

N A T I O N A L    B E S T S E L L E R

# All the Pretty Horses

Cormac McCarthy



## I

THE CANDLEFLAME and the image of the candleflame caught in the pierglass twisted and righted when he entered the hall and again when he shut the door. He took off his hat and came slowly forward. The floorboards creaked under his boots. In his black suit he stood in the dark glass where the lilies leaned so palely from their waisted cutglass vase. Along the cold hallway behind him hung the portraits of forebears only dimly known to him all framed in glass and dimly lit above the narrow wainscotting. He looked down at the guttered candlestub. He pressed his thumbprint in the warm wax pooled on the oak veneer. Lastly he looked at the face so caved and drawn among the folds of funeral cloth, the yellowed moustache, the eyelids paper thin. That was not sleeping. That was not sleeping.

It was dark outside and cold and no wind. In the distance a calf bawled. He stood with his hat in his hand. You never combed your hair that way in your life, he said.

Inside the house there was no sound save the ticking of the mantel clock in the front room. He went out and shut the door.

Dark and cold and no wind and a thin gray reef beginning along the eastern rim of the world. He walked out on the prairie and stood holding his hat like some suppliant to the darkness over them all and he stood there for a long time.

As he turned to go he heard the train. He stopped and waited for it. He could feel it under his feet. It came boring out of the east like some ribald satellite of the coming sun howling and bellowing in the distance and the long light of the headlamp running through the tangled mesquite brakes and creating out



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of the night the endless fenceline down the dead straight right of way and sucking it back again wire and post mile on mile into the darkness after where the boilersmoke disbanded slowly along the faint new horizon and the sound came lagging and he stood still holding his hat in his hands in the passing ground-shudder watching it till it was gone. Then he turned and went back to the house.

She looked up from the stove when he came in and looked him up and down in his suit. Buenos días, guapo, she said.

He hung the hat on a peg by the door among slickers and blanketcoats and odd pieces of tack and came to the stove and got his coffee and took it to the table. She opened the oven and drew out a pan of sweetrolls she'd made and put one on a plate and brought it over and set it in front of him together with a knife for the butter and she touched the back of his head with her hand before she returned to the stove.

I appreciate you lightin the candle, he said.

Cómo?

La candela. La vela.

No fui yo, she said.

La señora?

Claro.

Ya se levantó?

Antes que yo.

He drank the coffee. It was just grainy light outside and Arturo was coming up toward the house.

HE SAW his father at the funeral. Standing by himself across the little gravel path near the fence. Once he went out to the street to his car. Then he came back. A norther had blown in about midmorning and there were spits of snow in the air with blowing dust and the women sat holding on to their hats. They'd put an awning up over the gravesite but the weather was all sideways and it did no good. The canvas rattled and flapped and the preacher's words were lost in the wind. When it was



over and the mourners rose to go the canvas chairs they'd been sitting on raced away tumbling among the tombstones.

In the evening he saddled his horse and rode out west from the house. The wind was much abated and it was very cold and the sun sat blood red and elliptic under the reefs of bloodred cloud before him. He rode where he would always choose to ride, out where the western fork of the old Comanche road coming down out of the Kiowa country to the north passed through the westernmost section of the ranch and you could see the faint trace of it bearing south over the low prairie that lay between the north and middle forks of the Concho River. At the hour he'd always choose when the shadows were long and the ancient road was shaped before him in the rose and canted light like a dream of the past where the painted ponies and the riders of that lost nation came down out of the north with their faces chalked and their long hair plaited and each armed for war which was their life and the women and children and women with children at their breasts all of them pledged in blood and redeemable in blood only. When the wind was in the north you could hear them, the horses and the breath of the horses and the horses' hooves that were shod in rawhide and the rattle of lances and the constant drag of the travois poles in the sand like the passing of some enormous serpent and the young boys naked on wild horses jaunty as circus riders and hazing wild horses before them and the dogs trotting with their tongues aloll and foot-slaves following half naked and sorely burdened and above all the low chant of their traveling song which the riders sang as they rode, nation and ghost of nation passing in a soft chorale across that mineral waste to darkness bearing lost to all history and all remembrance like a grail the sum of their secular and transitory and violent lives.

He rode with the sun coppering his face and the red wind blowing out of the west. He turned south along the old war trail and he rode out to the crest of a low rise and dismounted and dropped the reins and walked out and stood like a man come to the end of something.



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