

The Hitchhiker

It had been raining steadily for
 hours on a wretched country highway
 where cars edgewise along the ditch
 highway with mud oozing
 everywhere. The hitchhiker
 stood in the rain, shivering
 and waiting. He had no
 umbrella and no money.
 The rain fell in a steady
 stream, making it impossible
 to see more than a few
 feet ahead.

He had been waiting for
 almost two hours. The
 rain had become more
 furious. He was getting
 desperate. He had heard
 that a car was coming
 from the other side of
 the bridge. He had
 waited for hours.
 The car was a large
 sedan. The driver
 looked at him and
 drove on. He was
 disappointed. He
 had hoped to get a ride
 to the other side of
 the bridge. He had
 waited for hours.
 The rain was still
 falling. He was
 getting colder. He
 had no money. He
 had no food. He
 had no shelter.
 He was alone.
 He was
 alone.

For an instant, Peggy is tempted to stop and pick her up. But her husband's words ring in her ears. " Now don't stop and pick up any kitch hikers. They're dangerous. Even young girls are sometimes put out there as a decoy and when you stop - boom - up pop some young thugs and rob you."

She smiles as she thinks of Carl with his conservative lifestyle. Always so cautious and always so suspicious of everybody. Perhaps that's what it took to be a successful lawyer these days. But - oh how she wishes that just once he would ~~eat~~ ^{eat} his hari down and throw caustion to the wind. She had met Carl when she moved to Chicago from a small town in Ohio. She had gone to work in hislaw firm where he was a junior partner. She For her, it was love at first sight - but it took her five years to land him. They have been happily married for the last 10 years. At first, ~~they~~ ^{she} was disappointed because they couldn't have any children and there was talk of adoption but somehow or other the talk never materialized into any form of action. Maybe it was just as well.

The rain slackens and her tension eases. There ahead ^{of her} is a restaurant. Maybe they can direct her to a motel. She pulls the car into the driveway and climbs out into the feggy-misty evening. A hunger pain ~~stabs-her~~ reminds her that it has been over six hours since she left her mother's farm and it has been over six hours since she had anynourishment. She hastens her pace and enters the crowded restaurant.

After telephongng her husband that she will be home later than she planned. She finds an empty table and orders a meal that would fill ~~any~~ truck driver up. The smell of hot food tantalizes her tastebuds. "Might as well relax and get something to eat in me before I start out again. I have a long drive ahead of me if I don't find a place to put over for the night." Her thoughts race ahead of her actions. Just as the waitress plunks down her coffee cup, she Peggy looks up and sees the familiar outline of the young hitch hiker standing before her. "Is this seat taken?" she asks, and points to the empty chair beside Peggy.

With a motion of her head, Peggy says no. "Please feel welcome to join me." As soon as the young girl is seated, Peggy sums her up in one glance. Probably a runaway. Looks like she hasn't eaten in days. The girl avoids her eyes. The tattered suitcase by her feet looks like it has ~~seen~~ ^{seen} bwtter days. The girl herself looks rathered tattered. Her long blond hair is wet and stringy. Her clothes, too, are wet! ^{probably} Probably was standing in the rain a long time. Despite an inner warning, Peggy ~~soon~~ ^{being} finds herself drawn to this pitiful looking creature.

She couldn't be over 16. When Peggy was 16 she had the comfort of a nice home and would never consider running away. Wonder what ~~made~~ ^{made} her ~~to~~ leave? I have to admit her - ~~it takes a lot of nerve to~~

She watches as the girl fumbles around in the bottom of her shoulder strap purse and fishes out some loose change. She tells the waitress "Just a glass of milk, please."

Peggy realizes that the girl probably doesn't have any money and she wonders how she can offer her money to eat on without offending her.

"Ahem - er - how far are you traveling, honey?" she asks. "Wasn't that you I passed back on the highway a piece?"

The girl lowers her head as she answers. "Yes, ma'am. Uh - I'm going to Chicago. To see my mother." she hastily adds.

"Oh, I see." Peggy digs into the heaps of food placed before her. "Does your mother know that you're - er - hitch hiking. Doesn't it worry her?"

"Oh no - she doesn't - I mean - well, you see, I haven't seen my mother in a long long time. This is going to be a surprise visit." Surprisingly the girl's eyes meet Peggy's. And the dull vacant look is replaced with a flash of enthusiasm.

The waitress brings the girls' milk. With one swift gulp - she swallows it down.

"Look, honey" Peggy feels a twang of sympathy for this strange girl. "It's none of my business and I don't mean to pry - but if you don't have any money - well, I'd be glad to pay for your meal. Won't you let me do that for you?"

The girl lowers her eyes. "No - no, thank you. I'm just not very hungry."

"I see" Peggy replies. "Well, then, how about helping me eat some of this delicious steak? I'm afraid that my eyes were bigger than my stomach and it really is a shame to waste it. C'mon - just try it."

"Well, I don't know - maybe - if you're sure you don't want it." The girl takes the steak from her and hungrily gobbles it up like a turkey eating corn. After she eats a few bits, she opens up and talks to her new "friend".

"What about you? I mean - how come you're traveling all alone? Don't you have a husband or something?" ~~Was-this-the-same-shy-girl-that-had~~ Where are you going anyway?" Questions fly from her like a computer tape. Peggy manages to conceal a smile that edges her lips. Was this the same shy girl that sat down a few moments ago.

"Well - yes, I do have a husband. And I'm traveling all alone because I've just been to visit my mother back in Ohio. She lives

on a farm there. I haven't been home for three years. We had a lovely reunion. My husband is a lawyer in Chicago and it's hard for him to get away - so I came by myself. I'm on my way home now. I must confess that if I had known the weather was going to be this bad, I would have stayed on for a few more days back in Ohio."

"Gee! Isn't that something." The girl continues to eat. Peggy pushes her pie in front of her and makes a motion of her hand for the waitress to refill her milk glass. The girl takes it gratefully without openly acknowledging it. "Here you just came from seeing your mother and I'm on my way to see mine. Kind of a coincidence, huh?"

"Yes, I suppose so." Peggy releases the smile she has been hiding. "Say - how would you like to ride with me? I'm going into Chicago myself and I would really welcome some company. What do you say?"

"Are you sure?" The girl wipes her mouth with her napkin and pushes the empty dishes away from her. "I sure would be thankful for the ride, ma'am. I know that my mother will be glad to pay you after we get there."

"Oh pesh--fiddles -" Peggy quickly turns down the offer of any money. "I'm going there anyway. You don't owe me for anything. C'mon, we better get started before the rain starts up again."

The amber glow of the restaurant lights reflects on the two females as they climb into Peggy's car and start off down the lonely highway.

As the rain pounds the pavement, Peggy turns on the car radio to get a weather report. As she settles back in her seat she feels the cold steel chamber of a gun being pressed into her neck.
the back of

A husky voice drifts from the back of the car. "Okay, lady, do what you're told and you won't get hurt?"

Peggy throws a quick glance at her new companion thinking that she has fallen for one of those plots she was warned about. But she is surprised to see a look of fear on the young girl's face that clears of her any guilt. Obviously, the girl isn't in on it.

"What do you want me to do?" she whispers in a shaky voice.

"Just keep driving, lady. We won't hurt you unless you force us to." The gun moves away from her neck but she can feel his hot breath on her spine and she shivers.

"We? - He said "we" - that means there's two of them." Peggy glances into her rear view mirror. It's dark and she can only pick up some undistinguishable shapes in the back seat. I have to keep a clear head. Mustn't panic. Talk! Must talk to them. Try not to act scared." Peggy's brain issues instructions while her body automatically obeys.

For what seems like hours, they drive along in silence with only the occasional sound of thunder and steady pounding of the rain. The radio continues to play softly. From the corner of her eye, Peggy can see that the young hitch hiker hasn't moved an inch. The poor girl seemed frozen with fright. Maybe now was the time to try to talk to them. Maybe it would also reassure her young passenger that she wasn't afraid. He!- She gulped. Oh boy, like hell she wasn't afraid - but she mustn't let them know it. "Speak, Peggy" her mind commands. She gropes for her voice.

"Er - I'm going to Chicago. I live there." Her voice comes out like that of a squeaky mouse.

"Shut up." The gun cold gun is again thrust in her neck. "Talk when I tell you to, lady. Just keep driving."

"Hey, Jake " for the first time the other man speaks. "If she's going to Chicago - we can go to Bill's place. He'd put us up 'till the heat was off."

A loud smack resounds in the car. "You dummy. Can't you keep your trap shut? Now - no more names. Understand?"

"I was only thinking that - -" the other man's voice is subdued.

"Well - don't." The man called Jake again reprimands him. "Say - lady, Chicago is about 150 more miles - do you think we can make it in this downpour?"

Peggy is surprised at the change of tone in his voice. "Yes - we can make it. I'll drive careful. Mister, please don't hurt us. We'll do whatever you say - only please, don't hurt us." She pleads.

" Heh, Heh - you're scaired, ain'tyou? I like that." He then breaks his own rule. "Hey, Willie, how about that? She's actually scared of us. Well, sister, as long as you do what we tell you, there'll be no trouble - if you don't - well, we can get real mean. Know what I mean?" The cold gun barrel makes his point.

The news is on the car radio and Peggy strains to listen. She doesn't want to attract any attention by turning up the volume. "Two escaped convicts - from Terre Haute, Indiana --- then static. Barn it! Peggy's grip tightens on the stirring wheel. Her fright is heightened by the thought that she may be carrying the fugitives in her back seat.

"Hey, Kid." The man called Jake ruffles the hair of Peggy's silent passenger. "Whatsa matter? Cat got your tongue? We aint gonna hurt your Momma - not if she's a good girl."

For the first time, the young hitch hiker speaks. "She's not my momma and you should be ashamed of yourself going around scaring people like this. Why, it's not a decent thing to do. It's just not decent at all."

Peggy is surprised at the bravery displayed by the young girl.

"Whocee! She's got spunk, Willie. Listen to her, will you? Say - what's your name, girlee? I think I like you."

"My name's is Sherry. Not that it's any of your business. Why don't you men get out now and let us alone. We won't tell anyone about you. Honest?" With her last words, her voice cracks.

An act. Peggy thinks. She must be trying to bolster my moral. The poor kid is scared stiff.

"Oh ho - you'd like that, wouldn't you? Well, little girl, we're riding it out - all the way to Chicago, whether you like it or not."

A bolt of lightning flashes through the darkened skies and with a swift glance, Peggy can see in the rear view mirror that the two men there are wearing dark gray shirts. "Could be." she mentally registers this fact. "If they're convicts - maybe I could offer them money to leave us alone."

"Uh - Mister" her voice sounds strange in the stillness of the car. "If it's money you want - I have about \$250 in my purse. If I give it to you, will you get out and let us go? With the money, you can go anywhere you want. Just please let us go." A trace of fear lines her words.

"Why you -" a sharp slap on her face brings suppressed tears of anxiety. "Here - give me that purse. Hey, Willie, she's right. We got a stake now anyway. \$250 aint much - but it'll help. Thanks, lady. I would have never thought of it. Now, why don't you be a good girl and keep driving. We don't want to hurt you."

"You big bullies." Again the girl named Shelly lashes out at them. Her words are as strong as the thunderbolts of lightning now flashing through the sky. "Leave her alone. She was only trying to help you and you reward her by slapping her. Bet that makes you feel big, huh? Picking on a helpless old lady?"

"Shut up, kid, or you'll get the same thing." Jake pushes her head.

"Helpless old lady?" Her words bounce off Peggy's thoughts. "Is that what I am? Yes - to someone so young, I guess I am old but somehow I never connected the age of 41 with "a helpless old lady". A rush of warmth fills her as she realizes that this strange girl is taking up for her.

"Hey, lady" a voice from the back seat retracts her thoughts and pins her down to her fear. "You better check your gas - the gauge is almost on empty."

"Oh dear - it is. I don't think there's a gas station along here either." she answers. Her voice comes in jerks.

"Yes there is -" Willie slurs his words. "Straight up the road about a mile or two. They used to stay open 24 hours."

The seriousness of the situation picks at her as she realizes that the men have a bottle of whiskey with them. "Oh no, two armed men are bad enough to handle - but two drunken men are impossible." She pushes aside these unwise thoughts and searches for the words to form a prayer.

The gas station is lit up but no one is in sight. As they pull in the driveway and honk the horn - a light flashes in a house near-by. "Guess they're coming." Peggy murmurs. "I don't have any money to pay for it - can you give me some?"

"Pay for some? Are you crazy?" Jake is also slurring his words. "We need that money. We'll just take our gas and be on our way."

Jake gets out of the car. In the bright light, all of Peggy's fears are confirmed as she sees that he is wearing a prison uniform. He breaks the lock on the gas pump and helps himself to a full tank of gas. Just as they start to pull away from the pumps, an old man wearing a rusty looking robe appears. He is shaking his fists after them. "You come back here. You gosh darn thieves!"

"Aw - go climb a tree - you bastard." The man called Jake pushes the gun out the window but Willie retrieves it. "No - we don't want no trouble, Jake. Let's keep going."

"Yeah - you're right. Get a move on, lady." Jake slumps back in the seat. "Don't get any cute ideas now. I never sleep."

The rain slaps the windshiled like bullets ricocheting off steel plates and the wind whips about them like an attacking snake. "I can't see to drive." Peggy is forced to admit.

"Okay - okay. There's a barn up ahead. We can shack up there until it lets up." Jake answers.

Once inside the barn - the four people crouch in a dry spot where the roof isn't leaking and seek shelter from the fierce storm.

Willie decides to sing and is aggitated when Jake makes him stop. "Always telling me what to do. You aint my boss, man. So, button your lip. I just might decide to amuse myself with these young ladies here. He laughs wickedly. If you'll be nice, Jake, I might share them with you."

"Oh no - not that." Peggy can feel her heart pulsing in her neck. "Say - I know a good gong -" she tries to revert his thoughts. "Come on - we can sing along."

"I don't want to sing, lady." Willie's eyes are slit as lust oozes out of them. "I want you. Come on. Be a good girl now. He starts to take her coat from her."

"Aw - leave her alone." His partner urges. "We don't want no trouble like that now, Willie. Tomorrow, we can have all the women we want. Hell, man. We got \$250 here. Let her alone, huh?"

Willie pushes him. "You leave her alone. I'm going to get some action. It's been a long time." His eyes are burning with fire.

Shelly watches in terror. "No - no" she screams. "Don't touch her. You're horrid."

Her words only seem to excite Willie more than ever. "Oh? Don't touch her. Maybe I'll take you. You're a little young but that young stuff is pretty good." He releases Peggy and grabs Shelly.

Jake watches him from the corner of his eye. "Look lady, don't excite him. He did time for rape of a thirteen-year old girl. I fight wouldn't want him to kill you. ~~They's find us for sure then.~~ Armed robbery is one thing but I don't want no part of a murder rap. No siree. Not Jake."

"Listen to 'em, will you? Don't want no part of a murder rap. Who's talking about murdering anyone? I just want to have a little fun. Here." He throws Shelly at him. "You take her and I'll take this fine lady here. Never been with anyone as refined as her." He laughs a wicked laugh as he once again takes Peggy in his rough arms and pulls her into the hay.

"I said leave her alone." Jake's voice is calm. He has his gun pointed at the pair lying in the hay. "I don't want any trouble with you, Willie, but you force me."

"Hey, man. You're jiving, ain't you?" Willie makes no attempt to release Peggy. "You want to watch. Go on. I'm not bashful. He starts to rip off Peggy's clothing.

As Jake raises the gun to fire, Shelly rushes to the aid of her companion and tries to pull Willie off her.

The blast sounds much like the thunder roaring through the rampaging night. A small frame keels over and a small whimper can be heard. "Oh, my God. You've shot Shelly." Peggy is hysterical.

"You stupid jackass. Now look what you caused." Jake punches Willie and as he falls to the ground, he picks him up and punches him again. "You stupid jackass."

Willie breaks loose from him and runs out into the night. He jumps into the car and starts the engine. Before he can leave, Jake joins him in the front seat and the car is soon speeding down the rain drenched highway.

Peggy pulls her slip off to make bandages to apply to Shelly's wound. She makes a bed of hay and lies her in.

"Peggy?" The child's voice is no more than a faint echo. "My mother's name and address. Go to her. It's in my purse. Tell her -- tell her --"

"Shhhh! Don't try to talk." Peggy sobs. "You saved my life, Shelly. If you hadn't tried to help me, I would be the one lying there."

Shelly doesn't hear her. She has fainted.

Above the thunder and roaring wind, Peggy hears the faint cry of a wailing siren. It comes deeper and nearer until it stops in front of the barn.

"How did you ever find us?" She asks the officer that is placing Shelly on a stretcher. "How did you know we were here?"

"The convicts -" he shouts. "One of them told us before he died."

"Before he - died?" Peggy doesn't understand.

"You see, the gas attendant took the license number and we were looking for your car. We spotted it and took up chase. They ran off a hill up ahead - well, they're both dead now. But Jake Mahoney - the armed robber - lived long enough to tell us what happened and that you were here. He told us the girl was dead - but she's still breathing. We'll get both of you to the hospital."

Peggy rests on the ride to the hospital. Her ~~wind~~ mind races with a turmoil of questions. "Why? Why me? Why did this have to happen to me?" She cries quietly into her pillow. *until the reaction releases her and she falls into a deep sleep.*

later,
From her hospital bed, she smiles up at her adoring husband. Carl's anxiety smothered his face. "Peggy, Peggy. Thank God you're all right." She hugs him to her breast and tears of relief are spilled over the blanket.

"Doctor Martin - report to the operating room. This is an emergency." The hospital inter-com barks out its steady orders.

"The girl. Oh, Carl, is the girl all right? She saved my life." Peggy raises up on her elbow and discovers that she is too weak to sit up.

Carl gently pushes her back on the bed. "I don't know, dear. I just don't know. She's in the operating room now. The hospital called me and I ~~flew-here~~ got here as fast as I could. I thought that you had been -" He puts his head down to cover the overflow of tears.

"Carl - her purse. Get her purse from the nurse. I promised her to get in touch with her mother. Please, Carl, hurry."

Peggy watches anxiously as Carl returns with the girl's shoulder strap purse. "Here, Darling, is this what you want?"

Peggy fumbles through it and finds an envelope at the bottom. She takes it out and reads it. "I don't understand - what? What can this mean?" Suddenly, she bursts into tears and uncontrolled sobs issue from her throat.

Carl is shocked. "What is it, Peggy? What's wrong?" He takes the envelope from her and reads the name and address. Mrs. Margaret Wilson - 22 Winter Way - Chicago, Illinois. Why - that's you? Why is this girl carrying a letter addressed to you, Peggy?"

"She's mine, Carl. She's my baby daughter that I gave away so long ago. Somehow she found me - but I don't understand how. She was adopted out. I was so young, Carl. My family thought it was a disgrace - but I loved the boy. They made me give my baby away I didn't want to. They made me. I know that you'll hate me now - but I have to talk to her. Oh, Carl, she has to live. She has to. It's my baby in that operating room. I can't lose her - not again. Tell them - Carl. Tell them it's my daughter and I want the best doctor they got. Please, Carl. You can leave me then if you want to - but please tell them it's my daughter ~~for~~-me."

Her confession pours from her like a tumbling waterfall.

Carl stands with head bowed. "Leave you? I'm not going to leave you, Peggy. I love you. Why didn't you tell me before? I would have understood."

Peggy still sobs. "I was afraid, Arl. Don't you understand that. I was afraid of losing you. I know how much kids mean to you

I couldn't tell you before but that's the reason I can't have any children. When she was born, the butchers that delivered her ruined me. I'll never bear any other children, Carl - but that girl in the operating room - she's mine. Oh God, please don't take her from me again." Peggy sobs.

Carl gently pats her ~~folded~~^{shoulder} hands. "Let me see what I can do. You just relax, honey." Oh - do you mind if I take this with me?" He takes the letter from her clenched hands and slowly walks to the door.

God was listening to Peggy's prayers because Shelly lived. The bullet had scraped her lung but did not permanent damage. Peggy is allowed to visit her in a wheel chair. The doctors, however, forbid her to tell her that she is her real mother. They fear the shock might be too much for her just now. "Shelly -" Can you hear me? It's Peggy, honey. " She brushes a few strands of stray hair from her forehead.

"Peggy? - Where am I? What happened?" Shelly's
Her voice is barely audible.

"Shhhh - don't tire yourself out." We have all the time in the world for talk. You just rest now and get better." Her-eyes--She kisses her forehead as the nurse arrives to take her back to her own bed.

For the next few days - Peggy is flooded with mixed emotions. Why hasn't Carl returned? And why doesn't he answer his phone? Even his co-workers don't know where he is. They had been under the assumption he was with her at the hospital. Was the merciful God who returned her daughter now going to make her pay a price and take her husband from her. But he said he had understood - still and all - why didn't she hear from him? Carl

As the days stretched into a week - Peggy was really worried. She had come to accept the fact that Carl could not forgive her - but why didn't he call and tell her. At least she would know that he was all right. The doctor decided that it was okay to tell Shelly that she had found her mother in a bizarre way. Today was to be the day.

As the morning sun dripped its golden rays on the fresh clean sheets, Peggy applied fresh make up. She wanted to look her best when she broke the news. As she stares into the mirror a familiar face smiles back at her. "Carl - Carl - is it really you?" She whirls around and runs crying into his arms. "Oh, Darling - I thought you had gone - I thought ---"

"Hey - what's this? No tears. I apologize, Peggy for not calling you. I had to think things out. I also had to check out the story about your "new" ~~daughter~~ found daughter. It turns out that she is your daughter. I went back to Ohio and got proof. I checked with the neighbors where she was living. It seems that her adoptive mother was killed in a car wreck. Her Dad started drinking pretty heavy after that and the girl was left more or less on her own. Poor kid - apparently she's had it pretty rough. I checked at the adoption center and they had a break in about the time she disappeared. Apparently - she got what information she needed there in the files to trace you. She went to a lot a trouble to find you, Peggy."

~~Peggy-can't-answer-him~~. Through muffled sobs, she answers " Oh, Carl. My poor baby. But what about you? I love you, too. If you don't want me to take her - I won't. It's unfair to you. I mean just out of the blue - spring a grown up daughter on you. I - I understand - if you'll just let me see her once more before I go home. I'll set it up with the hospital to put her in a good home -then, we can move and she won't be able to find us ---- "

"Hold on." Carl answers. " What kind of a heel do you think I am?" You'll do no such thing. I came here today to take my family home with me. My wife and my daughter. I know that I'll like Shelly - she's a part of you - so how could I help but love her? Come on, slow poke, get your face on - so we can go to our daughter."

"Oh Carl - I think I'm going to faint - I'm so happy." Carl holds onto his wife as they walk down the hospital corridor.

"There is one thing I'm going to be firm about " Carl stops her before they open the door. to Shelly's room - "No more hitch hiking for our girl here."

Peggy smiles up at him and shakes his hand "It's a deal - no more hitch hiking"

The End