

## THE ROAD

lost the track on the better ground beyond the bracken and then picked it up again. When they got to the road he stopped the boy with his hand. The road was exposed to the wind from the sea and it was blown free of ash save for patches here and there. Dont step in the road, he said. And stop crying. We need to get all the sand off of our feet. Here. Sit down.

He untied the wrappings and shook them out and tied them back again. I want you to help, he said. We're looking for sand. Sand in the road. Even just a little bit. To see which way they went. Okay?

Okay.

They set off down the blacktop in opposite directions. He'd not gone far before the boy called out. Here it is, Papa. They went this way. When he got there the boy was crouched in the road. Right here, he said. It was a half teaspoon of beachsand tilted from somewhere in the understructure of the grocery cart. The man stood and looked out down the road. Good work, he said. Let's go.

They set off at a jogtrot. A pace he thought he'd be able to keep up but he couldn't. He had to stop, leaning over and coughing. He looked up at the boy, wheezing. We'll have

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to walk, he said. If they hear us they'll hide by the side of the road. Come on.

How many are there, Papa?

I dont know. Maybe just one.

Are we going to kill them?

I dont know.

They went on. It was already late in the day and it was another hour and deep into the long dusk before they overtook the thief, bent over the loaded cart, trundling down the road before them. When he looked back and saw them he tried to run with the cart but it was useless and finally he stopped and stood behind the cart holding a butcher knife. When he saw the pistol he stepped back but he didnt drop the knife.

Get away from the cart, the man said.

He looked at them. He looked at the boy. He was an out-cast from one of the communes and the fingers of his right hand had been cut away. He tried to hide it behind him. A sort of fleshy spatula. The cart was piled high. He'd taken everything.

Get away from the cart and put down the knife.

He looked around. As if there might be help somewhere. Scrawny, sullen, bearded, filthy. His old plastic coat held together with tape. The pistol was a double action but the

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man cocked it anyway. Two loud clicks. Otherwise only their breathing in the silence of the salt moorland. They could smell him in his stinking rags. If you dont put down the knife and get away from the cart, the man said, I'm going to blow your brains out. The thief looked at the child and what he saw was very sobering to him. He laid the knife on top of the blankets and backed away and stood.

Back. More.

He stepped back again.

Papa? the boy said.

Be quiet.

He kept his eyes on the thief. Goddamn you, he said.

Papa please dont kill the man.

The thief's eyes swung wildly. The boy was crying.

Come on, man. I done what you said. Listen to the boy.

Take your clothes off.

What?

Take them off. Every goddamned stitch.

Come on. Dont do this.

I'll kill you where you stand.

Dont do this, man.

I wont tell you again.

All right. All right. Just take it easy.

He stripped slowly and piled his vile rags in the road.

The shoes.

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Come on, man.

The shoes.

The thief looked at the boy. The boy had turned away and put his hands over his ears. Okay, he said. Okay. He sat naked in the road and began to unlace the rotting pieces of leather laced to his feet. Then he stood up, holding them in one hand.

Put them in the cart.

He stepped forward and placed the shoes on top of the blankets and stepped back. Standing there raw and naked, filthy, starving. Covering himself with his hand. He was already shivering.

Put the clothes in.

He bent and scooped up the rags in his arms and piled them on top of the shoes. He stood there holding himself. Dont do this, man.

You didnt mind doing it to us.

I'm begging you.

Papa, the boy said.

Come on. Listen to the kid.

You tried to kill us.

I'm starving, man. You'd have done the same.

You took everything.

Come on, man. I'll die.

I'm going to leave you the way you left us.

Come on. I'm begging you.

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He pulled the cart back and swung it around and put the pistol on top and looked at the boy. Let's go, he said. And they set out along the road south with the boy crying and looking back at the nude and slatlike creature standing there in the road shivering and hugging himself. Oh Papa, he sobbed.

Stop it.

I cant stop it.

What do you think would have happened to us if we hadnt caught him? Just stop it.

I'm trying.

When they got to the curve in the road the man was still standing there. There was no place for him to go. The boy kept looking back and when he could no longer see him he stopped and then he just sat down in the road sobbing. The man pulled up and stood looking at him. He dug their shoes out of the cart and sat down and began to take the wrappings off the boy's feet. You have to stop crying, he said.

I cant.

He put on their shoes and then stood and walked back up the road but he couldnt see the thief. He came back and stood over the boy. He's gone, he said. Come on.

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He's not gone, the boy said. He looked up. His face streaked with soot. He's not.

What do you want to do?

Just help him, Papa. Just help him.

The man looked back up the road.

He was just hungry, Papa. He's going to die.

He's going to die anyway.

He's so scared, Papa.

The man squatted and looked at him. I'm scared, he said. Do you understand? I'm scared.

The boy didnt answer. He just sat there with his head bowed, sobbing.

You're not the one who has to worry about everything.

The boy said something but he couldnt understand him. What? he said.

He looked up, his wet and grimy face. Yes I am, he said. I am the one.

They wheeled the tottering cart back up the road and stood there in the cold and the gathering dark and called but no one came.

He's afraid to answer, Papa.

Is this where we stopped?

I dont know. I think so.