



Hitching

by Kim van Alkemade

We thought it would be easy to hitch a ride

home after the Ted Nugent concert, and safe as long as we stuck together. But one after another, cars leaving downtown Milwaukee were passing us by, not slowing down to pick up a group of teenagers but gathering speed for the merge onto I-94. We decided we might have better luck in pairs, so Nina and I moved further down the shoulder of the on-ramp, separating ourselves from Mark and Mia.

A long, dark car with a peaked hood and a low trunk pulled over almost as soon as we stuck out our thumbs. I won't pretend to remember its make and model, but I picture a '69 Lincoln Continental, the worse for wear after a decade of Wisconsin winters, traded in, resold, and passed down until what was once a suburban status symbol became an iconic inner-city ride. Imagine that this, then, is the car our thumbs summoned out of the summer night. With a gloating look back at our stranded friends, Nina and I hustled up to the idling vehicle.

Both passenger-side doors opened like metal wings. Two young men stepped out, still teenagers themselves, though older than we were. I've tried to think of another word, but they were, really, boys. They stood at the open car doors, lean limbs and brown skin, and gestured inside like chauffeurs. Nina was ushered toward the front; I peered into the back. Two boys shifted to make room on the wide back seat, and there was the driver, of course, so that made five boys all together. Five boys we saw as black offering a ride to two girls they saw as white.

"Where you girls going?" one of them asked.

"Down to Racine," Nina said.

"Us too! Coming back from Summerfest. Come on in, we'll make room."

I hesitated. I'd assured my mom that Nina's brother was going to pick us up right outside Milwaukee County Stadium to drive us back to Nina's, where I'd sleep over. But Nina's brother's plans had changed, and Nina and Mia and Mark convinced me it would be fine to hitch a ride all together. And now it was just the two of us, and five boys in the car, and I'd seen enough cautionary films in school to know this was something I wasn't supposed to be doing.

Then one of the boys in the back seat smiled at me, and I noticed the huge stuffed animal on his lap. How could a boy who had a stuffed animal on his lap be dan-

gerous? That stuffed animal—I think it was a floppy-eared dog—made me dismiss those school movies as easily as I dismissed most of what I was told by parents or teachers. These boys weren't a threat; they were just a bunch of friends on their way home from Summerfest, where they'd pitched pennies or thrown darts until they'd worked their way up to the biggest prize they could get. I imagined them walking around the festival grounds totting that floppy-eared dog while the Sky Glider whizzed overhead and fireworks reflected on Lake Michigan. I could see these were nice boys, no different from my brother or Nina's. Afraid only that my hesitation might look like prejudice, I got into the car.

If hitchhiking was over in 1978, no one had

told me. Back when I was in high school, we didn't need to hitchhike to get from place to place. For that, we had our mothers' station wagons, our bus passes, our bicycles, our feet. We hitchhiked because it combined a hippie's faith in one's fellow man with a thrilling sense of danger, so that when we put out our thumbs we felt both trusting and daring. The little hitchhiking I'd done was limited to rides home from school, my thumb out in broad daylight on Main Street, easy encounters that ended with a wave at the corner of 3 Mile Road. Once, my friend Lisa's dad had picked me up and lectured me on the dangers of hitching before dropping me off ten minutes later at my front door.

Hitching from Milwaukee to Racine was nothing compared with the extravagant journey my uncle had taken a few years earlier. My family was still living in New Jersey when Dick flew in from the Netherlands. He was in his twenties and totally cool with his Dutch accent and long hair. With a mixture of pride and envy, my dad drove Dick out to the George Washington Bridge and left him there with a pack on his back, sticking his thumb out and holding a sign that read MEXICO CITY. A postcard a couple of weeks later assured us Dick had arrived safely. At the end of the summer, Dick passed through again, dusty and tan. We gathered around the kitchen table while he entertained us with tales of his adventures.

Just the year before my friend Melanie had left home around Christmas to track down her biological father, a

deadbeat dad who cultivated psilocybin mushrooms in the boondocks of central Florida. "I just headed out to the truck stop on County Line Road," she said when she got back. "The truckers called me a little road angel, treated me like a daughter. I got rides all the way to Florida in just a couple of days." Melanie, with her blonde curls and crooked teeth, made it seem like a lark. Years later, she would confess to sleeping with brass knuckles to fend off the grown men who assumed sex with a thirteen-year-old girl was fair exchange for a ride. One trucker kicked her out of his cab in the middle of nowhere for not putting out. Melanie almost froze to death that night, huddled in a ditch, her knit poncho pulled tight against falling snow. "I didn't want to say what it was really like," she said when I asked her why she'd lied. "Who wants to hear that story?"

This ride home from Milwaukee would not be the one to make me stop hitching. That ride would come several months later, when I turned in my seat to thank the driver who'd picked me up after school and saw he was sliding his foreskin up and down over the pink head of his cock. I didn't panic, but I gripped the door handle, ready for any chance to escape. He was about to turn left off Main Street onto Douglas Avenue when we stopped for a red light. I shoved open the car door, got out, and crossed myself in the middle of the street as if I were Catholic. I walked the two miles home to my neighborhood of big ranch houses on landscaped quarter-acre lots, promising whatever forces influenced the universe I'd never push my luck like that again. Even so, to this day, whenever I see someone on the side of the road with a hand-lettered sign and a beckoning thumb, I long for the kind of world where, come on people now, we smile on our brother. But these days I don't stop, I never stop, I keep going, glancing in my mirror with regret at the person I am leaving behind.

Nina sat up front, and the two boys who'd ushered us in slid in beside us and pulled the doors shut. We were hip to hip on the broad bench seats, but they were right, there was room for us all. We pulled away from the shoulder of the road, leaving Mark and Mia behind. The boy riding shotgun turned the radio back up, a station I never listened to, and music filled the car: the Commodores maybe, or Funkadelic's "One Nation Under a Groove." Not Elton John, that was for sure, or John Travolta crooning to Olivia Newton-John.

As soon as the car settled into a lane on the highway, one of the boys asked, "You girls get high?"

"Sure we do," I said. I spent half my days in school with eyes so red my art teacher counted me absent even if I was sitting right in front of him. Lisa and I had discovered an unlocked door in the girls' bathroom that led to a narrow space behind the row of toilets, and we'd steal away to our

secret spot between classes to toke up. So when the boy next to me drew out a skinny joint, lit it from a Bic, took a hit, and offered it to me, I accepted eagerly. The sweet smell of burning pot soon mingled with the patchouli I always wore and the oil in the boys' hair.

I don't know if you smoked pot in the seventies, but those of us who did thought we were part of a counterculture whose only membership requirement was that you be cool, man. We thought it was like sharing a peace pipe in a teepee, the way strangers instantly became friends in the

Nina sat up front, and the two boys who'd ushered us in slid in beside us and pulled the doors shut. We were hip to hip on the broad bench seats, but they were right, there was room for us all.

shared circle of intimacy formed by the passing of a joint. And it was sexy, too: drawing a joint up to your mouth, your lips pursed as if for a kiss; tasting the caramelized paper, moist with shared saliva; brushing fingertips as you handed the burning joint to your neighbor. By the time we killed that roach, we were all one in that car. The boys sang along with the radio as we grooved down the highway, the headlights making white cones of light in the darkness.

I felt so pleased with myself, so liberal and so cool, as Nina and I, so pale, partied with these five dark boys the same age as Nina's older brother. They were nice, they were funny, they were on their way back from Summerfest where they'd won a floppy-eared dog. They could have been the same boys Nina and I walked past every day on our way to Walden.

Walden, the magnet school we attended, was a free-wheeling place founded by a couple of hippies with doctorates in education. Named for Thoreau's pond, it was housed in an aging building emptied in 1976 when the Racine schools had grudgingly desegregated by busing the younger brothers of boys like the ones in the car to newer schools, better schools, where they were assigned seats surrounded by white kids at hard desks in bright classrooms.

At Walden, we sat on couches and called our teachers by their first names. Our janitor taught Spanish, the English teacher held book discussions in the boiler room, and we threw clay pots on kick wheels in the ceramics studio.

End of excerpt