

## The Hitchhiker

As Andrea turned off the motorway onto the road to Brighton, the small village in which she lived, it was four o'clock in the afternoon, but already the sun was falling behind the hills. At this time in December, it would be completely dark by five o'clock. Andrea shivered. The interior of the car was not cold, but the trees bending in the harsh wind and the patches of yesterday's snow still heaped in the fields made her feel chilly inside. It was another ten miles to the cottage where she lived with her husband Michael, and the dim light and wintry weather made her feel a little lonely. She would have liked to listen to the radio, but it had been stolen from her car when it was parked outside her office in London about two weeks ago, and she had not got around to replacing it yet.

She was just coming out of the little village of Stockton when she saw the old lady, standing by the road, with a crude hand-written sign saying "Brighton" in her hand. Andrea was surprised. She had never seen an old lady hitchhiking before. However, the weather and the coming darkness made her feel sorry for the lady, waiting hopefully on a country road like this with little traffic. Normally, Andrea would never pick up a hitchhiker when she was alone, thinking it was too dangerous, but what was the harm in doing a favour for a little old lady like this? Andrea pulled up a little way down the road, and the lady, holding a big shopping bag, hurried over to climb in the door which Andrea had opened for her.

When she did get in, Andrea could see that she was not, in fact, so little. Broad and fat, the old lady had some difficulty climbing in through the car door, with her big bag, and when she had got in, she more than filled the seat next to Andrea. She wore a long, shabby old dress, and she had a yellow hat pulled down low over her eyes. Panting noisily from her effort, she pushed her big brown canvas shopping bag down onto the floor under her feet, and said in a voice which was almost a whisper, "Thank you my dear -- I'm just going to Brighton."

"Do you live there?" asked Andrea, thinking that she had never seen the old lady in the village in the four years she had lived there herself.

"No, my dear," answered the passenger, in her soft voice, "I'm just going to visit a friend. He was supposed to meet me back there at Stockton, but his car won't start, so I decided to hitchhike -- there isn't a bus until seven, and I didn't want to wait. I knew some kind soul would give me a lift."

Something in the way the lady spoke, and the way she never turned her head, but stared continuously into the darkness ahead from under her old yellow hat, made Andrea uneasy about this strange hitchhiker. She didn't know why, but she felt instinctively that there was something wrong, something odd, something....dangerous. But how could an old lady be dangerous? It was absurd.

Careful not to turn her head, Andrea looked sideways at her passenger. She studied the hat, the dirty collar of the dress, the shapeless body, the arms with their thick black hairs....

Thick black hairs?

Hairy arms? Andrea's blood froze.

This wasn't a woman. It was a man!

At first, she didn't know what to do. Then suddenly, an idea came into her racing, terrified brain. Swinging the wheel suddenly, she threw the car into a skid, and brought it to a halt.

"My God!" she shouted, "A child! Did you see the child? I think I hit her!"

The "old lady" was clearly shaken by the sudden skid. "I didn't see anything my dear," she said. "I don't think you hit anything."

"I'm sure it was a child!" insisted Andrea. "Could you just get out and have a look? Just see if there's anything on the road?" She held her breath. Would her plan work?

It did. The passenger slowly opened the car door, leaving her bag inside, and climbed out to investigate. As soon as she was out of the vehicle, Andrea gunned the engine and accelerated madly away. The car door swung shut as she rounded a bend, and soon she had put a good three miles between herself and the awful hitchhiker.

It was only then that she thought about the bag lying on the floor in front of her. Maybe the bag would provide some information about the real identity about the old woman who was not an old woman. Pulling into the side of the road, Andrea lifted the heavy bag onto her lap and opened it curiously.

It contained only one item -- a small hand axe, with a razor-sharp blade. The axe, and the inside of the bag, were covered with the dark red stains of dried blood.

Andrea began to scream.