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How to Hitchhike West with a Promise

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HOW TO HITCHHIKE WEST WITH A PROMISE

By

Max Wojciechowski

THESIS

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How to Hitchhike West with a Promise

This thesis by Max Wojciechowski is recommended for approval by the student's Thesis Committee and Department Head in the Department of English and by the Assistant Provost of Graduate Education and Research.

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ABSTRACT

HOW TO HITCHHIKE WEST WITH A PROMISE

By

Max Wojciechowski

This work is an excerpt of a larger novel in progress that closely follows the journey of the main character, Charlie, who is hitchhiking from the Chicago suburbs to California in order to spread his mother's ashes. It takes inspiration from the traditional American road trip novels, while following a contemporary narrative that dives into the main character's judgmental attitude toward his fellow human. The story highlights his character growth with tips for hitchhiking that Charlie directs toward the audience sporadically throughout the piece. Charlie happens to be gay. A conscious decision was made to not highlight his sexual orientation, but allow the reader to see clear evidence of it in order to normalize this human experience without the character revolving around that singular trait. The road trip novel model offers a unique opportunity to use multiple side characters in order to pull out honest dialogue, varied experiences, and display human growth in a way that cannot be achieved in a stationary setting.

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INTRODUCTION

The process of weaving this novel in progress took quite some time, and a lot of different drafts and settings that were reworked over the process of writing the first few chapters. It is possible to pinpoint its conception through Charlie. Charlie was first conceived in a fiction workshop class after there was a group discussion about unlikable narrators and their effectiveness, or lack thereof. The subject of judgmental attitudes seemed to dominate a lot of the conversation about these unlikable narrators. However, the idea of first impressions and how often they tend to have a judgmental tone to them in our own minds, whether many of us recognize this or not, was an idea that stuck in my head throughout most of the discourse.

With this rhetoric in mind, the character of Charlie started to form over the next few weeks. He was designed to be off-putting but realistic. While many of his thoughts and comments can be peculiar and sometimes offensive, the tips that he leaves for the readers were designed to pull that sense of humanity full-circle.

The road trip model of the story lends itself greatly to character development over a shorter period of time, creating a situation in which the character is forced to grow and see how others might view them. The act of Charlie carrying his mother's remains across the country was also meant to further humanize him in order to keep the audience invested at times where he can be particularly unpleasant.

As a gay man, I also felt the need to include the element of sexual orientation and identity in a way that does not fall into a camp or stereotype. Even in works I have read where the main character is not heterosexual, the story almost always revolves around

self discovery of said orientation and/or a love interest. I wanted Charlie to be gay, while not becoming the driving force of his narrative. I think this is important in our contemporary era in order to normalize this characteristic as something that is not all consuming of someone's life.

Charlie's characteristics were best displayed when put in a scenario that forced him to interact with numerous strangers, and learn key life lessons that he would not have obtained staying in a central location.

Mom's Ashes are going to Disneyland

What's so patriotic about foreclosure? The bold red and white FOR SALE just feels like an election sign begging for approval. Even the real estate agent looked like some candidate strutting up to my house in a blue blazer and Hillary Clinton hair. In the middle of her campaigning on my front lawn, she finally noticed me watching her from the sidewalk. It only took one look at my backpack and duffle bag to send her scuttling through the front door.

Oh hey, the robins managed to rebuild their nest in the maple. I probably wouldn't have even noticed that if they hadn't been sent scattering in a flurry from the screech that came from the open window. Good, she must have found my parting present on the kitchen floor. Mom would be so proud.

Pulling the strap tight against my chest a sigh escaped, hissing through my clenched teeth. "Well Mom, sorry I couldn't hold onto the house. At least you'll get to see the West Coast." Stepping over my age-worn handprints imbedded in the concrete, it was time to get the hell out of here.

Trying to hitchhike out of Illinois is like reliving gym class in high school, there're a lot of insults, assholes, and pit stains. But eventually it ends, only this time instead of a diploma it's a rusted Chevy plastered with Coexist and Equality bumper stickers that came to my rescue.

"Are you a murderer, or have any plans to take up the profession?" I asked the mousy guy as he rolled down the passenger side window. I figured if I'm the one to pop the inevitable question then motorists will feel a little safer picking some stranger off the side of the road.

“No?” I could tell he was sincere, but starting to second guess his decision to pull over. I tossed my duffle bag into the back seat and kept Mom’s backpack in my lap.

“Thanks for the lift. I can give you some gas money when we get where we’re going.” I pulled the seatbelt down, noticing he didn’t put the car back in drive until he heard the click. “How far west are you headed?” The guy still looked nervous, he was probably just trying to break out of his routine and do something impulsive by picking up a hitchhiker. Well good thing he decided to stop for me instead of some other psycho.

“Oh, I’m headed back to school, it’s just in Iowa. Sorry it isn’t farther.” This kid really shouldn’t be picking up strangers.

“No problem, gotta start somewhere. By the way, I’m Charlie and I promise I’m not going to try and carjack you or anything.” There was a loose corner of upholstery on the corner of the door that quickly found itself being tugged at and twisted between my fingers. “So you can stop looking like you’ve just invited Jason Voorhees into your car whenever you’d like.”

“Right, sorry, I just uh, never picked up a hitchhiker before-”

“Please,” I raised my hand with the most fake indignation I could muster, “‘backpack enthusiast’ is our preferred term.”

“Oh, uh, my bad. I’ll remember that.” He pulled back onto the highway, glancing over periodically but slowly starting to control his overactive imagination. “Anyhow, we watched Craigslist Joe in a film studies class last semester and ya know it kinda makes you feel like taking chances on people. Oh, I’m Andy.”

“Praise be for documentaries.”

- Here's my first tip for road tripping: never start it by going through Iowa.

I mean Northern Illinois isn't so great itself; Chicago belches bile over most of the northern half of the state, but at least graffiti and the occasional meth head in the gutter spruces up the scenery. Iowa has corn.

After a decent while traversing the potholes and road kill that decorated the streets of the Land of Lincoln, I guess Andy had either finally relaxed, or grown so bored that he spoke up. "So, west huh?" He was a master of conversation.

"Yup."

"Uh, how far west? If you don't mind me asking."

"California." I'm a master of conversation.

"Oh, that's cool. Are you visiting family, vacation, or something?"

"Or something." In my defense I had just been kicked out of my own home a day earlier, and wasn't quite up for getting into the hospital, funeral, or utility bills I was running from. "So how about you? Said you're heading back to school?"

"Yeah, I'm enrolled at Des Moines University. I'm studying Osteopathic medicine. It's one of the largest medical schools in the country."

"Osteopathic? Is that a foot doctor?"

Andy finally cracked a smile, I thought I broke him. "No, it's an alternative approach to medical care. Very hands on and it explores alternatives to mainstream treatments." He sounded like one of those people, the kind who actually enjoyed what they do for a living. "Did you ever go to college?"

“Yup, I have a PhD in wingin’ it.” He didn’t get it. “No, college wasn’t really in my cards.”

“Oh, sorry.” For some reason anytime I told someone that I haven’t gone to college they do that whole pity dance around an elephant they placed in the room, or in this case Chevy.

Luckily my cell started going off to cut the tension. “Hello. This is not Charlie’s cell, stop calling.”

“Charles, this is the third day you haven’t come in for work. I’m afraid this sort of behavior reflects poorly on your work ethic, and as your boss I have no choice but to let you go if you do not show up again tomorrow.”

“Oh, Mallory, has it really been three days already?” I glanced at the setting sun over the rolling fields of...corn. Yeah, I suppose the diner would be closing about now.

“Yes, three whole days, Charles. I think we both know that the best thing for you to do is come in tomorrow and maybe pick up an extra shift.”

“Oh dear, my most sincere apologies Mallory, I must have just lost track of time. I’ll be in bright and early tomorrow morning. Please, have a splendid evening.” I hung up the phone, rolling my eyes.

“Did you forget something? Need me to turn around?”

“No, it’s fine thanks.” Shaking my head, I rolled the window down to get some fresh air. If nothing else I’ve got to give credit to Iowa for one thing; the air smells nothing like dirty gym socks. Even the drivers passing by seemed like there was less to worry about out here. There was no rush, no scowls, just a relaxed monotony that bled from driver to driver as I glossed them over with a sidelong stare.

Letting Mallory and the diner drift from mind I finally realized that I had to piss like Seabiscuit. “Hey, mind if we take the next exit to make a quick pit stop?”

“Sure, I have to top off the tank anyhow.”

“Great.” I fished the wallet out of my back pocket as Andy took the winding exit to a one horse town. As we pulled into the CITGO I slapped a couple tens onto the dashboard and threw myself out of the car, taking Mom’s backpack with me. This kid seemed trustworthy enough, but I wouldn’t trust anyone to leave Mom with. “Be back in a sec.”

“Well Mom, we’ll be to Cali before ya know it. I’m sure you’re not too keen on me bailing on my ‘responsibilities,’ but a promise is more important.”

The bathroom was in its prime, green and yellow stains spackled the linoleum tiling, sinks, and walls. My guess was the patrons from the bar next door made quick work of this place on a nightly basis. Just as I stepped up to one of the urinals and unzipped my fly the bathroom door slammed open and some schmuck stumbled in and right up next to me. This drunken orangutan decided to use the closest urinal to *me* out of the eight that lined the wall. Eight.

At first it seemed like he didn’t notice my eyes burrowing holes into the side of his head, but eventually he turned and met my gaze. I had him right where I wanted him. This dink’s piss came to an abrupt stop as I stared him down, suddenly the drunken haze was lifting and he was left in a position he had no way of dealing with. He had broken one of the most sacred rules of bathroom conduct: never piss next to a man when there is room to place at least one urinal between you and the other occupant.

I had to give him props though, he managed to last a whole minute staring back at me mouth agape while I refused to look elsewhere. Once those fried little synapses finally started firing, he just gave up and slowly proceeded to leave the bathroom without a word.

- Here's my second tip for hitch hiking: never back down.

Once the middle-aged primate was thoroughly startled and out of my hair, I was free to finish my business. All things considered, this road trip was going pretty well so far.

Iowa: Oasis in the Corn

I-80 at night pulled a fast one on me; it actually made me miss all that corn. At least in the daylight I could play Spot the Soy Field. Believe me when your only form of entertainment is Where's Waldo with vegetables, it doesn't take long for your mind to wander back to the fact you're hitchhiking with your dead mother's ashes in your lap.

As I shifted the backpack, trying to tune my brain to static as much as I could expect, I noticed the clock displaying 8:12 wasn't the only thing glowing on the dashboard. "Are those glow in the dark Hello Kitty stickers?"

"Those? Oh, yeah," he smiled the way someone does when they're choking on an emotion that they can't really handle. Maybe it was just the iridescent green glow, but it looked like my question struck a chord. Oh crap, abort. I had to change the topic quick before-

"My sister put them there a while ago when I drove her to see her doctor."

Dammit, too late. As a general rule of thumb I try to stay out of other people's business. I could do one of two things now: be an ass and ignore the comment while Andy and I sit in excruciatingly awkward silence for the rest of the ride, or be polite and ask a follow-up question.

- Which leads me to hitchhiking tip number three: always be polite to your ride, even if you're really an anti-social asshole.

"You say that like she sees a doctor a lot?" Down the rabbit hole I go.

“Yeah, she uh, has muscular dystrophy. It’s kinda why I got into Osteopathic medicine,” his voice seemed sheepish, almost like he felt guilty about it.

“Okay, so you said before that isn’t a foot doctor. It’s like alternative medicine or something?”

“To put it simply, Osteopathic medicine focuses on the whole body. Instead of just treating the core area that a disease or ailment affects, Osteopathic medicine approaches the problem by incorporating the healing abilities of every part of the body in order to better treat a patient.” There was a loose thread on my shirt that I was suddenly fascinated with. “I just think that since there’s still so much we don’t know about the way our bodies work, cures for diseases like muscular dystrophy for example, don’t just lie in the muscle cells and tissue, but the bones, and nervous system, or who knows what else. It’s not just herbal remedies and natural alternatives either, DOs –that’s what an Osteopath is by the way, instead of an MD –DOs are fully licensed to write prescriptions and practice medicine and all that.”

Wow, apparently Andy could talk without all the “umm’s” and “uh’s” I’d gotten used to. “Sounds like it makes enough sense.” Well at least that wasn’t as painful of a conversation as I thought.

“Try telling that to my parents.”

I just had to jinx it by thinking about it. “They don’t want you to be a doctor or something?”

“Oh no, they were thrilled that I wanted to go into medicine. They were just disappointed that I chose something like a DO over an MD. A lot of people still think that traditional medicine is going to hold all the answers.”

“Well you’re still doing your DO thing anyhow, so who cares if they aren’t as giddy as they would be if you were planning to be an MD?”

“Yeah, I guess. I just wish they’d see that I’m doing it ‘cause modern medicine still hasn’t done enough to help Dani. There’s gotta be an answer for it somewhere out there.”

I shrugged. It’d clearly been on his mind, and now that it was off his chest hopefully he wouldn’t get the urge to prattle on about something else all introspective and personal. As interesting as his college career most certainly was, I really didn’t want to talk about doctors at all.

Andy glanced over at me a few times, I didn’t know what else he expected from me. I’d done my job and been polite, well polite enough anyway.

Before enough time passed to warrant another forced conversation on my end, the painfully bare Iowa horizon crackled and popped with city lights as the Des Moines skyline came into view. It was a welcome contrast to the unbearably rural drive so far. I’ve heard people talk about the charm and peace of living the rural life, but the fact is just driving through it was almost enough to make me reconsider my “no taking rides from psychos” policy. At least if I were riding through corn fields with a psycho I’d get to occupy my time with thoughts of, “is this the kind of psycho who would be more likely to kill me quick and clean with a gun? Or would they have a hunting knife named Shirley that likes to talk in a high pitched voice while carving me up?”

Andy sighed while rolling his neck with a crack; he seemed relieved at the sight of civilization too. “Straight from the chaos of one city into the chaos of another,” he conceded. I never said I was the greatest at reading people.

Traffic had maintained a steady, free flowing pace through the bulk of the drive. It only made sense that once Des Moines was in sight the highway would fill up with semis that wanted to play chicken with Andy's Chevy. He refused to blink, and a squeaky gasp escaped his pursed lips anytime a truck was inching too close to his lane. I bet my gestures and comments aimed at the drivers helped his nerves.

After finally navigating his way into the city, Andy's knuckles regained their color. My guess was he felt safer surrounded by cars that wouldn't send him under twelve tires with only our bodies compacted into a sticky pulp jammed under a fender to show for it.

"So, uh, is there anywhere in particular you want me to drop you off? My place isn't far so, I don't really know if there's a hotel you wanted me to stop at or something?"

"Wherever's fine, I'm sure I can find a bench or something for the night." If I could afford to splurge on a hotel, why the hell would I be hitchhiking?

Andy's face suddenly sunk along with his shoulders. He scratched behind his ear before running a hand through a bed of short dark curls. His eyebrows twisted upward in a mixture of what I could guess looked like guilt and thoughtfulness. "Well, it isn't much but I've got a couch in my studio. If you want I guess you could stay there tonight?"

My eyebrow arched, I couldn't understand why he was willing to take me in for the night. "You know, it isn't in the description for you to house hitchhikers. We honestly just appreciate the lift."

"Yeah, but I just thought you might prefer a couch. It's really not much trouble. You've been nice enough."

Well that was rare. The last time someone referred to me as “nice” was by a coworker who commented when I decided not to spit in a customer’s food. “Well, sure I guess. Thanks.”

Andy’s apartment was only a few turns away on Grand Avenue downtown. Keeping Mom close, I slung the duffle bag over my shoulder before giving Andy a hand with a couple of his bags. The four flights of stairs might have made me pick the bench if I’d known about them beforehand. Walking in the door I was surprised at how bare the walls were compared to the sticker plastered car. There were piles of books and papers covering nearly half the floor space, the clutter made the already tiny studio apartment claustrophobic. I dropped Andy’s bags on his bed before walking the four steps it took to get to the couch. Dropping my duffle bag in between two towers of papers, I kept the handle of Mom’s backpack firmly in hand.

“Sorry for the mess. I get a little carried away with research some times.” Andy tried nudging some of the piles under his bed before rifling through his bags to unpack clothes.

“I’ve seen worse. Mind if I use the bathroom?” Asking to use someone’s bathroom is the most pointless courtesy I can think of, aside from asking how someone’s day is. I was already stepping through the bathroom door when he nodded, seeing that I’d already found it. It wasn’t that hard to do being only one out of two doors in the apartment.

I closed the door and set Mom down in the corner, there was about enough room for two people to stand in there if they stood back to back and held their breath. At least

one perk from taking Andy up on his offer was the luxury of using a bathroom that didn't smell like urinal cakes and regurgitated beer.

After taking my time enjoying the solitude, I flipped open the medicine cabinet. Shaving cream, Advil, toothpaste, a half empty box of Q-tips. "Well you'd definitely like this guy Mom, he sure is boring enough." You can always tell what kind of person you're dealing with by looking in their medicine cabinet. At this point I'd be willing to bet Andy was also a straight A student with next to no friends.

Once I was done with the invasion of privacy, I grabbed Mom and headed back to the couch. Andy had just finished folding and storing his clothes in a plain plywood dresser, next to a plain desk, in one of the four plain corners of the studio. "I bet you have tons of friends over and just live it up here every weekend, huh?"

"What? Oh, no not really."

"Think I might start winding down for bed." I thought there might be something more to do in the apartment, not that I would have played Monopoly with the guy or anything, but there wasn't even a TV. Who the hell doesn't even have a TV?

"I was about to do the same actually." Andy started getting down to his boxers while I did the same. It was clear that his passion for health carried over into his personal life, the guy was more fit than the statue of David. I glanced down at my now obvious belly, rounded out from more than a few beers and the suburban fast food diet. I glared at Andy for a few seconds, just long enough to let the hatred for him and his damn perfect body permeate my mind before settling for slight disdain. After all, he was letting me sleep on his couch.

“Need a pillow? I uh, don’t have any other blankets.” As he posed the offer I was digging a light blanket out of my duffle bag and setting Mom’s backpack up as a pillow.

“I’m good,” I settled into the couch, elbowing a lump until it receded into the bowels of the springs and stuffing. Clasp my hands behind my head it wasn’t difficult to let my eyes drift shut, my eyelids clicking in unison with the switch Andy flipped.

Thinking it was safe to fall asleep, my body jerked in irritation when Andy decided to break the muffled quiet of cars passing by down on the streets. Headlights danced over the flimsy white shades. It reminded me of the suburbs.

“You know Charlie, I uh, just realized I don’t know anything about you.”

I had told him I wasn’t planning on murdering him, but that promise was starting to look flexible. “If you don’t want me here then just say so.”

“Oh, no, that isn’t what I meant.” I heard him shift in his bed, turning to face the couch. I was dedicated to my current position admiring the popcorn ceiling. “I just mean, I told you about my studies, my parents, even my sister. I mean, I guess I just don’t talk to many people about my personal life.”

“You’re kidding. I would’ve sworn you get together with your Osteopathic friends and gab over what drives your passion for medicine over beer.”

“No, not really. Most people in my program don’t drink.”

He was lucky that I was too damn lazy to just get up and leave right then. “What do you wanna know?” There was a pause; I hoped he’d just fallen asleep. No such luck.

“I dunno, you said you didn’t go to college. Did you finish high school? How old are you? What’s your family like? Why are you really going to California? Did you have a girlfriend back home? Is that who that Mallory was on the phone?”

It was like I'd already stepped into a nightmare before falling asleep. The question about Mallory caught me off guard. It sent me into a bit of a laughing fit. "God no. Mallory was my old boss at this crappy diner I worked at. I haven't dated anyone since high school, and his name was Derek. And yes, I finished high school, and I'm twenty-seven." Andy should be proud of himself for having gotten that much out of me. Elaboration be damned, I didn't owe him anything.

- That reminds me of the fourth tip for hitchhiking: always assume you owe someone something.

"Oh." He was taking his time to think again, honestly who cares about some random hitchhiker's life story? "What about your family and California?" Apparently Andy cares about random hitchhiker's life stories.

"It's complicated." My jaw was clenched, this guy was nice enough but he was playing a dangerous game. There was a couch cushion zipper near my hand in the crease of the couch, which was soon being pulled back and forth with increasing vigor.

"Are you in trouble with the police or something?"

"No, well, maybe with debt collectors or something, but that's not really the problem."

"What's the problem then?"

I pinched the bridge of my nose and let a huff of breath pass over the roof of my mouth. "If you're so damn hell bent on knowing: something happened, my Mom died, and I'm going to California to keep a fucking promise to her. Is that enough for you?" I

snapped. There was a long silence in the room. A twinge ran up my spine, twisting my face into a grimace. I grabbed Mom tighter. I felt my fingers go numb digging into the frayed red canvas. The sound of my quickened breath forcing its way through my sinuses rang in my head.

“Sorry. Not just about your Mom, but for bringing any of it up.” The softness in his voice was full of regret and ignorance. I hated it. Laying in the dim room I let the silence grow, chewing my lip. Of course it had to be me that this guy tried to come out of his shell to; me that he picked up off the road to make just a fleeting friend. But most of all, of course he had to be a decent human being.

- The fifth tip for hitchhiking: find kindness somewhere, because your entire trip you’ll be depending on it from someone else.

“I’m sorry about Dani. I’m sure she knows why you’re doing all this.” I pulled Mom closer, turning to face the back of the couch.

Andy shifted in his bed again, but didn’t speak. I couldn’t tell what he was thinking, or if he was just done with me.

Streets of Des Moines

“Morning,” was the second thing that struck my senses when I woke up in Iowa. The first was a rush of light and that popcorn ceiling. Some guttural noise escaped my throat as a response, swinging my legs over the side of the couch and pulling myself up to sit. Andy was fidgeting with clothes in his dresser, jumping from drawer to drawer.

“Do you want to use the shower? You can go ahead first if you want,” he offered. Re-gathering myself I remembered the night before, the irritation and regret.

I had to clear my throat before replying, “Thanks, you go ahead first. I have to adjust to the morning.”

With a simple “alright,” Andy finally grabbed a polo shirt that he had held up three separate times, along with pants, underwear and headed into the bathroom.

The tinny sound of the lock clicked to the bathroom door and the sound of running water started up. “Shit Mom, we’re in Iowa,” I finally stood from the couch and stretched. The basic white box of an apartment was just as basic and white in the sunlight. “Iowa. Showers. Crap, how am I going to deal with showers for the rest of the trip?”

Propping Mom’s backpack up against the head of the couch, it was impossible not to notice the dozens of stacks of books and papers littering the desk and floor. After taking a seat on the crusty carpet and thumbing through a few piles, I realized none of this made sense and I’d have better luck at trying to read a blender manual.

“Just had to have your heart set on California, huh? Lake Michigan never was good enough for you. Damn hospice bitch wouldn’t even let you go see that one last time anyway. I guess California isn’t that big of a deal.”

After a while of pulling loose threads of carpet, I caught a glimpse of some color by Andy's nightstand. Flashes of pink bows, rainbows and Hello Kitty made for one ugly picture frame. I picked it up, seeing the round face and scrunched brown eyes of a young girl. I ran my thumb over the frame; it felt like it was glued together haphazardly. Like a kid had made it. Maybe it wasn't that ugly.

The water from the bathroom stopped and I put the frame back down on the nightstand. After heading back to the couch, I rummaged for some clothes. As I pulled out a wrinkled t-shirt, boxers, and the jeans from yesterday, Andy walked out of the bathroom. He looked like he was headed to a cubicle in the nerdiest combo of green polo and khakis.

"Have a big meeting today or something?" I had to ask.

"No. Why?"

"Never mind, I'll just use the bathroom and be out of your hair."

"There's a guest towel in there if you need one."

"Thanks." Shit, a towel. No I had in fact not taken one with me. Grabbing my clothes and Mom's bag I headed into the bathroom. Closing the door I realized that I hadn't packed soap, shampoo, or deodorant. Oh well, what Andy didn't know wouldn't hurt him.

Every hygiene product that Andy kept in his bathroom was completely generic. At least we had that much in common. I tried to enjoy the freshness of a shower since I had no idea when the next time I'd get to take one would be. Unfortunately my patience for savoring the experience lasted approximately twenty-three seconds before I didn't care enough anymore and finished up.

Brushing my teeth was another story. My toothbrush I did remember. Bad breath is about as accosting as going up to someone and driving your heel into their big toe. Unfortunately, Andy kept that cinnamon toothpaste that tasted like a Warhead and Hot Tamales were duking it out in my mouth. I inspected my teeth in the mirror. Satisfied, I noticed the stubble growing on my jaw line and realized I was sans a razor as well.

After snagging a spare bar of soap from under Andy's sink and stuffing it into my bag, I peeked out of the bathroom door. Andy was sitting at his desk, nose-deep in some textbook. I figured it might just be best if I slipped out before he had the chance to offer some sort of awkward goodbye to a passing hitchhiker. Luckily I was able to grab my duffle without being noticed, though I think I heard something as I tried to slip out the front door.

Goodbyes were too messy; I already said my thanks that should be good enough. I glanced at the apartment number while making my escape, 413. The one was missing, but the age-worn outline made the number pretty obvious.

The streets smelled fresh of tar and dew. Yankee should make a candle called Downtown Des Moines. It was still too damn early, but it was time to hit the road regardless. Trying to hitch a ride from the middle of downtown proved pretty impossible. I mean, far be it for me to talk ill of the blaring horns and finger gestures that were exchanged. The language of city roads was one I spoke fluently. After about an hour of unsuccessful hitching attempts I decided I'd better book it for the outskirts of the city. The increase in cop cars had nothing to do with his decision.

Sun beat down; assaulting me with less and less shade as the few towering buildings began to recede. This city wasn't exactly what I had expected. Granted I had

never really traveled outside of Chicago suburbia, it felt lighter out here. It would have probably been a pleasant shift of urban perspective if it were anyone else, or if I weren't trudging across the city all day.

Breakfast and lunch (brunch is not a real fucking thing) came in the form of granola bars, soggy gas station donuts, and an even more questionable gas station sandwich. I would have been concerned if the last few years of my life hadn't been lived in a slop shop.

Come afternoon my pocket began to vibrate, before I even looked at the phone I could feel the proper idiocy of Mallory on the other end. Just to double check I took a peek at the screen, briefly watching the name and number flash across the screen.

"Nope." I flicked the little red X across the screen and let it fall back into my pocket. I swear I could feel the all too familiar mother's disapproving glare bore into my back. "If she calls tomorrow I'll tell her, okay?" I felt Mom rolling in her grave, or maybe that was just me adjusting the shoulder straps.

It wasn't hard to find myself thinking about my general lack of planning. It never really was my bailiwick; flying by the seat of my pants had always proven to turn out fine. At the moment it had turned out in a park bench.

- Hitchhiking tip the sixth: look at a damn map.

I was by the river, and I went west, as far as I knew. It was hard to give a fuck though after walking to try and find a less patrolled area. Still don't really know why hitchhiking is such a big deal. I blame Jeffrey Dahmer. Little bastard.

“Never really got why you had such a thing for water Mom.” The droning honks and quacks hit my ears like kids fighting over who got the last cookie. I had the backpack on the bench, pressed up against myself. “Smells like dead fish, and I swear if I had any rat poison, those geese would be—“

“Aint gonna lay a finger on my geese!” The voice sounded like a backfiring lawnmower, life time smoker. Gotta respect dedication like that.

“I said *if*, pal.” The bridge troll shambled up around the bench. He had a hobble in his walk, but it was hard to tell from what with his overcoat hanging to the ground, which smelled like it was crusted in a thick layer of eau de dumpster. He took a seat on the bench with a rasp of difficulty.

“And ya shouldn’t be on my bench neither.” As soon as he sat down the geese rushed us, taking down the ducks in their way like Water Fowl Fight Club or something. I had to yank my duffle bag out of the way too before they started pecking at the pockets, honking ‘fuck you’s’ as I did so.

The old guy thought this was hilarious, letting loose a racket of laughter, coughing, and phlegm. “Don’t like you, do they?” He half taunted, pulling out a bag of dinner rolls from his coat. I couldn’t decide if the fuzzy blue stuff growing on the rolls were from age, or from the overcoat.

“Yeah well they can join the ninety-nine percent of the country.” I was considering ducking out, if you can recall I’m not a big people person. I had just gotten comfortable though, and didn’t feel like experiencing a gauntlet of beaks if I tried to escape.

“Dramatic, eh? Bet your little bitch ass hasn’t even met one percent of the country.” His hands were shaking while he tore up the bread, the geese fighting one another for the crumbling carbohydrates.

“Yeah, drama queen, that’s me,” I said, with flat tone. I was still too preoccupied with the gaggle of geese swarming the bench. The old man dropped a piece of roll near my feet. The geese that went for it decided I was some sort of threat to their meal.

“Shit!” The geese started to peck and bite at my jeans, shoes, shoelaces, until I yanked free by pulling my legs up onto the bench. This was met with another cacophonous blast of laughter from the old man. He looked like a crusty understudy for Hagrid, but still carried an attitude that made you know he thought he was better than you.

“Told ya you didn’t have the grit to be at my damn bench.” I couldn’t understand why this guy was so damn obsessed with his damn bench.

“Well call off the damn geese and I’ll find another fuckin’ bench.”

“Nah,” he said, tossing a few more bread crumbs in front of me, making sure those monsters kept me on my toes, or off my toes, whatever. “It’s fun to mess with little bitches like you. So what’s your name kid?” His leathery face was stretched tight with amusement.

“Charlie,” I muttered. This guy sure was a piece of work, a real dick; though he was definitely an off-brand kind of dick. The kind of dick I could appreciate while simultaneously wanting to watch trip over his malicious pets and take a dirt nap.

“Charlie? Sounds like some rich bitch name. You ain’t never been rich in your life though. Ya can tell in those beady little eyes of yours.” God, this guy was just such a treat to be around. “Your hag of a mother must’ve had a sense of humor.”

“You don’t know a damn thing about my Mom, ya old fuck.” I pulled her backpack a little closer into my lap, before finding myself picking at some threads on the shoulder strap. If this guy tried to start digging about my Mom I swear, I was gonna start punting some geese. I’d had plenty enough family conversation to last me the month.

“Woah, whatever kid. Guess you’re a mama’s boy,” he guffawed, “what a shock.” This guy sure had a personality.

“So what do I call you old man?” It was time for a topic change.

“Well if ya gotta know, you can call me Mr. Richter.” He added a hint of authority to his introduction. Like he had some reason to be proud.

“Richter? What, you don’t have a first name?”

“*Mr. Richter*, and that ain’t none of your concern. Show your elders some respect ya little shit.” He sounded impish, confrontational, like he had since he sat down.

“If I call you Mr. Richter will you stop throwing that damn bread by me?”

He shrugged and chuckled, which led into a coughing fit. “Worth a shot.”

“Okay then, *Mr. Richter*, do you usually make all your friends by trapping them on your bench with a flock of ornery geese?”

“Pretty much.”

“How do those things like you anyhow? I’ve seen little fuckers just like them steal a sandwich out of some kid’s hand, then hiss at them once they were done scarfing it down. Why not feed the pigeons or ducks, like a normal crazy person?”

Richter blew raspberries, flecks of spittle projecting onto the pavement. “Shit, pigeons? Ducks? Those are pussy birds. Geese ain’t afraid to tell ya what’s what. You just gotta show them you ain’t a little pussy either.” Almost like they’d rehearsed it in advance, one of the geese lifted its gangly neck up to try and snatch a roll out of the old man’s hands. Before the bird had a chance, Richter swatted it with the back of his hand and lunged his head forward. The goose honked and flapped its wings, but backed up to the tail of the crowd.

“Dissension in the ranks?”

“Nah, just the peckin’ order. They know I’m on top. Just try to test it every now and again.” Richter crumbled up some more of the bread for the geese.

It was nice to be off my feet for a bit. Apparently I didn’t consider just how much walking was involved with hitchhiking. At least I was at the edge of the city finally, or so I hoped. While I watched the river spark and shift shades of orange, I figured I had better find a ride soon, or ask Richter if there was any choice cardboard lying around.

“Hey Richter, know where—“

“*Mr.* Richter ya little shithead.” Damn was he insistent on being called mister. It started to remind me of gradeschool.

“Why the hell does it matter so much that I call you *Mr.* Richter? Were you a teacher or something? A glorified snot-wiper?”

“I told ya, it’s a matter of respect. You damn kids don’t know a thing about respect these days.”

“Oh god, you’re really doing a ‘you kids these days’ line? Thought a crazy goose-man might have a little more interesting of a vocabulary.” Richter was bitter and sour,

something I could respect. Though, if he was going to start yammering on about what was wrong with my generation, I was starting to think firing squad via goose beak began to look a little bit more appealing.

“You kids, old kids, young kids, it don’t fuckin’ matter. No one knows any damn manners. You kids bitch about having it so hard, but that’s still all it is, bitching. The big babies, old fuckers who’re just as stupid blaming all of you kids for the economy that they fucked up, can’t step up and take no damn responsibility.” He hocked up a loogie and spit it to the side of the bench. “It’s all about fuckin’ respect. If you’d stop bitching for a second and use a little respect, bet ya wouldn’t be packed up on some park bench right now.”

“You do know, Mr. Richter, that you’re just bitching about other people bitching.” I had to wonder if he could recognize the irony himself.

“Sure, but that’s fine as long as ya do it with a little respect,” Richter said, tossing a whole roll to the geese as he chortled. There was absolutely no respect in the way he bitched about everything.

“Looks like you finally get it.” He gestured at me, roll in hand, as he noticed the sardonic grin slit across my face. Another goose tried to grab the bread from him, met with another swift backhand.

“Guess so, Mr. Richter.” As far as I was concerned this guy was alright. There was something oddly familiar about him, like déjà vu but more personal.

“Well, you’ve wasted enough of my time kid.” Richter took the empty plastic bag out of his coat, dumping the crumbs over the heads of the geese. Carefully he folded the bag up, returning it to some other dimension inside that overcoat.

“Hey, you know where I might be able to get a ride out west around here?” I almost forgot to ask, getting swept up in lessons of respect. I felt like it was kind of a gamble asking Richter. There was a solid chance that he’d just laugh in my face, phlegm and all.

“Fuck should I know? Greyhound?” He laughed at the joke he didn’t make. Called it. I swear his joints sounded like the geese honking as he labored to bring himself to his feet. As he started to shamle away, the geese followed for a bit, before realizing there was no more blue-green bread to be had.

“Thanks for nothing Mr. Richter,” I said, in my best sing-song voice, god I’m cute. At the very least the geese were at least starting to disperse.

Richter turned back to me, jerking his thumb in the direction of the river. “There’s a bar over by the bridge, Sally’s, buncha truckers drink there. If you’re hitchin’ it’s your best bet. Now leave me the hell alone.”

“Thank you Mr. Richter,” I called back, in the same obnoxious school-yard sing-song voice that warranted a one finger wave goodbye from the old man.

“Looks like we’re going for a drink, Ma.” I took the backpack off my lap, resting it atop my duffel as I stretched my legs, finally letting my shoes feel pavement again. I heard a perfect pitched squish as my left foot came down. A thoughtful present left by the geese. I bet one of them shat in that particular spot just to spite me. I could see why Richter got along with the birds so well.

Jumping to my feet, careful of any other precarious packages left on the ground, I let the pins and needles set in as blood rushed back to my legs. Short to follow was the

ache of walking around the city all day. I could hear it already, a bottle of vodka calling my name from Sally's bar.

Tossing Mom's backpack over one shoulder and my duffel over the other, a bronzed plaque showed itself on the back of the bench. Normally I wouldn't give a fuzzy rat's ass about some memorial, but the name caught my eye. The plaque read: "In loving memory of Melanie Richter."

- The seventh tip for hitchhiking: have a little respect.

Tequila Shots and Chicken Nuggets

Sally's was tucked away on the street intersecting the nearest bridge. It wasn't the easiest place to find. The entire road was littered with bars, restaurants, and night dwellers sniffing around the street for their first drink of the night. The visual was accosting. The body glitter alone was enough to give someone glaucoma. Bros strutting around with wife beaters ripped down far enough they might as well be wearing a poncho.

The other denizens, those who looked like they could have been drinking since ten in the morning, littered a very specific cluster of the street's bars. Flannel, denim, and country rock went on for miles plastered over various bodies; standing around either chain smoking or puffing on a too wet stogie.

I was really hoping for a turf war.

Sally's sat on the very edge of drunk row. The lettering was sun bleached, and probably older than me. One of the L's dangled just above the door entrance, hanging on by the grace of a rusty overworked screw that had to prove it was tougher than its fallen partner. Deep drunken belly laughs echoed in the adjacent alley. The way smoke plumed from the opening made you wonder if there was a steam engine somewhere back there. Stepping over charming puddles of spit, I made my entrance into the grand matriarch of dives.

The interior was just as impressive as the exterior. Peanut shells crunched underfoot, stained various colors of liquor, mucus, vomit, and what I guessed was dried blood. It was like they were using a Jackson Pollock peanut carpet. There was a half upholstered pool table in the back, its faded green cloth complimented the cigarette

smoke painted dinginess of the walls. Bar stools ranged from average to funhouse warped stems. The bar was missing a sizable chunk right in the center. I really wish I could come up with a story for that one.

“What’s your poison hun?” My thoughts were reeled in by the bartender. She had those eyes that drooped at the outer corners, giving her that look of being perpetually tired, a feature highlighted by smoky makeup. She was imposing, thick and tall, probably almost six foot with those heels. There was a red bandana tied over a large bun on her head, only bangs hanging down.

“Vodka Coke, make it a triple.” I took a seat on one of the stools that looked safe enough. I dropped the duffel at my feet and kept Mom in my lap. It was still barely night, and there was an already an assortment of drunks scattered about. Not too many people to make a crowd, but enough to watch and wonder what horrible life choices they made to end up like this.

“Wanna start a tab?” I was asked, as the bartender set a strong smelling glass in front of me. Her voice was deep, but accented with a weird squeak that made her sound like she was getting over pneumonia.

“Yeah, sure,” I said, taking a swig off the top of the drink. It stung going down, rubbing alcohol with a hint of cola. Perfect.

“Card or ID hun.” She reached a hand out with the classic ‘gimme’ gesture. An old man was hollering from the other end of the bar for more beer, he sounded like he hadn’t been sober a day in his life.

“I swear to God Luis. Wait!” she hollered back, shooting him the stink eye. This seemed to get the other couple drunks around Luis to let out low ‘ooohs’ as if he had just

been scolded. At first glance I wouldn't be surprised if the three of them were truckers. Though guessing from their estimated BAC I doubted any of them were driving out tonight. If they were, well let's just say I'm a jackass, not an dumbass.

“Always like this on weeknights?” I asked, pulling the Illinois ID out of my wallet, handing it over. She took it, sliding it onto the counter behind her with the rest, not bothering to look at it.

“Comes with the territory, hun.” As Luis began to quietly bang his glass against the bar like an infant with a rattle, the bartender held her finger up toward me before heading to the other end of the bar.

Watching the trio from my seat it was hard not to visualize them as spoiled children, whining to the bartender about getting the wrong kind of Busch. I've always had a complicated relationship with dive bars. On the one hand there was a decent amount of perfectly broken people who knows that the best way to deal with your own shit is to slowly drown it internally instead of projecting your own shit all over perfectly innocent bystanders. On the other hand, there're the man-babies.

I noticed Luis was the ringleader of the stooges; making sexist jokes that were supposed to be 'endearing.' The other bloated booze bags just laughed along like it was a damn Trump rally. I was starting to feel a little less neutral for this bartender. Territory, blah blah blah sure, but to really have to listen to those dick-weasels prattle and demand, she must have the patience of a school teacher.

Would I be this critical of them if I were to think I could hitch a ride off them? No I would not be.

Eventually the bartender made her way back to my neck of the bar, noticing that my triple was sufficiently drained. “So what’s your deal? Running from home?” She took a glance at me as she worked on my next drink. Points to her for not needing to ask. “Though you look a little old for that, hun.”

“Hitchin’ out west,” I said, taking the refreshed Coke stained vodka, raising it to her in a toast. “Don’t suppose you’re planning a road trip at the end of your shift nameless bartender?” She seemed calm, not too invasive. If there was one type of person that I never felt awkward around, it was bartenders. After all no matter how pathetic my life was, there was always some sad sack in the back corner worse off than I am.

“It’s Trixie, hun. And sorry, no such luck.” She busied herself with some dirty glasses, occasionally flipping Luis and his gang the bird after hearing more piggish talk. Her response always seemed to send them into fits of laughter.

“You seriously deal with these gas bags every night?”

“Nah, just a few days a month. Week at the most. Truckers, ya know? As long as they tip, it ain’t that bad, Sir Lancelot.”

I took a moment to look as shocked as I could. “My fair lady, was that a jab?”

“No Charlie, that was being facetious.” She said with her corniest bar tender smile. She slid my third drink in front of me. At this point I felt a comfortable homeostasis of buzz-drunk, so I made sure to try nursing the drinks instead of storing them like a camel.

“So how did you know my name?” I could have sworn she hadn’t even glanced at my card.

“Working a gig like this, you gotta be observant.” Trixie sure was a surprise, but that’s what I love best about dive bars. You are surrounded by the literal scum of the earth, but once in a while you find an equally broken, guarded individual that just makes me feel right at home. Of course that’s probably exaggerated with the booze.

“Well cheers to you Trixie,” I raised my glass in another toast. I said I’d try to nurse it, I never said that worked.

It was still relatively early on in the night, but the clock started to toll drunks’ o’clock, as a small gaggle of college girls made their way through the front doors. All heads turned to the newcomers for a moment. Most didn’t pay them a second thought, but a couple whistles came from Luis’ gang.

Don’t sit next to me, don’t sit next to me, don’t sit— dammit. For some reason any time girls tried to slum it, they always found themselves gravitating toward me. I used to think it was an inconvenient perk of being gay and non-threatening. As I heard more cat calls from Luis, I definitely knew it was because I was gay and non-threatening.

As the girls began to occupy the stools next to me, I was overcome by a cloud of floral and fruit. Three of them were blonde, with their one dumpy brunette. I never could tell if this group dynamic was an act of compassion towards the ‘less fortunate’ friend, or if it was pure evil exploitation.

“What can I get ya girls?” Trixie asked, setting up four glasses, the same bare minimum of hospitality in her voice that she seemed to afford everyone at her bar.

“Vodka cranberry.”

“Vodka cranberry.”

“Vodka cranberry, please.”

“Vodka cranberry.”

If I was going to be stuck in the sorority circle there was no way I could not just maintain buzz-drunk. Nor did I think I could continue my chain of Vodka Cokes. They just made me feel dirty now.

“Rum and Coke, Trixie,” I said, polishing off the drink in front of me to start anew. In my past experience I had learned I had approximately fifteen minutes before the gaggle of girls would start pulling me into their conversation.

Trixie was already halfway done pouring the vodka cranberries while the girls were still in the midst of rattling off the same drink. She was a damn good bartender. “Careful mixing your liquors or you’ll end up like Luis there,” Trixie warned, with an impish grin as she fixed my drink.

“Oh Trixie, it’s almost like you care.” I took the drink in front of me, satisfied knowing I wasn’t on the same level as Luis and his crew, or the sorority.

“Just don’t wanna deal with another passed out lush at close, hun.” On cue, Luis flagged Trixie down again. Glancing over I could tell that his glass was only half empty. This guy had some serious drinking problems if he needed a new one every time someone else ordered.

I adjusted Mom’s backpack a bit, making sure I didn’t spill anything on her. I’ve been to enough bars to know sooner or later a new stain will find its way on my shirt. Meanwhile the girls were gossiping about some guys at another bar. At least I assumed it was another bar; ‘The X’ doesn’t sound like some place you’d take a kid for their birthday.

“Wasn’t Anna coming with us? Where’d she go?”

“No, she found that guy at The X, remember?”

“Wait, why’d we come here again?”

“Duh, it’s cheap. Speaking of,” the alpha had to pause for dramatic effect, “who wants to do some shots?”

The only way I can describe the noise that followed the alpha’s question was what I imagine a group of happy pterodactyls would sound like. As the girls proceeded to try to get Trixie’s attention, the one sitting directly next to me pulled something out of her purse. I honestly wouldn’t have given it a second thought if she hadn’t produced a small McDonald’s box of chicken nuggets. Sure people get drunk munchies, it just seemed like such a peculiar food to bring into a bar.

“Four shots of tequila,” the alpha instructed. Getting out the shot glasses, Trixie proceeded to pour them, with the customary salt shaker and lime wedges that had probably been sitting in a refrigerated bucket for weeks.

With a little cheers the girls all downed the shots, making various faces that were quickly cured as one after another they bit into the limes. Except for the girl next to me. Following her shot, she decided to bite into a floppy, soggy, purse chicken nugget.

“Holy crap, what the hell’s wrong with you?” I heard my mouth blurting before my brain could pass it through the ‘do not engage’ filter. The other three girls just started to laugh, while the girl next to me rolled her eyes with a mouthful of purse nugget.

“Jill *always* has to eat a chicken nugget after she takes a shot,” the alpha explained. Obviously under normal circumstances I would have probably moved to a different seat in the bar to avoid the banter that was sure to follow. However, my lips loosened with liquor, I had to explore this truly bizarre human behavior. I may have seen

my fair share of off the wall individuals, but this was completely new. I just had to know what compelled someone to bite into a nugget of processed gray chicken after drinking liquor.

“Why the hell does she have to ruin tequila like that?”

“It’s really gross, and it’s not just tequila. Any shot she drinks, she needs to eat a chicken nugget after.” the alpha responded.

“I’m right here, geez,” nugget girl said after finally swallowing the masticated mass of McNasty™. “If I don’t eat one after I take a shot, I’ll throw up, okay?” She sounded a little guarded, and of course the sensitive human being that I am I graciously backed off.

“I vomiting might be just a little less gross.” The other girls started cracking up at that one. God, they must’ve been drunker than I thought.

“Hey, why don’t you do a shot with us?” the alpha suggested. The two other girls who had become part of the scenery for me at this point nodded in agreement. Nugget girl looked indifferent. May it be told, I never turn down free booze.

“Sure, why not.” The four of them cheered. Apparently nugget girl was pretty forgiving so long as you give her another excuse to drink.

The alpha instructed Trixie that they’d be having another five shots of tequila. I grinned at her, triumphant in my ability to have college girls buy me a drink. Trixie just shook her head at me. Liquor number three, but who cares? Shotgunning the rest of my rum and Coke, I was pleasantly drunk enough to have a tequila toast with the girls.

- The eighth tip for hitchhiking: Alcohol can make you friends, but it can also get you into a shitload of trouble.

Lights on the River

Hours passed, so had many, many shots. The girls had seemed content with me adding colorful commentary as we drank. This may not be my usual drinking crowd; then again my usual drinking crowd consisted of a bottle of vodka, a couch, Netflix, and a mother in a hospice bed.

“Okay, so like, who wants like,” The alpha was drunk. Her orders were faltering which meant one of two things. Either the other girls would surround and usurp her in a bloody coup for power, or Trixie would cut them off soon. “shots!” she kept laughing between her lapses, “We need more shots.”

I know by this point I must’ve been white-girl-wasted myself because I hadn’t noticed Luis and his crew skulking around behind us until he spoke up.

“Hey boys, why don’t we treat these fine ladies to their shots?” His speech was slurred, not that I could notice at the time, and in this state he thought resting his chin on the alpha’s shoulder was totally acceptable.

“Oh my god, eww!” The alpha jumped up out of her stool, granted there were a few stumbles as her brain had to readjust to the fact that she was still in heels.

Luis reeled back as the alpha pulled away. “Aww, c’mon we’re all just being friendly here.” He swayed like a weeble, weeble’s wobble but they don’t fall down. The other two lunks had their elbows propped up on the bar looking at the other girls. Drunken morons hitting on girls at least half their age, outraged girls, and a bartender who had to wait until they sorted things out themselves, or she had to call the cops, it really rounded out the dive bar experience.

“Oh. My. God. Could you be any grosser? I want my check, we’re going.” The authoritative alpha was back in charge of the situation.

“Have a good night girls,” Trixie said, sliding the check in front of the alpha. Trixie had already run the credit card, man she really was on top of things. After sloppily signing away the receipt, the girls gathered their things and stormed out of the bar. I felt like I was in some C-list college flick.

“Way to clear a room,” I said, reaching for one of the shots that the girls left behind. Apparently white-girl-wasted Charlie doesn’t like to keep his mouth shut in situations that he really should. The group was halfway back to their corner of the bar when my comment struck drunken ears. Luis turned around and instead decided to seat his crew around me.

“Hey pal,” Luis started. Now let me take a moment to remind you that most of my daily calories had just been ingested through booze, so in my mind Luis was still just a sad, lonely drunk.

- Which brings me to my ninth tip for hitchhiking: never get white-girl-wasted at a shady bar with complete strangers.

“You’ve been here all night too. I should introduce my patriots and me.”

“Compatriots,” Trixie corrected him.

“Whatever. I’m Luis, this here is Bobby and Troy.” The other two men gave sloppy waves while I wondered if the girls had paid for my tequila shots, or if I’d wind up finding those on my own tab.

“Charlie. Would you maybe mind breathing downwind there Luis?” Troy or Bobby snorted, but I didn’t care enough to be focused on Luis. My concentration had been confined to finishing any drinks that the girls left behind to really care about conversational decorum.

“Hey Charlie, I heard that you’re looking for a ride, huh?” He now held what was left of my concentration. “Troy here is heading out to Wyoming this morning. How ‘bout we go toss your things into his rig, then share a beer? What’d’ya say?”

“Not so drunk enough to ride with drunk who’s drunk all night.” That was totally a coherent sentence.

“What’re’ya talking about? Troy’s our DD, ain’t had more than two beers all night.” I glanced over at Troy who just gave me a thumbs up. There was apparently a level of drunk I could achieve that made anyone look sober.

“Gotta pay first,” I said, trying to fish out my wallet.

“Don’t worry ‘bout it. We’ll be right back, just gonna show ya the rig,” Luis assured me, getting up from his stool, the other two following suit. I shrugged and got up with them. A ride, and more booze, it was like all my needs were met. I swung Mom’s bag over my shoulder, and grabbed my duffel. As we walked out the door I saw Trixie shaking her head for some reason and pointing back to my seat. I had no idea what that was about.

I wasn’t sure what time it was, but the streets were pretty quiet. The night air was a shock to my system, shaking knees, walking crooked lines, it was just the reminder I needed of how drunk I was.

The four of us were walking out back behind the bar. There was a staff parking lot that hugged the river, a couple cars, and trash cans. “Where’s the rig?” I asked, turning around a few times like a deluded child.

“Fuckin’ cock blocker,” was all I heard before I felt the wind knocked out of me. As I bent forward from the impact I saw someone’s knee withdrawing, the hit was enough to send my stomach into an eruption. While my system emptied itself, I felt a sharp contact with my left eye. Once the adrenaline finally hit my sluggish system I made the mistake of taking a swing at one of the blurs. I felt blunt stings as fist and foot connected. I don’t even remember falling to the ground but there I was, having the shit beat out of me. What’s worse is, I didn’t care.

After I finished vomiting in a puddle in front of me, I felt one or two more kicks before hands started plunging into my pockets, unzipping my duffel, throwing shirts, boxers, everything I owned onto the blacktop. My wallet was dug out of my pocket. I just didn’t care. These guys were assholes, but I knew that I was too. Of course I had to laugh for a moment as I remembered Trixie trying to drop hints. For as smart of a mouth that I had, I sure could be a dumbass.

My drunken self-pity ended quickly once I felt someone tugging on the red bag strapped to my back. They could fuck me over, I was used to self-loathing, but I had Mom with me.

“Fuck off!” I screamed, twisting and pulling until I freed myself from the straps, wrenching around to grab and claw at the backpack. A stray fist made contact with Troy, or Bobby’s nose. I had surprised them for a moment, long enough to grab the backpack, but not long enough to keep their hands out of it. Luis yanked back; having grabbed the

plastic bag inside, the force of it ripped a hole in the plastic. There was a puff of ash as the bag fell to the ground.

“What the fuck?” Luis wasn’t sure what he stumbled onto.

“Hey man, those are ashes. That’s like the bag they put my gramps in,” Bobby or Troy said, stepping back.

“Shit, seriously?” Luis said, backing up too. Mom gave me a streak of luck, the drunken men didn’t know how to react. “Fuckin’ sicko. We got the cash, let’s get the fuck outta here.” As the cloud of Mom settled on the asphalt, the three of them weaved back to Sally’s.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry,” I croaked. I grabbed Mom’s backpack, picking up handfuls of the ash and stuffing her back into the bag. I’d promised her, I *promised* her that she’d see the ocean, and here I was drunk off my ass getting mugged behind a bar. I was a terrible son. As I closed the bag up, the wind taking what bits of ash I couldn’t recover, I’d never felt this ashamed of myself.

Clamping the backpack to my chest, I curled up on the parking lot. My duffel bag was scattered around the pavement, a puddle of my vomit between me and the bar’s backside. I shoved an elbow into the ground until I was able to flip myself to face the river. I was on the very edge of Des Moines now. The city danced on the river’s surface, just the lights. There were no bars on the water, no drunks, no one, just the lights.

“The water’s nice here Mom. Thanks.”

- Tenth tip for hitchhiking: don’t let yourself forget who you’re doing it for.