

~ Hitchin' ~

Cliff had given him a lift as far as the bridge. With the jerk gone home to visit his girlfriend over Spring Break, Cliff offered him use of the jerk's room again. But he didn't want to impose on their hospitality any more. Those Olo-Olos really were great guys once you got to know them. Except for the jerk. The Olo-Olos rented a two-story frame house on the north side of town for the school year. He'd spent his first night back from the road trip with them, the night the ball club got back to town at three a.m. after the bus had broken down south of Corvallis. Besides, Coach had given the team a long weekend off—the rest of the break. He was looking forward to some of his aunt's home-cooking.

Walking over the Marion Street Bridge, he watched the river rolling north beneath his feet. Dang sun was still out—what a miracle. Except for about a ten-day hiatus in February, he hadn't seen the sun out here since September. A year ago last July, when he'd visited the local universities around his aunt and uncle's place in the Valley, dang sun was out every dang day. Everything was green and lush. He thought it would be an ideal place to go to college while getting far away from his home back East. Now he knew why everything was so green and lush out here in the summer—it rained the rest of the year. But it was nice today, dang nice. Spring was in the air. Made his step a little lighter.

Cars whizzed past his left shoulder heading out of town in the early afternoon rush hour. Other than finals in a couple months, he had no worries. He'd made the team as a freshman, which was his goal, and he'd gotten to play in two of the first four games. He had the respect of his teammates and hoped he had the coach's respect, too. It would have helped had he taken that rising up-the-ladder fastball with a full count, instead of striking out with the bases loaded to end the second game of a twin-bill. But he'd sat all day on the bench for an early March double-header freezing his butt off, wearin' only his uniform and a thin windbreaker. Wind chill on that dang mountain top in Ashland had to be below freezin'. Down six runs, at the end of a long, cold, windy double-bill, he didn't figure the umpire would have walked him. The ump had been freezin' his tail off all day, too. After he'd fouled off half a dozen pitches to work the count full, no way he figured that ump would have given him the base, so he swung—and missed. Coach thought enough of him to pinch-run him the next day against the Ducks, so he guessed all's well. Sittin' the bench behind a senior Little All-American was nothin' to be ashamed of. After all, he *was* stingin' the ball in BP.

Hatless, with his brown corduroy car coat fully unbuttoned, he sauntered down the exit ramp into sunny West Salem over to Wallace Road. The road was four lanes here and looked new. It was a good place to catch a ride north to his relative's house about thirty miles away. He stepped off the sidewalk, turned around and stuck out his thumb. Sure was a dang nice day—for a change.

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He had hitched into town this morning from his aunt's house for ball practice. Made it in plenty of time, thanks to this hippy chick he ran into on the road that led over to the Wheatland Ferry. He had been standing a while at a rural intersection in the middle of nowhere waitin' for another ride, when a passing car dropped off the hippy chick before heading east to the ferry.

She was wearin' a tailored light brown, deep-swaled, corduroy sport jacket and a long, flowin' skirt to match her long, frizzy brown hair, reined in by a flowered head band. No make-up, but she looked clean and fresh. She had a classy, sedate air about her that requested respect.

He said, "Been waitin' a while. Not many cars."

"Why don't you hitch with me? I always get a ride." She smiled.

He could believe that. She wasn't hard to look at.

"Okay, great. Where ya headed?"

"Town."

"Salem?"

"Unh-hunh. Get my weekly shot."

"Oh ... what for—ya don't mind my askin'?"

"Penicillin."

"No kiddin'. I take a penicillin pill every day. No shots though."

"Really? What for?"

"Aw, had Rheumatic Fever when I was thirteen. How 'bout you?"

"Gonorrhea."

She said it as if she was discussin' the weather while she purveyed a new-plowed field. Never would have known to look at her that she had a venereal disease. She was sedate but classy with rosy cheeks. He replied.

"That penicillin's good stuff. Cure about anything, I guess." She nodded.

Having Gonorrhea didn't seem to bother her a bit. If it did, she didn't let on.

"Live around here?"

She nodded again. "Back up the road, at the commune." She smiled.

He nodded as if he knew where the commune was, when he didn't have the faintest dang clue. He nodded again not knowing what to say. They smiled at each other before glancing around at the surrounding orchards and fields.

A man in a straw cowboy hat drove up in an old pickup truck, asking where they were headed. He rode them clear into town. The hippy sat between him and the driver in the front seat. He hoped he couldn't catch Gonorrhea from sittin' next to her. Ah, but he took his penicillin regular—every day—no worries.

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Yeah, that was his ride into town this mornin'. Never knew who you might come across on the road. He kind of liked that. Most folks he rode with were okay. Some wanted to talk cuz they were lonely. Others didn't say a word. Just repayin' a debt he figured, maybe from their own hitchin' days.

Of course, there was that time a couple months ago, before try-outs. He was hitchin' in a drivin' rainstorm up I-5. Goin' up to Portland to get a new baseball glove cuz the local sports dealer didn't have the utility glove he wanted. He was on the highway, gettin' soaked in a winter rain, when a big ol' Caddy come barrelin' up the interstate doin' about seventy. Guy in a beige Stetson hat at the wheel. He'd stuck out his thumb for a ride when a lady wearin' a fur coat in the passenger seat leaned over to lock her door as that Caddy rocketed past him up the interstate. Like he was gonna jump on the hood and rob her or somethin' at seventy miles per hour?

Or the time when a family of Chicanos picked him up. Papa and mamasita with a baby up front and three little ones in the back drivin' a broken down 50s Chevy with fin fenders. He had sat in back with the three kids. The one wearin' only a diaper smiled, offering him a bite of a banana. Yeah. He'd learned you can't tell a person's heart by their car. That's for sure.

He hadn't been thumbin' five minutes, when a grey-blue VW-Bug careened north around the sharp curve off the Marion Street Bridge ramp, tires squeelin', bouncing from one lane to the other. There were three of 'em in the car. The windows were down, so he could hear the chick in the passenger seat yellin'—

“Hey Brenda! Lookee there. Let's give 'im a ride.”

The Bug veered from the far left lane toward him but, traveling too fast, overshot him by thirty yards. Instead of stopping and backing up, the car made a wide 360° turn coming to a frenzied, screeching halt at his feet.

“Where ya headed?” asked the chick in the passenger seat, leaning out though the opened window.

“Newberg?”

The chick in the passenger seat laughed.

“Oh hell! Give the boy a ride Brenda. We're goin' that way. 'Sides Lu Ann could use a friend back there, couldn't you Lulu?”

She yelled over her shoulder to a grinning brunette behind her.

The one called Brenda, the driver, chuckled. She said: “You're right about that Janice. Lulu sure needs a friend. Hop in.”

Brenda tossed her head backwards at the empty seat behind her.

He jogged behind the Bug. Brenda opened the door to pull her seatback forward so he could climb in behind the driver. The girl in back shifted a couple

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shopping bags from the empty seat beside her onto the floor between her feet. Lifting his foot to get in, he halted in mid-air, dumb-struck, pausing his foot on the door sill.

“Well, get in. What’s wrong?” It was the other one up front, the one Brenda had called Janice.

“Uh, well, there’s a shotgun in the way here, back of the seat.”

“Sh__! Forgot about that.” Brenda shook her head.

Janice yelled, “Come on Lulu, move that damn gun out of the way so he can get in. Crapsake. You’re holdin’ up the show.”

The brunette in back pulled the muzzle of the pump-action gun down onto the floor by the shopping bags at her feet.

“Let’s go,” said Janice. “Wanna get home and show the guys what we got.”

Lulu half-smiled sheepish-like, but moved the gun so he could step in. He wasn’t so sure about this deal but he climbed in beside Lulu, careful to avoid kicking the gun stock. No sooner had he sat down than the VW-Bug jolted forward with the door flyin’ open.

“Damn Mister. Ain’t ya gonna close the door,” asked the one called Janice. Turning her body to face him, her bare, left knee and thigh angled out behind and well past her skirt and the stick shift to rest on the edge of the driver’s seat. All three of them wore mini-skirts.

He nodded. “Sure. Sure,” he said.

But before he could move, they jettied off. Brenda, the driver, slammed the door shut with one hand using the other to steer.

—*BOOM.*

The Bug backfired then lurched forward, jolting him forward and back from the shifting of gears. Soon they were flyin’ about sixty, veerin’ across the lanes, even into the oncoming lanes, laughin’—joy-ridin’, the door still ajar. Janice stopped laughin’ to look him over, as if he were filet mignon.

“Oh my. He’s a cute one Lulu. Ain’t he cute?”

Beside him, Lulu, wearin’ a long, shag hair-cut, smiled a becoming smile.

“Well, come on Lu. Where’s my blouse,” asked Janice.

Lulu reached into a Meier-Frank shopping bag to pull out a sweater-blouse before tossing it to Janice. Janice took off her top and bra, slipping into the blouse. Beside him, Lulu did likewise with a similar top. Brenda was left out.

“Where’s mine?” she screamed.

Lulu pulled out another top. “What is it,” Brenda asked.

“Just grabbed what I could,” replied Lulu. “Should fit ya though—a pullover like that.”

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Lulu handed the bag forward to Janice, who trundled out the sweater top then tossed the bag out the open window. Letting go of the wheel, Brenda reached for the top as if it were gold. The car swerved left as they approached the end of the four-lane highway, before it narrowed to two single lanes separated by dashed, yellow lines. Janice grabbed the wheel to straighten out the road and avoid an oncoming pickup truck. Brenda turned the rear view mirror his way. Catching his eye, Brenda pulled her top off over her head then unsnapped her bra and threw both garments to the floorboard at Janice's feet. Brenda let him ogle her healthy, proud chest set via the rear view mirror. Road winds had both of her standing right out there. She winked at him before tugging the new sweater on over her head.

"Oh yeah, this is the one I wanted," she said, marveling at her new top.

He shifted uncomfortably in his seat, careful to avoid stepping on the shotgun lying across the floor at his feet. These girls couldn't have been much older than he was. None of 'em was hard to look at. He could swear on a bible none of 'em was flat-chested either. That was a fact that hadn't slipped by him. Everyone of 'em owned a healthy pair that stood right out there, firm and proud.

They modeled their new togs for him, asking his fashion opinion.

"Real nice. Fine merchandise. Looks good on you," he said, nodding and smiling to each girl in turn, hoping they'd be pleased with his response enough not to turn the shotgun on him. Brenda confirmed his opinion with another wink via the rear view mirror. Bothered him she didn't turn the mirror back to view the road. Seemed she'd rather watch him than the road behind them.

"Been shopping, I see," he said, hoping to get over.

They cracked up.

"Hell, more like five-finger discount," said Janice, slapping her bare knee that angled behind the stick shift beneath her high-rising mini-skirt. "Damn! thought that ole biddy was gonna catch us for sure."

"Nah," said Brenda shaking her head and stepping on the accelerator. "She never suspected for a minute. You had her side-tracked good."

"What about the perfume? And the jewelry?" asked Janice. "Come on Lu."

Lulu reached in another bag at her feet. "That necklace is mine," said Janice.

Lulu handed Janice a piece of costume jewelry before opening up a bottle of Chanel perfume, tipping the bottle into her free hand and dabbing some of the scent on her wrists and on the sides of her neck under her jawbone.

"Gimme some of that stuff," said Brenda. "Put some on me, Janice."

"Lemme get this necklace on first."

Janice fastened the necklace around her throat, patting the jewelry against her chest beneath her clavicle.

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“Classy, hunh Brenda?”

Nodding, Brenda leaned toward Janice to ask, “What about that perfume?”

Janice accepted the bottle of perfume from Lulu. Lulu held out her hand to him, nodding toward her wrist as Janice applied the perfume to Brenda’s neck.

“Like it,” asked Lulu. “It’s Number 5. Go ahead, take a whiff.”

As he leaned toward her hand, Lulu shoved her wrist up under his nose. He sniffed and nodded.

“Yeah, real classy stuff,” he said. She caressed his cheek with the back of her scented wrist. Janice shrieked so loud that he jumped off his seat.

“Ha! Believe that Lulu?” she said to Brenda. “Lu’s got herself a new man.”

Brenda nodded, watching him in the mirror instead of the road.

“Yeah, I see that,” replied Brenda still eying him and not the road.

Lulu beamed over at him.

“Where you from?” said Janice, turning to face him.

When he didn’t respond right away, cuz he was kind of taken aback, Brenda yelled back over her shoulder.

“Yeah, where you from Mann?”

“Uh, uh, I’m from ... [stopping to think] from Maryland.”

“Maryland?” said Lulu.

“Ah, Lu’s got herself a travelin’ man this time,” said Janice, wide-eyed and laughing.

Lulu slid closer to him, confessing she had never met anyone from Maryland.

“Well, I’m goin’ to school out here—at the college back in town,” he said.

Janice: “And a college man to boot. Lulu hit the jackpot!”

The girls up front laughed with Lulu shooting him love darts from her brown sloe-eyes. She stroked the back of his hand with her fingertips. He backed up into the corner of the seat as far as he could, which was nowhere really.

“You think the boys’ll like him all right,” asked Brenda.

“Sure, why not,” said Janice. “After Bobby beat the heck outta that last one, run him off like that, least he can do is let Lu have this one. What’s a big brother for? With us paired up, tain’t right for Lu to be the odd one out.”

Brenda turned her head to him, looking back between the seats. The car crossed the double yellow line toward an oncoming vehicle—horn blarin’—running the other vehicle onto the opposite shoulder. Janice grabbed the wheel to straighten out the car once more.

“Ah shut your f__in’ mouth,” screamed Brenda out the window.

“What you think Lu,” asked Brenda, unperturbed by their near miss, “you like him, don’ cha? Hell girl. If you don’t, I’ll swap ya Stu for him. Maryland here’s a cutie.”

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"Stu ain't gonna like that," said Janice.

"Like I give a f___ anymore what he likes. He's too damned bossy lately. Johnny'll fix him if I say so. You know that. Well Lu, what's it gonna be? Stu, or Maryland, here? I'm givin' ya a choice cuz I think Bobby shouldn't a run your guy out like that. But make up your mind cuz I kinda like this one—a lot."

"So do I," replied Lulu. "I'll take him."

Lulu scooted over next to him, smiling as if she'd just won first prize.

"Mann! We sure hit the jackpot today," said Janice. "Between this load from Meir and Frank and Maryland here, this is the best haul we ever had."

Via the rear view mirror he locked eyes with Brenda. Her yearning, hungry look combined with her recent busty revelation made her hard to resist.

"You touched me deep down just now Maryland, you know that?" Brenda said. She stared hard at him before she took back the wheel from Janice.

"I know," he said under his breath, numb-struck. "I know."

Lulu stared into his eyes with Brenda watching via the rear view mirror.

"Hey now. I'm for you," said Lulu. "Not her. I ain't too shabby am I?" Lulu hitched up her skirt revealing a healthy thigh and stuck out her ample chest.

He shook his head. "No, not at all," he said, unsure, hopin' to get over.

Lulu beamed, staring into his eyes. Her hand found the back of his. He rose as the South hopes to do once again. Lulu noticed the bulge in his cords.

"Oh my, that's nice," said Lulu. "And ya seen half the goods already ain'cha? Liked what you saw didn'cha? Know ya did. Seen your eyes bug out."

Swallowing hard, he nodded. What else could he do with that shotgun at his feet? In all honesty, she was kind of okay lookin', more feminine than she acted, and she sure had a healthy figure all right but geeze-Louise what was he gettin' into with these wild chicks? Her rovin' hand had him growin' in spite of himself. But that Brenda—Brenda was the one who'd touched him deep down, since she'd first been bare-chested and winked to him via the mirror. Brenda was special. And her eyes were hungry for him.

"Whaddaya say, Sugar?" said Lulu. She grinned wide. "You could go for me, hunh? Whaddaya say?"

Her brown eyes pleaded green for go. His heart was pounding. He thought it might burst through his rib cage; it was pounding so hard. He had to think fast. He saw a sign up ahead for the Wheatland Ferry.

"Uh, uh, where you girls headed?" He glanced to the two in front.

"Other side of the commune," said Janice.

Lulu stared at him with Cupid arrows darting from her eyes.

Commune? — Gonorrhea. Oh, crap! It hit him like a thunderbolt.

"Know what? You all can let me out at the Ferry Road just up here a ways."

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Lulu said, "But you said you were goin' to Newberg."

"Yeah, yeah, I know. But seein' that sign for the ferry made me think of my cousin lives just over the river. And she hasn't been feelin' well. Think maybe I should go over and see her."

That was a bald-faced lie. He had no cousin living across the river. He'd never even been to the ferry, didn't even know if it existed. But with the shotgun at his feet, Lulu's roving hand and the threat of communal venereal disease hanging in the air, he figured lying was justified.

Lulu's roving hand moved from his lap back to hers. Her face fell a mile.

"Gee Maryland," she said, "you act like you don't like me."

"Aw no Lulu. You're great. Just that I got to thinkin' of my cousin feelin' so poor and all, and made me feel guilty. Here I am havin' such a fine time with you girls on this beautiful, sunny day and there she is all laid up. Think she could use a friendly face. Nothin' against you at all."

He'd lied again. These chicks had him buffaloed but he couldn't let on.

Janice said, "Pull over Brenda and let him out."

Brenda slowed to a stop off the right side of the road. When she opened the door and pulled back her seat, Lulu reached over to place a hand on his thigh.

"Sorry you're leavin' Maryland, we could've had a good time."

"Yeah, me too. Sorry girls. Sure do appreciate the lift. Great ridin' with ya."

He stepped out of the Bug into the road. The girls bid their goodbyes. As he shut the door, Lulu slid across the seat. She placed her folded arms beneath her chest atop the opened window sill. She poked her head through the window straining forward pushing her healthy tandem up above her low-cut Poor Boy top toward his face.

She said, "Ya like ta go fishin', Maryland? Maybe you can go fishin' with me sometime?" She winked and grinned wide.

He recoiled, drawing his head back. Lulu frowned then brightened.

"Hey, don't knock it buddy." She grinned. "Fishin' can be a real good time."

"Yeah, next time maybe Lulu," he replied. "Believe fishin' with you would be fun." He faked the best smile he could muster then waved goodbye.

Brenda waved back. Lulu winked over a coy smile. Brenda peeled out, spraying gravel from the shoulder all over him and the road. Waving good-bye, he congratulated himself on his quick-thinking. He sure dodged one that time.

He watched the VW-Bug lurch away, shifting gears—

Boom! Must have backfired again, like before. Right? Couldn't've been that shotgun, could it?

The VW-Bug turned left at the T-intersection then receded from view. When they were out of sight and he was alone with the road, he congratulated himself

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on his quick-thinking. Yeah, he sure dodged one that time. A little shaky, he walked over to sit down on the shoulder, facing the road. He sat cross-legged, Indian style, resting his forearms on his knees. He started thinking about what had happened. His thoughts spawned a chuckle. Chuckling spurred greater reflection about the total absurdity of the whole ridiculous deal. The more he thought back over it, reliving the scene in his mind, the more he chuckled. He began to laugh. He couldn't stop himself. He convulsed with laughter, laughing so hard that his whole body jerked and twitched until he was out of breath so that no sound came forth, though his body yet rocked with convulsions.

He became aware of a car approaching him from the south, headed the direction he was going. The car slowed, halting as it pulled even with him. It was a white Audi Opal. The passenger window rolled down. A man's head appeared in the aperture. The man asked if he was all right.

He nodded. "Yeah. Think so anyway."

"Need a ride?"

"Sure do."

"Where ya headed?"

"Newberg."

"Hop in. I'm goin' to Tigard."

The door popped open. The driver leaned back into his seat behind the wheel.

He stood up, stepped in and shut the door. The driver stepped on the gas. The car slipped forward. The driver turned to him.

"My name's Byron."

Byron looked to be approaching forty with dark hair straddling nascent male pattern baldness. He was clean-shaven, had blue eyes and long, dark lashes that looked out of place on a man. He was dressed in a grey turtle neck that rose above the collar of a herring-bone sport jacket, featuring a built-in tan leather patch over the elbow. He wore dark slacks and black loafers.

"What were you doin', sittin' on the road back there? Looked like you were shaking?"

"Anh, just takin' a load off for a while. No big deal."

"That's kind of dangerous, don't you think?"

"Guesso. I'm okay though."

A car passed them going the other way. Byron swiveled his head offering a smile. Byron took his right hand from the wheel, reaching across the seat to pat him on the knee.

"Glad to hear that," he said before replacing his hand on the steering wheel.

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Uh-oh, he thought. That touchin' bit wasn't a good sign but he didn't want to jump to any conclusions, prejudging this guy. He'd let this deal play out a little. He did press his left knee against his right, as far from Byron as he could get.

Byron turned left onto the Wheatland Ferry Road, headed away from the ferry toward Amity.

"How old are you—sixteen?" Byron arched his right eyebrow.

"No sir—eighteen. Go to school back there in Salem."

"I see. Why are you going to Newberg?"

"Stayin' in Dundee with my aunt and uncle over spring break."

"Dundee? Not Newberg?"

"Yes sir."

"What's your name?"

"They call me Murylan'."

Byron swiveled his head toward him, dipping his chin to his shoulder.

Byron smiled. "Murilyn? Or Marilyn, as in Monroe? Oh, I like that."

Oh crap, he thought. Here we go. Still, if this guy *Byron* was goin' to Tigar, he could take him to clear to Dundee.

"No sir. *Mary-Land*, as in the state, on account of that's where I'm from."

"Oh, I see. So you're going to the college back in town?"

"Yes sir. That's right."

Byron asked about his studies, what he liked about school, being away from home, if he had a girlfriend—

"Yeah, sure do," he said, jumping on the opportunity with another bald-faced lie. "And she's a hum-dinger, got curves like Marilyn Monroe, yes she does. Really go for them curves." He smiled as wide as he could without any Vaseline greasing the corners of his lips. "Yes sir. Really go for them hourglass figures. That's a fact." He nodded.

Byron kind of shut up after that. They turned north onto Lafayette. Before long they hit 18 north. They passed through the flashin' light at Dayton and swung up onto 99W. The air grew a little stuffy. He cracked his window a couple inches. As they approached Dundee, Byron asked where he lived. He pointed up the hill to the left.

"They live up there. Near the top of that hill."

When they reached the light at the intersection at the foot of the hill leading up to his aunt's house, he turned to jump out.

"What are you doing?" said Byron.

"Figured I'd get out here."

Byron frowned. "Nonsense. I'll take you up there."

"Well, you don't have to. It's out of your way. I don't mind walkin'."

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He put his hand on the door handle. Byron reached over to pet his knee again. “You sit right there, kid. It’s no trouble at all. Here. The light’s changing. You sit back there now. Relax. Take it easy. I won’t bite you.”

Before he could say or do anything, Byron was turning left onto his aunt’s road. He sat back, not sure that he wanted Byron to know where his aunt lived—where he was staying. But the car was moving. It was too late to jump out now.

Byron drove him up past the rows of orchard trees—filberts, he thought they were—lining the road along the sloping hill, following the road that curved left in front of his aunt and uncle’s two-story home, dug high up into the east side of the hill.

“That’s it there.” He pointed to the two-story, claret wooden siding structure.

Byron slowed the Opal before swinging right onto the steep gravel drive that climbed north, crossing the face of the hill, before curving west around his aunt’s terraced, flower garden up to the opened, two-car, cinder-block garage. Byron pulled the Opal clear up to the opened door of the garage.

“There—front door service. What do you think of that?” Byron grinned.

“Oh this is great. I could have walked up the hill though. Do it all the time. But this is really great. I really appreciate it. Thanks a lot.”

He turned to open the door but felt Byron’s hand above his knee again.

“Glad to help. You’re a nice looking, polite young man. I travel that road all the time. Maybe I’ll see you again sometime?”

Byron smiled, fluttering his long lashes twice.

He opened the door, replying, “Well, ya never know, never know who you might meet out there on the road.” He hopped out of the car.

“Oh. You’re so right dear boy. You are so right. I’ll be looking for you.” Byron smiled.

“Okay. Can always use a ride, ‘specially front door service.”

He hopped out of the car. Before closing the door, he leaned down to face Byron.

“Thanks a lot Mr. Byron. I really do appreciate it. ‘Bye.”

He slammed the door in the guy’s face before Byron could answer.

Byron waved, as he backed the Opal down the gravel drive around the curve of the flower bed. He didn’t wait to watch Byron drive off or wave good-bye.

He bounded into the house through the door that led to the basement utility room. After a pit stop in the basement bathroom, he tossed his coat onto the bed he used in the big downstairs bedroom then bounced across the rec. room and up the stairs. He turned right on the landing and took the steps two at a time up to

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the second floor where he strolled through the dining room to the kitchen table. A wide picture window stretched from the tabletop to the ceiling.

Smelled like onions cooking—smelled good—made his stomach growl. His Uncle Howard sat at the end of the kitchen table with his back to the counter separating the kitchen eating area from the walk-in kitchen proper. Smoke rose from the curling cigarette ash resting in a glass ash tray next to his uncle's filled highball glass on the Formica-topped kitchen table.

His diminutive aunt, the elder of his Mom's two kid sisters, was in the kitchen the other side of the counter preparing dinner. She peeked under the overhanging cabinets and above the L-shaped counter separating the kitchen from the dining area.

"Wondered who that was pulling in the drive. Thought it was you." She spoke in a kind tone that was measured but not scolding.

Sitting at the end of the table with his back to the kitchen, his uncle scrunched the newspaper together lengthwise, poking his head over a raised elbow to ask how he was doing then blinked twice and peered through black-framed bifocals.

"Good, Uncle Howard. How are you?"

"Great," replied his uncle, poking his head of sparsely topped brown hair back into the paper.

"Somehin' smells good."s

"Liver and onions," said his uncle behind the paper. "Hope you like liver."

Liver?

"Oh, stop teasing the boy, Howard." Behind his uncle, his aunt peeped under the overhead cupboard above the counter separating the kitchen proper from the kitchen table. She grinned. "Goodness. We're having steak—filet mignon sautéed in onions—in your honor. Don't let him kid you. Are you hungry?"

"Yes ma'am. Sure am."

His aunt and uncle were in their mid to late forties. After twenty-five years of a happy marriage raising three children of their own and twin nephews not theirs, they were on the cusp of those golden years of being empty nesters with the mortgage paid off. Yet, they had settled him in at college last fall three thousand miles from his home and taken him in on holidays like this Spring Break as if it was the most natural thing to do.

He sat down in a straight-backed, foam cushion chair, leaving an empty chair between him and his uncle for his aunt. He faced the picture window on the other side of the table. His aunt went back to preparing dinner for them on the counter next to the sink, staring out a similar, large picture window above the kitchen sink that likewise faced east across the valley, as did all the windows across the front of the house.

~ Hitchin' ~

Their house ran south from the kitchen, north to the living room. The entire front side of the house was open—not partitioned—with walls only for the bedrooms and bathroom in the back half of the place. The kitchen-proper, kitchen-eating area, dining room, second-story front door foyer and the living room on the north end, all on the front half of the house were distinguished as separate rooms only by their furniture. Each room featured a high, wide picture window that dominated the room. Each picture window offered the identical, grand, panoramic eastward view of the valley.

“Did you have a good day today,” asked his aunt speaking to him but staring out the window.

That’s how it was here. You talked looking out a picture window almost in a trance, drawn by the magnificence of the unchanging valley panorama cut into tracts of green, amber and brown farm land. The silver brown Willamette River meandered north down the valley center towards the Columbia. And, with the sun setting over the hill behind them on a grand, clear day like this, you could see the Cascades seventy to ninety miles to the east. Snow-capped Mount Hood off to the left and white-topped Mount Jefferson, center right, loomed clearly visible in the distance the other side of the window glass and the valley beyond.

“Yeah, had a good day. Was sunny today. Real nice for a change. Even worked up a little sweat.”

“So did I,” said his aunt in a kind of easy-rolling, soft cadence. “Worked out in the garden today. Got the vegetables planted. Believe we’ll have a good year this year.” She drew out her words in a reflective tone that caught his attention.

There was silence for a minute.

“Howard? Did you hear that? Planted the vegetables today.”

“Hunh?” The newspaper his uncle held out over the Formica-topped table did not budge. Nor did his uncle, whom he could not see behind the erect paper.

“I say I planted the vegetables today.”

“Oh?” The newspaper quivered. “Good, good. Good day to plant, Dear.”

“Yes, it was. Felt good to get my hands dirty in the earth again.” Once more, she assumed a wistful, pensive tone.

Behind the newspaper Uncle Howard grunted. The paper folded in on itself as he let go of it with his right hand nearer the window to reach for his highball glass. He bent forward to take a long draught, smacked his lips after swallowing, replaced the glass on the table and buried his nose back in the *Oregonian*.

“There’s Mountain Dew in the refrigerator,” called his aunt from the kitchen.

“Great.” It was considerate of her to have his favorite soda pop on ice.

“Might want to wash your hands first.”

“Already did, downstairs,” he countered.

~ Hitchin' ~

He stepped into the kitchen to the pale yellow refrigerator standing against the back wall, where he opened the door retrieving his preferred beverage.

"You know where the opener is," she said with her back to him as she stared out the window, her hands working, preparing food on the counter top. But she nodded to her left towards the drawer under the divider counter.

"Would you take those dishes in with you, stack the utensils on top? You know where they are."

She nodded again to her left, still staring out the window with her back to him. He noticed a stack of three clean dishes there close by her.

"Sure. Be glad to."

He set the pop bottle down on the counter to extract three sets of eating utensils from the drawer near her, stacking them on the top dish as she'd suggested.

"Dinner will be ready shortly," she said.

"Sure smells great," he replied. "Got my stomach to growlin'."

She chuckled.

He hefted the dishes and utensils into the dining room, set the table then returned to open his Dew. He stepped around her to toss the soda pop bottle cap into the waste basket in the cabinet under the sink, then backed around her to settle the bottle opener back in its drawer.

"Anything else I can do?"

"Not right now," she replied. "Go ahead and sit down and enjoy your drink. Have any trouble getting a ride?"

"No." He passed behind her carrying his bottle of soda pop around the divider counter to sit down at the kitchen table, leaving the empty chair again between him and his uncle. "No trouble at all. Got picked up right away."

"That's good. Worry about you out there on the road sometimes."

Again, her voice trailed off as if she wasn't trying to scold him but was merely noting her concern. He didn't reply. He enjoyed hitch-hiking but mainly he did it because he didn't want to put them out by having them cart him thirty miles back and forth to school. And he wouldn't think to put them out by asking to borrow her car. Besides, what if he did borrow her car and wrecked it? No. Hitchin' was okay. If there had been any real danger, he doubted his uncle would permit him to hitch. After all, his uncle owned the local Chevy-Oldsmobile dealership. They treated him as an adult and hitchin' without being nagged made him feel like one. He felt that was understood between them.

Sipping his Dew, now *he* was caught in the trance, staring out across the valley, drawn to that awesome view like iron by a magnet. The weather changed. The seasons changed. But the view never did. And it never got old. He

~ Hitchin' ~

let his eyes roam from north to south, then east over the highways sandwiching the river and on out toward the majestic, snow-covered peaks. The sky was azure, still a high sky, as it had been since the sun burned through, mid-morning. From behind the house, sunlight glinted now off aluminum barn roofs, silos and the passing traffic. On the highway below the hill cars and trucks passed each other heading north or south on 99W. Other side of the river, he could make out insect-like cars, mostly by way of the sun glinting off them as they cruised north or south on I-5 and even further over on 99E where they looked more like sliding silver dots.

There were folks living out there. You didn't see them, but they were out there. They tilled those fields, built those barns, drove those cars and trucks. But the only sign of life was in the passing of traffic. Seeing cars and trucks moving over the roads, even though they appeared as toys just below, or insects or dots further east, you knew they had to be driven by people—all kinds of people.

"Howard," said his aunt.

He glanced toward his uncle but the paper didn't move.

"Howard?"

Still no sign of life behind the raised newspaper.

"How-ARD."

"Hunh?" The paper bobbed. "Unh-hmm-hmm. You say something, Gin?" But still absorbed in his article, his uncle didn't turn around toward the kitchen.

"You know," he said from behind the paper. "State championships are on up in the Coliseum tomorrow. Maybe we should go up and see them. That six-foot ten, blue-chipper Richard Washington's got Benson Tech in the Five-A championship again. Like to see that. Signed to play for John Wooden down at U.C.L.A. Wished he'd stayed home, played for the Beavers. Sure hate to lose those big ones."

His aunt stopped what she was doing, walking toward the counter to peer under the cupboard.

"HOW-ARD." She almost yelled. The mighty mite of a woman faced them.

The paper folded together lengthwise again. Uncle Howard turned to her like a gopher popping its head above its hole to look about curiously.

"Yes, Dear." Blue eyes blinked twice innocently behind his black-framed bifocals.

She stabbed a large knife in their direction, under the overhanging cupboard.

"We have a guest." She poked the air with her knife again for emphasis.

"Oh. Oh. Hmmm."

~ Hitchin' ~

Uncle Howard folded the paper, setting it down beneath the picture window the other side of the ash tray, still within arm's reach. He took a drag on his cigarette before tapping the ash off the end into the glass tray. He looked up.

"So. How was your day today, Mick? How was practice?"

His aunt returned to her work station. With the nail between his fingers, his uncle picked up his highball, draining it beneath the halfway point. Then he set the glass down, keeping the cigarette butt in his fingers between the glass and his hand. His chin and aquiline nose jutted forward beneath an engaging grin, waiting for a response.

"Good, Uncle Howard. Had a good day today. Really stung the ball in BP. Lost a pop-up in that high sky though. Made a stab at the last second. Caught it only two foot off the ground. The guys laughed. Coach raised his brow but didn't say anything."

His uncle chuckled.

"Coach's givin' us a long weekend. We're off the rest of the break. Like to go up to Portland to watch those ball games, if it's okay."

"Great. That's what we'll do then. Leave after lunch."

Turning toward the kitchen, Uncle Howard said: "Okay with you Gin?"

"Sure. Sounds like fun," said his aunt, cutting vegetables for their salads.

Uncle Howard turned back to the table to drag on his cigarette, smoking what was left of the nail down to the filter then smashed the butt into the glass tray as he exhaled. His uncle turned toward the kitchen.

"Anything I can do to help in there Gin?"

"Yes, you can help me dish up. It's ready."

"Okay."

A grinning Uncle Howard rose out of his chair, clapping and rubbing his hands together as if he were about to undertake a task he had been relishing all day. Seemed he was that way with everything he did. Leaving the table, Uncle Howard asked.

"So, anything else exciting happen today Mick?"

"Howard?"

"Yes Dear, coming."

Uncle Howard stepped with his characteristic long stride around the corner of the divider counter into the kitchen eager to help.

"You can start by dishing the salad there," she said.

"Okay, great." Uncle Howard forgot about his question and went to work.

As the pair stood side by side, dishing up dinner, the view called to him like a siren. He stared out the window again, entranced.

Anything else excitin' happen today?

~ Hitchin' ~

He stared down at the highways and the river flowing between them. Maybe there was someone out there hitchin' a ride right now, eager to get picked up, wonderin' who was waitin' for 'em in the car or the truck or whatever it was that'd stopped just ahead with the door opened to them.

Excitin'?

Yeah. Hitchin' could be a real trip. Ya never knew who or what you might run into on the road. Just never knew.

Hitchin'

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