The Hitchhiker

You probably can’t tell from looking at me, but I am a habitual hitchhiker picker-upper. Look at me, I’m a young single woman. I’ve got my life pretty much put together. My Prius is the love of my life. It gets vacuumed on Tuesdays and still smells like new car. And despite all of this, I have this guilt every time I pass a hitchhiker, so I stop and pick them up every time.

Thinking back on it, I have let some dirty vagabonds into my car. On occasion there is a dog. The dog is a good cue to a good hitcher. If they have a dog at least they are semi-responsible (I don’t even have a dog). But then here I go letting this stranger and their dog get dirt all over the back seat, reeking of gasoline and crusty sweat.

One hitcher even lit up a cigarette, it was so natural to him he forgot to ask until halfway through inhaling: “Is it ok if I *cough* smoke?” And what do you think my answer was? “Oh ya! Its fine!” Me! I was the president of my high school D.A.R.E. program. Even more surprisingly I made my way through five years of college without once even trying a cigarette. And yet here I am, three years later, letting all sorts of addicts into my beautiful little fuel-efficient hybrid.

They have been tobacco addicts mostly. Although there have been some stoners, the occasional alcoholic. I don’t necessarily mean to pick these guys up, but it is hard to tell sometimes unless you are closed up in a small box with them for a while and you can’t help but smell the stale alcohol. Mostly though they are all just addicts of the road and what they find there.
My mother would die if she knew. I must have started picking people up just to prove to her that it wasn't dangerous. I always thought she was too timid, scared of everything. But I never told her about my little habit.

It wasn't until I picked up Jenkins that I found that the real reason I pick up hitchhikers is because the experiences you have in a car with strangers are the most raw and real experiences you will ever have.

Jenkins was one of the people I had to turn around to go back and pick up. Even before I passed him going seventy miles an hour I asked myself if I should pick him up. As I passed I checked him out for general friendliness in the .02 milliseconds that I whizzed by. He was a pretty beefy looking guy somewhere between overweight and built, a size that made the backpack he was wearing look just a little bit goofy. What struck me was the hopeful laughing smile he wore as he walked alongside the road. Immediately after passing I began to think, I should have stopped I should have stopped I should have stopped.

Hitchhiking here is like hitchhiking in a warzone, everyone is skeptical of your intentions. I guessed that he was going to the Garden of One Thousand Buddhas two hours away. There was a festival that weekend. It seemed like the kind of event that participants would hitchhike to, but nobody would pick him up because he looked like a dirty hippy in a crocheted beanie and people here hate hippies. If you have to rely on other people to get you around here you might as well give up your independence and become a government moocher. But I didn't think that way. I understood that all he wanted to do was go to the Buddha garden. So
after five miles of frantic deliberation I pulled a u-ie without stopping and headed back to where I first saw Jenkins with his thumb optimistically stuck out.

When I pulled over to let him in his laughing smile stayed the same but all my other assumptions were way off. Underneath his beanie was a buzz cut. He was the guy who forgot to ask if it was ok to smoke in my car. The first words he said to me were: “Thanks for stopping. It’s been hard, everyone thinks I’m a dirty fuckin’ hippy.” He obviously did not realize that he was now riding in a fuel-efficient hybrid. I was thankful that I hadn’t put my ‘Visualize Whirled Peas’ bumper sticker on yet.

He supplied most of the conversation, mostly stories about fishing on huge commercial boats from California to Alaska. He said he was just coming back from Seattle where he was following some leads to get himself onto a crabbing boat in the Bering Sea that winter. If anyone could have that job, I think Jenkins could. If I learned anything about fishing from Jenkins it was how incredibly dangerous the job is, and not just because of the weather. Even on mild days you still have to deal with equipment, the stink, an old malfunctioning heavy boat, and a grungy angry pent up crew.

I think Jenkins was a bit afraid of silence. Between stories of fishing and general inebriated shenanigans he would reach over for the radio dial, seeking through stations until he found something he could sing along to. Thankfully it was rarely country, mostly rock, but he had a soft spot for pop. He was in the middle of harmonizing with Rihanna when he turned to me and stated, “We have to stop for jerky soon.” I was startled, hitchhikers never ask for special stops, but as per usual I gave in.
We pulled over at this roadside store that Jenkins knew about. There was a deer carcass hanging from the porch rafter next to some type of large bird. “It’s the best jerky I’ve ever eaten,” he said noticing my hesitation. Walking through the doors I was stunned by the amount of meat in the building. There were racks upon racks of jerky, freezers full of steaks, ground meat, and sausages. It was overwhelming. I was busy looking at meat and bones for dogs when Jenkins held up a huge bag full of jerky. “Here, this is for you. It’s a pound of bison. Can’t exactly buy you a drink so I thought I would get you some meat.” I was flattered by the gesture.

It was the best jerky I had ever had. It was spicy, flavorful, and delightfully juicy. I wondered how he decided on this kind of jerky for me without even asking if I was a vegetarian. Now that I think about it, he probably doesn’t know what a vegetarian is.

We were about an hour away from both of our destinations when Jenkins began rummaging through his backpack. He was chewing on a chunk of jerky and we were listening to Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young. It looked like his pack was mostly full of cigarettes. He pulled out of one of the smaller pockets a simple silver band and put it onto his ring finger.

He caught me watching, “I’m going home to the wife, I have to show her I love her.” He also took the crocheted beanie from his bag and gave it to me. “I can’t wear that home. She will wonder where it came from.”

“Where did it come from?” I asked. It was obviously handmade.
“This girl I worked with on the docks made it. She made everyone hats. Man she was such a sweetheart. One of those truly nice people you know? And she was a fire dancer. Why can’t my wife be that cool? Why can’t she be nice?”

“She isn't?” I asked. Jenkins’ life seemed to be so full of adventure. It was weird that one, he had settled down to a wife and two, that she wasn’t as cool as he was. The stories he told me before certainly seemed to imply that he was still spitting game.

He laughed pretty hard at that. “I mean she is nice to her friends. She would have hated this girl. She would have said she's too happy and positive. Nah, its best she doesn’t know. I think she would be jealous. She shouldn’t be. We are having a baby. I’m going to call him Daniel James Jenkins, a good solid American name. None of that flouncy creative name bullshit.” And he laughed again.

I found it hard to believe that a wife could control her husband like that. It seemed to me like this other girl he met really meant something to him, but he was just going to let her go even if she was just a friend. I found it hard to believe that he was going to have a son too. I had to ask if they knew it was going to be a boy. They did know. I would have been worried if he was assuming the birth of a male.

Then I thought of his work schedule. He would be leaving on this crabbing boat in November come back in March then be gone again in June on the next boat.

“Do you think I would be a good father?” That was the only question he asked during the whole drive. And I didn’t answer, at least not quick enough before he answered his own question.
“Sam, that’s my wife, we almost broke up because she feels like I am not pulling my weight in parenthood. I almost threw this ring into the Pacific from the Seattle pier after our last conversation. The kid isn’t even born yet. How can I pull my weight when I am out breaking my back to get funds for her and Daniel. Every day I fish is for them, not for me. And she gets mad at me because I’m not there to take her to the hospital for check ups. I mean I get it, I should be there. I will be there for his birth. He is due at the end of the month. I don’t leave til November. She’s got her mom there to help her out when I’m not there. I’m providing for this family. She knew I was a fisherman when she married me.”

Crosby Stills Nash & Young were still crooning away in the background.

“I’m going to miss so much of his childhood. It’s true. Better than having a drunk for a dad huh?” And he chuckled to himself. “Nah at least I won’t do that. I had a bad father. Sam doesn’t like it when I drink anyway. I save that for the docks.” He whistled obviously thinking about his drunken wanderings on the docks. He gave me a grin as if I knew what sort of craziness he got up to, “You know, life could be a lot worse! I got a nutcracker at home for a wife, but I got another life you know. You do too it seems like, miss bison chewer.” He smiled mischievously and looked at me as I gnawed away at the jerky.

I was surprised he noticed that his presence in my car was out of the ordinary. He seemed so comfortable riding in my passenger seat. I was taken aback, “Oh! Nah… I’ve done this before.” I had the sudden urge to lie to him and make my life seem a lot more bad-ass than it really was. After all what experiences had I had compared to his nomad life? College?
But instead of lying I found myself talking to him about how attracted I am to
the voyagers life. The appeal of the road, the addiction to it I have observed. I talked
about Jack Kerouac and how I wish that today's society was more accepting of the
beatnik culture because we all have so much to learn from each other. Until that
point I had not put all of those thoughts in one place.

He asked me to drop him off at a gas station. I would have gone to his house
but I had the feeling that he didn’t want his wife to see me. As he got out of the car
he pulled a pen from his pocket and wrote his address down on an empty Marlboro
reds carton. “It’s my buddy Matt’s address. If you ever have your own story to tell I
would love to hear it. I’ve always got one up my sleeve. Thanks for the ride.” And he
walked off across the street.

Somehow, Jenkins, a man I knew for two hours, had figured me out. A few
weeks later I sent him a postcard of the lake with a poem on it about relationships
with people and places and how you always seem to be either coming or going. He
sent me back a picture of a beautiful smiling baby. It was unmistakably Daniel James
Jenkins.