

*Cornmac*

# MCCARTHY

*The*

SUNSET

LIMITED

NOTHING SHORT OF DAZZLING.

A NOVEL

SO ASTONISHINGLY AFFECTING,

IN DRAMATIC

SO POWERFUL, SO STIMULATING!

FORM

CHICAGO TRIBUNE

## CORMAC McCARTHY

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# THE SUNSET LIMITED

*A Novel in Dramatic Form*

CORMAC McCARTHY

*Vintage International*

Vintage Books

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New York

*This is a room in a tenement building in a black ghetto in New York City. There is a kitchen with a stove and a large refrigerator. A door to the outer hallway and another presumably to a bedroom. The hallway door is fitted with a bizarre collection of locks and bars. There is a cheap formica table in the room and two chrome and plastic chairs. There is a drawer in the table. On the table is a bible and a newspaper. A pair of glasses. A pad and pencil. A large black man is sitting in one chair (stage right) and in the other a middle-aged white man dressed in running pants and athletic shoes. He wears a T-shirt and the jacket—which matches the pants—hangs on the chair behind him.*

Black     So what am I supposed to do with you, Professor?

White     Why are you supposed to do anything?

I done told you. This aint none of my doin. I left out of here

Black     this mornin to go to work you wasnt no part of my plans at all. But here you is.

White     It doesnt mean anything. Everything that happens doesnt mean something else.

Black     Mm hm. It dont.

White     No. It doesnt.

Black     What's it mean then?

It doesnt mean anything. You run into people and maybe

White     some of them are in trouble or whatever but it doesnt mean that you're responsible for them.

Black     Mm hm.

Anyway, people who are always looking out for perfect strangers are very often people who wont look out for the

White ones they're supposed to look out for. In my opinion. If you're just doing what you're supposed to then you dont get to be a hero.

Black And that would be me.

White I dont know. Would it?

Well, I can see how they might be some truth in that. But in this particular case I might say I sure didnt know what sort

Black of person I was supposed to be on the lookout for or what I was supposed to do when I found him. In this particular case they wasnt but one thing to go by.

White And that was?

That was that there he is standin there. And I can look at

Black him and I can say: Well, he dont *look* like my brother. But there he is. Maybe I better look again.

White And that's what you did.

Well, you was kindly hard to ignore. I got to say that your approach was pretty direct.

White I didnt approach you. I didnt even see you.

Black Mm hm.

White I should go. I'm beginning to get on your nerves.

No you aint. Dont pay no attention to me. You seem like a

Black sweet man, Professor. I reckon what I dont understand is how come you to get yourself in such a fix.

White Yeah.

Black Are you okay? Did you sleep last night?

White No.

Black When did you decide that today was the day? Was there something special about it?

White No. Well. Today is my birthday. But I certainly don't regard that as special.

Black Well happy birthday, Professor.

White Thank you.

Black So you seen your birthday was coming up and that seemed like the right day.

White Who knows? Maybe birthdays are dangerous. Like Christmas. Ornaments hanging from the trees, wreaths from the doors, and bodies from the steam pipes all over America.

Black Mm. Don't say much for Christmas, does it?

White Christmas is not what it used to be.

Black I believe that to be a true statement. I surely do.

White I've got to go.

*He gets up and takes his jacket off the back of the chair and lifts it over his shoulders and then puts his arms in the sleeves rather than putting his arms in first one at a time.*

Black You always put your coat on like that?

White What's wrong with the way I put my coat on?

Black I didnt say they was nothin wrong with it. I just wondered if that was your regular method.

White I dont have a regular method. I just put it on.

Black Mm hm.

White It's what, effeminate?

Black Mm.

White What?

Black Nothin. I'm just settin here studyin the ways of professors.

White Yeah. Well, I've got to go.

*The black gets up.*

Black Well. Let me get my coat.

White Your coat?

Black Yeah.

White Where are you going?

Black Goin with you.

White What do you mean? Going with me where?

Black Goin with you wherever you goin.

White No you're not.

Black Yeah I am.

White I'm going home.

Black All right.

White All right? You're not going home with me.

Black Sure I am. Let me get my coat.

White You cant go home with me.

Black Why not?

White You cant.

Black What. You can go home with me but I cant go home with you?

White No. I mean no, that's not it. I just need to go home.

Black You live in a apartment?

White Yes.

Black What. They dont let black folks in there?

White No. I mean of course they do. Look. No more jokes. I've got to go. I'm very tired.

Black Well I just hope we dont run into no hassle about you gettin me in there.

White You're serious.

Black Oh I think you know I'm serious.

White You cant be serious.

Black I'm as serious as a heart attack.

White Why are you doing this?

Black Me? I aint got no choice in the matter.

White Of course you have a choice.

Black No I aint.



White Who appointed you my guardian angel?

Black Let me get my coat.

White Answer the question.

Black You *know* who appointed me. I didnt ask for you to leap into my arms down in the subway this mornin.

White I didnt leap into your arms.

Black You didnt?

White No. I didnt.

Black Well how did you get there then?

*The professor stands with his head lowered. He looks at the chair and then turns and goes and sits down in it.*

Black What. Now we aint goin?

White Do you really think that Jesus is in this room?

Black No. I dont think he's in this room.

White You dont?

Black I *know* he's in this room.

*The professor folds his hands at the table and lowers his head. The black pulls out the other chair and sits again.*

Black      Its the way you put it, Professor. Be like me askin you do you *think* you got your coat on. You see what I'm sayin?

              It's not the same thing. It's a matter of agreement. If you and I say that I have my coat on and Cecil says that I'm

White      naked and I have green skin and a tail then we might want to think about where we should put Cecil so that he wont hurt himself.

Black      Who's Cecil?

White      He's not anybody. He's just a hypothetical... There's not any Cecil. He's just a person I made up to illustrate a point.

Black      Made up.

White      Yes.

Black      Mm.

White      We're not going to get into this again are we? It's not the same thing. The fact that I made Cecil up.

Black      But you did make him up.

White      Yes.

Black      And his view of things dont count.

              No. That's why I made him up. I could have changed it

White      around. I could have made you the one that didnt think I was wearing a coat.

Black      And was green and all that shit you said.

White      Yes.

Black But you didnt.

White No.

Black You loaded it off on Cecil.

White Yes.

Black But Cecil cant defend hisself cause the fact that he aint in agreement with everbody else makes his word no good. I mean aside from the fact that you made him up and he's green and everthing.

White He's not the one who's green. I am. Where is this going?

Black I'm just tryin to find out about Cecil.

White I dont think so. Can you see Jesus?

Black No. I cant see him.

White But you talk to him.

Black I dont miss a day.

White And he talks to you.

Black He has talked to me. Yes.

White Do you hear him? Like out loud?

Black Not out loud. I dont hear a voice. I dont hear my own, for that matter. But I have heard him.

White Well why couldnt Jesus just be in your head?

Black He is in my head.

White Well I don't understand what it is that you're trying to tell me.

I know you dont, honey. Look. The first thing you got to

Black     understand is that I aint got a original thought in my head.  
             If it aint got the lingerin scent of divinity to it then I aint  
             interested.

White    The lingering scent of divinity.

Black    Yeah. You like that?

White    It's not bad.

             I heard it on the radio. Black preacher. But the point is I  
             done tried it the other way. And I dont mean chippied,  
Black    neither. Runnin blindfold through the woods with the bit  
             tween your teeth. Oh man. Didnt I try it though. If you can  
             find a soul that give it a better shot than me I'd like to meet  
             him. I surely would. And what do you reckon it got me?

White    I dont know. What did it get you?

Black    Death in life. That's what it got me.

White    Death in life.

Black    Yeah. Walkin around death. Too dead to even know enough  
             to lay down.

White    I see.

Black    I dont think so. But let me ask you this question.

White    All right.

Black    Have you ever read this book?

White    I've read parts of it. I've read in it.

Black    Have you ever read it?

White    I read *The Book of Job*.

Black    Have. You. Ever. Read. It.

White No.

Black But you is read a lot of books.

White Yes.

Black How many would you say you read?

White I've no idea.

Black Ball park.

White I dont know. Two a week maybe. A hundred a year. For close to forty years.

*The black takes up his pencil and licks it and falls to squinting at his pad, adding numbers laboriously, his tongue in the corner of his mouth, one hand on his head.*

White Forty times a hundred is four thousand.

*(Almost laughing)* I'm just messin with you, Professor. Give

Black me a number. Any number you like. And I'll give you forty times it back.

White Twenty-six.

Black A thousand and forty.

White A hundred and eighteen.

Black Four thousand seven hundred and twenty.

White Four thousand seven hundred and twenty.

Black    Yeah.

White    The answer is the question.

Black    Say what?

White    That's your new number.

Black    Four thousand seven hundred and twenty?

White    Yes.

Black    That's a big number, Professor.

White    Yes it is.

Black    Do you know the answer?

White    No. I dont.

Black    It's a hundred and eighty-eight thousand and eight  
hundred.

*They sit.*

White    Let me have that.

*The black slides the pad and pencil across the table. The professor does the figures and looks at them and looks at the black. He slides the pencil and paper back across the table and sits back.*

White    How do you do that?

          Numbers is the black man's friend. Butter and eggs. Crap

Black    table. You quick with numbers you can put the mojo on you  
          brother. Confiscate the contents of his pocketbook. You get  
          a lot of time to practice that shit in the jailhouse.

White    I see.

Black    But let's get back to all them books you done read. You  
          think maybe you read four thousand books.

White    Probably. Maybe more than that.

Black    But you aint read this one.

White    No. Not the whole book. No.

Black    Why is that?

White    I dont know.

Black    What would you say is the best book that ever was wrote?

White    I have no idea.

Black    Take a shot.

White    There are a lot of good books.

Black    Well pick one.

White    Maybe *War and Peace*.

Black    All right. You think that's a better book than this one?

White    I dont know. They're different kinds of books.

Black    This *War and Peace* book. That's a book that somebody  
          made up, right?

White    Well, yes.

Black     So is that how it's different from this book?

White    Not really. In my view they're both made up.

Black    Mm. Aint neither one of em true.

White    Not in the historical sense. No.

Black    So what would be a true book?

          I suppose maybe a history book. Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of*

White    *the Roman Empire* might be one. At least the events would  
          be actual events. They would be things that had happened.

Black    Mm hm. You think that book is as good a book as this book  
          here?

White    The bible.

Black    The bible.

White    I dont know. Gibbon is a cornerstone. It's a major book.

Black    And a true book. Dont forget that.

White    And a true book. Yes.

Black    But is it as good a book.

White    I dont know. I dont know as you can make a comparison.  
          You're talking about apples and pears.

          No we aint talkin bout no apples and pears, Professor. We

Black    talkin bout books. Is that *Decline and Fall* book as good a  
          book as this book here. Answer the question.

White    I might have to say no.

Black    It's more true but it aint as good.

White    If you like.

Black    It aint what I like. It's what you said.



White All right.

*The black lays the bible back down on the table.*

Black It used to say here on the cover fore it got wore off: The greatest book ever written. You think that might be true?

White It might.

Black You read good books.

White I try to. Yes.

Black But not the best book. Why is that?

White I need to go.

Black You dont need to go, Professor. Stay here and visit with me.

White You're afraid I'll go back to the train station.

Black You might. Just stay with me.

White What if I promised I wouldnt?

Black You might anyways.

White Dont you have to go to work?

Black I was on my way to work.

White A funny thing happened to you on your way to work.

Black Yes it did.

White Will they fire you?

Black Naw. They aint goin fire me.

White You could call in.

Black Aint got a phone. Anyways, they know if I aint there I aint comin. I aint a late sort of person.

White Why dont you have a phone?

Black I dont need one. The junkies'd steal it anyways.

White You could get a cheap one.

Black You cant get too cheap for a junky. But let's get back to you.

White Let's stick with you for a minute.

Black All right.

White Can I ask you something?

Black Sure you can.

White Where were you standing? I never saw you.

Black You mean when you took your amazin leap?

White Yes.

Black I was on the platform.

White On the platform.

Black Yeah.

White Well I didnt see you.

Black I was just standin there on the platform. Mindin my own business. And here you come. Haulin ass.

White I'd looked all around to make sure there was no one there. Particularly no children. There was nobody around.

Black Nope. Just me.

White Well I dont know where you could have been.

Black Mm. Professor you fixin to get spooky on me now. Maybe I was behind a post or somethin.

White There wasnt any post.

Black So what are we sayin here? You lookin at some big black angel got sent down here to grab your honky ass out of the air at the last possible minute and save you from destruction?

White No. I dont think that.

Black Such a thing aint possible.

White No. It isnt.

Black Well you the one suggested it.

White I didnt suggest any such thing. You're the one put in the stuff about angels. I never said anything about angels. I dont believe in angels.

Black What is it you believe in?

White A lot of things.

Black All right.

White All right what?

Black All right what things.

White I believe in things.

Black You said that.

White Probably I dont believe in a lot of things that I used to believe in but that doesnt mean I dont believe in anything.

Black Well give me a for instance.

White Mostly the value of things.

Black Value of things.

White Yes.

Black Okay. What things.

White Lots of things. Cultural things, for instance. Books and music and art. Things like that.

Black All right.

White Those are the kinds of things that have value to me. They're the foundations of civilization. Or they used to have value. I suppose they don't have so much any more.

Black What happened to em?

White People stopped valuing them. I stopped valuing them. To a certain extent. I'm not sure I could tell you why. That world is largely gone. Soon it will be wholly gone.

Black I ain't sure I'm followin you, Professor.

White There's nothing to follow. It's all right. The things that I loved were very frail. Very fragile. I didn't know that. I thought they were indestructible. They weren't.

Black And that's what sent you off the edge of the platform. It wasn't nothin personal.

White It is personal. That's what an education does. It makes the world personal.

Black Hm.

White Hm what.

Well. I was just thinkin that them is some pretty powerful

words. I dont know that I got a answer about any of that and it might be that they aint no answer. But still I got to ask what is the use of notions such as them if it wont keep you glued down to the platform when the Sunset Limited comes through at eighty mile a hour.

White Good question.

Black I thought so.

I dont have an answer to any of that either. Maybe it's not logical. I dont know. I dont care. I've been asked didnt I think it odd that I should be present to witness the death of everything and I do think it's odd but that doesnt mean it's not so. Someone has to be here.

Black But you dont intend to stick around for it.

White No. I dont.

So let me see if I got this straight. You sayin that all this culture stuff is all they ever was tween you and the Sunset Limited.

White It's a lot.

Black But it busted out on you.

White Yes.

Black You a culture junky.

If you like. Or I was. Maybe you're right. Maybe I have no beliefs. I believe in the Sunset Limited.

Black Damn, Professor.

White     Damn indeed.

Black     No beliefs.

White     The things I believed in dont exist any more. It's foolish to pretend that they do. Western Civilization finally went up in smoke in the chimneys at Dachau but I was too infatuated to see it. I see it now.

Black     You a challenge, Professor. Did you know that?

White     Well, there's no reason for you to become involved in my problems. I should go.

Black     You got any friends?

White     No.

Black     You aint got even one friend?

White     No.

Black     You got to be kiddin me, Professor. Not one?

White     Not really. No.

Black     Well tell me about that one.

White     What one?

Black     The not really one.

White     I have a friend at the university. Not a close friend. We have lunch from time to time.

Black     But that's about as good as it gets.

White     What do you mean?

Black     That's about all you got in the way of friends.

White     Yes.

Black Mm. Well. If that's the best friend you got then I reckon that's your best friend. Aint it?

White I dont know.

Black What did you do to him.

White What did I do to him?

Black Yeah.

White I didnt do anything to him.

Black Mm hm.

White I didnt do anything to him. What makes you think I did something to him?

Black I dont know. Did you?

White No. What is it you think I did to him?

Black I dont know. I'm waitin on you to tell me.

White Well there's nothing to tell.

Black But you didnt leave him no note or nothin. When you decided to take the train.

White No.

Black Your best friend?

White He's not my best friend.

Black I thought we just got done decidin that he was.

White *You* just got done deciding.

Black You ever tell him you was thinkin about this?

White No.

Black Damn, Professor.

White Why should I?

Black I dont know. Maybe cause he's your best friend?

White I told you. We're not all that close.

Black Not all that close.

White No.

Black He's your best friend only you aint all that close.

White If you like.

Black Not to where you'd want to bother him about a little thing like dyin.

(*Looking around the room*) Look. Suppose I were to give you my word that I would just go home and that I wouldnt try to kill myself en route.

Black Suppose I was to give you my word that I wouldnt listen to none of your bullshit.

White So what am I, a prisoner here?

You know bettern that. Anyway, you was a prisoner fore you got here. Death Row prisoner. What did your daddy do?

White What?

Black I said what did your daddy do. What kind of work.

White He was a lawyer.

Black Lawyer.

White Yes.

Black What kind of law did he do?

He was a government lawyer. He didnt do criminal law or



White things like that.

Black Mm hm. What would be a thing *like* criminal law?

White I dont know. Divorce law, maybe.

Black Yeah. Maybe you got a point. What did he die of?

White Who said he was dead?

Black Is he dead?

White Yes.

Black What did he die of?

White Cancer.

Black Cancer. So he was sick for a while.

White Yes. He was.

Black Did you go see him?

White No.

Black How come?

White I didnt want to.

Black Well how come you didnt want to?

White I dont know. I just didnt. Maybe I didnt want to remember him that way.

Black Bullshit. Did he ask you to come?

White No.

Black But your mama did.

White She may have. I dont remember.

Black Come on, Professor. She asked you to come.

White Okay. Yes.

Black And what did you tell her?

White I told her I would.

Black But you didnt.

White No.

Black How come?

White He died.

Black Yeah, but that aint it. You had time to go see him and you didnt do it.

White I suppose.

Black You waited till he was dead.

White Okay. So I didnt go and see my father.

Your daddy is layin on his deathbed dyin of cancer. Your mama settin there with him. Holdin his hand. He in all

Black kinds of pain. And they ask you to come see him one last time fore he dies and you tell em no. You aint comin. Please tell me I got some part of this wrong.

White If that's the way you want to put it.

Black Well how would you put it?

White I dont know.

Black That's the way it is. Aint it?

White I suppose.

Black No you dont suppose. Is it or aint it?

White Yes.

Black Well. Let me see if I can find my train schedule.

*He opens the table drawer and rummages through it.*

Black     See when that next uptown express is due.

White    I'm not sure I see the humor.

I'm glad to hear you say that, Professor. Cause I aint sure either. I just get more amazed by the minute, that's all.

Black    How come you cant see yourself, honey? You plain as glass. I can see the wheels turnin in there. The gears. And I can see the light too. Good light. True light. Cant you see it?

White    No. I cant.

Black    Well bless you, brother. Bless you and keep you. Cause it's there.

*They sit.*

White    When were you in the penitentiary?

Black    Long time ago.

White    What were you in for?

Black    Murder.

White    Really?

Black Now who would claim to be a murderer that wasn't one?

White You called it the jailhouse.

Black Yeah?

White Do most blacks call the penitentiary the jailhouse?

Black Naw. Just us old country niggers. We kind of make it a point to call things for what they is. I'd hate to guess how many names they is for the jailhouse. I'd hate to have to count em.

White Do you have a lot of jailhouse stories?

Black Jailhouse stories.

White Yes.

Black I don't know. I used to tell jailhouse stories some but they kindly lost their charm. Maybe we ought to talk about somethin' more cheerful.

White Have you ever been married?

Black Married.

White Yes.

Black *(Softly)* Oh man.

White What.

Black Maybe we ought to take another look at them jailhouse stories. *(He shakes his head, laughing soundlessly. He pinches the bridge of his nose, his eyes shut.)* Oh my.

White Do you have any children?

Naw, Professor, I ain't got nobody. Everbody in my family is dead. I had two boys. They been dead for years. Just about

Black     everybody I ever knowed is dead, far as that goes. You might want to think about that. I might be a hazard to your health.

White    You were always in a lot of trouble?

Black    Yeah. I was. I liked it. Maybe I still do. I done seven years hard time and I was lucky not to of done a lot more. I hurt a lot of people. I'd smack em around a little and then they wouldnt get up again.

White    But you dont get in trouble now.

Black    No.

White    But you still like it?

Black    Well, maybe I'm just condemned to it. Bit in the ass by my own karma. But I'm on the other side now. You want to help people that's in trouble you pretty much got to go where the trouble is at. You aint got a lot of choice.

White    And you want to help people in trouble.

Black    Yeah.

White    Why is that?

*The black tilts his head and studies him.*

Black    You aint ready for that.

White    How about just the short answer.

Black That is the short answer.

White How long have you been here?

Black You mean in this buildin?

White Yes.

Black Six years. Seven, almost.

White I dont understand why you live here.

Black As compared to where?

White Anywhere.

Well I'd say this pretty much is anywhere. I could live in another buildin I reckon. This is all right. I got a bedroom where I can get away. Got a sofa yonder where people can crash. Junkies and crackheads, mostly. Of course they goin to carry off your portables so I dont own nothin. And that's good. You hang out with the right crowd and you'll finally get cured of just about ever cravin. They took the

Black refrigerator one time but somebody caught em on the stairs with it and made em bring it back up. Now I got that big sucker yonder. Traded up. Only thing I miss is the music. I aim to get me a steel door for the bedroom. Then I can have me some music again. You got to get the door and the frame together. I'm workin on that. I dont care nothin about television but I miss that music.

White You dont think this is a terrible place?

Black Terrible?

White Yes.

Black     What's terrible about it?

White    It's horrible. It's a horrible life.

Black    Horrible life?

White    Yes.

Black    Damn, Professor. This aint a horrible life. What you talkin bout?

White    This place. It's a horrible place. Full of horrible people.

Black    Oh my.

White    You must know these people are not worth saving. Even if they could be saved. Which they cant. You must know that.

Black    Well, I always liked a challenge. I started a ministry in prison fore I got out. Now that was a challenge. Lot of the brothers'd show up that they didnt really care nothin bout it. They couldnt of cared less bout the word of God. They just wanted it on their resumé.

White    Resumé?

Black    Resumé. You had brothers in there that had done some real bad shit and they wasnt sorry about a damn thing cept gettin caught. Of course the funny thing was a lot of em did believe in God. Maybe even more than these folks here on the outside. I know I did. You might want to think about that, Professor.

White    I think I'd better go.

Black    You dont need to go, Professor. What am I goin to do, you leave me settin here by myself?

White     You dont need me. You just dont want to feel responsible if anything happens to me.

Black     What's the difference?

White     I dont know. I just need to go.

Black     Just stay a while. This place is got to be more cheerful than you own.

White     I dont think you have any idea how strange it is for me to be here.

Black     I think I got some idea.

White     I have to go.

Black     Let me ask you somethin.

White     All right.

Black     You ever had one of them days when things was just sort of weird all the way around? When things just kindly fell into place?

White     I'm not sure what you mean.

Black     Just one of them days. Just kind of magic. One of them days when everthing turns out right.

White     I dont know. Maybe. Why?

Black     I just wondered if maybe it aint been kindly a long dry spell for you. Until you finally took up with the notion that that's the way the world is.

White     The way the world is.

Black     Yeah.

White     And how is that?



I dont know. Long and dry. The point is that even if it might seem that way to you you still got to understand that the sun dont shine up the same dog's ass ever day. You understand what I'm sayin?

If what you're saying is that I'm simply having a bad day that's ridiculous.

I dont think you havin a bad day, Professor. I think you havin a bad life.

You think I should change my life.

What, are you shittin me?

I have to go.

You could hang with me here a little while longer.

What about my jailhouse story?

You dont need to hear no jailhouse story.

Why not?

Well, you kind of suspicious bout everthing. You think I'm fixin to put you in the trick bag.

And you're not.

Oh no. I am. I just dont want you to know about it.

Well, in any case I need to go.

You know you aint ready to hit the street.

I have to.

I know you aint got nothin you got to do.

And how do you know that?

Black Cause you aint even supposed to be here.

White I see your point.

Black What if I was to tell you a jailhouse story? You stay then?

White All right. I'll stay for a while.

Black My man. All right. Here's my jailhouse story.

White Is it a true story?

Black Oh yeah. It's a true story. I dont know no other kind.

White All right.

All right. I'm in the chowline and I'm gettin my chow and this nigger in the line behind me gets into it with the server. Says the beans is cold and he throws the ladle down in the beans. And when he done that they was beans splashed on me. Well, I wasnt goin to get into it over some beans but it did piss me off some. I'd just put on a clean suit—you know, khakis, shirt and trousers—and you only got two a week. And I did say somethin to him like hey man, watch it, or somethin like that. But I went on, and I'm thinkin, just let it go. Let it go. And then this dude says somethin to me and I turned and looked back at him and when I done that he stuck a knife in me. I never even seen it. And the blood is just flyin. And this aint no jailhouse shiv neither. It's one of them italian switchblades. One of them black and silver jobs. And I didnt do a thing in the world but duck and step under the rail and I reached and got hold of the leg of this table and it come off in my hand

Black

just as easy. And it's got this big long screw stickin out of the end of it and I went to wailin on this nigger's head and I didnt quit. I beat on it till you couldnt hardly tell it was a head. And that screw'd stick in his head and I'd have to stand on him to pull it out again.

White What did he say?

Black What did he say?

White I mean in the line. What did he say.

Black I aint goin to repeat it.

White That doesnt seem fair.

Black Dont seem fair.

White No.

Hm. Well, here I'm tellin you a bonafide blood and guts tale

Black from the Big House. The genuine article. And I cant get you to fill in the blanks about what this nigger said?

White Do you have to use that word?

Black Use that word.

White Yes.

Black We aint makin much progress here, is we?

White It just seems unnecessary.

You dont want to hear nigger but you about to bail out on

Black me on account of I wont tell you some terrible shit the nigger said. You sure about this?

White I just dont see why you have to say that word.

Well it's my story aint it? Anyway I dont remember there

Black     bein no Afro-Americans or persons of color there. To the best of my recollection it was just a bunch of niggers.

White    Go ahead.

Well at some point I had pulled the knife out and I reckon I'd done dropped it in the floor. I'm wailin on this nigger's head and all the time I'm doin that his buddy has got hold of me from behind. But I'm holdin on to the rail with one hand and I aint goin nowhere. Course what I dont know is that this other dude has picked up the knife and he's tryin to gut me with it. I finally felt the blood and I turned around and busted him in the head and he went skitterin off across the floor, and by now they done pushed the button and the alarm is goin and everbody's down on the

Black    floor and we're in lockdown and the guard up on the tier is got a shotgun pointed at me and he hollers at me to put down my weapon and get on the floor. And he's about to shoot me when the lieutenant comes in and hollers at him to hold his fire and he tells me to throw that club down and I looked around and I'm the only one standin. I seen the nigger's feet stickin out from under the servin counter where he'd crawled so I throwed the thing down and I dont remember much after that. They told me I'd lost about half my blood. I remember slippin around in it but I thought it was this other dude's.

White    *(Dryly)* That's quite a story.

Black    Yeah. That's really just the introduction to the actual story.

White Did the man die?

No he didnt. Everbody lived. They thought he was dead but he wasnt. He never was right after that so I never had no more trouble out of him. He was missin a eye and he

Black walked around with his head sort of sideways and one arm hangin down. Couldnt talk right. They finally shipped him off to another facility.

White But that's not the whole story.

Black No. It aint.

White So what happened.

I woke up in the infirmary. They had done operated on me. My spleen was cut open. Liver. I dont know what all. I come pretty close to dyin. And I had two hundred and eighty stitches holdin me together and I was hurtin. I didnt know you could hurt that bad. And still they got me in leg irons and got me handcuffed to the bed. If you can believe

Black that. And I'm layin there and I hear this voice. Just as clear. Couldnt of been no clearer. And this voice says: If it was not for the grace of God you would not be here. Man. I tried to raise up and look around but of course I couldnt move. Wasnt no need to anyways. They wasnt nobody there. I mean, they was somebody there all right but they wasnt no use in me lookin around to see if I could see him.

White You dont think this is a strange kind of story?

Black I do think it's a strange kind of story.

White What I mean is that you didnt feel sorry for this man?

Black You gettin ahead of the story.

White The story of how a fellow prisoner became a crippled one-eyed halfwit so that you could find God.

Black Whoa.

White Well isnt it?

Black I dont know.

White You hadnt thought of it that way.

Black Oh I'd thought of it that way.

White And?

Black And what?

White Isnt that the real story?

Black Well. I dont want to get on the wrong side of you. You seem to have a powerful wish for that to be the real story. So I will say that that is certainly one way to look at it. I got to concede that. I got to keep you interested.

White String me along.

Black That okay with you?

White And then put me in the what was it? The trick bag?

Black Yeah.

White Right.

Black You got to remember this is a jailhouse story.

White All right.

Black Which you specifically asked for.

White All right.

Black     The point is, Professor, that I aint got the first notion in the world about what makes God tick. I dont know why he spoke to me. I wouldnt of.

White     But you listened.

Black     Well what choice would you have?

White     I dont know. Not listen?

Black     How you goin to do that?

White     Just dont listen.

Black     Do you think he goes around talkin to people that he knows aint goin to listen in the first place? You think he's got that kind of free time?

White     I see your point.

Black     If he didnt know I was ready to listen he wouldnt of said a word.

White     He's an opportunist.

Black     Meanin I guess that he seen somebody in a place low enough to where he ought to be ready to take a pretty big step.

White     Something like that.

Black     And you think that maybe I think that you might be in somethin like that kind of a place you own self.

White     Could be.

Black     Well I can dig that. I can dig it. Of course they is one small problem.

White     And that is.

Black I aint God.

White I'm glad to hear you say that.

Black It come as a relief to me too.

White Did you used to think you were God?

Black No. I didnt. I didnt know what I was. But I thought I was in charge. I never knowed what that burden weighed till I put it down. That might of been the sweetest thing of all. To just hand over the keys.

White Let me ask you something.

Black Ask it.

White Why cant you people just accept it that some people dont even *want* to believe in God.

Black I accept that.

White You do?

Black Sure I do. Meanin that I believe it to be a fact. I'm lookin at it ever day. I better accept it.

White Then why cant you leave us alone?

Black To do your own thing.

White Yes.

Black Hangin from them steampipes and all.

White If that's what we want to do, yes.

Black Cause he said not to. It's in here. (*Holding up the book*)

*The professor shakes his head.*



Black I guess you dont want to be happy.

White Happy?

Black Yeah. What's wrong with happy?

White God help us.

Black What. We done opened a can of worms here? What you got against bein happy?

White It's contrary to the human condition.

Black. Well. It's contrary to your condition. I got to agree with that.

White Happy. This is ridiculous.

Black Like they aint no such a thing.

White No.

Black Not for nobody.

White No.

Black Mm. How'd we get in such a fix as this?

White We were born in such a fix as this. Suffering and human destiny are the same thing. Each is a description of the other.

Black We aint talkin about sufferin. We talkin about bein happy.

White Well you cant be happy if you're in pain.

Black Why not?

White You're not making any sense.

*The black falls back clutching his chest.*

Oh them is some hard words from the professor. The preacher has fell back. He's clutchin his heart. Eyes is rolled back in his head. Wait a minute. Wait a minute folks. His eyes is blinkin. I think he's comin back. I think he's comin back.

*The black sits up and leans forward.*

The point, Professor, is that if you didnt have no pain in your life then how would you even know you *was* happy? As compared to what?

White You dont have anything to drink around here do you?

Black No, Professor, I aint. You a drinkin man?

White Are we about to get a temperance lecture?

Black Not from me.

White It's been a difficult day. I take it you dont drink.

Black I dont. I have done my share of it in my time.

White Are you in AA?

Black No. No AA. I just quit. I've had a lots of friends was drinkers. Most of em, for that matter. Most of em dead, too.

White From drinking.

Well. From drinkin or from reasons that dont get too far from drinkin. Not too long ago I had a friend to get run down by a taxicab. Now where do you reckon he was goin? Drunk.

White I dont know. Where was he going?

Black Goin after more whiskey. Had plenty at the house. But a drunk is always afraid of runnin out.

White Was he killed?

Black I hope so. We buried him.

White I suppose there's a moral to this story.

Black Well, it's just a story about what you want and what you get. Pain and happiness. I'll tell you another one.

White All right.

One Sunday they's a bunch of us settin around at my house drinkin. Sunday mornin. Favorite time for drunks to get together and drink and I'll let you think about why that might be so. Well here come one of my buddies with this girl. Evelyn. And Evelyn was drunk when she got there but we fixed her a drink and directly Redge—my buddy—he goes back in the kitchen to get him a drink only now the bottle's gone. Well, Redge has been around a few drinkin people in his time so he commences to hunt for the bottle.

Black Looks in all the cabinets and behind everthing. He cant find it but of course he knows what's happened to it so he comes back in and he sets down and he looks at Miss Evelyn settin

there on the sofa. Drunk as a goat. And he says: Evelyn, where's the whiskey? And Evelyn, she goes: Ah ghaga baba lala ghaga. And he says: Evelyn, where did you put the whiskey? Ah lala boggle blabla. And Redge is settin there and this is beginnin to piss him off just a little and he gets in her face and he goes: Ah loddle loddle blabble ghaga blabla and she says I hid it in the toilet.

White That's pretty funny

Black I thought you might like that.

White And is that where the whiskey was?

Oh yeah. That's a favorite place for drunks to hide a bottle.

But the point of course is that the drunk's concern aint that

Black he's goin to die from drinkin—which he is. It's that he's goin to run out of whiskey fore he gets a chance to do it.

Are you hungry? I can come back to this. I aint goin to lose my place.

White I'm all right. Go ahead.

Black If you was to hand a drunk a drink and tell him he really dont want it what do you reckon he'd say?

White I think I know what he'd say.

Black Sure you do. But you'd still be right.

White About him not really wanting it.

Yes. Because what he really wants he cant get. Or he thinks

Black he cant get it. So what he really dont want he cant get enough of.

White    So what is it that he really wants.

Black    You know what he really wants.

White    No I dont.

Black    Yeah you do.

White    No I dont.

Black    Hm.

White    Hm what.

Black    You a hard case, Professor.

White    You're not exactly a day at the beach yourself.

Black    You dont know what he wants.

White    No. I do not.

Black    He wants what everbody wants.

White    And that is?

Black    He wants to be loved by God.

White    I dont want to be loved by God.

          I love that. See how you cut right to it? He dont either.

Black    Accordin to him. He just wants a drink of whiskey. You a  
          smart man, Professor. You tell me which one makes sense  
          and which one dont.

White    I dont want a drink of whiskey, either.

Black    I thought you just got done askin for one?

White    I mean as a general proposition.

Black    We aint talkin about no general propositions. We talkin  
          about a drink.

White I dont have a drinking problem.

Black Well you got some kind of a problem.

White Well whatever kind of a problem I have it's not something that I imagine can be addressed with a drink of liquor.

Black Mm. I love the way you put that. So what can it be addressed with?

White I think you know what it can be addressed with.

Black The Sunset Limited.

White Yes.

Black And that's what you want.

White That's what I want. Yes.

Black That's a mighty big drink of whiskey, Professor.

White That I dont really want.

Black That you dont really want. Yes.

White Well. I think I do want it.

Black Of course you do, honey. If you didnt we wouldnt be settin here.

White Well. I disagree with you.

Black That's all right. That's the hand I'm playin.

White I dont think you understand that people such as myself see a yearning for God as something lacking in those people.

Black I do understand that. Couldnt agree more.

White You agree with that?

Black Sure I do. What's lackin is God.

White Well, as I say, we'll just have to disagree.

Black You aint closin down the forum for discussion are you?

White Not at this juncture.

Black Cause I had a little more to say.

White How did I know that?

I did go to one or two AA meetins. Lot of folks didnt like the God part of it all that much but I hadnt set there too long fore I figured out that the God part was really all the part they was. The problem wasnt that they was too much God in AA it was that they wasnt enough. And I got a pretty thick head about some things but I finally figured out that what was true about AA was probably true about a lot of other things too.

White Well I'm sorry, but to me the whole idea of God is just a load of crap.

*The black puts his hand to his chest and leans back.*

Black Oh Lord have mercy oh save us Jesus. The professor's done blasphemed all over us. We aint never gone be saved now.

*He closes his eyes and shakes his head, laughing silently.*

White    You dont find that an evil thing to say.

Black    Oh Mercy. No, Professor. I dont. But you does.

White    No I dont. It's simply a fact.

Black    No it aint no simply a fact. It's the biggest fact about you.  
It's just about the only fact.

White    But you dont seem to think that it's so bad.  
Well, I know it to be curable. So it aint *that* bad. If you  
talkin about what that man up there thinks about it I figure  
he's probably seen enough of it that it dont bother him as  
Black    bad as you might think. I mean, what if somebody told you  
that you didnt exist. And you settin there listenin to him  
say it. That wouldnt really piss you off, would it?

White    No. You'd just feel sorry for them.  
I think that's right. You might even try to get some help for  
em. Now in my case he had to holler at me out loud and me  
layin on a slab in two pieces that they'd sewed back  
Black    together where some nigger done tried to core me like a  
apple but still I got to say that if God is God then he can  
speak to your heart at any time and furthermore I got to say  
that if he spoke to me—which he did—then he can speak to  
anybody.

*The black drums his fingers lightly three times on the table and looks at*



*the professor.*

*Silence.*

Black      Well. Wonder what this crazy nigger fixin to do. He liable to put the mojo on me. Be speakin in tongues here directly. I better get my ass out of here. He's liable to try and steal my pocketbook. Need to get my ass down to the train depot fore somethin happen to me. What we goin to do with you, Professor?

White      I need to go.

Black      I thought you was goin to stay and visit with me some.

White      Look. I know I owe you a good deal. In the eyes of the world at least. Cant I just give you something and we'll call it square? I could give you some money. Something like that.

*The black studies him. He doesnt answer.*

White      I could give you a thousand dollars. Well. That's not very much, I guess. I could give you three thousand, say.

Black      You dont have no notion the trouble you in, do you?

White      I dont know what you mean.

Black I know you dont.

White I'd just like to settle this someway.

Black It aint me you got to settle with.

White Do you really believe I was sent to you by God?

Black Oh it's worse than that.

White How do you mean?

Belief aint like unbelief. If you a believer then you got to come finally to the well of belief itself and then you dont have to look no further. There aint no further. But the unbeliever has got a problem. He has set out to unravel the world, but everthing he can point to that aint true leaves two new things layin there. If God walked the earth when

Black he got done makin it then when you get up in the mornin you get to put your feet on a real floor and you dont have to worry about where it come from. But if he didnt then you got to come up with a whole other description of what you even mean by real. And you got to judge everthing by that same light. If light it is. Includin yourself. One question fits all. So what do you think, Professor? Is you real?

White I'm not buying it.

Black That's all right. It's been on the market a long time and it'll be there a while yet.

White Do you believe everything that's in there? In the bible?

Black The literal truth?

White Yes.

Black Probably not. But then you already know I'm a outlaw.

White What is it you would disagree with?

Maybe the notion of original sin. When Eve eat the apple and it turned everybody bad. I dont see people that way. I think for the most part people are good to start with. I think

Black evil is somethin you bring on your own self. Mostly from wantin what you aint supposed to have. But I aint goin to set here and tell you about me bein a heretic when I'm tryin to get you to quit bein one.

White Are you a heretic?

Black You tryin to put me in the trick bag, Professor.

White No I'm not. Are you?

Black No more than what a man should be. Even a man with a powerful belief. I aint a doubter. But I am a questioner.

White What's the difference?

Black Well, I think the questioner wants the truth. The doubter wants to be told there aint no such thing.

White *(Pointing at bible)* You dont think you have to believe everything in there in order to be saved?

No. I dont. I dont think you even have to read it. I aint for sure you even got to know there is such a book. I think whatever truth is wrote in these pages is wrote in the human heart too and it was wrote there a long time ago and will still be wrote there a long time hence. Even if this book is burned ever copy of it. What Jesus said? I dont

Black think he made up a word of it. I think he just told it. This

book is a guide for the ignorant and the sick at heart. A whole man wouldn't need it at all. And of course if you read this book you goin to find that they's a lot more talk in here about the wrong way than they is about the right way. Now why is that?

White I dont know. Why is it?

Black I'd rather hear from you.

White I'll have to think about it.

Black Okay.

*Silence.*

White Okay what?

Black Okay go ahead and think about it.

White It might take me a little longer than you to think about something.

Black That's all right.

White That's all right.

Yes. I mean they's two ways you can take that remark but

Black I'm goin to take it the good way. It's just my nature. That way I get to live in my world instead of yours.

White What makes you think mine's so bad?

Black Oh I dont know as it's so bad. I know it's brief.

White All right. Are you ready?

Black I'm ready.

White I think the answer to your question is that the dialectic of the homily always presupposes a ground of evil.

Black Man.

White How's that.

Black That's strong as a mare's breath, Professor. Wouldnt I love to lay some of that shit on the brothers? Whoa. Now. Just the two of us here talkin. In private. What did you just say?

White Your question. The bible is full of cautionary tales. All of literature, for that matter. Telling us to be careful. Careful of what? Taking a wrong turn. A wrong path. How many wrong paths are there? Their number is legion. How many right paths? Only one. Hence the imbalance you spoke of.

Black Man. I'll tell you what, Professor. You could go on television. Goodlookin man such as yourself. Did you know that?

White Stop.

Black I'm serious. I wasnt even all that sure you *was* a professor till you laid that shit on me.

White I think you're having fun at my expense.

Black Aint done no such a thing, Professor.

White Well. I think you are.

Black Honey, I swear I aint. I couldnt say a thing like you just got done sayin. I admire that.

White And why do you keep calling me honey?

Black That's just the old south talkin. They aint nothin wrong with it. I'll try and quit if it bothers you.

White I'm just not sure what it means.

Black It means you among friends. It means quit worryin bout everthing.

White That might be easier said than done.

Black Well yes it might. But we just talkin here. Just talkin.

White What else?

Black What else what?

White Any other heresies?

Black At this juncture?

White At this juncture. Yes.

Black Yeah, but I aint tellin you.

White Why not?

Black Cause I aint. Shouldnt of told you what I did.

White Why not?

Black You settin here at my table dead to God as the fallen angels and you waitin on me to lay another heresy on you to clutch to your bosom and help shore you up in your infidelity and I aint goin to do it. That's all.

White Dont then.

Black Dont worry. I aint.

White I have to go.

Black Ever time the dozens gets a little heavy you got to go.

White What's the dozens?

Black It aint really even the dozens. It's really just a discussion.

White What's the dozens.

Black It's when two of the brothers stands around insultin one another and the first one gets pissed off loses.

White What is the point of it?

Black Winnin and losin is the point of it. Same as the point of everthing else.

White And you win by making the other guy angry.

Black That's correct.

White I dont get it.

Black You aint supposed to get it. You white.

White Then why did you tell me?

Black Cause you asked me.

White So if I find you a bit irritating and decide to leave then I lose.

Black Well, like I said, this aint even the dozens. We just talkin.

White But that's what you think.

Black Oh yeah, that's what I think.

White Well how long do you think I might have to stay before I could leave without losing?

Black That's kindly hard to say. I guess the best way to put it might be that you'd have to stay till you didnt want to leave.

White Stay until I didnt want to leave.

Black Yeah.

White And then I could leave.

Black Yeah.

*The professor runs one hand alongside his head and then holds the back of his neck, his head down and his eyes closed. He looks up.*

White Why is it called the dozens?

Black Dont know.

White What sorts of insults?

Oh, you might say somethin about the other man's mama.

That's a sensitive area, you might say. And he might lose it and come after your ass but when he done that it's like he's

Black sayin that what you just got done tellin about his mama was true. It's like he sayin: You aint supposed to know that about my mama and you damn sure aint supposed to of told it and now I'm fixin to whip your ass. You see what I'm sayin?

White I suppose.

Black Well, probably not.

White And is this something you do with your friends?

Black Me? No. I dont play the dozens.

White Tell me something.

Black Sure.



White    Why are you here? What do you get out of this? You seem like a smart man.

Me? I'm just a dumb country nigger from Louisiana. I done  
Black    told you. I aint never had the first thought in my head. If it aint in here then I dont know it.

*He holds the bible up off the table and lays it down again.*

White     Half the time I think you're having fun with me. I dont see how you can live here. I dont see how you can feel safe.

Black     Well you got a point, Professor. About bein safe anyways.

White     Have you ever stopped any of these people from taking drugs?

Black     Not that I know of.

White     Then what is the point? I dont get it. I mean, it's hopeless. This place is just a moral leper colony.

Black     Damn, Professor. Moral leper colony? Where my pencil at?

*He pretends to rummage through the kitchen table drawer.*

White     Well it is.

Black     I aint never goin to want you to leave. Put that in my book.

White     In your book?

Black     *In the Moral Leper Colony.* Damn, I like the sound of that.

White     You're kidding me.

Black     You know I aint writin no book.

White     Well I still dont get it. Why not go someplace where you might be able to do some good?

Black As opposed to someplace where good was needed.

White Even God gives up at some point. There's no ministry in hell. That I ever heard of.

No there aint. That's well put. Ministry is for the livin. That's why you responsible for your brother. Once he's quit

Black breathin you cant help him no more. After that he's in the hands of other parties. So you got to look after him now. You might even want to monitor his train schedule.

White You think you are your brother's keeper.

Black I dont believe *think* quite says it.

White And Jesus is a part of this enterprise.

Black Is that okay with your

And he's interested in coming here to this cesspool and salvaging what everybody knows is unsalvageable. Why would he do that? You said he didnt have a lot of free time.

White Why would he come here? What would be the difference to him between a building that was morally and spiritually vacant and one that was just plain empty?

Black Mm. Professor you a theologian here and I didnt even know it.

White You're being facetious.

Black I dont know that word. Dont be afraid to talk down to me. You aint goin to hurt my feelins.

It means. I guess it means that you're not being sincere.

White That you dont mean what you're saying. In a cynical sort of

way.

Black Mm. You think I dont mean what I'm sayin.

White Sometimes. I think you say things for effect.

Black Mm. Well, let me say this for effect.

White Go ahead.

Suppose I was to tell you that if you could bring yourself to

Black unlatch your hands from around your brother's throat you could have life everlastin?

White There's no such thing. Everybody dies.

That aint what he said. He said you could have *life* everlastin. Life. Have it today. Hold it in your hand. That you could see it. It gives off a light. It's got a little weight to it. Not much. Warm to the touch. Just a little. And it's forever. And you can have it. Now. Today. But you dont want it. You dont want it cause to get it you got to let you

Black brother off the hook. You got to actually take him and hold him in your arms and it dont make no difference what color he is or what he smells like or even if he dont want to *be* held. And the *reason* you wont do it is because he dont deserve it. And about that there aint no argument. He *dont* deserve it. (*He leans forward, slow and deliberate.*) You wont do it because it aint just. Aint that so?

*Silence.*

Black     Aint it?

White    I dont believe in those sorts of things.

Black    Just answer the question Professor.

White    I dont think in those terms.

Black    I know you dont. Answer the question.

White    I suppose there's some truth in what you say.

Black    But that's all I'm goin to get.

White    Yes.

Black    Well. That's all right. I'll take it. Some is a lot. We down to  
             breadcrumbs here.

White    I really have to go.

             Just stay. Just a little. We can talk bout somethin else. You  
Black    like baseball? Tell you what. Why dont I fix us somethin to  
             eat?

White    I'm not hungry.

Black    How about some coffee then?

White    All right. But then I've got to go.

Black    *(Rising)* All right. The man says all right.

*He runs water in the kettle at the sink and pours the water into the  
percolator.*

You see I wouldnt be this rude under normal circumstances.  
Man come in my house and set at my table and me not offer  
Black him nothin? But with you I figure I got to strategize. Got to  
play my cards right. Keep you from slippin off into the  
night.

*He spoons coffee from a can into the percolator and plugs the percolator  
in.*

White It's not night.

Black Depends on what kind of night we talkin bout.

*He comes back to the table and sits.*

Black Let me ask you kindly a personal question.

White This will be good.

Black What do *you* think is wrong with you that has finally  
narrowed all your choices down to the Sunset Limited?

I dont think there's anything wrong with me. I think I've  
White just been driven to finally face the truth. If I'm different it

doesnt mean I'm crazy.

Black Different.

White Yes.

Black Different from who?

White From anybody.

Black What about them other folks tryin to off theyselves?

White What about them?

Well, maybe them is the folks that you is like. Maybe them

Black folks is your natural kin. Only you all just dont get together all that much.

White I dont think so.

Black Dont think so.

White No. I've been in group therapy with those people. I never found anyone there that I felt any kinship with.

Black What about them other professors? They aint no kinship there?

White (*Disgustedly*) Good god.

Black I'm goin to take that for a no.

White I loathe them and they loathe me.

Black Well now wait a minute. Just cause you dont like em dont mean you *aint* like em. What was that word? Loathe?

White Loathe.

Black That's a pretty powerful word, aint it?

White Not powerful enough, I'm afraid.

Black     So how come you be loathin these other professors?

White    I know what you're thinking.

Black    What am I thinkin?

White    You're thinking that I loathe them because I'm like them  
and I loathe myself.

Black    *(Sitting back in his chair)* Damn, Professor. If I had your  
brains aint no tellin what all I might of done. I'd of been a  
drug king or somethin. Ride round in a Rolls Royce.

White    You're being facetious again.

Black    No I aint. I wasnt the first time. Let me ask you this.

White    All right.

Black    Is you on any kind of medication?

White    No.

Black    They aint got no medication for pilgrims waitin to take the  
Sunset?

White    For suicidal depression.

Black    Yeah.

White    Yes. They do. I've tried them.

Black    And what happened?

White    Nothing happened.

Black    You didnt get no relief.

White    No. I think the coffee's percolated.

Black    I know. Does these drugs work for most folks?

White    Yes. For most.



Black But not for you.

White Not for me. No.

Black *(Rising)* And what do you make of that?

White I dont know. What am I supposed to make of it?

Black *(Crossing to kitchen counter)* I dont know, Professor. I just tryin to find you some constituents out there somewheres.

White Constituents?

Black *(Unplugging percolator and getting down cups)* Yeah. You like that?

White Is that a word they use on the streets?

Naw. I learned that word in the jailhouse. You pick up stuff from these jailhouse lawyers and then it gets used around.

Black Be talkin bout your constituents. Some other cat's constituents. Your *wife's* constituents. You use cream and sugar?

White No. Just black.

Black Just black.

White Why do I have to have constituents?

Black I aint said you *got* to. I just wondered if maybe you do and we just aint looked hard enough.

*He brings the percolator and the cups to the table and pours.*

Black      They could be out there. Maybe they's some other  
drugproof terminal commuters out there that could be your  
friends.

White     Terminal commuters?

Black     Got a nice sound to it, aint it?

White     It's all right.

Black     (*Sitting*) Nobody.

White     Nobody. No.

Black     Hm.

White     I'm not a member. I never wanted to be. I never was.

Black     Not a member.

White     No.

Black     Well. Sometimes people dont know what they want till they  
get it.

White     Maybe. But I think they know what they dont want.

I dont know, Professor. I try and go by what I see. The  
simplest things has got more to em than you can ever  
understand. Bunch of people standin around on a train  
platform of a mornin. Waitin to go to work. Been there a  
hundred times. A thousand maybe. It's just a train platform.  
Aint nothin else much you can say about it. But they might

Black     be one commuter waitin there on the edge of that platform  
that for him it's somethin else. It might even be the edge of  
the world. The edge of the universe. He's starin at the end  
of all tomorrows and he's drawin a shade over ever

yesterday that ever was. So he's a different kind of commuter. He's worlds away from them everyday travelers. Nothin to do with them at all. Well. Is that right?

White I dont know.

Black I know you dont. Bless your heart. I know you dont.

*They sip their coffee.*

Black You ride that subway ever day, Professor?

White Yes.

Black What do you think about them people?

White On the subway?

Black On the subway.

White I try not to think about them at all.

Black You ever speak to any of em?

White Speak to them?

Black Yeah.

White About what?

Black About anything.

White No. God no.

Black God no?

White Yes. God no.

Black You ever curse em?

White Curse them?

Black Yeah.

White Why would I do that?

Black I dont know. Do you?

White No. Of course not.

Black I mean where they cant hear it.

White What do you mean?

Black Maybe just under your breath. In your heart. To yourself.

White Because?

Black I dont know. Maybe they just in your way. Or you dont like the way they look. The way they smell. What they doin.

White And I would mutter something ugly under my breath.

Black Yeah.

White I suppose.

Black And how often do you reckon you might do that?

White You really dont get to interrogate me, you know.

Black I know. How often?

White I dont know. With some frequency. Probably.

Black Give me a number.

White A number?

Black Yeah. Say just on a average day.

White I've no idea.

Black Sure you do.

White A number.

Black I'm a number man.

White Two or three times a day, I would guess. Something like that. Maybe.

Black Could be more.

White Oh yes.

Black Could be five?

White Probably.

Black Ten?

White That might be a bit high.

Black But we can go with five. That's safe.

White Yes.

Black That's eighteen twenty-five. Can we round that off to two grand?

White What's that, per year?

Black Yeah.

White Two thousand? That's a lot.

Black Yes it is. But is it accurate?

White I suppose. So?

Black So. I aint goin to guess your age but let me put you on the low side and say times twenty years of commutin and now we got forty thousand curses heaped on the heads of folks you dont even know.

White So where is this going?

Black I just wondered if you ever thought about that. If it might have anything to do with the shape you has managed to get yourself in.

White It's just symptomatic of the larger issues. I dont like people.

Black But you wouldnt hurt them people.

White No. Of course not.

Black You sure.

White Of course I'm sure. Why would I hurt them?

Black I dont know. Why would you hurt yourself?

White It's not the same thing.

Black You sure about that?

White I'm not them and they're not me. I think I know the difference.

Black Mm.

White More mm's.

Black You sure you aint hungry?

White No.

Black You aint eat nothin.

White That's all right.

Black I see you eyein the door. I got to strategize, you know.

White I'm really not hungry.

Black Active morning like you had you aint worked up no appetite?

White No.

Black     I see you lookin around. Everthing in here is clean. No, dont say nothin. It's all right.

*The black pushes back his chair and rises.*

Black     I could eat a bite and I think you could too.

*The black goes to the refrigerator and takes out some pots. He turns on the stove. He washes his hands and dries them with a towel.*

              You break bread with a man you have moved on to another  
Black     level of friendship. I heard somewheres that that's true the  
              world over.

White     Probably.

Black     I like probably. Probably from you is worth a couple of  
              damn rights anywheres else.

White     Why? Because I dont believe in anything?

*The black has put the pots on the stove to warm and he brings napkins and silverware to the table and sets them out. He sits down.*

Well. I dont think that's the problem. I think it's what you  
Black do believe that is carryin you off, not what you dont. Let  
me ask you this.

White Go ahead.

Black You ever think about Jesus?

White Here we go.

Black Do you?

White What makes you think I'm not Jewish?

Black What, jews aint allowed to think about Jesus?

White No, but they might think about him differently.

Black Is you Jewish?

White No. As it happens. I'm not.

Black Whew. You had me worried there for a minute.

White What, you dont like jews?

*(Shaking his head, almost laughing)* Pullin your chain,  
Professor. Pullin your chain. I dont know why I love to  
mess with you. But I do. You need to listen. Or you need to  
believe what you hearin. The whole point of where this is  
goin—which you wanted to know—is that they aint no  
jews. Aint no whites. Aint no niggers. People of color. Aint  
none of that. At the deep bottom of the mine where the  
Black gold is at there aint none of that. There's just the pure ore.  
That forever thing. That you dont think is there. That thing



that helps to keep folks nailed down to the platform when the Sunset Limited comes through. Even when they think they might want to get aboard. That thing that makes it possible to ladle out benediction upon the heads of strangers instead of curses. It's all the same thing. And it aint but one thing. Just one.

White And that would be Jesus.

Got to think about how to answer that. Maybe one more heresy wont hurt you. You pretty loaded up on em already. Here's what I would say. I would say that the thing we are talkin about is Jesus, but it is Jesus understood as that gold at the bottom of the mine. He couldnt come down here and

Black take the form of a man if that form was not done shaped to accommodate him. And if I said that there aint no way for Jesus to be ever man without ever man bein Jesus then I believe that might be a pretty big heresy. But that's all right. It aint as big a heresy as sayin that a man aint all that much different from a rock. Which is how your view looks to me.

White It's not my view. I believe in the primacy of the intellect.

Black What is that word.

White Primacy? It means first. It means what you put first.

Black And that would be intellect.

White Yes.

Black What about the primacy of the Sunset Limited?

White Yes. That too.

Black But not the primacy of all them folks waitin on a later train.

White No. No primacy there.

Black Mm.

White Mm what.

Black You tough, Professor. You tough.

*The black rises and goes to the stove. He reaches down plates and stirs the pots and ladles out the dinner. He takes down a loaf of white bread and puts four slices on a plate and brings the plate of bread to the table and sets it down.*

Black Yeah you tough.

*The black brings the two plates to the table and sets them out and takes his seat. He looks at the professor.*

You see yourself as a questioner, Professor. But about that I got my doubts. Even so, the quest of your life is *your* quest.

Black You on a road that you laid. And that fact alone might be all the reason you need for keepin to it. As long as you on that road you cant be lost.

White I'm not sure I understand what you're saying.

Well, Professor. I have got some very serious doubts about

Black you not understandin anything I say. Now I'm goin to say  
Grace.

*The black puts his hands on the table at either side of his plate and bows  
his head.*

Black Lord we thank you for this food and we ask that you keep us  
ever mindful of the many blessins we have received from  
your hand. We thank you today for the life of the professor  
that you have returned to us and we ask that you continue  
to look after him because we need him. *(Pause)* I aint sure  
why we need him. I just know we do. Amen.

*The black looks up. He smiles at the professor.*

Black All right. You tell me if you like this.

White It looks good.

*They begin to eat.*

White    This is good.

*They eat.*

White    This is very good.

Black    Supposed to be good. This is soul food, my man.

White    It's got what in it? Molasses?

Black    Mm. You a chef, Professor?

White    Not really.

Black    But some.

White    Some, yes. Bananas, of course. Mangos?

Black    Got a mango or two in there. Rutabagas.

White    Rutabagas?

Black    Rutabagas. *Them* aint easy to find.

White    It's very good.

Black    It gets better after a day or two. I just fixed this last night.  
You need to warm it up a few times to get the flavors right.

White    Like chile.

Black    Like chile. That's right. You know where I learned to fix

this?

White In Louisiana?

Black Right here in the ghettos of New York City. They's a lot of influences in a dish like this. You got many parts of the world in that pot yonder. Different countries. Different people.

White Any white people?

Black Not if you can help it.

White Really?

Black Messin with you, Professor. Messin with you. You know these French chefs in these uptown restaurants?

White Not personally.

Black You know what they like to cook?

White No.

Black Sweetbreads. Tripe. Brains. All that shit they dont nobody eat. You know why that is?

White Because it's a challenge? You have to innovate?

You pretty smart for a cracker. A challenge. That's right.

Black The stuff they cook is dead cheap. Most folks throws it out. Give it to the cat. But poor folks dont throw nothin out.

White I guess that's right.

Black It dont take a lot of skill to make a porterhouse steak taste good. But what if you cant buy no porterhouse steak? You still wants to eat somethin that tastes good. What you do then?

White Innovate.

Black Innovate. That's right, Professor. And when do you innovate?

White When you dont have something that you want.

Black You fixin to get a A plus. So who would that be? That aint got what they want?

White Poor people.

Black I love this man. So how you like this?

White It's very good.

Black Well let me have your plate.

White Just a small portion.

Black That's all right, Professor. You need to eat. You done had yourself a pretty busy day.

*The black puts more of the dish on the professors plate and comes to the table and sets it in front of him.*

Black You want some more coffee?

White Yes. That would be great.

*He brings the pot to the table and pours his cup and sets the pot on the table and takes his seat and they continue to eat.*

White     You dont think a glass of wine would have been good with this?

Black     Oh no. I think it might of been good.

White     But you wouldnt drink it.

Black     Oh I might. One glass.

White     Jesus drank wine. He and his disciples.

Black     Yes he did. Accordin to the bible. Of course it dont say nothin about him hidin it in the toilet.

White     Is that really a favorite hiding place?

Black     Oh yes. I've knowed drunks to lift the tops off of toilet tanks in strange places just on the off chance.

White     Is that true?

Black     Naw. It could be, though. Wouldnt surprise me none.

White     What is the worst thing you ever did.

Black     More jailhouse stories.

White     Why not?

Black     Which why not you want to hear?

White     Is bludgeoning the man in the prison cafeteria the worst thing you ever did?

Black     No. It aint.

White     Really? What's the worst?

Black     Aint goin tell you.

White    Why not?

Black    Cause you'd jump up and run out the door hollerin.

White    It must be pretty bad.

Black    It is pretty bad. That's why I aint tellin you.

White    Now I'm afraid to ask.

Black    No you aint.

White    Have you ever told anyone?

          Oh yeah. It wouldnt leave me alone. The soul might be  
          silent but the servant of the soul has always got a voice and

Black    it has got one for a reason. The life of the master depends  
          on the servant and this is one master that has got to be  
          sustained. Got to be sustained.

White    Who did you tell it to?

Black    I told it to a man of God who was my friend.

White    What did he say?

Black    He didnt say a word.

White    But you're not curious about the worst thing I ever did.

Black    Yeah I am.

White    But you wont ask me what it is.

Black    Dont have to.

White    Why is that?

Black    Cause I was there and I seen it.

White    Well, I might have a different view.

Black    Yeah. You might. You want some more?



White No. I'm stuffed.

Black Hungrier than you thought.

White Yes. I was.

Black Good.

White Is this some kind of a test of your faith?

Black What, you?

White Me. Yes.

Black Naw, Professor. It aint my faith you testin.

White You see everything in black and white.

Black It is black and white.

White I suppose that makes the world easier to understand.

Black You might be surprised about how little time I spend trying to understand the world.

White You try to understand God.

Black No I dont. I just try and understand what he wants from me.

White And that is everything you need.

If God aint everthing you need you in a world of trouble.

And if what you sayin is that my view of the world is a

Black narrow one I dont disagree with that. Of course I could point out that I aint down on the platform in my leapin costume.

White You could.

A lot of things is beyond my understandin. I know that. I

Black say it again. If it aint in this book then they's a good chance that I dont know it. Before I started readin the bible I was pretty much in that primacy thing myself.

White Primacy thing.

Yeah. Not as bad as you. But pretty bad. I was pretty dumb, but I wasnt dumb enough to believe that what had got me nowheres in forty years was all of a sudden goin to get me somewheres. I was dumb, but I wasnt that dumb. I seen what was there for the askin, and I decided to ask. And

Black that's all I done. And it was hard. I'll tell you right now, Professor, it was hard. I was layin there all cut up and chained to that hospital bed and I was cryin I hurt so bad and I thought they'd kill me if I did live and I tried to say it and tried to say it and after a while I just quit. I put all of that away from me. And I just said it. I said: Please help me. And he did.

*They sit.*

Black Long silence.

White It's just a silence.

Well. That's my story, Professor. It's easy told. I dont make a move without Jesus. When I get up in the mornin I just

Black try to get ahold of his belt. Oh, ever once in a while I'll catch myself slippin into manual override. But I catch myself. I catch myself.

White Manual override.

Black You like that?

White It's okay.

Black I thought it was pretty good.

So you come to the end of your rope and you admit defeat and you are in despair and in this state you seize upon this

White whatever it is that has neither substance nor sense and you grab hold of it and hang on for dear life. Is that a fair portrayal?

Black Well, that could be one way to say it.

White It doesnt make any sense.

Well, I thought when we was talkin earlier I heard you to

Black say they wasnt none of it made no sense. Talkin bout the history of the world and all such as that.

It doesnt. On a larger scale. But what you're telling me isnt

White a view of things. It's a view of one thing. And I find it nonsensical.

Black What would you do if Jesus was to speak to you?

White Why? Do you imagine that he might?

Black No. I dont. But I dont know.

White I'm not virtuous enough.

No, Professor, it aint nothin like that. You dont have to be

Black virtuous. You just has to be quiet. I cant speak for the Lord but the experience I've had leads me to believe that he'll speak to anybody that'll listen. You damn sure aint got to be virtuous.

White Well if I heard God talking to me, then I'd be ready for you to take me up to Bellevue. As you suggested.

Black What if what he said made sense?

White It wouldnt make any difference. Craziness is craziness.

Black Dont make no difference if it makes sense.

White No.

Black Mm. Well, that's about as bad a case of the primacy as I ever heard.

White Well. I've always gone my own way. Ich kann nicht anders.

Black What is that you talkin?

White It's german.

Black You talk german?

White Not really. A little. It's a quotation.

Black Didnt do them Germans much good though, did it?

White I dont know. The Germans contributed a great deal to civilization. *(Pause)* Before Hitler.

Black And then they contributed Hitler.

White If you like.

Black Wasnt none of my doin.

I gather it to be your belief that culture tends to contribute to human misery. That the more one knows the more

White    unhappy one is likely to be.

Black    As in the case of certain parties known to us.

White    As in the case.

Black    I dont believe I said that. In fact, I think maybe you said it.

White    I never said it.

Black    Mm. But do you believe it?

White    No.

Black    No?

White    I dont know. It could be true.

Black    Well why is that? It dont seem right, does it?

It's the first thing in that book there. The Garden of Eden.

White    Knowledge as destructive to the spirit. Destructive to goodness.

Black    I thought you aint read this book?

White    Everyone knows that story. It's probably the most famous story in there.

Black    So why do you think that is?

I suppose from the God point of view all knowledge is

White    vanity. Or maybe it gives people the unhealthy illusion that they can outwit the devil.

Black    Damn, Professor. Where was you when I needed you?

White    You'd better be careful. You see where it's gotten me.

Black    I do see. It's the subject at hand.

White      The darker picture is always the correct one. When you read the history of the world you are reading a saga of bloodshed and greed and folly the import of which is impossible to ignore. And yet we imagine that the future will somehow be different. I've no idea why we are even still here but in all probability we will not be here much longer.

Black      Them is some pretty powerful words, Professor. That's what's in your heart, aint it?

White      Yes.

Black      Well I can relate to them thoughts.

White      You can?

Black      Yes I can.

White      That surprises me. What, you're going to think about them?

Black      I done have thought about em. I've thought about em for a long time. Not as good as you said it. But pretty close.

White      Well you surprise me. And you've come to what conclusions?

Black      I aint. I'm still thinkin.

White      Yes. Well, I'm not.

Black      Things can change.

White      No they cant.

Black      You could be wrong.

White      I dont think so.

Black      But that aint somethin you have a lot of in your life.

White    What isnt?

Black    Bein wrong.

White    I admit it when I'm wrong.

Black    I dont think so.

White    Well, you're entitled to your opinion.

*The black leans back and regards the professor. He reaches and picks up the newspaper from the table and leans back again and adjusts his glasses.*

Black    Let's see here. Story on page three.

*He folds the paper elaborately.*

Yeah. Here it is. Friends report that the man had ignored all  
Black    advice and had stated that he intended to pursue his own  
course.

*He adjusts his glasses.*

A close confidant stated (*he looks up*)—and this here is a  
quotation—said: You couldnt tell the son of a bitch nothin.  
Black    (*He looks up again*) Can you say that in the papers? Son of a

bitch? Meanwhile, bloodspattered spectators at the hundred and fifty-fifth street station—continued on page four.

*He wets his thumb and laboriously turns the page and refolds the paper.*

—who were interviewed at the scene all reported that the  
Black man's last words as he hurtled toward the oncoming  
commuter train were: I am right.

*He lays down the paper and adjusts his spectacles and peers over the top of them at the professor.*

White Very funny.

*The black takes off his glasses and lowers his head and pinches the bridge of his nose and shakes his head.*

Black Oh Professor. Mm. You an amazin man.

White I'm glad you find me entertaining.



Black Well, you pretty special.

White I dont think I'm special.

Black You dont.

White No. I dont.

Black You dont think you might view them other commuters from a certain height?

White I view those other commuters as fellow occupants of the same abyssal pit in which I find myself. If they see it as something else I dont know how that makes me special.

Black Mm. I hear what you sayin. But still I keep comin back to them commuters. Them that's waitin on the Sunset? I got to think maybe they could be just a little bit special theyselves. I mean, they got to be in a deeper pit than just us daytravelers. A deeper and a darker. I aint sayin they down as deep as you, but pretty deep maybe.

White So?

Black So how come they cant be your brothers in despair and selfdestruction? I thought misery loved company?

White I'm sure I don't know.

Black Well let me take a shot at it.

White Be my guest.

Black What I think is that you got better reasons then them. I mean, their reasons is just that they dont like it here, but yours says what they is not to like and why not to like it. You got more intelligent reasons. More elegant reasons.

White Are you making fun of me?

Black No. I aint.

White But you think I'm full of shit.

I dont think that. Oh I dont doubt but what it's possible to

Black die from bein full of shit. But I dont think that's what we lookin at here.

White What do you think we're looking at?

I dont know. You got me on unfamiliar ground. You got these elegant world class reasons for takin the Limited and

Black these other dudes all they got is maybe they just dont feel good. In fact, it might could be that you aint even all that unhappy.

White You think that my education is driving me to suicide.

Black Well, no. I'm just posin the question. Wait a minute. Fore you answer.

*He takes his pad and his pencil and begins to write laboriously, his tongue in the corner of his mouth, grimacing. This for the professor's benefit. He looks sideways at him and smiles. He tears off the page and folds it and puts it in his shirtpocket.*

Black All right. Go ahead.

White I think that's the most ridiculous thing I ever heard.

*The black takes the folded paper from his pocket and hands it across. The professor opens it and reads it aloud.*

White I think that's the most ridiculous thing I ever heard. Very clever. What's the point?

The point dont change. The point is always the same point. It's what I said before and what I keep lookin for ways to say it again. The light is all around you, cept you dont see nothin but shadow. And the shadow is you. You the one makin it.

White Well, I dont have your faith. Why dont we just leave it at that.

Black You dont never think about maybe just startin over?

White I did. At one time. I dont any more.

Black Sometimes faith might just be a case of not havin nothin else left.

White Well, I do have something else.

Maybe you could just keep that in reserve. Maybe just take a shot at startin over. I dont mean start again. Everbody's done that. Over means over. It means you just walk away. I mean, if everthing you are and everthing you have and everthing you have done has brought you at last to the bottom of a whiskey bottle or bought you a one way ticket

Black     on the Sunset Limited then you cant give me the first reason on God's earth for salvagin none of it. Cause they aint no reason. And I'm goin to tell you that if you can bring yourself to shut the door on all of that it will be cold and it will be lonely and they'll be a mean wind blowin. And them is all good signs. You dont say nothin. You just turn up your collar and keep walkin.

White    I cant.

Black    Yeah.

White    I cant.

Black    You want some more coffee?

White    No. Thank you.

Black    Why do you think folks takes their own lives?

White    I dont know. Different reasons.

Black    Yeah. But is there somethin them different reasons has got in common?

White    I cant speak for others. My own reasons center around a gradual loss of make-believe. That's all. A gradual enlightenment as to the nature of reality. Of the world.

Black    Them worldly reasons.

White    If you like.

Black    Them elegant reasons.

White    That was your description.

Black    You didnt disagree with it.

*The professor shrugs.*

It's them reasons that your brother dont know nothin about hangin by his necktie from the steampipe down in the basement. He got his own dumb-ass reasons, but maybe if we could educate him to where some of them more elegant reasons was available to him and his buddies then they'd be a lot of folks out there could off theyselves with more joy in they hearts. What do you think?

White Now I know you're being facetious.

Black This time I think you're right. I think you have finally drove me to it.

White Mm hm.

Black Well, the professor's done gone to layin the mm hm's on me. I better watch my step.

White Yes you had. I might be warming up the trick bag.

Black But still you think that your reasons is about the world and his is mostly just about him.

White I think that's probably true.

Black I see a different truth. Settin right across the table from me.

White Which is?

Black That you must love your brother or die.

White I dont know what that means. That's another world from anything I know.

Black What's the world you know.

White You dont want to hear.

Black Sure I do.

White I dont think so.

Black Go ahead.

White All right. It's that the world is basically a forced labor camp from which the workers—perfectly innocent—are led forth by lottery, a few each day, to be executed. I dont think that this is just the way I see it. I think it's the way it is. Are there alternate views? Of course. Will any of them stand close scrutiny? No.

Black Man.

White So. Do you want to take a look at that train schedule again?

Black And they aint nothin to be done about it.

White No. The efforts that people undertake to improve the world invariably make it worse. I used to think there were exceptions to that dictum. I dont think that now.

*The black sits back, looking down at the table. He shakes his head slightly.*

White    What else do you want to talk about?

Black    I dont know. Them sounds to me like the words of a man on his way to the train station.

White    They are those words.

Black    What do you think about that man?

          I'm like you. I dont. I used to. Now I dont. I think about

White    minimalizing pain. That is my life. I dont know why it isnt everyone's.

Black    You dont think gettin run over by a train might smart just a little?

          No. I did the calculations. At seventy miles an hour the

White    train is outrunning the neurons. It should be totally painless.

Black    I'm goin to be stuck with your ass for a while, aint I?

White    I hope not.

Black    If this aint the life you had in mind, what was?

White    I dont know. Not this. Is your life the one you'd planned?

Black    No, it aint. I got what I needed instead of what I wanted and that's just about the best kind of luck you can have.

White    Yes. Well.

Black    You cant compare your life to mine, can you?

White    In all honesty, no. I cant.

Black    Mm.

White    I'm sorry. I should go.

Black    You dont have to go.

White I've offended you.

Black I got a thicker hide than that, Professor. Just stay. You aint hurt my feelins.

White I know you think that I should be thankful and I'm sorry not to be.

Black Now Professor, I dont think no such a thing.

White I should go.

Black I'm diggin a dry hole here, aint I?

White I admire your persistence.

Black What can I do to get you to stay a bit?

White Why? Are you hoping that if I stay long enough God might speak to me?

Black No, I'm hopin he might speak to me.

White I know you think I at least owe you a little more of my time. I know I'm ungrateful. But ingratitude is not the sin to a spiritual bankrupt that it is to a man of God.

Black You dont owe me nothin, Professor.

White Do you really think that?

Black Yes. I really do.

White Well. You're very kind. I wish there was something I could do to repay you but there isnt. So why dont we just say goodbye and you can get on with your life.

Black I cant.

White You cant?



Black No.

White What do you want me to do?

I dont know. Suppose you could wake up tomorrow and  
Black you wouldnt be wantin to jump in front of no train.

Suppose all you had to do was ask. Would you do it?

White It would depend on what I had to give up.

Black I started to write that down and put it in my pocket.

White What is it that you think I'm holding on to? What is it that  
the terminal commuter cherishes that he would die for?

Black I dont know. I dont know.

White No.

Black You dont want to talk to me no more, do you?

White I thought you had a thick skin.

Black It's pretty thick. It aint hide to the bone.

White *Why* do you think it? Why do you think there is something?

I dont know. It just seems to me that a man that cant wait  
for a train to run over him has got to have *somethin* on his  
mind. Most folks would settle for maybe just a slap up the  
side of the head. You say you dont care about nothin but I  
dont believe that. I dont believe that death is ever about  
nothin. You asked me what I thought it was you was holdin  
Black on to and I got to say I dont know. Or maybe I just dont  
have the words to say it. And maybe you know but you aint  
sayin. But I believe that when you took your celebrated  
leap you was holdin on to it and takin it with you. Holdin

on for grim death. I look for the words, Professor. I look for the words because I believe that the words is the way to your heart.

White You think that anyone in my position is automatically blind to the workings of his own psyche.

Black I think that anybody in your position is automatically blind. But that aint the whole story. Because we still talkin bout the rest of them third railers and them takin one train and you takin another.

White I didnt say that.

Black Sure you did. They got a train for all them dumb-ass crackers that just feels bad and then they got this other train for you cause your pain and the world's pain is the same pain and this train requires a observation car and a diner.

White Well. You can think what you want. You dont need my agreement.

Black I know. But that aint the way to the trick bag.

White Well. The trick bag seems to have shaped itself up into some sort of communal misery wherein one finds salvation by consorting among the loathsome.

Black Damn, Professor. You puttin me in the bag. Where you come up with stuff like that?

White It was phrased especially for you. For your enjoyment. You see what a whore I am?

Black No you aint. You a smart man. Too smart for me.

White I feel the bag yawning.

Black I wish I knew how.

White Do you really think that? That I'm too smart for you?

Black Yes I do. If you can jack you own self around nine ways from Sunday I'd like to know what chance you think I got.

White I see.

Black What I need to do here is to buy more time. But I dont know what to buy it with.

White You dont know what to offer a man about to board the Limited.

Black No. I dont. I feel like I'm about traded out.

White Maybe you are. Have you ever dealt with suicides?

No. You the first one. These junkies and crack-heads is about as far from suicide as you can get. They wouldnt even know what you was talkin about. They wake up in pain ever day. Bad pain. But they aint headed for the depot. Now you can say, well, they got a fix for their pain. Just need to hustle on out there and get it. And that's a good argument.

Black But still we got this question. Just what is this pain that is causin these express riders to belly up at the kiosk with the black crepe. What kind of pain we talkin about? I got to say that if it was grief that brought folks to suicide it'd be a full time job just to get em all in the ground come sundown. So I keep comin back to the same question. If it aint what you

lost that is more than you can bear then maybe it's what you won't lose. What you'd rather die than to give up.

White But if you die you will give it up.

Black No you won't. You won't be here.

Well. I can't help you. Letting it all go is the place I finally

White got to. It took a lot of work to get there and if there is one thing I would be unwilling to give up it is exactly that.

Black You got any other way of saying that?

The one thing I won't give up is giving up. I expect that to carry me through. I'm depending on it. The things I believed in were very frail. As I said. They won't be around

White for long and neither will I. But I don't think that's really the reason for my decision. I think it goes deeper. You can acclimate yourself to loss. You have to. I mean, you like music, right?

Black Yes I do.

White Who's the greatest composer you know of?

Black John Coltrane. Hands down.

White Do you think his music will last forever?

Black Well. Forever's a long time, Professor. So I got to say no. It won't.

White But that doesn't make it worthless, does it?

Black No it doesn't.

You give up the world line by line. Stoically. And then one day you realize that your courage is farcical. It doesn't mean

White anything. You've become an accomplice in your own annihilation and there is nothing you can do about it. Everything you do closes a door somewhere ahead of you. And finally there is only one door left.

Black That's a dark world, Professor.

White Yes.

Black What's the worst thing ever happen to you?

White Getting snatched off a subway platform one morning by an emissary of Jesus.

Black I'm serious.

White So am I.

Black Before this mornin. What was the worst thing.

White I dont know.

Black Well, let's pretend you dont know then. Still, do you reckon it was about you? Or about somebody close to you?

White Probably someone close to me.

Black I think that's probably right. Dont that tell you somethin?

White Yes. Dont get close to people.

Black You a hard case, man.

White How else could I win your love?

Black You probably right. Let me try this. I dont believe that the world can be better than what you allow it to be. Dark a world as you live in, they aint goin to be a whole lot of surprises in the way of good news.

White I'm sure that's true.

Black Well jubilation. Listen at the professor.

White But I'm at a loss as to how to bring myself to believe in some most excellent world when I already know that it doesn't exist.

Black Most excellent.

White Yes.

Black I sure do like that. Most excellent.

White Do you actually believe in such a world?

Yes I do, Professor. Yes I do. I think it's there for the asking.

You got to get in the right line. Buy the right ticket. Take that regular commuter train and stay off the express. Stay on the platform with your fellow commuter. You might

Black even want to nod at him. Maybe even say hello. All of them is travelers too. And they's some of em been places that most people don't want to go to. They didn't neither. They might even tell you how they got there and maybe save you a trip you'll be thankful you didn't take.

White Yes. Well, that's not going to happen.

Black Why not?

White Because I don't believe in that world. I just want to take the train. Look, why don't I just go?

Black How about some more coffee?

White No thank you.

Black What can I do?

Maybe you just need to accept that you're in over your

White head.

Black I do accept it. It dont let me off the hook though.

White You think I dont understand. But I'm not sure you'd want to listen to the things I do understand.

Black Try me.

White It would just upset you.

Black I been upset before.

White It's worse than you think.

Black That's all right.

White You dont want to hear this.

Black Yes I do. I got no choice.

*The professor leans back and studies the black.*

White Okay. Maybe you're right. Well, here's my news, Reverend. I yearn for the darkness. I pray for death. Real death. If I thought that in death I would meet the people I've known in life I dont know what I'd do. That would be the ultimate horror. The ultimate despair. If I had to meet my mother again and start all of that all over, only this time without the prospect of death to look forward to? Well. That would be the final nightmare. Kafka on wheels.

Black     Damn, Professor. You dont want to see you own mama?  
No. I dont. I told you this would upset you. I want the dead to be dead. Forever. And I want to be one of them. Except that of course you cant be one of them. You cant be one of

White    the dead because what has no existence can have no community. No community. My heart warms just thinking about it. Silence. Blackness. Aloneness. Peace. And all of it only a heartbeat away.

Black     Damn, Professor.  
Let me finish. I dont regard my state of mind as some pessimistic view of the world. I regard it as the world itself.

White    Evolution cannot avoid bringing intelligent life ultimately to an awareness of one thing above all else and that one thing is futility.

Black     Mm. If I'm understandin you right you sayin that everbody that aint just eat up with the dumb-ass ought to be suicidal.

White    Yes.

Black     You aint shittin me?  
No. I'm not shitting you. If people saw the world for what it truly is. Saw their lives for what they truly are. Without

White    dreams or illusions. I dont believe they could offer the first reason why they should not elect to die as soon as possible.

Black     Damn, Professor.  
(Coldly) I dont believe in God. Can you understand that? Look around you man. Cant you see? The clamor and din of those in torment has to be the sound most pleasing to his



ear. And I loathe these discussions. The argument of the village atheist whose single passion is to revile endlessly that which he denies the existence of in the first place. Your fellowship is a fellowship of pain and nothing more. And if that pain were actually collective instead of simply reiterative then the sheer weight of it would drag the world from the walls of the universe and send it crashing and burning through whatever night it might yet be capable of engendering until it was not even ash. And justice? Brotherhood? Eternal life? Good god, man. Show me a religion that prepares one for death. For nothingness.

White There's a church I might enter. Yours prepares one only for more life. For dreams and illusions and lies. If you could banish the fear of death from men's hearts they wouldn't live a day. Who would want this nightmare if not for fear of the next? The shadow of the axe hangs over every joy. Every road ends in death. Or worse. Every friendship. Every love. Torment, betrayal, loss, suffering, pain, age, indignity, and hideous lingering illness. All with a single conclusion. For you and for every one and every thing that you have chosen to care for. There's the true brotherhood. The true fellowship. And everyone is a member for life. You tell me that my brother is my salvation? My salvation? Well then damn him. Damn him in every shape and form and guise. Do I see myself in him? Yes. I do. And what I see sickens me. Do you understand me? *Can* you understand me?

*The black sits with his head lowered.*

White I'm sorry.

Black That's all right.

White No. I'm sorry.

*The black looks up at him.*

Black How long you felt like this?

White All my life.

Black And that's the truth.

White It's worse than that.

Black I dont see what could be worse than that.

Rage is really only for the good days. The truth is there's little of that left. The truth is that the forms I see have been slowly emptied out. They no longer have any content. They

White are shapes only. A train, a wall, a world. Or a man. A thing dangling in senseless articulation in a howling void. No meaning to its life. Its words. Why would I seek the company of such a thing? Why?

Black     Damn.

White    You see what it is you've saved.

Black    Tried to save. Am tryin. Tryin hard.

White    Yes.

Black    Who is my brother.

White    Your brother.

Black    Yes.

White    Is that why I'm here? In your apartment?

Black    No. But it's why I am.

            You asked what I was a professor of. I'm a professor of  
White    darkness. The night in day's clothing. And now I wish you  
            all the very best but I must go.

*He pushes back his chair and rises.*

Black     Just stay a few more minutes.

White     No. No more time. Goodbye.

*He turns toward the door and the black rises.*

Black     Come on, Professor. We can talk about somethin else. I promise.

White    I dont want to talk about something else.

Black    Dont go out there. You know what's out there.

            Oh yes. Indeed I do. I know what is out there and I know who is out there. I rush to nuzzle his bony cheek. No doubt

White    he'll be surprised to find himself so cherished. And as I cling to his neck I will whisper in that dry and ancient ear: Here I am. Here I am. Now open the door.

Black    Dont do it, Professor.

            I'm sorry. You're a kind man, but I have to go. I've heard you out and you've heard me and there's no more to say. Your God must have once stood in a dawn of infinite possibility and this is what he's made of it. And now it is

White    drawing to a close. You say that I want God's love. I dont. Perhaps I want forgiveness, but there is no one to ask it of. And there is no going back. No setting things right. Perhaps once. Not now. Now there is only the hope of nothingness. I cling to that hope. Now open the door. Please.

Black    Dont do it.

White    Open the door.

*The black undoes the chains. They rattle to the floor. He opens the door and the professor exits. The black stands in the doorway looking down the hall.*

Professor? I know you dont mean them words. Professor?

Black I'm goin to be there in the mornin. I'll be there. You hear?  
I'll be there in the mornin.

*He collapses to his knees in the doorway, all but weeping.*

Black I'll be there.

*He looks up.*

He didnt mean them words. You know he didnt. You know  
he didnt. I dont understand what you sent me down there  
Black for. I dont understand it. If you wanted me to help him how  
come you didnt give me the words? You give em to him.  
What about me?

*He kneels weeping rocking back and forth.*

That's all right. That's all right. If you never speak again you  
Black know I'll keep your word. You know I will. You know I'm  
good for it.

*He lifts his head.*

Black Is that okay? Is that okay?

THE END

Cormac McCarthy is the author of eleven novels. Among his honors are the National Book Award, the Pulitzer Prize, and the National Book Critics Circle Award.

*Books by Cormac McCarthy*

The Road

The Sunset Limited (*a novel in dramatic form*)

No Country for Old Men

Cities of the Plain

The Crossing

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



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The setting is Louisville, Kentucky, in the 1970s. The Telfairs are stonemasons and have been for generations. Ben Telfair has given up his education to apprentice himself to his grandfather, Papaw. Out of the love that binds these two men and the gulf that separates them from the Telfairs who have forsaken—or dishonored—the family trade, McCarthy has crafted a drama that bears all the hallmarks of his great fiction.

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#### THE SUNSET LIMITED

A startling encounter on a New York subway platform leads two strangers to a run-down tenement where a life or death decision must be made. In that small apartment, “Black” and “White,” as the two men are known, begin a conversation that leads each back through his own history, mining the origins of two fundamentally opposing world-views. White is a professor whose seemingly enviable existence of relative ease has left him nonetheless in despair. Black, an ex-con and ex-addict, is the more hopeful of the men—though he is just as desperate to convince White of the power of faith as White is desperate to deny it. Their aim is no less than this: to discover the meaning of life.

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Fiction/Literature/978-0-307-38789-9 (trade)  
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