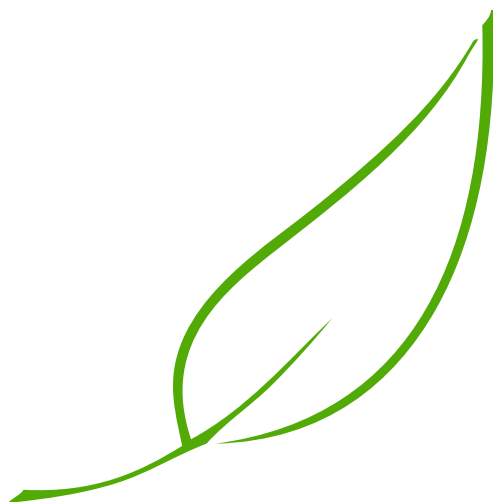


THE PHANTOM HITCHHIKER

by Ken Bradbury



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(A play for three males and two females. Mom (Miriam), Dad (Ralph), Charlie the son, Sarah the daughter, the Hitchhiker.) This could also be done with three females and two males with some rewording.)

(The setting is the interior of a car. Mom and Dad are in the front seat with an empty chair between them. Charlie and Sarah are in the rear.)

DAD: *(as the kids bicker)* Miriam, you've got to quiet those kids down. We've still got two days driving 'til we to California and I think I may not make it to Nevada with a brain left.

MOM: That's strange, Ralph. I distinctly remember packing one. Look, it's a long drive for two children. If you'd stop more often ...

DAD: Don't have time. Don't have time. We've only got a week's vacation and I'm not going to waste it in some motel on the Interstate. *(shouting)* Would you kids be quiet!

SARAH: He's on my side of the seat, Dad!

CHARLIE: It's my side!

SARAH: Is not!

CHARLIE: Is too!

DAD: If you don't' stop whining I'll give you something to whine about. *(they quiet momentarily)* There you go, Miriam. All you need is a little firmness. I wish you could learn that.

SARAH: Daddy he's breathing my air!

CHARLIE: It's my air!

SARAH: I breathed it first!

CHARLIE: Did not!

MOM: Anything else you want to teach me, Ralph?

SARAH: Are we about there, Daddy?

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DAD: Yeah. California's just around the next corner.

CHARLIE: I can't hold it that long!

MOM: Your breath?

CHARLIE: No! Somethin' else!

MOM: Stop the car, Ralph!

SARAH: Daddy, Charlie's under pressure!

DAD: He's always under pressure. Charlie, I'd love to stop but this is the part of Colorado where they keep seeing the Phantom Hitchhiker! *(a sudden stillness smoothers the noise...all look wide-eyed at Dad with Miriam's wonder quickly turning to skepticism)*

CHARLIE: The what?

DAD: The Phantom Hitchhiker! You mean you kids haven't heard of that? Heck, it was in all the national news reports.

CHARLIE: You pullin' my leg, Dad?

DAD: Wish I was, Charlie. The Phantom Hitchhiker is famous in this part of the state. Everybody knows about him. *(then a long silence as Charlie and Sarah look at each other wide-eyed)*

SARAH: *(finally)* I don't.

DAD: Oooooo. Too bad. Too bad, Sarah. You're the kind of traveler that usually runs into him ... the one's that don't know a thing about him.

MOM: *(under her breath)* Ralph?

DAD: *(whispering to her)* Quiet, Miriam. It's working. It's working. *(to the kids)* It's a pretty gruesome story, kids. They said he came this way during the California gold rush. Wandered off from his family one night and they never found him. His dad told him they didn't have time to stop the wagon but he insisted and that's the last they heard of him. Raised by coyotes, I hear. Got wild as jackrabbit! The buffalo used him for a plaything, kicking him back and forth ... then the wolves ... but I can't tell you that part.

SARAH: *(completely into this)* Tell us, Daddy! Tell us!

DAD: Well, the wolves captured him as their slave. They gnawed on his ears and chewed on his toes ... every

year the toes would grow back and they'd chew 'em off again. They say he still roams these hills looking for the family that left him. He's looking for revenge.

MOM: (*whispering*) Ralph, please.

CHARLIE: (*not completely buying all this but curious*) You aren't makin' this up?

DAD: Why Charlie! If you don't ...

MOM: Look out, Ralph! There's a man beside the road.

DAD: Hey! Let's pick him up!

SARAH: No, Daddy!

MOM: Ralph, are you out of your mind?

DAD: (*aside, to her*) Oh, he looks safe enough.

MOM: Ralph this is crazy.

DAD: Hey! We're on vacation! (*pulling the car over*)

MOM: Ralph!

DAD: He's just a harmless little old man, Marian. His car probably broke down. (*out his window to the Hitchhiker*) Need a ride, mister?

HITCHHIKER: (*nods*)

DAD: Then hop in! Hop in! (*The Hitchhiker slowly moves to the passenger side of the car.*)

SARAH: Daddy, he's going to kill us!

MOM: Ralph, you've completely lost your mind. (*The hitchhiker grabs for the door handle.*) (*to Dad*) I'm not sitting in the middle. I want to be where I can jump out. (*she gets out and the Hitchhiker gets into the middle front seat ... Sarah and Charlie are absolutely terrified. Mom gets in and shuts the door.*)

DAD: Howdy stranger! (*the stranger slowly turns to look at him, then nods*) Kids, say hi to our new friend! (*Charlie and Sarah are numbed with terror by now ... they can only nod their heads and mutter*)

SARAH & CHARLIE: Hi.

MOM: (*extremely nervous herself, trying anything to break the tension*) So ... are you from around here? (*the Hitchhiker slowly turns to her and shakes his head yes*)

DAD: We're headed for California! You? (*The Hitchhiker sighs and shrugs*) Tired I'll bet. All that walking. Kids,



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