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Surviving On *The Road*

“Our will to live is often much greater than the difficulties of life!”

— Mehmet Murat ildan

Not wanting to live anymore is an easy thing to think and do. Wanting to survive requires effort. You have to eat, you have to sleep, and you have to keep yourself hydrated. Try not doing those things and see how long you last. Now try to imagine doing all of those things in a post-apocalyptic setting. This is how a man and his son have to live in their day to day life in Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*. Survival isn’t just eating, sleeping, and staying hydrated, there is a lot more to it. Relationships, love, the past, a person’s thought process, and having the ability/skills to stay alive are major factors of survival. Those things are what shape a person and without having certain experiences, you might not make it out there. Throughout Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*, we get to see how the will to survive is much more than literally staying alive (Eating, Sleeping, Drinking), but that it is about the other things that will keep you going.

When you are out on the road, you are constantly trying your best to survive. First and foremost, the urge to keep living is a necessity. Without the urge to keep living, there is nothing stopping you from ending it all. For example the man “hoped it would be brighter where for all he knew the world grew darker daily” (McCarthy 213). He goes throughout his days with the hope that things will get better, even though he knows that things will probably just end up getting worse. The man is not alone, though. If he was alone, I do not know if he would even

want to keep going. In this case the man keeps on going because he needs “to protect the life of his son at all costs” (Constantakis). In the eyes of the man, his son (referred to as “The Boy” in the novel) means everything. He will do anything in his power to keep his son from being in harm.

The road is a dangerous and mysterious place, so having a set of rules is key. The man is a pretty smart man and you see this because of how clear some of his rules are. At one point the boy asks “We wouldnt ever eat anybody, would we?” (McCarthy 128) to which the man replies, “No. Of course not” (McCarthy 128). The man and the boy make it clear that no matter how hungry they get or how bad things get, they will never result to eating another human being. This is because “the man and the boy still maintain a moral code and are careful to clearly delineate between good and evil” (Constantakis). Throughout the novel, the man and the boy run into an array of different characters. Every time they meet someone new, you get the feeling that the boy is trying to figure out whether they are a good or bad guy. The boy thinks like this because this how the man has brought him up. This is how they see the world.

Having some sort of awareness for this world and how it works is very important. The world in this novel has become a very scary place. One of the things that make the man so smart is how aware he is of his surroundings. Early on in the novel, the man and the boy find themselves at a nice lake with a waterfall and at first sight it seems like the perfect place to be. Right away the man says “We can’t stay, he said. It’s getting colder every day. And the waterfall is an attraction” (McCarthy 42). He knows what he is doing. Yes having access to all that water is a dream come true, but it will only hurt them in the end because waterfalls are pretty loud areas. When someone in this time hears a waterfall, you know for a fact that they are going to making a B-line for it.

In life, the relationships you have or have had with certain people can shape how you live. With *The Road*, Cormac McCarthy uses the relationships that certain characters have with each other to flesh out those characters and to give them more motivation. For instance, God plays a pretty big role in the man's life. At one point he says to the boy, "My job is to take care of you. I was appointed to do that by God" (McCarthy 77). The man feels that the reason he is living, is because God appointed him to protect the boy. There is also a bit of resentment on the man's part towards God. William Kennedy of The New York Times said that *The Road* "is as biblical as it is ultimate, and the man implies that the end has happened through godly fanaticism" (Kennedy). The man believes that people's extreme beliefs in God, have caused what has happened to the Earth. Even if that is true, look how much God becomes a part of the man's life as the years have gone by.

A character who you do not get to know a ton about, but what you know about her is enough to know what impact she has made on the man and boy's lives, is the man's wife. Times got too tough and too scary for the man's wife that she decided to take her own life. When the man asks what he is going to tell their son if she kills herself, she replies by saying "I cant help you" (McCarthy 59). She abandoned them, and it has defiantly left a mark on the duo. You may think, how could or a mother do this or could a father and son let her do this? But the thing is the man "could not think of a good reason for her not to" (Constantakis). How could the man make someone go through a life that has little to no hope left in it? He wouldn't do that to his wife. The man learned from this experience though. I personally believe that this situation gave him an even greater reason to keep on going. He is not ready to let go of the world, and this motivated him to keep on searching for hope in this world.

But the single most important relationship in *The Road* is the relationship between our two main characters, the man and the boy. Their companionship is what drives the story and is the heart and soul of the entire book. They have a relationship with each other that is unparalleled to any other in this story. The man will do anything for his son. There is this really intense confrontation with a stranger on the road and things get crazy “When the man from the truck grabs the boy, the boy's father shoots the man in the head, killing him instantly” (Constantakis). When this happens, it is pretty much confirmed that there is no line for the man when it comes to protecting his son. The boy is the last person in this world that the man cares about and it is safe to assume that this is the only family of his left in the world. Even though the world has become a frightening and terrible place, the man only wants his son to not be afraid to keep on living. He says things like “Come on, the man said. Everything’s okay. I promise” (McCarthy 135). That line isn’t the only time he says something like that to him in the novel. On a regular basis he will say something like that to the boy. Just imagine being a little boy, seeing all of these terrible things happening. You might lose hope and a will to live, but if someone that you look up to is telling you that everything is going to be alright, you’re probably going to be a little comforted by that.

The way a person thinks plays a huge part in their survival. There are all sorts of different mentalities a person can have. There are a lot of people in *The Road* that are realists. To them, hope does not exist. The man’s wife is 100% a realist. She believes that “Sooner or later they will 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 wont face it” (McCarthy 56). With her years of life experience and knowledge of how people are, she fears that the worst is yet to come. This is what causes to take her own life. The man’s wife is not the only character with this mentality. Another character like

this is the old man that the man and the boy meet on the road. The man's wife and the old man are actually pretty similar. Both of them have serious fears. For the woman it is being raped, killed, and eaten. In the old man's case, he fears his inevitable death. To the old man "food will only prolong the time that he has to dread his imminent death" (Constantakis). He knows his time here is numbered and he just wants to just die already so he does not have to wait any longer to go. Death seems like the only escape for these characters, but at the same time it is something they fear.

Curiosity is why we are here today. Without having a curious mind, the world will never progress. It is nice to see a character like the boy, who has a very curious mind. From the start of the book, to the end of the book, the boy is asking questions. For example, a conversation between the boy and his father goes a little something like this, "Can we go down there and see it? I think it's too far. Will the dam be there for a long time?" (McCarthy 20). It might get annoying for the man to repeatedly answer question after question, but the only way the boy will learn is by asking questions. What I like so much about the boy's curiosity, is that he asks an array of different questions about different things. We see the boy ask "countless questions of his father about the way the world was before the event, about when they are going to die and other things that he thinks about" (Constantakis). If you were the boy, wouldn't you be curious about these sorts of things?

Something that anyone who reads this book can connect with is its sense of uncertainty. Just like us in reality, the characters in *The Road* do not know what is coming next. There is no one-hundred percent guarantee that the man and the boy are going to wake up the next day. There is this one part of the book where the boy asks the question "If we were going to die would you tell me?" (McCarthy 94) and the man replies "I dont know" (McCarthy 94). The man in all

seriousness does not know how he will act in a possible future situation. This just shows that one: the man is honest, and two: the man doesn't have it all figured out. Really the man is one of the most lost characters in *The Road*. At first it is a little hard to buy that, but just try to give it some thought. Sara Constantakis said best when she said, "Although the man is fighting for survival for himself and the boy, he is not sure why" (Constantakis). We know that the man does whatever it takes to stay alive, but there is never a moment where he says to the boy "This is why we need to survive." They just keep going on, without any true goal that makes survival a necessity. It is a very dark thing to think about, but it is true.

Once you begin *The Road*, you can tell that these characters have gone through a lot. Events from the man and the boy's past have made a major impact on their futures. One of the most devastating moments in the lives of the man and the boy, was the suicide of the man's wife. Families are supposed to stick together, and seeing one of your own take their own life is something that'll be hard to get over. The man and the boy took this as a learning experience, though. When the going gets tough, the man will say to the boy, "This is what the good guys do. They keep trying" (McCarthy 137). The two of them look at the woman as someone who gave up. The boy wants to always be one of the "good guys", so if it means never giving up, he won't. The man's wife is not thought of too highly anymore, and "The man thinks of her longingly sometimes but is resolved that her memory can have no place in his life or the boy's because she abandoned them both" (Constantakis). The woman is the reason why the man and the boy have taken this stance of survival at all costs. They do not want to get to the point in life where they just do not want to be alive anymore, like the woman did. After her suicide, the man and the boy seem to have gained an appreciation for a lot more things in the world.

Since the Earth has gone through this decline, there has become an appreciation for the little things. For humans on Earth, actual food has become a more scarce and important thing. Coming across any food is a huge deal for the man and the boy. We see the boy and his father, find a bunch of dirty/gross apples at one point, and they could not be happier just to have an apple. As the boy eats the apple, it is described as “Dry and almost tasteless. But an apple. He ate it entire, seeds and all” (McCarthy 121). It did not matter to the boy. An apple is still an apple, not matter how dirty or gross it may be. He was so grateful for the food, that he literally ate the entire apple. Living on the road like they are, you know by now that it is not easy. In an excerpt from *Novels for Students*, Sara Constantakis describes their daily lives like this:

“The Road can be categorized as a dystopian novel because it is set in the future and depicts a horrific society in which day-to-day life consists of scavenging for any edible morsel and hiding from bands of cannibals on the hunt for flesh” (Constantakis).

Once you live a life like that on a daily basis, you learn that everything must be cherished. Whether it is eating an apple or surviving in a world full of cannibals, the two characters appreciate that they are still alive.

Loss is one of the central themes in *The Road*. Not only have our protagonists suffered huge losses, the world as a whole has too. What is sad is that loss continues and continues as the story goes on. Cormac McCarthy describes how the world is by saying “Like the dying world the newly blind inhabit, all of it slowly fading from memory” (McCarthy 18). The world that used to be is fading from the consciousness of the survivors because things just keep on getting worse. But then there are some characters, who deal with loss in a different way. You can tell that the man has lost something but “he seems to take life as it is without lamenting what has been lost”

(Constantakis). He hides his pain from his son. On the outside, the man comes off as man concerned with the future. On the inside, he is filled with guilt and sadness.

Love is a very powerful thing. As much as a book like *The Road* comes off as really depressing and dark, love and its powers are all present from the first page on. The man and the boy are father and son, and they really do have a love for each other. Their relationship is really great example of companionship. They are almost inseparable. In one passage, the man and the boy are going back and forth with each other, and the boy begs his father not leave him alone. It goes like this:

“Don’t go away

Of course I wont go away.

Even for just a little while.

No. I’m right here.

Okay. Okay, Papa” (McCarthy 247).

The boy has never lived in a world without his father. That world where he is not with him, is pretty scary. Now in this situation, the father was only going to leave for a few minutes, but the boy felt so scared and vulnerable, that he just needed his father by his side. The man also loves his son more than anything in the world. In fact, “The man's love for the boy and his hope for the boy's survival are what sustain him and what propel him to keep moving forward”

(Constantakis). The boy is the man’s reason to keep on living. He wants his son to be safe and to not be afraid. The only person who can try their best to do that is the man.

Something that is all throughout *The Road*, is what love makes you do. A large percentage of the man’s options are derived from his love for his son. He will do anything in his



power (Sometimes even beyond his power) to keep the boy alive and well. One of the most memorable moments from the book, is this part:

“The man had already dropped to the ground and swung with him and leveled the pistol and fired from a two-handed position balanced on both knees at a distance of six feet.

The

man fell back instantly and lay with blood bubbling from the hole in his forehead” (McCarthy 66).

The man killed another man with no regret because this guy had his son at hostage. It makes sense for a loving father to save his son from psychopath like that, but some people would try to negotiate with the person in a situation like that. In the man’s case, he does not believe in negotiating. He just went right in for the kill. The man would never kill a man to eat him or just to do it. Love was his motivation. *The Road* is “ultimately about a father sacrificing everything for his son—keeping on and surviving despite a nightmare landscape, and only for his son's sake” (Fassler). This man will go through absolutely anything, in order to keep his son alive.

Now imagine losing someone you really love. Now imagine that was the last person you had left on this planet. The man and the boy live with this fear every single day of their lives. It is a very scary thing to think about, especially in this setting. At one point, the man and the boy are being hunted and the man says “If they find you you are going to have to do it. Do you understand? Shh. No crying. Do you hear me? You know how to do it. You put it in your mouth and point it up” (McCarthy 113). Now that is some really dark stuff. The man is a character who is all about surviving and keeping on going, but in his mind, his son is better off dead than without him. He is just that scared of his son’s inevitable future without him. It does contradict a lot of the man’s morals, but in a situation like this, the man’s true colors start to come out.

Something interesting to point out, is that “Everything that the man does, he does for the boy. Although the man is fighting for survival for himself and the boy” (Constantakis). He is fighting for their lives so they don’t have to be alone. Being alone is a scary thought and from what it looks like, something these two have no desire to be. So they’ll (Mostly the man) do whatever they can to keep on moving together, unless they just cannot.

As time goes in *The Road*, we see how people work in a post-apocalyptic world. Cormac McCarthy shows us how the will to survive and the power of love can shape characters and their impacts on the people/world around them. Staying alive is not an feat. You need a will to survive because if you don’t want to keep going, nothing is stopping you. Then there is the that you form relationships with. Some can have negative impacts, but others can make life worth living. Something in a person’s past can also shape the behavior and morals. We see how the man and the boy have taken the man’s wife suicide as an abandonment and have formed a relationship that makes them inseparable. There are signs in this story that makes it really hard to think how the man or the boy would act if the next day they were all alone. The way a person thinks is a pretty big deal when it comes to surviving. You have a cast of characters in *The Road* that are all over the place with how they think. But most of all we see how love is what people a reason to keep going, but also a reason to end it all. The road is a scary place. Do you have what it takes?

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