

The Hitchhiker

Lucille Fletcher

Characters

Ronald Adams
Mrs. Adams
The Hitchhiker
A Mechanic
The Storekeeper
The Storekeeper's Wife
A Girl
A Telephone Operator
A Long-Distance Operator
An Albuquerque Operator
A New York Operator
Mrs. Whitney

The time of the play is the early 1940's.

(Sound: Automobile wheels humming over concrete road. Music: Something weird and shuddery.)

Adams: I'm in an auto camp on Route 66 just west of Gallup, New Mexico. If I tell it, maybe it will help me. It will keep me from going crazy. But I must tell this quickly. I am not crazy now - I feel perfectly well, perfectly well except I am running a slight temperature. My name is Ronald Adams; I'm thirty-six years of age, unmarried, tall, dark with a black moustache. I drive a 1940 Ford V8, license number 6V7989. I was born in Brooklyn. All this I know. I know I'm at this moment perfectly sane, that it is not me that's gone mad, but something else, something utterly beyond my control. But I must speak quickly. At any moment 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...

(Music: In)

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

Mrs. Adams: Goodbye, Son. Good luck to you my boy.

Adams: Goodbye, Mother. Here, give me a kiss and then I'll go.

(Sound: Door opening...sound of rain.)

Mrs. Adams: I'll come out with you to the car.

Adams: No, it's raining. Stay here at the door. Hey, what's this, tears? I thought you promised me you wouldn't cry.

Mrs. Adams: I know, dear. I'm sorry. But I - do hate to see you go.

Adams: I'll be back. I'll only be on the Coast three months.

Mrs. Adams: Oh, it isn't that. It's just - the trip, Ronald. I wish you weren't driving.

Adams: Oh, Mother. 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: Lord. No. You'd think I was still seventeen to hear you talk –

Mrs. Adams: And wire me as soon as you get to California, won't you, Son?

Adams: Of course I will. Now don't you 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...
(*Fade*)

(Sound: *Auto hum. Music: In.*)

Adams: I was in excellent spirits - drive ahead, even the loneliness seemed like a lark. But I reckoned without *him*.

(Music: *Changes to something weird and empty.*)

Adams: Crossing the 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. He stepped off the walk and if I hadn't swerved - if I hadn't swerved - I'd have hit him. I almost did! Almost did hit him.

(Sound: *Terrible skidding. Music: In.*)

Adams: 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 one of those fast trucks had picked him up, beaten me to the Skyway, and let him off. I - I didn't stop for him. Then, late that night, I saw him again.

(Music: *Changing*)

Adams: It was on the new Pennsylvania Turnpike between Harrisburg and Pittsburgh. It's 265 miles long with a very high speed limit. I was just slowing down for one of the tunnels when I saw him standing under an arclight 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 hailed me this time.

Hiker: (*ghostly and faint*) Hellooo. (*Echo as through tunnel*) Hellooo.

Adams: I stepped on the gas like a shot. It's lonely country though 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.

(Sound: *Auto tires screeching to stop. Horn honk.*)

Mechanic: Yes, sir.

Adams: Fill'er up, will you.

Mechanic: Certainly, sir. Check your oil, sir?

Adams: No. Thanks.

(Sound: *Gas being put into car, bell tinkle, etc.*)

Mechanic: Nice night, ain't it?

Adams: Yes, it is. It hasn't been raining here recently, has it?

Mechanic: Not a drop of rain all week.

Adams: Hm. I suppose that hasn't done your business any harm?

Mechanic: No, 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 guess not. (*Casually*) What about hitchhikers?

Mechanic: (*half laughing*) Hitchhikers? *Here?*

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

Mechanic: A guy'd be a fool to start out to hitchhike on this road. Look at it! It's two hundred and sixty-five miles long, there's practically no speed limit, and it's a straight-away. Now what car is going to stop to pick up a guy under those conditions? Would you stop?

Adams: No. (*Slowly, with puzzled emphasis*) Then you've never seen anybody?

Mechanic: Nope. Maybe they get a lift before the turnpike starts. I mean, you know, just before the toll-house. But then it's a mighty long ride. Most cars wouldn't pick up a gut for that long a ride. And, you know, this is pretty lonesome country here, mountains and woods. You ain't seen nobody like that have you?

Adams: No. (*Quickly*) Oh, no, no. It's just a technical question.

Attendant: Oh, I see. Well, that'll be a dollar forty-nine, with the tax... (*Fade*)

(Sound: *Auto hum up. Music: Changing.*)

Adams: The thing gradually passed from my mind as a coincidence. I had a good night's sleep in Pittsburgh. I didn't think about the man all the next day until, just outside of Zanesville, Ohio. I saw him again.

(Music: *Dark, ominous note.*)

Adams: 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 in, when the road suddenly ended in a detour. In front of the barrier, *he* was standing.

(Music: *In*)

Adams: 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 merely 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. He started to walk forward.

Hiker: (*far off*) Hellooo, hellooo.

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

(Sound: *Gears jamming...sound of motor turning over hard...nervous accelerator*)

Hiker: Hello.

Adams: (*panicky*) No, not just now, I'm sorry.

Hiker: Going to California?

(Sound: *Starter starting...gears jamming*)

Adams: (*as though sweating blood*) No, no, not today. I'm going to New York. Sorry! Sorry!

(Sound: *Car starts with squeal of wheels on dirt...into auto hum. Music: In*)

Adams: 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.

(Sound: *Auto hum up.*)

Adams: Hour after hour went by. The fields, the towns ticked off one by one. The lights 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: *Auto hum up...car screeches to a halt...impatient honk two or three times...door being unbolted.*)

Storekeeper: (*sleepily*) Yep. What is it? What 'ou want?

Adams: (*breathless*) You sell sandwiches and pop here, don't ya?

Storekeeper: (*cranky*) Yep. We do in the daytime. But we're closed up for the night.

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

Storekeeper: Not at this time of night, mister. My wife's the cook and she's in bed. Mebbe further down the road – at the Honeysuckle Rest...

(Sound: *Door squeaking on hinges as though being closed.*)

Adams: No – no. Don't shut the door. (*Shakily*) Listen, just a minute ago there was a man standing here, right beside this stand, and he - a suspicious looking man.

Woman: (*from distance*) Henry. Who is it, Henry?

Storekeeper: It's nobody, Mother. Just a feller thinks he wants a cup of coffee. Go back to bed.

Adams: I don't mean to disturb you, but you see, I was driving along when I just happened to look – and there he was.

Storekeeper: What was he doing?

Adams: Nothing. He ran off – when I stopped the car.

Storekeeper: Then what of it? That's nothing to wake a man in the middle of his sleep about. (Sternly) Young man, I've got a good mind to turn you over to the sheriff.

Adams: But – I –

Storekeeper: You've been taking a nip – that's what you've been doing. And you haven't got anything better to do than wake decent folk out of their hard-earned sleep. Now get goin'. Get on!

Adams: It looked as though he was going to rob you.

Storekeeper: I ain't got nothin' in this stand to lose. Now on your way before I call out Sheriff Oakes. (*Fade*)

(Sound: *Auto hum up.*)

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, but 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 that when I saw him next, I'd run him down...

(Sound: *Auto hum up.*)

Adams: But I didn't see him again until late the next afternoon...

(Sound: *Of railroad warning signal at crossroads.*)

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

(Sound: Distant sound of train chugging...bell ringing steadily)

Adams: (*very tense*) 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.

(Sound: *Train chugging closer.*)

Adams: 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 went wrong with the car. It stalled right on the tracks.

(Sound: *Train chugging closer. Above this, sound of car stalling.*)

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

(Sound: *Train chugging close. Whistle blows wildly. Then train rushes up and by with pistons going, etc.*)

Adams: Well, I frustrated him that time. The starter had worked at last. I managed to back up, but after train had passed he was gone and I was all alone in the hot dry afternoon.

(Sound: *Train retreating. Crickets begin to sing. Music: In*)

Adams: 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 be alone on the road for one minute.

(Sound: *Auto hum up. Slow down. Stop. Door opening.*)

Adams: Hello there, hello. Like a ride?

Girl: What do you think? How far are you going?

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

Girl: Amarillo, Texas?

Adams: Yeah, I'll drive you there.

Girl: Gee!

Adams: Hop in.

(Sound: *Door closed – car starts. Music: In*)

Girl: Mind if I take of my shoes? My dogs are killing me...

Adams: No, go right ahead.

Girl: Oh, gee, what a break this is - swell car and a decent guy, drivin' all the way to Amarillo. All I've been getting so far is trucks.

Adams: Hitchhike much?

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

Adams: Yeah, I'd think it would be, but I'll bet, though, if you got a good pick up in a fast car you could get to places faster than, well, say another person in another car.

Girl: I don't get you.

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

Girl: I dunno – maybe she could, maybe she couldn't. What difference does it make?

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

Girl: (*laughing*) Oh, imagine spending your time in a swell car thinkin' of things like that.

Adams: What would you do instead?

Girl: (*admiringly*) What would I do? If I was a good-lookin' fellow like yourself? Why – I'd just enjoy myself every minute of the time. I'd sit back and relax and if I saw a good-lookin' girl along the side of the road... (*Sharply*) Hey! Look out!

Adams: (*breathlessly*) Did you see him too?

Girl: See who?

Adams: That man! Standing beside the barbed-wire fence!

Girl: I didn't see anybody.

Adams: Right there!

Girl: It was nothin', just a barbed-wire fence. What'd you think you was doin' tryin' to run into that barbed-wire fence?

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

Girl: Run him down? You mean kill 'im?

Adams: He's a sort of – phantom. I'm trying to get rid of him – or at least prove that he's real. But (*desperately*) you say you didn't see him back there. You're sure?

F. Hiker: (*queerly*) I didn't see a soul. And as far as that's concerned, mister...

Adams: Well, watch for him! Watch for him the next time and keep watching. Keep your eyes peeled on the road. He'll turn up again. Maybe any minute now. (*Excitedly*) There. Look there!

(*Sound: Auto sharply veering and skidding. Girl screams. Sound: Crash of car going into barbed-wire fence. Frightened lowing of steer.*)

Girl: How's this door work? I – I'm gettin' outta here.

Adams: Did you see him that time? Did you see him?

Girl: (*sharply*) 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' and I don't see how I will very long, driving with you.

Adams: Look, I'm sorry. I - I don't know what came over me. (*Frightened*) Please, don't go.

Girl: So, if you'll excuse me, mister –

Adams: Please, you can't go. Listen, how'd you like to go to California. I'll drive you all the way to California.

Girl: Seein' pink elephants all the way? No thanks.

Adams: (*desperately*) Listen, please, just one minute.

Girl: You know what I think you need, big boy, not a girlfriend, just a good dose of sleep. There, I got it now.

Adams: No, no, you can't go!

Girl: (*screams*) Leave your hands off o' me, d'ya hear? Leave your hands off me!

(Sound: *Door opens...slams.*)

Adams: Come back here, please! Come back!

(Sound: *Struggle...slap...footsteps running away on gravel...lowing of steer.*)

Adams: She ran from me as if I was some kind of monster. A few minutes later, I saw a passing truck pick her up, and I near then that I was utterly alone.

(Sound: *Lowing of steer up.*)

Adams: I was in the heart of the great Texas prairies. There wasn't a car on the road after the truck went by. 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, get some sleep just along side the road. I was getting my winter overcoat out of the back seat to use as a blanket, just as a blanket (*Hellooo*) when I saw him coming toward me (*Hellooo*), coming toward me - emerging from the herd of moving steers....

Hiker: Hellooo....Hellooo...

(Sound: *Auto starting violently...up to steady hum. Music: In.*)

Adams: I didn't wait for him to come any closer. Maybe I shoulda' spoken to him then. Fought it out then and there. And now he began to be everywhere. Whenever I stopped even for a minute - for gas, for oil, for a drink of pop, a cup of coffee, a sandwich - he was there.

(Music: *Faster*)

Adams: I saw him standing outside the auto camp in Amarillo that night when I dared to slow down. He was standing near the drinking fountain at a little camping spot just inside the border of New Mexico.

(Music: *Faster*)

Adams: He was waiting for me outside the Navajo reservation where I stopped to check my tires. I saw him in Albuquerque where I bought ten gallons of gas. I was afraid now, afraid to stop. I began to drive faster and faster. I was in 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.

(Music: *Faster*)

Adams: But 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 could see his figure, shadowless, flitting before me, still in its same attitude over the still and lifeless ground, flitting over dried up rivers, over broken stones cast up by old glacial upheavals, flitting in the pure and cloudless air...

(Music: *Strikes sinister note of finality.*)

Adams: I was beside myself, beside myself, when I finally reached Gallup, New Mexico, this morning. There's an auto 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 I could speak to somebody familiar, somebody that I loved, I could pull myself together.

(Sound: *Nickel put in slot.*)

Operator: Number, please?

Adams: Long distance:

Operator: Thank you.

(Sound: *Return of nickel; buzz.*)

Long Distance: This is long distance.

Adams: I'd like to put in a call to my home to Brooklyn, New York. I'm Ronald Adams. The number is Beechwood 2-0828.

Long Distance: Thank you. Thank you. What is your number?

Adams: My number? It's 312.

Albuquerque Operator: Albuquerque.

Long Distance: New York for Gallup. (*Pause*)

New York Operator: New York.

Long Distance: Gallup, New Mexico calling Beechwood 2-0828. (*Fade*)

Adams: I'd read somewhere that love could banish demons. It was in the middle of the morning. I knew mother'd be home. I pictured her tall, 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.

Long Distance: Will you please deposit three dollars and eighty-five cents for the first three minutes. When you have deposited a dollar and a half, will you wait until I have collected the money?

(Sound: *Clunk of six coins.*)

Long Distance: All right, please deposit another dollar and a half.

(Sound: *Clunk of six coins.*)

Long Distance: Will you please deposit the remaining eighty-five cents?

(Sound: *Clunk of four coins.*)

Long Distance: Ready with Brooklyn. Go ahead, please.

Adams: Hello?

Mrs. Whitney: Hello, Mrs. Adams' residence.

Adams: Hello, Mother?

Mrs. Whitney: (*very flat and rather proper*) This is Mrs. Adams' residence, who is it you wish to speak to, please?

Adams: Why – who's this?

Mrs. Whitney: This is Mrs. Whitney.

Adams: Mrs. Whitney? Why, I don't know any Mrs. Whitney. Is this Beechwood 2-0828?

Mrs. Whitney: Yes.

Adams: 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 prostrated for five days - a nervous breakdown. Who is this calling?

Adams: Nervous breakdown? My mother was never nervous.

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

Adams: The death of her oldest son, Ronald? Hey! What is this? What number is this?

Mrs. Whitney: This is Beechwood 2-0828. It's all been very sudden. He was killed six days ago in an automobile accident on the Brooklyn Bridge.

Operator: (*breaking in*) Your three minutes are up, sir. (*Pause*) Your three minutes are up, sir. (*Pause*) Your three minutes are up, sir. (*Fade*) Sir, three minutes are up. Your three minutes are up, sir.

Adams: (*in a strange voice*) And so I'm sitting here in this deserted auto camp in Gallup, New Mexico. And so, I'm trying to think. I'm trying to get a hold of myself. Otherwise...otherwise, I'll go crazy. Outside it is 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 is waiting for me - somewhere. Somewhere I shall know who he is and who...I...am...

(Music: *Up*)