

The Hitchhiker

By Lucille Fletcher

CAST of Characters;

Ronald Adams (Narrator)

Mrs. Adams

Hitchhiker (male)

Gas Station Attendant

Storekeeper

Storekeeper's Wife

Woman Hitchhiker (female)

Mrs. Whitney

ADAMS: I'm in a trailer camp on I-40 just west of Gallup, New Mexico. If I tell it, maybe it'll help me -- it'll-- it'll--keep me from going crazy. I must tell this quickly. I'm not crazy now - I feel perfectly well, perfectly well, except that I'm running a slight temperature.

My name is Ronald Adams. I'm thirty-six years of age, unmarried, tall, dark with a black mustache. I drive a 1978 Ford, license number 6V7989. I was born in Brooklyn. All this I know. I know I'm at this moment--I'm perfectly sane, that it's not me that's gone mad -- but something else, something utterly beyond my control.

But I must speak quickly. At any minute the link with life may break. This may be the last thing I ever tell on earth - the last night I ever see the stars.

ADAMS: Six days ago I left Brooklyn to drive to California.

MRS. ADAMS: (APPREHENSIVE) Goodbye, son. Good luck to you, my boy.

ADAMS: (LIGHTLY) Goodbye, mom. Here, give me a kiss... and then I'll go.

MRS. ADAMS: I'll come out with you to the car.

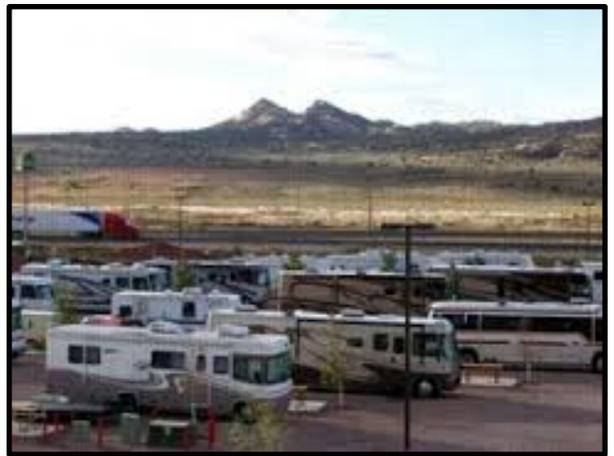
ADAMS: Oh, it's raining. Stay here at the door.

MRS. ADAMS: (STIFLES A SOB)

ADAMS: (LAUGHS) Hey, what's this, tears?

MRS. ADAMS: Oh, it's - it's just the trip, Ron. I wish you weren't driving.

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ADAMS: Oh, mom. There you go again. People do it every day.

MRS. ADAMS: I know, but - you'll be careful, won't you? Promise me you'll be extra careful. Don't fall asleep or drive fast or pick up any strangers on the road.

ADAMS: Stranger? Look... don't worry. There isn't anything going to happen. It's just eight days of perfectly simple driving on smooth, decent, civilized roads with a hot dog or a hamburger stand every ten miles. Now, don't worry. Goodbye...

ADAMS: I was in excellent spirits. The drive ahead of me, even the loneliness, seemed like a lark. But I didn't count on *him*.

Crossing Brooklyn Bridge that morning in the rain, I saw a man leaning against the cables. He seemed to be waiting for a lift. There were spots of fresh rain on his shoulders. He was carrying a cheap overnight bag in one hand. He was thin, nondescript, with a cap pulled down over his eyes.



Now, I would have forgotten him completely except that just an hour later, while crossing the Pulaski Skyway over the Jersey Flats, I saw him again. At least, he looked like the same person. He was standing now with one thumb pointing west. I couldn't figure out how he'd got there, but I thought maybe a fast truck had picked him up, beaten me to the Skyway, and let him off. I didn't stop for him.

And then, late that night -- I saw him again.

It was on the new Pennsylvania Turnpike between Harrisburg and Pittsburgh. It's two hundred and sixty- five miles long with a very high speed limit. I--I was just slowing down for one of the tunnels - when I saw him - standing under an arc light by the side of the road. I could see him quite distinctly - the bag, the cap - even the spots of fresh rain spattered over his shoulders. He "Halloed" at me this time.

HIKER: (GHOSTLY ECHO) Hellooo! Hellooo!

ADAMS: I stepped on the gas like a shot. It's lonely country through the Alleghenies, and I had no intention of stopping. Besides, the coincidences, or whatever it was, gave me the willies. I stopped at the next gas station.

ATTENDANT: Yes, sir? What can I do for ya?

ADAMS: Uh, fill 'er up, will ya?

ATTENDANT: Check your oil?

ADAMS: No, thanks. No.

ATTENDANT: Let me get the gas cap here. Nice night, ain't it?

ADAMS: Yes. It hasn't been raining here lately, has it?

ATTENDANT: Not a drop of rain all week.

ADAMS: Oh? Oh, no? I - I suppose that hasn't done your business any harm?

ATTENDANT: Oh, people drive through here all kinds of weather. Mostly business, though. Ain't many pleasure cars out on the turnpike this season of the year.

ADAMS: I--I guess not. What, ah - er - ah - What about hitchhikers?

ATTENDANT: (CHUCKLE) Hitchhikers? Here?

ADAMS: What's the matter? Don't you ever see any?

ATTENDANT: Oh, a guy'd be a fool who started out to hitch rides on this road. Just look at it.

ADAMS: You mean--then - you've never seen anybody?

ATTENDANT: No. Maybe they get the lift before the turnpike starts. I mean, you know, just before the toll house. But then it's a pretty long ride. Most cars wouldn't want to pick up a guy for that long a ride. And, this is pretty lonesome country here, mountains and woods. You ain't seen nobody like that, have you?



ADAMS: Oh, no. Oh, no, not - not at all. I was just-- Ah, uh, a technical question.

ATTENDANT: Oh, I see. Well, that'll be twenty-four forty-nine, with the tax, sir.

ADAMS: The thing gradually passed from my mind as sheer coincidence. I had a good night's sleep in Pittsburgh. I didn't think about the man all next day until -- just outside of

Zanesville, Ohio. I saw him again.

It was a bright sunshiny afternoon. The peaceful Ohio fields, brown with the autumn stubble, lay dreaming in the golden light. I was driving slowly, drinking it all in, when the road suddenly ended in a detour. In front of the barrier, HE was standing....

Let me explain about his appearance before I go on. I repeat: there was nothing sinister about him. He was as drab as a mud fence, nor was his attitude menacing. He-- he just stood there - waiting, almost drooping a little, the cheap overnight bag in his hand. He looked as though he'd been waiting there for hours. And he hailed me - started to walk forward.

HIKER: (FROM A DISTANCE) Hellooo!

ADAMS: I had stopped the car of course for the detour. For a few minutes I--I couldn't seem to find the new road. I realized he must be thinking I'd stopped for him...

HIKER: (CLOSER) Hellooo!

ADAMS: (NERVOUS, CALLS OUT) No, not just now, sorry!

HIKER: Goin' to California?!

ADAMS: No, no, not today! I'm--I'm going to New York! Sorry... sorry!

After I got the car back on the road again, I felt like a fool. Yet the thought of picking him up, of having him sit beside me, was somehow unbearable. Yet at the same time I felt - more than ever - unspeakably alone.

(AFTER A LONG PAUSE) Hour after hour went by. The fields, the towns, ticked off one by one. The light changed. I knew now that I was going to see him again.

And though I dreaded the sight, I caught myself searching the side of the road, waiting for him to appear.

SOUND: (CAR BRAKES, ENGINE SLOWS TO IDLE ... HORN HONKS ... DOOR OPENS)



STOREKEEPER: (FROM OFF, ANNOYED) What is it?! What d'you want?!

ADAMS: You sell sandwiches and pop here, don't ya?

STOREKEEPER: Yeah, we do in the daytime! But we're closed for the night!

ADAMS: Well, I know, but I was wondering if you could possibly let me have a cup of coffee. Black coffee.

STOREKEEPER: My wife's the cook, she's in bed!

SOUND: (DOOR STARTS TO CLOSE)

ADAMS: Well, n--now, listen, just a minute ago-- Just a minute ago there was a man standing here, right beside this - here - a suspicious looking man.

STOREKEEPER'S WIFE: Henry? Who is it, Henry?

STOREKEEPER: It's nobody, Mother. Just a fella thinks he wants a cup o' coffee. Go back to bed.

ADAMS: I--I don't mean to disturb you. You see, I was driving along when I just happened to look... and there he was...

STOREKEEPER: What was he doin'? Awwww, you've been hittin' the bottle - that's what's the matter with you. Got nothin' better to do than wake decent folks out of their hard-earned sleep? What've you been doin'! Get goin'! Get on!

ADAMS: Well... it looked as if he was going to rob ya...

STOREKEEPER: I've got nothin' to stand to lose. Now, on your way before I call out Sheriff Paltz!

ADAMS: I got into the car again and drove on slowly. I was beginning to hate the car. If I could've found a place to rest a little... I was in the Ozark Mountains of Missouri now. The few resort places there were closed. I HAD seen him at that roadside stand. I knew I'd see him again. Maybe at the next turn of the road. I knew then that when I saw him next -- I would run him down.

But I didn't see him again - until late next afternoon.

I'd stopped the car at a sleepy little junction just across the border into Oklahoma to let a train pass... when he appeared across the tracks - leaning against a telephone pole.

SOUND: (DISTANT TRAIN WHISTLE)

ADAMS: It was a perfectly airless, dry day. The red clay of Oklahoma was baking under the southwestern sun ... yet there were spots of fresh rain on his shoulders. I couldn't stand that. Without thinking, blindly, I started the car across the tracks.

He didn't even look up at me. He was staring at the ground. I stepped on the gas hard, veering the wheel sharply toward him. I could hear the train in the distance now, but I didn't care. Then something...
...something went wrong with the car. It stalled right on the tracks.

SOUND: (TRAIN WHISTLE AND BELL)

ADAMS: The train was coming closer. I could hear its bell. It's - It's cry. It's whistle crying. Still he stood there. Now I knew that he was beckoning -- beckoning me to my death!

SOUND: MUSIC

ADAMS: Well ... I frustrated him that time. It started. It worked at last. I managed to back up. But after - when the train passed, he--he was gone. And I was all alone in the hot, dry afternoon.

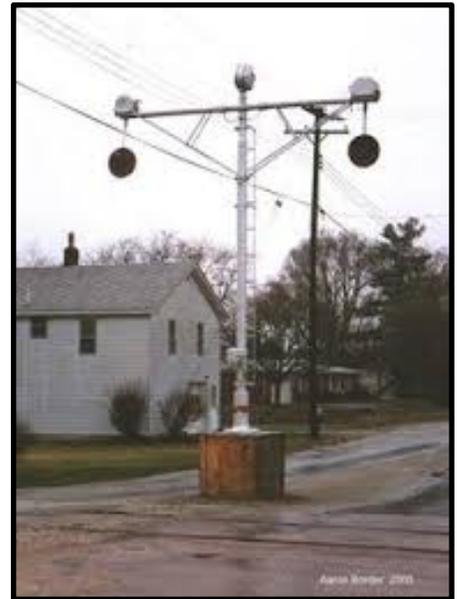
After that, I knew I had to do something.

I didn't know who this man was - or what he wanted of me. I only knew that from now on -- I mustn't let myself alone on the road for one minute.

SOUND: (CAR ENGINE SLOWS TO IDLE ... CAR BRAKES)

ADAMS: (CALLS OUT) Uh, hello there! Hello...

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SOUND: (CAR DOOR OPENS)

ADAMS: Like a ride?

HITCHHIKING WOMAN: Well, what do you think? How far are you goin'?

ADAMS: Amarillo. I'll take you to Amarillo.

HITCHHIKING WOMAN: Amarillo, Texas?

ADAMS: Yeah, I'll drive you there.

HITCHHIKING WOMAN: Gee!



ADAMS: Hop in...

HITCHHIKING WOMAN: Uh, you mind if I take off my shoes? My feet are killin' me.

ADAMS: No. Go right ahead.

HITCHHIKING WOMAN: (RELIEVED) Ohhhh. Gee, what a break this is -- great car, decent guy, driving all the way to Amarillo. All I've been gettin' so far is trucks.

ADAMS: You hitchhike much?

HITCHHIKING WOMAN: Sure. Only it's tough sometimes in these great open spaces to get the breaks.

ADAMS: Yeah, I should think it would be, but I'll bet though - you get a good pick up in a fast car, you could get places faster than, say... another person in... another car

HITCHHIKING WOMAN: I don't get ya.

ADAMS: Well, take me for instance. Suppose I'm - I'm driving across the country, say, at a nice steady clip, about sixty-five miles an hour. Couldn't - couldn't a girl like you, just standing beside the road waiting for a lift, beat me to town, after town, provided she got picked up every time in a car doing from seventy-five to eighty miles an hour?

HITCHHIKING WOMAN: I don't know. Maybe she could. Maybe she couldn't. What difference does it make?

ADAMS: Oh, it's no difference. It's--It's just a crazy idea I had sitting here in the car.

HITCHHIKING WOMAN: (AMUSED) Oh, imagine spending your time in a great car thinkin' of things like that.

ADAMS: What would you do instead?

HITCHHIKING WOMAN: What would I do? Well, if I was a good-lookin' fellow like yourself? I'd just enjoy myself, every minute of the time. I'd sit back and - and relax. And if I saw a good-lookin' g-- (GASPS) Hey!

ADAMS: Did you see him? Did you see him, too?

HITCHHIKING WOMAN: See who?

ADAMS: That man, standing beside the barbed-wire fence.

HITCHHIKING WOMAN: I didn't see - anybody. I-- it's just a barbed-wire fence. What'd you think you was doin'? Tryin' to run into the barbed-wire fence?

ADAMS: Th--There--There was a man there, I tell ya! A thin, gray man with - with an overnight bag in his hand. I - I was trying to ... run him down.

HITCHHIKING WOMAN: Run him down? You mean - kill 'im?

ADAMS: You say you didn't see him back there? You sure?

HITCHHIKING WOMAN: I didn't see a soul. And as far as that's concerned--

ADAMS: Well, you watch for him. You watch for him the next time. Keep watching. Keep your eyes peeled on the road. He'll turn up again. May be any minute now. There... right there!



HITCHHIKING WOMAN: (PANICS) Ah - No! How does this door work?! I - I've gotta get outta here!

ADAMS: Did you see him that time?

HITCHHIKING WOMAN: No, I didn't see him that time! And, personally, mister, I don't expect never to see him! All I want to do is go on livin'! I don't see how I will very long, drivin' with you!

ADAMS: Look - Look, I'm sorry. I - I - don't know what came over me. Please...

HITCHHIKING WOMAN: So, if you'll excuse me--

ADAMS: You can't go! Listen, how would you like to go to California? I'll drive you all the way to California!

HITCHHIKING WOMAN: You're creepin' me out, man...

ADAMS: Listen, please, just - just one minute, please!

HITCHHIKING WOMAN: You know what I think you need, man? Not a girlfriend, just a good dose o' sleep.

HITCHHIKING WOMAN: Leave your hands off o' me! Just--Just-- Leave your hands off me!

ADAMS: Come back here! Please! Please come back!

She ran from me ... as if I were some kind of monster. A few minutes later, I saw a passing truck pick her up. And I knew then that I was - utterly alone. I was in the heart of the great Texas prairies. There wasn't a car on the road after the truck went by. I tried to figure out what to do, how to get a hold of myself.

If I could find a place to rest or even if I could sleep right here in the car - just a few hours - along the side of the road ... I was getting my winter overcoat out of the back seat to use as a blanket, just as a blanket - when - I saw him coming toward me - emerging from the herd of moving steer.

HIKER: (OFF) Hellooo!

ADAMS: I didn't wait for him to come any closer.

HIKER: (DROWNED OUT BY SOUND) Hellooo!

ADAMS: Maybe I should have spoken to him then. Fought it out, then and there. And now he began to be everywhere. Wherever I stopped, even for a minute - for gas, for oil, for a drink of pop, a cup o' coffee, sandwich - he was there!

I saw him standing outside the trailer camp in Amarillo that night when I dared to slow down. He was standing near the drinking fountain of a little camping spot just inside the border of New Mexico. He was waiting for me outside the Navajo reservation where I stopped to check my tires. I saw him in Albuquerque when I bought more gas. I--I was afraid now - afraid to stop.

I began to drive faster and faster. I was - in a lunar landscape now -- the great, arid mesa country of New Mexico. I drove through it with the indifference of a fly crawling over the face of the moon. And now he didn't even wait for me to stop!

Unless I drove at eighty-five miles an hour over those endless roads, he waited for me at every other mile. I'd see his figure, shadowless, flitting before me, still in its same attitude, over the cold, lifeless ground -- flitting over dried up rivers, over broken stones cast up by old glacial upheavals -- flitting in that pure, cloudless air.

I was beside myself when I finally reached Gallup, New Mexico, this morning. There's a trailer camp here -- It's cold, almost deserted, this time of year.

I went inside and asked if there was a telephone. I had the feeling that if only I could speak to someone familiar, someone I loved, I could pull myself together...

It was in the middle of the morning. I - I - I knew mother'd be home. I pictured her tall and white-haired, in her crisp house dress, going about her tasks. It'd be enough, I thought, just to hear the even calmness of her voice.

MRS. WHITNEY: Mrs. Adams' residence.

ADAMS: Hello? Hello, mother?

MRS. WHITNEY: This is Mrs. Adams' residence. Who is it you wish to speak to, please?

ADAMS: Wha--? Who's this?

MRS. WHITNEY: This is Mrs. Whitney.

ADAMS: Mrs. Whitney? I - I don't know any Mrs. Whitney. Is this 748-9970?

MRS. WHITNEY: Yes.

ADAMS: W-w-where's my mother? Where's Mrs. Adams?

MRS. WHITNEY: Mrs. Adams is not at home. She's still in the hospital.

ADAMS: The hospital?

MRS. WHITNEY: Yes. Who is this calling, please? Is this a member of the family?

ADAMS: What's she in the hospital for?

MRS. WHITNEY: She's been resting for five days. A nervous breakdown. Who is this calling?

ADAMS: Nervous breakdown?! My mother doesn't have a ner--

MRS. WHITNEY: It's all taken place since the death of her oldest son, Ronald.

ADAMS: Death of her - oldest son, Ronald? Hey! What's this? What number is this?



MRS. WHITNEY: This is 748-9970. It's all been very sudden. He was killed six days ago - in an automobile accident on the Brooklyn Bridge.

ADAMS: And so - I'm sitting here in this deserted trailer camp in - Gallup, New Mexico. And so I'm trying to think. Trying to get hold of myself. Otherwise, otherwise, I - I'm going to go crazy. Outside, it's night. The vast, soulless night of New Mexico. A million stars are in the sky. Ahead of me stretch a thousand miles of empty mesa -- and mountains, prairies, desert.

Somewhere among them, he's waiting for me. Somewhere. Somewhere I will know who he is - and who I am.

MUSIC: RUMBLES OMINOUSLY TO A FINISH

GIST: