

This excerpt from a novel describes a young man's homecoming.

## The Night Chanter

by N. Scott Momaday

1 You feel good out there, like everything was all right and still and cool inside of you, and that black horse loping along like the wind. Your grandfather was another year older and he cried; he cried because your mother and father were dead and he had raised you and you had gone away and you were coming home. You were coming home like a man, on a black and beautiful horse. He sang about it. It was all right, everything, and there was nothing to say.

You were tired then, and you went to sleep thinking of the morning. And at first light you went out and knew where you were. And it was the same, the way you remembered it, the way you knew it had to be; and nothing had changed. The first light, you thought, that little while before sunup; it would always be the same out there. That was the way it was, that's all. It was that way on the day you were born, and it would be that way on the day you died. It was cold, and you could feel the cold on your face and hands. The clouds were the same, smoky and small and far away, and the land was dark and still it went all around the sky. Nothing could fill it but the sun that was coming up, and then it would be bright, brighter than water, and the brightness would be made of a hundred colors and the land would almost hurt your eyes. But at first light it was soft and gray and very still. There was no sound, nothing. The sky was waiting all around, and the east was white, like a shell. At first light the land was alone and very still. And you were there where you wanted to be, and alone. You didn't want to see anyone, or hear anyone speak. There was nothing to say.

The sun came up behind you and you rode the black horse out on the way to the Cornfields. It was a good horse, all right, better than most. It was deep and wide in the chest, and longwinded. It could go on loping and loping like that all the way if you wanted to hurry. But it was early enough, and you didn't have far to go, half day's ride and a little more. You could see the earth going away under you, and could feel and hear the hoofs. It was early enough, and the heat was holding off; and the black horse carried you just hard enough into the slow morning air. It was good going out like that, and it made you want to pray.

*I am the Turquoise Woman's son.  
On top of Belted Mountain  
Beautiful horse—slim like a weasel.  
My horse has a hoof like a striped agate<sup>1</sup>;  
His fetlock<sup>2</sup> is like a fine eagle plume;  
His legs are like quick lightning.  
My horse's body is like an eagle-plumed arrow;  
My horse has a tail like a trailing black cloud.  
I put flexible goods on my horse's back;  
The Little Holy Wind blows through his hair.*

*His mane is made of short rainbows.  
My horse's ears are made of round corn.*

**1agate: a type of stone**

**2fetlock: tuft of hair on the back of a horse's leg**

*My horse's eyes are made of big stars.  
My horse's head is made of mixed waters—  
From the holy waters—he never knows thirst.  
My horse's teeth are made of white shell.  
The long rainbow is in his mouth for a bridle,  
and with it I guide him.  
When my horse neighs, different-colored horses  
follow.  
When my horse neighs, different-colored sheep  
follow.  
I am wealthy, because of him.  
Before me peaceful,  
Behind me peaceful,  
Under me peaceful,  
Over me peaceful,  
All around me peaceful—  
Peaceful voice when he neighs.  
I am Everlasting and Peaceful.  
I stand for my horse.*

You went up by Klagetoh, to the trading post there, and spent the early afternoon inside, talking and laughing, boasting of the black horse, until the sun was low and it was cool again. You rode on to Sam Charley's place, and he went the rest of the way with you. And the two of you laughed and made jokes about the girls at school—the Nambé girls and Apaches—and Sam Charley's horse was old and used to work. It was a poor thing beside the black, and the black horse danced around and threw its head and wanted to run. There was no ketoh<sup>3</sup>, but the black horse was yours for a while and you were riding it out to Cornfields and that was all that mattered.

<sup>5</sup> And there, afterward, a little way west of Cornfields, the sun was going down and the sunset was deep and purple on the sky and the night fell with cold. And there were wagons and fires, and you could hear the talk and smell the smoke and the coffee and the fried bread. And there was a spotted moon coming up in the east, like a concho<sup>4</sup> hammered out thin and deep in the center. And the drums. You heard the drums, and you wished you were still on the way and alone, miles away, where you could hear the drums and see only the moonlight on the land and then at last the fires a long way off. You can hear the drums a long way on the land at night and you don't know where they are until you see the fires, because the drums are all around on the land, going on and on for miles, and then you come over a hill and suddenly there they are, the fires and the drums, and still they sound far away.

They began the dance and you stood away and watched. There was a girl on the other side, and she was laughing and beautiful, and it was good to look at her. The firelight moved on her skin and she was laughing. The firelight shone on the blue velveteen of her blouse and the pale new moon najahes of the corn blossom. And after a while you watched her all the time when she wasn't looking because you saw slowly how beautiful she was. She was slender and small; she moved a little to the drums, standing in place, and her long skirt swayed at her feet there were dimes on her moccasins

**3ketoh: a handmade bracelet or wrist guard**

**4concho: a decorative disk used on a harness**

**5najahe: a crescent-shaped silver pendant**

"Hey, hosteen<sup>6</sup>." Sam Charley's hand was on your shoulder. "She has her eye on you. She's thinking it over."

"That's a fine necklace," you said. "Who is she?"

"Ei yei! It's a fine necklace! Maybe you want to give her something for it, huh? They call her Pony. She lives over yonder by Naslini, I think."

10 And after a while there were many couples dancing around the fires. They passed slowly in front of you, under their blankets, holding hands, stepping out lightly to the drums, the shapes of their bodies close together and dark against the fires. And you lost sight of her. You looked all around, but she was gone. Sam Charley said something, but you couldn't hear what it was; you could hear only the drums, going on like the beat of your heart. And then she was holding on to your arm, laughing, and she said, "Come on, or give me something that is worth a lot of money." Her laughter was a certain thing; it made you careless and sure of yourself, and you wanted always to hear it. She gave you her blanket and led you out in the open by the fires. And you let the blanket fall over your back and you held it open to her and she stepped inside of it. She was small and close beside you, laughing, and you held her for a long time in the dance. You went slowly together, slowly in time around the fires, and she was laughing beside you and the moon was high and the drums were going on far out into the night and the black horse was tethered close by in the camps and the moon and fires shone upon the dark blue velvet of its rump and flanks and your hand lay upon dark blue velvet and looking down you saw the little footsteps of the girl licking out upon the firelit sand, the small white angles of the soles and the deep red sheaths and the shining silver dimes. And you never saw her again.

**6hosteen: a title of respect for males**