



CORMAC McCARTHY

PULITZER PRIZE-WINNING AUTHOR OF *THE ROAD*

THE PASSENGER

ALSO BY CORMAC McARTHUR

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*All the Pretty Horses*

*The Stonemason* (a play)

*The Gardener's Son* (a screenplay)

*Blood Meridian*

*Suttree*

*Child of God*

*Outer Dark*

*The Orchard Keeper*

# THE PASSENGER

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Cormac McCarthy



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*It had snowed lightly in the night and her frozen hair was gold and crystalline and her eyes were frozen cold and hard as stones. One of her yellow boots had fallen off and stood in the snow beneath her. The shape of her coat lay dusted in the snow where she'd dropped it and she wore only a white dress and she hung among the bare gray poles of the winter trees with her head bowed and her hands turned slightly outward like those of certain ecumenical statues whose attitude asks that their history be considered. That the deep foundation of the world be considered where it has its being in the sorrow of her creatures. The hunter knelt and stogged his rifle upright in the snow beside him and took off his gloves and let them fall and folded his hands one upon the other. He thought that he should pray but he'd no prayer for such a thing. He bowed his head. Tower of Ivory, he said. House of Gold. He knelt there for a long time. When he opened his eyes he saw a small shape half buried in the snow and he leaned and dusted away the snow and picked up a gold chain that held a steel key, a whitegold ring. He slipped them into the pocket of his huntingcoat. He'd heard the wind in the night. The wind's work. A trashcan clattering over the bricks behind his house. The snow blowing out there in the forest in the dark. He looked up into those cold enameled eyes glinting blue in the weak winter light. She had tied her dress with a red sash so that she'd be found. Some bit of color in the scrupulous desolation. On this Christmas day. This cold and barely spoken Christmas day.*

# I

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*This then would be Chicago in the winter of the last year of her life. In a week's time she would return to Stella Maris and from there wander away into the bleak Wisconsin woods. The Thalidomide Kid found her in a roominghouse on Clark Street. Near North Side. He knocked at the door. Unusual for him. Of course she knew who it was. She'd been expecting him. And anyway it wasn't really a knock. Just a sort of slapping sound.*

*He paced up and back at the foot of her bed. He stopped to speak and thought better of it and paced again, kneading his hands before him like the villain in a silent film. Except of course they weren't really hands. Just flippers. Sort of like a seal has. In the left of which he now cradled his chin as he paused and stood to study her. Back by popular demand, he said. In the flesh.*

*It took you long enough to get here.*

*Yeah. The lights were against us all the way.*

*How did you know which room it was?*

*Easy. Room 4-C. I foresaw it. What are you using for money?*

*I've still got money.*

*The Kid looked around. I like what you've done with the place. Maybe we can tour the garden after tea. What are your plans?*

*I think you know what my plans are.*

*Yeah. Things don't look too promising, do they?*

*Nothing's forever.*

*You leaving a note?*

*I'm writing my brother a letter.*

*A wintry summary I'll wager.*

*The Kid was at the window looking out at the raw cold. The snowy park and the frozen lake beyond. Well, he said. Life. What can you say? It's not for everybody. Jesus, the winters are confining.*

*Is that it?*

*Is what it.*

*Is that all you have to say?*

*I'm thinking.*

*He was pacing again. Then he stopped. What if we packed up and just skedaddled?*

*It wouldnt make any difference.*

*What if we stayed?*

*What, another eight years of you and your penny dreadful friends?*

*Nine, Mathgirl.*

*Nine then.*

*Why not?*

*No thank you.*

*He paced. Slowly rubbing his small scarred head. He looked like he'd been brought into the world with icetongs. He stopped at the window again. You'll miss us, he said. We've come a long way together.*

*Sure, she said. It's been just wonderful. Look. This is all beside the point. Nobody's going to miss anybody.*

*We didnt even have to come, you know.*

*I dont know what you had to do. I'm not conversant with your duties. I never was. And now I dont care.*

*Yeah. You always did think the worst.*

*And was seldom disappointed.*

*Not every ectromelic hallucination who shows up in your boudoir on your birthday is out to get you. We tried to spread a little sunshine in a troubled world. What's wrong with that?*

*It's not my birthday. And I think we know what it is you've been spreading. Anyway, you're not going to get in my good graces so just forget it.*

*You dont have any good graces. You're fresh out.*

*All the better.*



*The Kid was looking around the room. Jesus, he said. This place really sucks. Did you see what just crossed the floor? What, are we completely out of Zyklon B? You were never exactly Mama's little housekeeper but I think you've outdone yourself here. Time was you wouldnt be caught dead in a dump like this. Are you seeing to your person?*

*That's none of your business.*

*One more in a long history of unkempt premises. Yeah, well. You dont know what's in the offing, do you? If you'll pardon the pun. Ever thought about taking the veil? Okay. Just thought I'd ask.*

*Why dont we just make what amends we can and let the rest go. Dont make it worse than it is.*

*Yeah yeah sure sure.*

*You knew this was coming. You like to pretend that I have secrets from you.*

*You do. Have secrets. Christ it's cold in here. You could hang meat in this fucking place. You called me a spectral operator.*

*I what?*

*Called me a spectral operator.*

*I never called you any such thing. It's a mathematical term.*

*Yeah. Say you.*

*You can look it up.*

*You always say that.*

*You never do that.*

*Yeah, well. It's water under the bridge.*

*Is that what it is? What, you're worried about a low grade on your job report?*

*Call it what you like, Princess. We did the best we could. The malady lingers on.*

*That's all right. It wont linger much longer.*

*Yeah, I keep forgetting. Off to the bourne from whence no traveler whatever the fuck.*

*You keep forgetting?*

*Figure of speech. I dont forget much. Of course you dont seem to have all that much in the way of recollection concerning the state we found you in when we first showed up.*

*I dont have to recollect it. I'm still in it.*

*Yeah, right. Correct me if I'm wrong but I think I remember a young girl on tiptoes peering through a high aperture infrequently reported upon in the archives. What did she see? A figure at the gate? But that aint the question, is it? The question is did it see her? A small bore of light. Who would notice? But the hounds of hell can pass through the weem of a ring. Am I right or what?*

*I was fine till you showed up.*

*Jesus you're a piece of work. Did you know that? Still, I've got to hand it to you. As the trick said to the blind hooker. Hell's own, drooling and leering, and she's trying to look over their shoulder. What's out there? Dunno. Some atavism out of a dead ancestor's psychosis come in out of the rain. Over there smoking in the corner. Well what the hell. Let me get the lights. No good. Shut off the projector. Who the fuck ordered this anyway? Roll up the screen and the fucking things are on the wall. The other thing you called me was a pathogen.*

*You are a pathogen.*

*See?*

*Are they coming in or not?*

*Is who coming in?*

*Cut it out. I know they're out there.*

*The horts, that would be.*

*That would be.*

*All in good time.*

*I can see their feet under the door. I can see the shadows of their feet.*

*Feet and the shadows of feet. Just like in the real world.*

*What are they waiting for?*

*Who knows? Maybe they dont feel welcome.*

*That never stopped them before.*

*The Kid arched one mothgnawn eyebrow. Yeah? he said.*

*Yeah, she said. Pulling the blanket about her shoulders. No one invited you. You just showed up.*

*Okay, said the Kid. Someone in the hallway, right? Well let's take a look.*

*He skated to the door in a long glissade and stopped and pushed back his sleeve and gripped the knob with his flipper. Ready? he called. He hauled the door open. The hallway was empty. He looked back over his shoulder at her. Looks like they flew the coop. Unless—how do I put this—it was your imagination?*

*I know they were there. I can smell them. I can smell Miss Vivian's perfume. And I can certainly smell Grogan.*

*Yeah? Could just be somebody cooking cabbages down the hall. Anything else? Any sulphur? Brimstone?*

*He shut the door. Immediately the crowd outside was back. Shuffling and coughing. He rubbed his flippers together. As if to warm them. All right. Where was I? Maybe we should bring you up to date on some of the projects. You might stabilize a bit if you saw some of the progress we've made.*

*Stabilize?*

*We ran the stuff we got from you and so far everything looks good.*

*What stuff you got from me? You didnt get any stuff from me.*

*Yeah, right. We're still getting one hundred leptons to the drachma which is okay in the sense that it's not really wrong but we hope that most of this classical stuff will come out in the wash and we can get down to the renormal. You're always going to see different shit once you get everything under the light. You just differentiate, that's all. No shadows at this scale of course. You got these black interstices you're looking at. We know now that the continua dont actually continue. That there aint no linear, Laura. However you cook it down it's going to finally come to periodicity. Of course the light wont subtend at this level. Wont reach from shore to shore, in a manner of speaking. So what is it that's in the in-between that you'd like to mess with but cant see because of the aforementioned difficulties? Dunno. What's that you say? Not much help? How come this and how come that? I dont know. How come sheep dont shrink in the rain? We're working without a net here. Where there's no space you cant extrapolate. Where would you go? You send stuff out but you dont know where it's been when you get it back. All right. No need to get your knickers in a twist. You just need to knuckle down and do some by god calculating. That's where you come in. You got stuff here that is*

*maybe just virtual and maybe not but still the rules have got to be in it or you tell me where the fuck are the rules located? Which of course is what we're after, Alice. The blessed be to Jesus rules. You put everything in a jar and then you name the jar and go from there à la the Gödel and Church crowd and in the meantime real stuff which is probably some substrate of the substrate is hauling ass off down the road at deformable speeds with the provision that what has no mass has no volume variant or otherwise and therefore no shape and what cant flatten cant inflate and vice versa in the best commutative tradition and at this point—to borrow a term—we're stuck. Right?*

*You dont know what you're talking about. It's all gibberish.*

*Yeah? Well just remember whose hand is on the nandgate Ducky. Because it aint the cradlerocker and it aint the dude in the runic tunic. If you get my drift. Hold it. I got a call. He rummaged in his pockets and produced an enormous phone and clapped it to his small and gnarly ear. Make it quick, Dick. We're in conference. Yeah. A semihostile. Right. Base Two. We're on fucking oxygen up here. No. No. Tough titty. Two wrongs dont make a riot. They're a pack of dimpled fuckwits and you can tell them I said so. Call me back.*

*He rang off and pushed the antenna down with the heel of his flipper and shoved the phone back into his clothes and looked at her. There's always somebody that doesnt get the word.*

*Who doesnt get.*

*Right. Back to the charts. I know what you're thinking. But sometimes you just got to go for the equivalence. Run a montecarlo on the motherfucker and be done with it. For better or worse. We aint got till Christmas.*

*It is Christmas. Almost.*

*Yeah, well. Whatever. Where was I?*

*Does it make any difference?*

*Your number one lab device is going to be the servomechanism. Master and slave. Hook up a pantograph. Put the stylus in the dilemma and rotate. Count to four. Sign to sign. Repeat until the lemniscate appears.*

*The Kid did a little buck and wing and another long slide across the linoleum and stopped and began to pace again. They're going for the big*

*Kahuna. Boom boom time on the savannah, Hannah. Plenty of broads in the mix too in spite of all the whining from the sci-fems. I had my people check it out. You got your Madam Curry. Your Pamela Dirac.*

*Your who?*

*Not to mention others nameless for the nonce. Jesus will you cheer up? You need to get out more. What was it you said? After the math comes the aftermath? Tell you what. Comic interlude. Okay? Stop me if you've heard this one. Mickey Mouse is filing for divorce and the judge looks down and he says: I understand that it is your contention that your wife Minnie Mouse is mentally deranged. Is that correct? And Mickey says: No, Your Honor, that's not what I said. What I said was she's fucking nuts.*

*The Kid stomped around the room holding himself at the waist and laughing his yukking laugh.*

*You always get everything wrong. What are you laughing at?*

*Whooh, he gasped. What?*

*You always get everything wrong. It's Goofy. It's not nuts.*

*What's the difference?*

*She was fucking Goofy. You dont even get it.*

*Yeah, well. We got you. Anyway the point is that you need to snap out of it. What do you think? At the last minute little Bobby Shafto is going to wake from the dead and come and rescue you? Silver buckles on his shoes or whatever the fuck? He's out of the loop, Louise. Since he duffeled his head in his racing machine.*

*She looked away. The Kid shaded his eyes with one flipper. Well, he said. That got her attention.*

*You dont know what you're talking about.*

*Yeah? How long's he been snoozing now? A couple of months?*

*He's still alive.*

*He's still alive. Oh, well shit. If he's still alive what the hell. Why dont you come off it? We both know why you're not sticking around vis-à-vis the fallen one. Dont we? What's the matter? Cat got your tongue?*

*I'm going to bed.*

*It's because we dont know what's going to wake up. If it wakes up. We both know what the chances are of his coming out of this with his mentis intactus and gutsy girl that you are I dont see you being quite so deeply*

*enamored of whatever vestige might still be lurking there behind the clouded eye and the drooling lip. Well what the hell. You never know what's in the cards, do you? You'd probably have wound up back in Chitlinland. Just the two of you. Dining on fatback and harmony grits or whatever the fuck it is that they eat down there in the land of the mammyjammer. Not exactly hobnobbing around Europe with the motorcar set but at least it's quiet.*

*That's not going to happen.*

*I know it's not going to happen.*

*Good.*

*So where do we go from here?*

*I'll send you a postcard.*

*You never did before.*

*This will be different.*

*I'll bet. Are you going to call your grandmother?*

*And tell her what?*

*I dont know. Something. Jesus, Jasmine. There's lots left to do you know.*

*Maybe. But not by me.*

*What about the nightgate and the lair of the unspeakables? Not scared of that?*

*I'll take my chances. I'm guessing that when I trip the breaker the board goes to black.*

*We really put ourselves out for you you know.*

*I'm sorry.*

*What if I was to tell you stuff I'm not supposed to tell you?*

*Not interested.*

*Stuff you really would like to know.*

*You dont know anything. You just make things up.*

*Yeah. But some of it's pretty cool.*

*Some of it.*

*How about this: What's black and white and red all over?*

*I cant begin to think.*

*Trotsky in a tuxedo.*

*Great.*

*Okay. How about this one. A farmer finds two boll weevils in his cotton patch.*

*You told me.*

*I never.*

*He chose the lesser of two weevils.*

*Yeah. Okay. Look. I'm putting together some new acts. I got some of the old Chautauqua stuff lined up. You always had a taste for the classics. A little costume repair. Couple of weeks' rehearsal.*

*Good night.*

*I even got a lead on some more eight millimeter. Not to mention a shoebox full of snaps from the forties. Los Alamos stuff. And some letters.*

*What letters?*

*Family letters. Letters from your mother.*

*You're full of it. All the letters were stolen.*

*Yeah? Maybe. What are you going to do?*

*Go to sleep.*

*I mean long range.*

*I'm talking long range.*

*All right. Save the best for last. Of course.*

*Dont put yourself out.*

*It's all right. It's not like I didnt know where all this was going. Who knows? You might want to see how you'll be spending your time. The past is the future. Close your eyes.*

*What if I dont want to close my eyes?*

*Humor me.*

*Yeah, sure.*

*All right. We'll do it the oldfashioned way. What do I know? This should be rich.*

*He pulled a large silk square from somewhere about his person and fluffed it aloft and caught it and stretched it and turned it both sides for her to see. He held it out and shook it. Then he snatched it away. In a canebottomed chair sat an old man in a dusty black clawhammer coat. Striped trousers and gray waistcoat. Black kidskin ankletop shoes and moleskin spats with pearlydink buttons. The Kid took a bow and stepped*

back and looked him up and down. Well. Where did we dig him up at, hey? Yuk yuk yuk.

He slapped the old man on the back and a cloud of dust billowed. The old man bent forward coughing. The Kid stepped away and fanned at the dust with his flipper. Jesus. Been a while since this one's seen the light of day, what? Well, Pops, how's the world look to you? We could use an outside opinion.

The old man raised his head and looked around. Pale and sunken eyes. He adjusted his cravat with a lurching upward motion of the knot and squinted and peered.

That suit's a classic, hey? said the Kid. A bit the worse for the ground damp. He was married in that outfit. Little wifey was sixteen. Of course he'd been banging her for a couple of years so that would put her at fourteen. Finally managed to knock her up and hey, here we all are. The dirty bugger was older than her father. Well the wedding bells did ring summarily. Eighteen and ninety-seven I believe was the year. A formal do. White shotguns. Anyway that's pretty much it. I thought the old fart might have something to say but he seems somewhat confused. Isn't he sort of listing a bit to the starboard?

The Kid straightened the old man in his chair and stepped back and measured him with one eye for verticality. Holding up an oarlike flipper and squinting. Maybe we could use a spirit level, what do you think? Yuk yuk yuk. Well, what the hell. So he's not a bundle of laughs. Wait a minute. It's his teeth. He's missing his goddamned teeth.

The old man had opened his leather mouth and was at pulling wads of stained cotton from his cheeks and stuffing them into the pocket of his coat. He cleared his throat and stared about bleakly.

What's he doing now? said the Kid. Something in his waistcoat pocket. What is that, his watch? Jesus. Don't tell me he's winding it? He's listening to it? It can't be fucking running. Nope. He's shaking it. Nicelooking watch actually. Half Hunter. Deadbeat escapement no doubt. Attaboy. Give it a shake. Nope. Nothing doing.

The old man clacked his gums. Wait for it, said the Kid. It's coming. News from beyond the something. Damned little thanks I get for all this shit I do for you.



*Where, wheezed the old man, is the toilet?*

*The Kid straightened up. What the fuck. Where's the toilet? That's it? I'm a son of a bitch. How about you get your cheesemold ass out of here? Where's the toilet? Bloody Christ. It's down the fucking hall. Just get the fuck out.*

*The old man rose from his chair and slouched toward the door. A fine dust sifted to the floor behind him. Some small creature fell out of his clothes and scurried away under the bed. He fumbled with the doorknob and got the door open and lurched out into the hallway and was gone. Christ, said the Kid. He went to the door and slapped it shut and turned and leaned against it. He shook his head. Well. What ya gonna do? Bad idea, okay? Fuck it. Some get rained out. Why dont we just bring in a few of the old gang. Maybe cheer us up a bit.*

*I dont want to bring in some of the old gang. I'm going to bed.*

*You said that.*

*Good. Watch me.*

*Look, Ducklet, I dont want to belabor anything here but you're on fast forward to fuck-all.*

*And you're here to torment me.*

*You all right? Not feverish? You want a glass of water?*

*She curled up in the bed and pulled the covers over herself. Douse the lights when you leave.*

*The Kid paced. Your name didnt get pulled out of a hat, you know. I dont know what it is that you're supposed to know and what it is you aint. I just work here. I'm an operator? So I'm an operator. And maybe somebody knows what's coming down the pike but it's not yours truly. Come on. I cant talk to you with your head under the bloody covers. You're not even going to say goodbye?*

*She pushed the covers back. Open the door and I'll wave.*

*The Kid stepped to the door and opened it. They were all there. Peering in to see, waving, some on tiptoe. Goodbye, she called. Goodbye. The Kid ushered them away with a shooining motion. Like a nun with schoolchildren. He pushed the door shut. Okay, he said.*

*Are we done now?*

*I dont know, Sweets. You're not making this easy. I'm not coming with you to the bin you know.*

*Good.*

*Concentrated populations of the deranged assume certain powers. It has an unsettling effect. You spend some time in a nuthouse and you'll see.*

*I know. I have. I did.*

*Choice is the name you give to what you got.*

*Stop quoting me.*

*You dont want to talk to me.*

*No.*

*Anything at all here? Any last words of advice for the living?*

*Yes. Dont.*

*Jesus. That's cold.*

*Let's just turn out the lights and call it a life.*

*We'll miss you.*

*Will you miss yourself?*

*We'll be around. There's always work to be done.*

*He looked a bit slumpshouldered standing there but he roused himself.*

*Okay, he said. If that's it that's it. I can take a hint.*

*He folded one flipper across his small paunch and made a sort of bow and then he was gone. She pulled the covers over her head. Then she heard the door open again. When she looked the Kid had come in once more and he stepped quietly to the center of the room and hefted the canebottomed chair by one slat and shouldered it and turned and went out and pulled the door shut after him.*

—

*She slept and sleeping she dreamt that she was running after a train with her brother running along the cinderpath and in the morning she put that in her letter. We were running after the train Bobby and it was drawing away from us into the night and the lights were dimming away in the darkness and we were stumbling along the track and I wanted to stop but you took my hand and in the dream we knew that we had to keep the train in sight or we would lose it. That following the track would not help us. We*

*were holding hands and we were running and then I woke up and it was day.*

**H**e sat wrapped in one of the gray rescue blankets from the emergency bag and drank hot tea. The dark sea lapped about. The Coast Guard boat that had pulled up a hundred yards off sat rocking in the swells with the running lights on and beyond that ten miles to the north you could see the lights of trucks moving along the causeway, coming out of New Orleans and heading east along US 90 toward Pass Christian, Biloxi, Mobile. Mozart's second violin concerto was playing on the tapedeck. The air temperature was forty-four degrees and it was three seventeen in the morning.

The tender was lying on his elbows with the headset on watching the dark water beneath them. From time to time the sea would flare with a soft sulphurous light where forty feet down Oiler was working with the cuttingtorch. Western watched the tender and he blew on the tea and sipped it and he watched the lights moving along the causeway like the slow cellular crawl of waterdrops on a wire. Strobing faintly where they passed behind the concrete balusters. There was an onshore wind coming up past the western tip of Cat Island and there was a light chop to the water. Smell of oil and the rich tidal funk of mangrove and saltgrass from the islands. The tender sat up and took off the headset and began to rifle through the toolbox.

How's he doing?

Doin okay.

What's he want?

The big sidecutters.

He hooked a set of shears to a carabiner and snapped the carabiner over the workline and watched the shears slide into the sea. He looked at Western.

How deep can you use acetylene?

Thirty, thirty-five feet.

And after that it's oxyarc.

Yes.