughter died.

Well. There aint no reason why he should be. He thought the world of her.

Yeah.

Maybe we ought to ask Delbert. Get Delbert's view of things.

Delbert aint as dumb as he looks.

I hope to God he aint. Anyway the old man always had a few things peculiar about him and he's still got em. This place aint the same. It never will be. Maybe we've all got a little crazy. I guess if everbody went crazy together nobody would notice, what do you think?

John Grady leaned and spat between his teeth and put the stem back in his mouth. You liked her, didnt you?

Awful well. She was as nice to me as anybody I ever knew.

A coyote came out of the brush and trotted along the crest of a rise a quarter mile to the east. I want you to look at that son of a bitch, said Billy.

Let me get the rifle.

He'll be gone before you get done standin up.

The coyote trotted out along the ridge and stopped and looked back and then dropped off down the ridge into the brush again.

What do you reckon he's doin out here in the middle of the day?

He probably wonders the same about you.

You think he seen us?

Well I didnt see him walkin head first into them nopal bushes yonder so I dont expect he was completely blind.

John Grady watched for the coyote to reappear but the coyote didnt.

Funny thing, said Billy, is I was fixin to quit about the time she took sick. I was ready to move on. After she died I had a lot less reason to stay on but I stayed anyways.

I guess maybe you figured Mac needed you.

Horseshit.

How old was she?

I dont know. Late thirties. Forty maybe. You'd never of knowed it though.

You think he's gettin over it?

Mac?

Yeah.

No. You dont get over a woman like that. He aint gettin over nothin. He never will.

He sat and put his hat on and adjusted it. You ready, cousin?

Yeah.

He rose stiffly and reached down and got his lunchpail and he swiped at the seat of his trousers with one hand and then bent and got his jacket. He looked at John Grady.

There was a old waddy told me one time he never knowed a woman raised on indoo plumbin to ever turn out worth a damn. She come up the hard way. Old man Johnson was never nothin but a cowboy and you know what that pays. Mac met her at a church supper in Las Cruces when she was seventeen years old and that was all she wrote. He aint goin to be gettin over it. Not now, not soon, not never.

It was dark when they got back. Billy rolled up the window of the truck and sat looking toward the house. I'm a wore-out sumbuck, he said.

You want to just leave the gear in the truck?

Let's bring in the come-along. It might rain. Might. And that box of staples. They'll rust up

I'll get em.

He got the stuff from the bed of the truck. The lights came on in the barn bay. Billy was

standing there shaking his hand up and down.

Ever time I reach for that son of a bitch I get shocked.

It's the nails in them boots.

Then why dont it shock my feet?

I dont know.

He hung the come-along on a nail and set the box of staples on a framing crossbrace ju inside the door. The horses whinnied from their stalls.

He went on down the barn bay and at the last stall pounded the flat of his hand against th stall door. There was an instant explosion against the boards on the other side. Dust drifted the light. He looked back at Billy and grinned. Egg it on, said Billy. He'll put a foot throug that son of a bitch.

JOAQUÍN STEPPED BACK with both hands atop the board he was leaning on and lowered his head as he'd seen something in the corral too awful to watch. But he was only stepping back to sp and he did so in his slow and contemplative way and then stepped forward and looke through the boards again. Caballo, he said. The shadow of the trotting horse passed across th boards and across his face and passed on. He shook his head.

They walked on down to where some two by twelves were nailed and braced along the to of the corral and climbed up and sat with their bootheels wedged in the board below an smoked and watched John Grady work the colt.

What does he want with that owlheaded son of a bitch anyway?

Billy shook his head. Maybe it's like Mac says. Ever man winds up with the horse that sui him.

What is that thing he's got on its head?

It's called a cavesson halter.

What's wrong with a plain hackamore?

You'd have to ask the cowboy.

Troy leaned and spat. He looked at Joaquín. Qué piensas? he said.

Joaquín shrugged. He watched the horse circle the corral at the end of the longeline.

That horse has been broke with a bit, Troy said.

Yeah.

I guess he aims to break it and start over.

Well, Billy said, I got a suspicion that whatever it is he aims to do he'll most likely get done.

They watched the horse circle.

He aint trainin it for the circus is he?

No. We had the circus yesterday evenin when he forked up on it.

How many times did he get thowed?

Four.

How many times did he get back up on it?

You know how many times.

Is he supposed to be some sort of specialist in spoiled horses?

Let's go, Billy said. He's liable to walk that son of a bitch all afternoon.

They went on toward the house.

Ask Joaquín yonder, Billy said.

Ask me what?

If the cowboy knows horses.

The cowboy says he dont know nothin.

I know it.

He claims he just likes it and works hard at it.

What do you think? said Billy.

Joaquín shook his head.

Joaquín thinks his methods is unorthodox.

So does Mac.

Joaquín didnt answer till they reached the gate. Then he stopped and looked back at the corral. Finally he said that it didnt make much difference if you liked horses or not if they didnt like you. He said the best trainers he ever knew, horses couldnt stay away from them. He said horses would follow Billy Sánchez to the outhouse and stand there and wait for him.

WHEN HE GOT BACK from town John Grady was not in the barn and when he walked up to the house to get his supper he was not there either. Troy was sitting at the table picking his teeth. He sat down with his plate and reached for the salt and pepper. Where's everybody at? he said.

Oren just left. JC's gone out with his girl. John Grady I reckon is laid up in the bed.

No he aint.

Well maybe he's gone off somewheres to think things over.

What happened?

That horse fell backwards on him. Like to broke his foot.

Is he all right?

I reckon. They carried him in to the doctor, him cussin and carryin on. Doctor wrapped him up and give him a pair of crutches and told him to stay off of it.

He's on crutches?

Yep. Supposed to be.

All this happened this afternoon?

Yep. It was lively as you could ever wish for here for a while. Joaquín come and got Oren

and he went down there and told him to come on and he wouldnt do it. Oren said he thought he was goin to have to whip him. Hobblin around after the damned horse wantin to get up on it again. Finally got him to take his boot off. Oren said another two minutes and they'd had to cut it off of him.

Billy nodded his head and bit thoughtfully into a biscuit.

He was ready to fight Oren?

Yep.

Billy chewed. He shook his head.

How bad is his foot?

He's sprained his ankle.

What did Mac say?

Nothin. He's the one carried him in to the doctor's.

I guess he cant do no wrong where Mac's concerned.

You got that right.

Billy shook his head again. He reached for the salsa. I miss ever show that comes to town he said. I guess this might whittle down his reputation as a pure D peeler some though mightnt it?

I dont know if it will or not. Joaquín says he stood in one stirrup and rode the son of a bitch down like a tree.

What for?

I dont know. I reckon he just dont like to quit a horse.

HE'D BEEN ASLEEP maybe an hour when the commotion in the dark of the barn bay woke him. He lay listening a minute and then he rose and reached for the cord and pulled on the overhead light and put on his hat and stepped to the door and pushed back the curtain and looked out. The horse hove past a foot from his face and went hammering down the bay and turned around and stood breathing and stamping in the dark.

Damn, he said. Bud?

John Grady went limping past.

What the hell are you doin'?

He hobbled on out of the lightfall. Billy stepped into the bay.

You are a goddamned idjit, aint you? What in the hell is wrong with you?

The horse began to run again. He heard it coming and knew it was coming but he'd more than just got back inside the doorframe before it exploded into the space of light from the single bulb in his cubicle, running with its mouth open and its eyes like eggs in its head.

Goddamn it, he said. He got his pants off of the iron footrail of his cot and pulled them on and squared his hat and stepped out again.

The horse had started down the bay again. He flattened himself against the stall door near

to his bunkroom. The horse went by as if the barn were afire and slammed up against the door at the end of the bay and turned and stood shrieking.

Goddamn it will you leave that squirrelheaded son of a bitch alone? What the hell's goin' into you?

John Grady came limping past into the dusty light again trailing a loop of rope and limped on out the other side.

You cant even see to rope the son of a bitch, Billy called.

The horse came pounding down the far side of the bay. It was saddled and the stirrups were kicking out. One of them must have caught on a board toward the far end where it turned in the thin slats of light from the yardlamp because there was a crack of breaking wood and a clattering in the dark and then the horse stood on its forefeet and jackslammed the boards at the end of the barn. A minute later the lights came on at the house. The dust in the barn drifted like smoke.

There you go, called Billy. The whole damn house is up.

The dark shape of the horse shifted in the barred light. It leaned its long neck and screamed. The door opened at the end of the barn.

John Grady limped past again with the rope.

Someone threw the lightswitch. Oren was standing there flapping his hand about. Goddamn it, he said. Why dont somebody fix that thing.

The crazed horse stood blinking at him ten feet away. He looked at the horse and then looked at John Grady standing in the middle of the barn bay with the catchrope.

What in hell's thunder is goin on out here? he said.

Go on, said Billy. Tell him somethin. I sure as hell dont have no answer for him.

The horse turned and trotted partway down the bay and stopped and stood.

Put the damn horse up, said Oren.

Let me have the rope, said Billy.

John Grady looked back at him. You think I cant even catch him?

Go on then. Catch him. I hope the son of a bitch runs over you.

One of you all catch him, said Oren, and lets quit this damn nonsense.

The door opened behind Oren and Mr Johnson stood there in his hat and boots and nightshirt. Shut the door, Mr Johnson, said Oren. Come in if you want.

John Grady dropped the loop over the horse's neck and walked the horse down along the rope and reached up through the loop and took hold of the trailing bridlereins and threw the rope off.

Dont get on that horse, said Oren.

It's my horse.

Well you can tell that to Mac then. He'll be out here in a minute.

Go on bud, said Billy. Put the damn horse up like the man asked you.

John Grady looked at him and he looked at Oren and then he turned and led the horse back down the barn bay and put it up in the stall.

Bunch of damned ignorance, said Oren. Come on, Mr Johnson. Damn.

The old man turned and went out and Oren followed and pulled the door shut behind him. When John Grady came limping out of the stall he was carrying the saddle by the horn, the stirrups dragging in the dirt. He crossed the bay toward the tackroom. Billy leaned against the jamb watching him. When he came out of the tackroom he passed Billy without looking at him.

You're really somethin, said Billy. You know that?

John Grady turned at the door of his bunkroom and he looked at Billy and he looked down the hall of the lit barn and spat quietly in the dirt and looked at Billy again. It wasnt any of your business, he said. Was it.

Billy shook his head. I will be damned, he said.

IN THE MOUNTAINS they saw deer in the headlights and in the headlights the deer were pale as ghosts and as soundless. They turned their red eyes toward this unreckoned sun and sidled and grouped and leapt the bar ditch by ones and twos. A small doe lost her footing on the macadam and scabbled wildly and sank onto her hindquarters and rose again and vanished with the others into the chaparral beyond the roadside. Troy held the whiskey up to the dashlights to check the level in the bottle and unscrewed the cap and drank and screwed the cap back on and passed the bottle to Billy. Be no lack of deer to hunt down here it looks like

Billy unscrewed the cap from the bottle and drank and sat watching the white line down the dark road. I dont doubt but what it's good country.

You dont want to leave Mac.

I dont know. Not without some cause to.

Loyal to the outfit.

It aint just that. You need to find you a hole at some point. Hell, I'm twenty-eight years old.

You dont look it.

Yeah?

You look forty-eight. Pass the whiskey.

Billy peered out at the high desert. The bellied lightwires raced against the night.

They wont care for us drinkin?

She dont particularly like it. But there aint much she can do about it. Anyway it aint like we was goin to show up down there kneewalkin drunk.

Will your brother take a drink?

Troy nodded solemnly. Quicker than a minnow can swim a dipper.

Billy drank and handed over the bottle.

What was the kid goin to do? said Troy.

I dont know.

Did you and him have a fallin out?

No. He's all right. He just said he had somethin he needed to do.

He can flat ride a horse. I'll say that.

Yes he can.

He's a salty little booger.

He's all right. He's just got his own notions about things.

That horse he thinks so much of is just a damned outlaw if you want my opinion.

Billy nodded. Yep.

So what's he want with it?

I guess that's what he wants with it.

You still think he's going to have it follerin him around like a dog?

Yeah. I think it.

I'll believe it when I see it.

You want to lay some money?

Troy shook a cigarette from the pack on the dash and put it in his mouth and pushed in the lighter. I dont want to take your money.

Hell, dont be backwards about takin my money.

I think I'll pass. He aint goin to like them crutches.

Not even a little bit.

How long is he supposed to be on em?

I dont know. A couple of weeks. Doctor told him a sprain could be worse than a break.

I'll bet he aint on em a week.

I'll bet he aint either.

A jackrabbit froze in the road. Its red eye shone.

Go on dumb-ass, Billy said.

The rabbit made a soft thud under the truck. Troy took the lighter from the dashboard and lit his cigarette with it and put the lighter back in the receptacle.

When I got out of the army I went up to Amarillo with Gene Edmonds for the rodeo and stock show. He'd fixed us up with dates and all. We was supposed to be at their house to pick em up at ten oclock in the mornin and it was after midnight fore we left out of El Paso. Gene had a brand new Olds Eighty-eight and he pitched me the keys and told me to drive. Quick as we hit highway eighty he looked over at me, told me to shower down on it. That thing would strictly motivate. I pushed it up to about eighty, eighty-five. Still had about a yard of ped left. He looked over again. I said: How fast do you want to go? He said just whatever you feel comfortable with. Hell. I didnt do nothin but roll her on up to about a hundred and ten and here we went. Old long flat road. Had about six hundred miles of it in front of us.

Well there was all these jackrabbits in the road. They'd set there and freeze in the light

Blap. Blap. I looked over at Gene and I said: What do you want to do about these rabbits? He looked at me and he said: Rabbits? I mean if you were lookin for somebody to give a shit can tell you right now it sure as hell wasnt Gene. He didnt care if syrup went to thirty cents a sop.

We pulled into a filling station at Dimmitt Texas just about daybreak. Pulled up to the pumps and shut her down and set there and there was a car on the other side of the pump and the old boy that worked there was fillin the tank and cleanin the windshield. Woman settin there in the car. The old boy drivin had gone in to take a leak or whatever. Anyway we pulled in facin this other car and I'm kindly layin there with my head back waitin on the old boy and I wasnt even thinkin about this woman but I could see her. Just settin there, sort of lookin around. Well directly she sat straight up and commenced to holler like she was bein murdered. I mean just a hollerin. I raised up, I didnt know what had happened. She was lookin over at us and I thought Gene had done somethin. Exposed hisself or somethin. You never knew what he was goin to do. I looked at Gene but he didnt know what the hell was goin on any more than I did. Well here come the old boy out of the men's room and I mean he was a big son of a bitch too. I got out and walked around the car. I thought I was goin crazy. The Oldsmobile had this big ovalshaped grille in the front of it was like a big scoop and when I got around to the front of the car it was just packed completely full of jackrabbit heads. I mean there was a hundred of em jammed in there and the front of the car the bumper and all just covered with blood and rabbit guts and them rabbits I reckon they'd sort of turned their heads away just at impact cause they was all lookin out, eyes all crazy lookin. Teeth sideways. Grinnin. I cant tell you what it looked like. I come damn near hollerin myself. I'd noticed the car was overheatin but I just put that down to the speed we was makin. This old boy wanted to fight us over it. I said: Damn, Sam. Rabbits. You know? He didnt. Gene got out and started mouthin at him and I told him to get his ass back in the car and shut up. Old boy went over and told the woman to hush up and quit slobberin and all but I like to never got him pacified. I started to just go on and hit the big son of a bitch and be done with it.

Billy sat watching the night spool past. The roadside chaparral, the flat black scrim of the mountains cut into the star-blown desert sky above them. Troy smoked. He reached for the whiskey and unscrewed the cap and sat holding the bottle.

I got discharged in San Diego. Took the first bus out. Me and another old boy got drunk on the bus and like to got throwed off. I got off in Tucson and went in a store and bought a new pair of Judson boots and a suit. I dont know what the hell I bought the suit for. I thought you was supposed to have one. I got on another bus and come on to El Paso and went up there evenin to Alamogordo and got my horses. I wandered all over this country. Worked in Colorado. Worked up in the panhandle. Got throwed in jail in this little old chickenshit town I wont even name it to you. State of Texas though. State of Texas. I hadnt done nothin. Just in the wrong place at the wrong time. I like to never got out of there. I'd got in a fight with a Mexican and like to killed him. I was in jail up there for nine months to the day. I wouldnt write home for nothin. Time I got out and went to see about my horses they'd been sold for the feedbill. I didnt care about the one but I did the other cause I'd had him a long time. Nobody seemed to know nothin about it. I knew if I grabbed the old boy I'd be right back in the damn jail again. Asked all around. Finally somebody told me they'd sold my horse out

the state. They thought the buyer was from Alabama or some damn place. I'd had that horse since I was thirteen years old.

I lost a horse in Mexico I was awful partial to, Billy said. I'd had him since I was nine.

It's easy to do.

What, lose a horse?

Troy had tipped the bottle up and he drank and lowered it and screwed the cap back on and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and laid the bottle on the seat. No, he said. Get partial to one.

Half an hour later they pulled off the highway and rumbled over the pipes of a cattleguard and drove up the mile-long dirt road to the ranch house. The porchlight was on and three heeler dogs came out and ran beside the truck barking. Elton came out and stood on the porch with his hands in his back pockets and his hat on.

They ate at a long table in the kitchen, passing bowls of hominy and okra and a greasy platter of fried steaks and biscuits.

This is awful good, mam, Billy said.

Elton's wife looked at him. You wouldn't mind not callin me mam would you?

No mam.

It makes me feel like a old woman.

Yes mam.

He can't help hisself, Troy said.

That's all right, the woman said.

You never let me off that easy.

Bein let off easy was never somethin you needed more of, the woman said.

I'll try not to say it, Billy said.

There was a seven year old girl at the table and she watched them with wide eyes. They ate. After a while she said: What's wrong with it?

What's wrong with what?

Sayin mam.

Elton looked up. There aint nothin wrong with it, honey. Your mama's just one of the modern kinds of women.

What's a modern kind of woman?

Eat your supper, the woman said. If your daddy had his way we wouldn't even have the wheel yet.

They sat in old cane-bottomed chairs on the porch and Elton set the three glass tumblers on the board floor between his feet and unscrewed the cap from the bottle and poured three measures and put the cap back and stood the bottle on the floor and passed the glasses round and leaned back in his rocker. Salud, he said.

He'd turned off the porchlight and they sat in the soft square of light from the window. H

raised his glass to the light and looked through it like a chemist. You wont guess who's back at Bell's, he said.

Dont even say her name.

Well you did guess.

Who else would it be?

Elton leaned back in the chair and rocked. The dogs stood in the yard at the foot of the steps looking up at him.

What, said Troy. Did her old man finally run her off?

I dont know. She's supposed to be visitin. It's turned out to be kindly a long visit.

Yeah.

For whatever consolation there might be in that.

It aint no consolation.

Elton nodded. You're right, he said. It aint.

Billy sipped the whiskey and looked out at the shapes of the mountains. Stars were falling everywhere.

Rachel run smack into her in Alpine, said Elton. Little darlin just smiled and hidied like butter wouldnt melt in her mouth.

Troy sat leaning forward with his elbows on his knees, the glass in both hands before him. Elton rocked.

You remember we used to go down to Bloy's to try and pick up girls? That's where he met her at. Camp meetin. That'll make you ponder the ways of God. He asked her out and she told him she wouldnt go out with a man that drank. He looked her straight in the eye and told her he didnt drink. She like to fell over backwards. I guess it come as somethin of a shock to her to meet a even bigger liar than what she was. But he told the naked truth. Of course she called his hand on it. Said she knew for a fact he drank. Said everbody in Jefferson Davis County knew he drank and drank plenty and was wild as a buck. He never batted an eye. Said he used to but he quit. She asked him when did he quit and he said I just now did. And she went out with him. And as far as I know he never took another drink. Till she quit him of course. By then he had a lot of catchin up to do. Tell me about the evils of liquor. Liquor aint nothin. But he was changed from that day.

Is she still as good lookin?

I dont know. I aint seen her. Rachel said she was. Satan hath power to assume a pleasing form. Them big blue eyes. Knew more ways to turn a man's head than the devil's grandmother. I dont know where they learn it at. Hell, she wasnt but seventeen.

They're born with it, Troy said. They dont have to learn it.

I hear you.

What they dont seem to learn is not to just run over the top of some poor son of a bitch for the pure enjoyment of it.

Billy sipped his whiskey.

Let me have your glass, Elton said.

He set it on the floor between his feet and poured the whiskey and recapped the bottle and reached and passed the glass across.

Thanks, said Billy.

Were you in the war? Elton said.

No. I was four-F.

Elton nodded.

I tried to enlist three different times but they wouldnt take me.

I know you did. I tried to get overseas but I spent the whole war at Camp Pendleton. Johnny fought all over the Pacific theatre. He had whole companies shot out from under him. Never got a scratch. I think it bothered him.

Troy handed across his glass and Elton set it on the floor and poured it and passed it back. Then he poured his own. He sat back. What are you lookin at? he asked the dog. The dog looked away.

The thing that bothers me and then I'll shut up about it is that we had a hell of a row the mornin and I never had the chance to make it up. I told him to his face that he was a damn fool—which he was—and that the worst thing he could do to the old boy was to let him have her. Which it was. I knew all about her by then. We like to come to blows over it. I never told you that. It was bad. I never saw him alive again. I should of just kept out of it. Anybody in the state he was in you cant talk to em noway. No use to try even.

Troy watched him. You told me, he said.

Yeah. I guess I did. I dont dream about him anymore. I used to all the time. I'd have these conversations with him.

I thought you was goin to get off the subject.

All right. It still seems like about the only subject there is, though. Dont it?

He rose heavily from the chair with bottle and glass in hand. Let's walk out to the barn. I show you the foal that Jones mare throwed you never did think much of. Just bring your all glasses. I got the bottle.

* * *

THEY RODE ALL MORNING through the open juniper country, keeping to the gravelly ridges. A storm was making up over the Sierra Viejas to the west and over the broad plain that ran south from the Guadalupe down around the Cuesta del Burro range and on to Presidio and the border. They crossed the upper reaches of the creek at noon and sat among the yellow leaves and watched leaves turn and drift in a pool while they ate the lunch that Rachel had packed for them.

Look at this, said Troy.

What is it?

A tablecloth.

Damn.

He poured coffee from a thermos into their cups. The turkey sandwiches they ate were wrapped in cloth.

What's in the other thermos?

Soup.

Soup?

Soup.

Damn.

They ate.

How long has he been manager down here?

About two years.

Billy nodded. Did he not offer to hire you on before now?

He did. I told him I didnt mind workin with him but I wasnt all that sure about workin for him.

What made you change your mind?

I aint changed it. I'm just thinkin about it.

They ate. Troy nodded downcountry. They say there's been a white man ambushed every mile of this draw.

Billy studied the country. Looks like they'd of learned to stay out of it.

When they'd done eating Troy poured the rest of the coffee into their cups and screwed the cap back on the thermos and laid it by with the soup and the sandwich cloths and the stacked folded tablecloth to pack back in the saddlebags. They sat sipping the coffee. The horses standing downstream side by side looked up from their drinking in the creek. They had white leaves stuck to their noses.

Elton's got his own notions about what happened, Troy said. Johnny if he hadnt of found that girl would of found somethin else. You couldnt head him. Elton says he changed. He never changed. He was four years older than me. Not a lot of years. But he walked ground I never see. Glad not to see. People always said he was bullheaded, but it wasnt just that. He fought Daddy one time he wasnt but fifteen. Fistfought him. Made the old man fight him. Told him to his face that he respected him and all but that he wasnt goin to take what he said. Somethin the old man had chewed him out over. I cried like a baby. He didnt cry. Kept gettin up. Nose all busted and all. The old man kept tellin him to stay down. Hell, the old man was cryin. I hope I never see nothin like it again. I can think about it now and it makes me sick. And there was nothin any mortal man could of done to of stopped it.

What happened?

The old man finally walked off. He was beat and he knew it. Johnny standin there. Couldnt hardly stand up. Callin to him to come back. The old man wouldnt even turn around. He just went on to the house.

Troy looked into the bottom of his cup. He slung the dregs out across the leaves.

It wasn't just her. There's a kind of man that when he can't have what he wants he won't take the next best thing but the worst he can find. Elton thinks he was that kind and maybe he was. But I think he loved that girl. I think he knew what she was and he didn't care. I think it was his own self he was blind to. I think he was just lost. This world was never made for him. He'd outlived it before he could walk. Get married. Hell. He couldn't even stand to wear lace-up shoes.

You liked him though.

Troy looked off down through the trees. Well, he said. I don't guess like really says it. I can't talk about it. I wanted to be like him. But I wasn't. I tried.

He was your dad's favorite I reckon.

Oh yeah. It wasn't a problem with anybody. It was just known. Accepted. Hell. It wasn't even a contest. You ready?

I'm ready.

He rose. He placed the flat of his hand in the small of his back and stretched. He looked at Billy. I loved him, he said. So did Elton. You couldn't not. That was all there was to it.

He folded the cloths under his arm together with the thermos bottles. They hadn't even looked to see what the soup was. He turned and looked back at Billy. So how do you like the country?

I like it.

I do too. Always have.

So you comin down here?

No.

It was dusk when they rode into Fort Davis. Nighthawks were circling over the old parade grounds when they passed and the sky over the mountains behind them was blood red. Elton was waiting with the truck and horsetrailer in front of the Limpia Hotel. They unsaddled the horses in the graveled parking lot and put the saddles in the bed of the truck and wiped the horses down and loaded them in the trailer and went into the hotel and through the lobby to the coffeeshop.

How did you like that little horse? said Elton.

I liked him fine, said Billy. We got along good.

They sat and studied the menus. What are you all havin? said Elton.

They left around ten o'clock. Elton stood in the yard with his hands in his back pockets. He was still standing there, just the silhouette of him against the porchlight, when they rounded the curve at the end of the drive and went on toward the highway.

Billy drove. He looked over at Troy. You goin to stay awake aint you?

Yeah. I'm awake.

You've done decided?

Yeah, I think so.

We're goin to have to go somewheres.

Yeah. I know it.

You aint asked me what I thought.

Well. You aint comin down here unless I do and I aint. So what would be the use in m askin?

Billy didnt answer.

After a while Troy said: Hell, I knew I wasnt comin back down here.

Yeah.

You go back home and everthing you wished was different is still the same and everthin you wished was the same is different.

I know what you mean.

I think especially if you're the youngest. You wasnt the youngest in your family was you?

No. I was the oldest.

You dont want to be the youngest. I can tell you right now. There aint no percentage in it.

They drove on through the mountains. About a mile past the intersection with highway 16 there was a truckload of Mexicans pulled off onto the grass. They stood almost into the road waving their hats. Billy slowed.

The hell with that, said Troy.

Billy drove past. He looked in the rearview mirror but he could see nothing but the dark of the road and the deep of the desert night. He pulled the truck slowly to a halt.

Damn it, Parham, Troy said.

I know. I just cant do it.

You're fixin to get us in a jackpot here we wont get home till daylight.

I know it.

He put the truck into reverse and began to grind slowly back down the highway, using the white line running from under the front of the truck to steer by. When the other truck hove into view alongside them he could see that the right front tire was down.

They gathered around the cab. Punchada, they said. Tenemos una llanta punchada.

Puedo verlo, said Billy. He pulled off the road and climbed out. Troy lit a cigarette and shook his head.

They needed a jack. Did they have a spare? Sí. Por supuesto.

He got the jack out of the bed and they carried it back to the truck and commenced to jack the front end up. They had two spares and neither of them would hold air. They spelled each other at the antique tirepump. Finally they raised up and looked at Billy.

He got the tiretools out of the truckbed and came around and got the patchkit and flashlight from under the seat. They carried one of the spares out into the road and laid it down and stood on it to break the bead and then the man who'd taken the tools from Billy stepped forward and began to pry the tire up off the rim while the others watched. The innertube that he snaked out of the tire's inner cavity was made of red rubber and there was a whole plague of patches upon it. He laid it out on the macadam and Billy trained the light

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