

**On *The Road* to Meaning**  
**Tromsø, UiT, 09/06/23**

"*The Road* is the story we have none of us wanted to tell or read about the end of the world. It is the story of what we have done to the planet that we did not want to have to read. It is a story I for one find it impossible to think of as being redeemed by a Christ. It is the story about the end of the world in which the world ends." (John Clute)

"A person who had no one would be well advised to cobble together some passable ghost. Breathe it into being and coax it along with words of love. Offer it each phantom crumb and shield it from harm with your body." (The wife in *The Road*)

**I. The meaning of 'meaning' and my approach**

The meta-picture of the meaning of life is complicated. In particular, there is no consensus on what the concept depicts. Some distinctions are important:

- Meaning *of* (a) life (as a whole) vs. meaning *in* life (as part or whole)
- Meaning vs related concepts (significance, the absurd)
- Concept vs. conception of meaning
- Meaning vs. happiness/self-interest, morality, worthwhileness
- Sense of meaning vs. meaning of life

I am interested in the *conception* of the meaning of/in life and not in the sense of meaning or in any other related concept.

I will work on the assumption that for McCarthy claims about the meaning of life appear mainly (albeit not exclusively) in the form of claims about *motivation*. Roughly, what propels one into the future, that is, what moves one to stay alive is what gives meaning to one's life.

It is generally but not unanimously thought that the novel is about the meaning of/in life. I will accept this. It is generally but not unanimously thought that the novel's account of this meaning is centred around God and the spiritual. I will *not* accept this.

**II. God and meaning in *The Road***

Central idea: What brings meaning to human life is God, typically via some relation we have to him: such as that we are part of the divine plan, that God has a purpose for us, that God has willed us to live this life, that we do our part in an effort to glorify him etc. On this interpretation, the boy as such does not bring meaning to the man's life: he is relevant more as a condition, as an indication of God's existence, or as an indication that God has a plan for the man, namely, to be the boy's guardian.

**TEXTUAL EVIDENCE:**

- God's purpose for the man: the boy. [1], [2] + God appointed the man to be the boy's guardian (80)
- The Boy's sacred role (also affirmed regularly by himself): "blessed boy", "I am the one", "when he moved the light moved with him"; the boy's breath is God's breath (306)
- Josephs: "salitter" (Jacob Boehme) – divine essence, the stuff of God; [3]
- Josephs: "tabernacle" – a place of worship [4]
- End of the novel: deus ex machina – the "Parka-man" who saves the boy, who "will bring goodness to the boy"

**EXTERNAL SUPPORT – *The Sunset Limited* (a drama that came right after *The Road*):**

- Black: clearly embodies a God-centred account of the meaning of life – "if it wasn't for the grace of God you would not be here." (49)

- Jesus as the gold ore at the bottom of the mine [6] that makes us not commit suicide
- The light is in White as well (like in the boy) (78, 118)
- In short: For Black White is like the boy for the man. Except that White struggles and doesn't embrace his 'role' (which is of course relevant). Still, the lesson to learn, according to Black, is that you are on this Earth to fulfil God's purpose for you.

#### EXTERNAL SUPPORT – Madách: *The Tragedy of Man* (19<sup>th</sup> century Hungarian dramatic poem)

- By eating from the tree of knowledge, Adam and Eve have denounced God, so, they, the humans are God now (33). But then the question looms: if there is no 'real' God, what is the point of life? What brings meaning to life? (40, 202)
- In this quest for meaning, Madách guides his hero, Adam – Eve also appears in each scene as in some way related to Adam - through different historical scenes to show that no naturalist - as a philosopher would call it - account of the meaning of life is adequate: no matter what great cause or other end Adam fights for and believes in, he always gets disappointed.
- In the last scene Adam finds himself at the end of time, or at least at the end of humanity: in a cold, dying world where people no longer have any morality, and their existence is pitiful. In this setting Adam understands that struggle itself also cannot be the aim of life: one must struggle *for* something in order to make sense of existence (216). This brings him back to God: only our relation to God can make our life meaningful.
- The conversation that follows is in [7]-[10]. My interpretation: In Madách's view our life acquires meaning by fulfilling God's purpose under the guidance and care of God. We should not know about God's purpose for us, however, because then struggling to fulfil it would no longer be virtuous, nor would we have incentive to struggle. Madách further suggests that fulfilling God's purpose makes us part of something infinite (and, perhaps, immortal).
- Same with *The Road*: In the man's case the child plays a crucial role: he is the man's link to God, the indication that God has a purpose for him in life, though, of course, just as Adam, the man cannot know it for sure that this is indeed so. In fact, what God tells Adam, we can also say about the man: were he to know that this was indeed his purpose, were he to have no doubts about his 'destiny', his motivation to survive and help the child would not be so strong, nor would it be virtuous. He needs his religion, his faith to guide and help him on the *road* to meaning.

#### PROBLEM – Textual (where is God in this world?)

- Clute: "The salitter *drying* from the earth." [my italics]
- Josephs: Ely (cf. Ely ghosts in the UK) – "a starved and threadbare buddha" (170): the only named character in the novel. "There is no God and we are his prophets." (168)
- Characterization: a Godless world (2), as a world without godspoken men (32), [11], [12]
- There appear to be a denial of the afterlife at several points (196, 210)
- This can be read as an affirmation of a godless, nihilistic world; or at least as some kind of deistic picture (earlier drafts of the novel suggested this explicitly)

#### PROBLEM – Nihilism (no values, no God)

- *The Sunset Limited* – White's position is clearly nihilistic [13] – [16]. White appears to win the 'battle', Black affirms his faith in the very end, but is also desperate: he runs out of arguments ("If you wanted me to help him how come you didnt give me the words?" he 'complains' to God; 142).
- Also, *The Road* has some relevant passages. The wife's view [17], [18] appears similar to White's including her affirmation of (her longing for) suicide (cf. esp. 135-6 of *The Sunset Limited*). It is clear throughout the novel that man is afraid that his wife was ultimately right...he is just making this up to survive... he is just a coward. And crucially, he admits that he has no arguments to offer to her! [19]
- The world is sometimes depicted, through the man's eyes as being devoid of value [20], [21]. "Upright" – also morally (as McCarthy also explained in an interview); "predicated on a world to come" – nothing is of value anymore.

- There is an interesting parallel here with *The Brothers Karamazov* (Hillier, 266): “where mankind’s belief in its immortality to be destroyed, *not only love but also any living power to continue the life of the world would at once dry up in it.*”

PROBLEM – Evil in the world

- In the novel it is clear, hauntingly clear, that there is both human (cannibals etc.) as well as natural evil (the unknown catastrophe) in this apocalyptic world.

- It is also clear and one important strand of thought in the novel that the man must fight his own ‘evil’ (moral progress) [22]

- *The Sunset Limited*: White’s reference to Auschwitz (“Western civilization finally went up in smoke in the chimneys at Dachau but I was too infatuated to see it. I see it now.” 27)

PROBLEM – Forfeiting autonomous agency

- Another standard problem for God-centred account of meaning: if we just follow an inscrutable plan made by God, we are not acting autonomously (instead: self-abasement, self-annulment).

- Hawkins: *The Road* can be read – and I think it should be read – as the father’s attempt to recover his agency. To give hope, in this way, both to himself and to his son (instead of endorsing his wife’s nihilism).

- Worth noting that both the wife and White in *The Sunset Limited* affirms a certain kind of existential/radical freedom. White: “The one thing I won’t give up is giving up.” (130)

- Hepburn: a God-centred account can accommodate agency. A worshipper “is not passively, heteronomously accepting claims about divine greatness; he is actively and autonomously recognising and relishing them. [...] There is both recognition of affinity and awareness of disparity. But the latter need not be taken as a command to surrender autonomy: rather to extend progressively the zone of ‘recognition’.” (137) Compare this to Madách [8], [10]

- But does this fit the novel (and/or McCarthy’s thinking)? I don’t think so. I doubt that anyone can read *The Road* as having the man as a worshipper à la Hepburn. It is hard to see the man as trying to glorify God (Hill) with his existence, with his bringing the boy to presumed safety.

A WAY OUT? – Wrong sense of meaningfulness

- We have lost sight of the distinction we began with: perhaps McCarthy’s interest is in the meaning of life, which would then bring in God? Idea: meaning of life = ultimate meaning = purpose/valued end for whole life (existence) provided by God. [Setting now aside scepticism or the temptation to remove God from this picture. Cf. Weinberg]

- I see little reason to think that *The Road* wants to make a metaphysical statement about the point of our entire existence in the world. But maybe I am wrong?

- Hill: meaning of life is necessary for us to have meaning in life. We have to have a purpose for our life), which gives meaning in our life when we make the purpose our own. “In short, it seems that is necessary for a life to be meaningful that it be freely lived, at least in significant part, for a valuable (important and morally good) purpose, and that, to a significant degree, the life achieve that purpose.”

- Theoretically, this assumes that one must not only have some purpose in life, but that this purpose ultimately has to come from God, as an intended purpose of his life (existence). One can question both claims, but certainly the second.

- Textually, there is no clear support for this rather complex view in the book. It does not seem that the man would be turning a metaphysical position about human existence into a driving force in his life.

### III. An alternative: narrative and meaning in *The Road*

What else could stand as the central meaning-making feature in *The Road*? There are several candidates, I think, but one particularly stands out.

STRUGGLE. In the novel we find points that seem to highlight the importance of struggle: [23], [24]

- But already the quotes show that have no intrinsic, final value for McCarthy; instead, it has an *instrumental* role with respect to the meaning of life: beauty, grace, and in the case of the man, the boy being the constitutive elements instead (or God to whom the boy relates the man).
- True, struggle can be part of morality: the good guys do not give up, says the man. But again, this gives no meaning-constituting role to struggle. At best it shows that it is virtuous/right to struggle; but then something else, of which struggle is a part, constitutes meaning, namely, morality.
- Again, useful parallel with Madách: Adam puts forward this idea explicitly [25] but then he realizes its falsity – one must struggle *for* something and it is that something that ultimately matters [26]

“CARRYING THE FIRE”. It is often said in conversations between the man and the boy that they ‘carry the fire’. But what is the fire? We only have [27] to guide us, which doesn’t specify.

- *Humanity*: Also, the ‘bad guys’ have this, unless it means morality.
- *Morality*: We can take this up later.
- *Soul*: No such idea is mentioned or hinted at in the novel and in any case, it easily relates to either God or morality.
- *Immortality*: Cf. Madách: “spark that lies within thy breast; The feeble flutt’ring of an endless power”, 27-8. But this again relates to God and it is also problematic for many.
- *God/Divinity*: what is divine within ourselves. This is supported certainly in *The Sunset Limited* (“the lingering scent of divinity”, the light; 13, 78, 118). But then we are back to God.

MORALITY. Moral lives can be said to be the par excellence meaningful lives (moral life = life that exhibits virtue, morality, living up to moral principles etc.) It is clear that the boy is (almost) a Christ-like figure (“second coming”) with (deontic) morality (42, 81, 136, 148, 51-3, 86, 90, 278). The question mainly concerns the man: is he a moral man? (cf. our discussion of nihilism above)

- There is some textual evidence: there are signs of moral progress (e.g. [22]) The woman in [17] says that the man “talks about taking a stand, but there is no stand to take”. And, as we saw above, struggle, though does not constitute meaning itself, could be taken to be a *moral* struggle. In short, the novel, certainly as far as the man is concerned, could be read as a ‘bildungsroman’ the aim of which is to chart the man’s moral development (cf. Hillier).
- Still, I am unconvinced. Generally, it is hard to believe that morality *exhausts* meaning (even if, with all its dangers, we subjectivise it). More to the point, most commentators (Hillier, Weilenberg) who take this line connect it to the man’s relationship to the boy (his devotion and love). While such ‘special relationships’ can be taken to be moral, they need not be so considered.
- Another issue is that if the novel is about moral progress, then it is also about the conflict of different moral codes (boy: deontic; man: consequentialist). So, which constitutes meaning? Can we say that the man is converging onto the boy’s deontic code?
- And why not hold that the morality concerned is God-centred? (Could be a divine command theory or else.) [28]

THE BOY. The loving relationship between the boy and the man appear to be a natural candidate (they are “each the other’s world entire”, 6). Exactly how this constitutes meaning depends on whether one is a subjectivist, objectivist or both: relationship, love, or both. And morality can also come into this: the man’s moral progression toward the boy’s (deontic) morality is part of their deepening devotion toward each other.

- Textual evidence is ripe: It is said that it is only the boy who stands between the man and death (29); the wife also explains the man’s insistence to keep on living with reference to the boy [17] and this appears admitted by the man, too [27], [30]
- At the same time, there is little to explain the striking difference between the man’s and his wife’s attitude towards life and death. For the question that naturally arises when one reads their conversation is: why does the woman throw away her life and the man does not? The woman, we saw, seems to refer to the boy as the man’s reason, but the question still remains: why is the boy enough cause for the man to stay alive and not for the woman, the mother of the child? Despite its nihilist

interpretation, in [18] it is clear the wife does think in moral terms (“It is the right thing to do”) and I think it is also hard to doubt her love for the boy. So, what is the extra motivation missing? One option is ‘mere’ disagreement about what morality and/or their mutual love for the boy requires – is that all? If it isn’t, what: God (cf. Madách, [30])? Or, else? What else?

- One response to nihilism is to re-affirm the values that are claimed not to exist – this with or without reference to God. I don’t think McCarthy is in such a ‘realist’ (looking) business. I think it would be a ‘cheap ‘trick’ for him to have just written a morality tale of this ‘standard’ kind.

NARRATIVE. I think it is the ‘good of the story’ that unites all these threads and provides the best interpretation. But this good is not instrumental (as in e.g. Hillier) but intrinsic: story-telling, creating/constructing a *narrative*, becomes the primary vessel of meaning-making in *The Road*

- Textual evidence: the wife in [18]; [19], White in [16]. Commentators: Cooper, Hawkins.

- de Bres: relationism (particular set of narrative relations obtain) and recountism (telling of the story about these relations). I think relationism is for the man (moral progress etc.), recountism is for the boy (the father creates a moral and spiritual universe for him as his ultimate gift).

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[1]

“When it was light enough to use the binoculars he glassed the valley below. Everything was paling away into the murk...Then he just sat there holding the binoculars and watching the ashen daylight congeal over the land. He knew only that the child was his warrant. He said: If he is not the word of God God never spoke.” (3)

[2]

“He descended into a gryke in the stone and there he crouched coughing and he coughed for a long time. Then he just knelt in the ashes. He raised his face to the paling day. Are you there? He whispered. Will I see you at the last? Have you a neck by which to throttle you? Oh God, he whispered. Oh God.” (10)

[3]

“He walked out into the road and stood. The silence. The salitter drying from the earth.” (261)

[4]

“he [the man] would raise his weeping eyes and see him [the boy] from some unimaginable future, glowing in the waste like a tabernacle” (273)

[6]

“At the deep bottom of the mine where the gold is at there aint none of that [people of color]. There is 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.

*Black.* [...] but it is Jesus understood as that gold at the bottom of the mine. He couldnt come down here and take the shape of a man if that form was not done shaped to accommodate him.” (95)

[7]

“My Lord, such frightful scenes have tortured me; and I know not what is reality. Oh! Tell me, tell me what is my destiny! [...] Enlighten me, and gratefully my fate, whate’er it be, I will endure, if only I may progress, for this uncertainty is hell.” (221)

[8]

“Ask not again, the secret, veiled beneficently from thy longing eyes, by the wise hand of God. But could’st thou know that momentarily on earth, thy soul did rest while waits eternity above, no virtue ‘twere to suffer longer here. If thou did’st know thy soul would be absorbed in dust, for grand ideas, what incentive to sacrifice the moment’s fleeting bliss? While now, the future gleameth through a mist, so heavy laden with the cares and woes of this transitory life, the sense of an infinitude doth wake; if this engender pride, mortality restricts; both greatness then and virtue, are assured.” (221-2)

[9]

“Thine arm is strong, thy soul exalted; infinite the scope which e’er to action doth invite; and if thou heedest well, a voice will call to thee unceasingly, to lure thee back and raise thee up; but follow e’er the call.” (222)

[10]

“What a mighty thought! We’re free, ‘twixt good and ill to choose, while over us, God’s mercy waiteth still. Act boldly, fearing not the herd’s ingratitude; for this is not thine aim but action, great and good...But on the lofty way let thee not blind the sight, the thought, that thou could’st add one atom to God’s might, he only speaks to thee, as means toward thy fate fulfilling. Honor comes from him, for him doth wait.” (223-4)

[11]

“He walked out in the gray light and stood and he saw for a brief moment the absolute truth of the world. The cold relentless circling of the intestate earth. Darkness implacable. The blind dogs of the sun in their

running. The crushing black vacuum of the universe. And somewhere two hunted animals trembling like ground-foxes in their cover.” (130)

**[12]**

“Out on the roads the pilgrims sank down and fell over and died and the bleak and shrouded earth went trundling past the sun and returned again as trackless and as unremarked as the path of any nameless sisterworld in the ancient dark beyond.” (181)

**[13]**

“[I believe] the world is basically a forced labor camp from which workers – perfectly innocent – are led forth by lottery, a few each day, to be executed. I don’t think that this is just the way I see it. I think it’s the way it is. Are there alternative views? Of course. Will any of them stand close scrutiny? 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 don’t think that now.” (122-3)

**[14]**

“If people saw the world for what it truly is. Saw their lives for what they truly are. Without dreams or illusions. I don’t believe they could offer the first reason why they should not elect to die as soon as possible.” (136-7)

**[15]**

“I don’t believe in God. Can you understand that? Look around you man. Can’t you see? The clamor and din of those in torment has to be the sound most pleasing to his ear. [...] Your fellowship is a fellowship of pain and nothing more. [...] Show me a religion that prepares one for death. For nothingness. 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...” (137-8)

**[16]**

“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 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?” (139)

**[17]**

“Please don’t do this.

I’m sorry.

I can’t do it alone.

Then don’t. I can’t help you. They say that women dream of danger to those in their care and men of danger to themselves. But I don’t dream at all. You say you can’t? Then don’t do it. That’s all. Because I am done with my own whorish heart and I have been for a long time. You talk about taking a stand but there is no stand to take. My heart was ripped out of me the night he was born so don’t ask for sorrow now. There is none. Maybe you’ll be good at this. I doubt it, but who knows. The one thing I can tell you is that you won’t survive for yourself. I know because I would never have come this far. A person who had no one would be well advised to cobble together some passable ghost. Breathe it into being and coax it along with words of love. Offer it each phantom crumb and shield it from harm with your body. As for me my only hope is eternal nothingness and I hope it with all my heart.” (59)

**[18]**

“We are survivors he told her across the flame of the lamp.

Survivors? she said.

Yes.

What in God’s name are you talking about? We’re not survivors. We’re the walking dead in a horror film.

I’m begging you.

I don’t care. I don’t care if you cry. It doesn’t mean anything to me.

Please.

Stop it.

I am begging you. I'll do anything.

Such as what? I should have done it a long time ago. When there were three bullets in the gun instead of two. I was stupid. We've been over all this. I didn't bring myself to this. I was brought. And now I'm done. I thought about not even telling you. That would probably have been best. You have two bullets and then what? You can't protect us. You say you would die for us but what good is that? I'd take him with me if it weren't for you. You know I would. It's the right thing to do.

You are talking crazy.

No, I'm speaking the truth. Sooner or later they'll catch us and they will kill us. They will rape me. They'll rape him. They are going to rape us and kill us and eat us and you won't face it. You'd rather wait for it to happen. But I can't. I can't. She sat there smoking a slender length of dried grapevine as if it were some rare cheroot. Holding it with a certain elegance, her other hand across her knees where she'd drawn them up. She watched him across the small flame. I used to talk about death, she said. I don't any more. Why is that?

I don't know.

It's because it's here. There's nothing left to talk about.

I wouldn't leave you.

I don't care. It's meaningless. You can think of me as a faithless slut if you like. I've taken a new lover.

He can give me what you cannot.

Death is not a lover.

Oh yes he is." (57-8)

### [19]

"There was no argument, The hundred nights they'd sat up debating the pros and cons of self destruction with the earnestness of philosophers chained to a madhouse wall. In the morning the boy said nothing at all and when they were packed and ready to set out upon the road he turned and looked back at their campsite and he said: She's gone isn't she? And he said: Yes, she is." (58)

### [20]

"The blackness he woke to on those nights was sightless and impenetrable. A blackness to hurt your ears with listening. Often he had to get up. No sound but the wind in the bare and blackened trees. He rose and stood tottering in that cold autistic dark with his arms outstretched for balance while the vestibular calculations in his skull cranked out their reckonings. An old chronicle. To seek out the upright. No fall but preceded by declination. He took great marching steps into the nothingness, counting them against his return. Eyes closed, arms oaring. Upright to what? Something nameless in the night, lode or matrix. To which he and the stars were common satellite. Like the great pendulum in its rotunda scribing through the long day movements of the universe of which you may it knows nothing and yet know it must." (15)

### [21]

"Years later he'd stood in the charred ruins of a library where blackened books lay in pools of water. Shelves tipped over. Some rage at the lies arranged in their thousands on row. He picked up one of the books and thumbed through the heavy bloated pages. He'd not have thought the value of the smallest thing predicated on a world to come. It surprised him. That the space which these things occupied was itself an expectation. He let the book fall and took a last look around and made his way out into the cold gray light." (187)

### [22]

We can't stay here. We have to go.

He's scared, Papa.

I don't think you should touch him.

Maybe we could give him something to eat.

He stood looking off down the road. Damn, he whispered. He looked down the old man. Perhaps he'd turn into a god and they to trees. All right, he said. (163)

[23]

“All things of grace and beauty such that one holds them to one’s heart have a common provenance in pain. Their birth in grief and ashes. So, he whispered to the sleeping boy. I have you.” (56)

[24]

“Okay. This is what the good guys do. They keep trying. They dont give up.” (145)

[25]

“What, after all’s the end? The end – when glory’s o’er – I apprehend, the end is death, and life is constant strife; the aim of man, to struggle throughout life.” (206)

[26]

“Let’s flee, Oh! Lucifer! My future sphere let me no longer view, my dreadful fate, the useless strife, now, I would meditate on this, If I can e’er defy God more?” (216)

[27]

“I want to be with you.

You cant.

Please.

You cant. You have to carry the fire.

I dont know how to.

Yes you do.

Is it real? The fire?

Yes it is.

Where is it? I dont know where it is.

Yes you do. It’s inside you. It was always there. I can see it.

Just take me with you. Please.

I cant.

Please, Papa.

I cant. I cant hold my son dead in my arms. I thought I could but I cant.” (298)

[28]

“They lay listening. Can you do it? When the time comes? When the time comes there will be no time. Now is the time. *Curse God and die*. What if it doesnt fire? Could you crush that beloved skull with a rock? Is there such a being within you of which you know nothing? Can there be? Hold him in your arms. Just so. The soul is quick. Pull him toward you. Kiss him. Quickly.” (120; italics are mine)

[29]

“What would you do if I died?

If you died I would want to die too.

So you could be with me?

Yes. So I could be with you.

Okay.” (9)

[30]

“Thou’lt smile when I avow my secret; this – come nearer Adam – now, into thine ear I’ll whisper but one word; I feel I am a mother.

*(Falling on his knees)*

Oh! my Lord, thou’st vanquished me. Here in the dust I lie; without thee, ‘gainst thee, vainly strive must I, raise me, or strike to earth! I bare my breast to thee.” (219-220)

[31]

“Evoke the forms. Where you’ve nothing else construct ceremonies out of the air and breathe upon them.” (74)

## Plot

A father and his young son journey on foot across the post-apocalyptic ash-covered United States some years after an extinction event. The boy's mother, pregnant with him at the time of the disaster, committed suicide some time before.

Realizing they cannot survive the winter in northern latitudes, the father takes the boy south along interstate highways towards the sea, carrying their meager possessions in their knapsacks and a supermarket cart. The father is suffering from a cough. He assures his son that they are "good guys" who are "carrying the fire". The pair have a revolver, but only two rounds. The father has tried to teach the boy to use the gun on himself if necessary, to avoid falling into the hands of cannibals.

They attempt to evade a group of marauders traveling along the road but one of the marauders discovers them and seizes the boy. The father shoots him dead and they flee the marauder's companions, abandoning most of their possessions. Later, when searching a mansion for supplies, they discover a locked cellar containing naked people whose captors have been eating limb by limb, and flee into the woods.

As they near starvation, the pair discover a concealed bunker filled with food, clothes and other supplies. They stay there for several days regaining their strength and then carry on, taking supplies with them in a cart. They encounter an old man with whom the boy insists they share food. Further along the road they evade a group whose members include pregnant women, and soon after they discover an abandoned campsite with a newborn infant roasted on a spit. They soon run out of supplies and begin to starve before finding a house containing more food to carry in their cart, but the man's condition worsens.

The pair reach the sea, where they discover a boat that has drifted from shore. The man swims to it and recovers supplies, including a flare gun, which he demonstrates to the boy. The boy becomes ill. When they stop on the beach while the boy recovers, their cart is stolen. They pursue and confront the thief, a wretched man traveling alone. The father forces him to strip naked at gunpoint, and takes his clothes together with the cart. This distresses the boy, so the father returns and leaves the man's clothes and shoes on the road, but the man has disappeared.

While walking through a town inland, a man in a window shoots the father in the leg with an arrow. The father responds by shooting his assailant with the flare gun. The pair move further south along the beach. The father's condition worsens, and after several days he realizes he will soon die. The father tells the son he can talk to him after he is gone, and that he must continue without him. After the father dies, the boy stays with his body for three days. The boy is approached by a man carrying a shotgun. The man tells the boy he and his wife have a son and daughter. He convinces the boy he is one of the "good guys" and takes the boy under his protection.