

# The Phantom Hitchhiker

Joel Harris was tired, so tired that he shouldn't have been driving at all. It was nearly three A.M., and he had been up since six o'clock the previous morning.

"Too hard," he muttered to himself. "I'm pushing myself too hard."

To make matters worse it had begun to rain. Joel had to strain his eyes to keep the deserted road in front of him in view.

"Thank God, it's only thirty more miles."

It was the sort of situation in which an ordinary driver might have been tempted to speed a bit, thinking that by getting home faster he could beat the rain and the fatigue. But Joel Harris was one of those instinctively cautious drivers. He automatically slowed his speed to adjust to the deteriorating driving conditions. A sense of real danger cut through the weariness and made him more alert.

That's why Joel became aware of the figure at the side of the road before most people would have. First it was just a flash of white in his headlights, but as the car drew closer he could see it was a girl. She was young, about eighteen he guessed, and she was wearing a white party dress. She wasn't actually thumbing a ride, she was just standing there. As the car came closer Joel made eye contact with her. She looked at him pleadingly.

A young girl, alone at night on a deserted road, wearing only a flimsy dress, with the rain beginning to really come down. There was no way he was just going to pass her by.

Joel stopped and leaned out the window. "Hey, you need a lift?"

deteriorate getting worse

flimsy thin, not strongly made

1. As you read, notice details about time and place that help create the mood. What is the mood of this story?

---



---



---

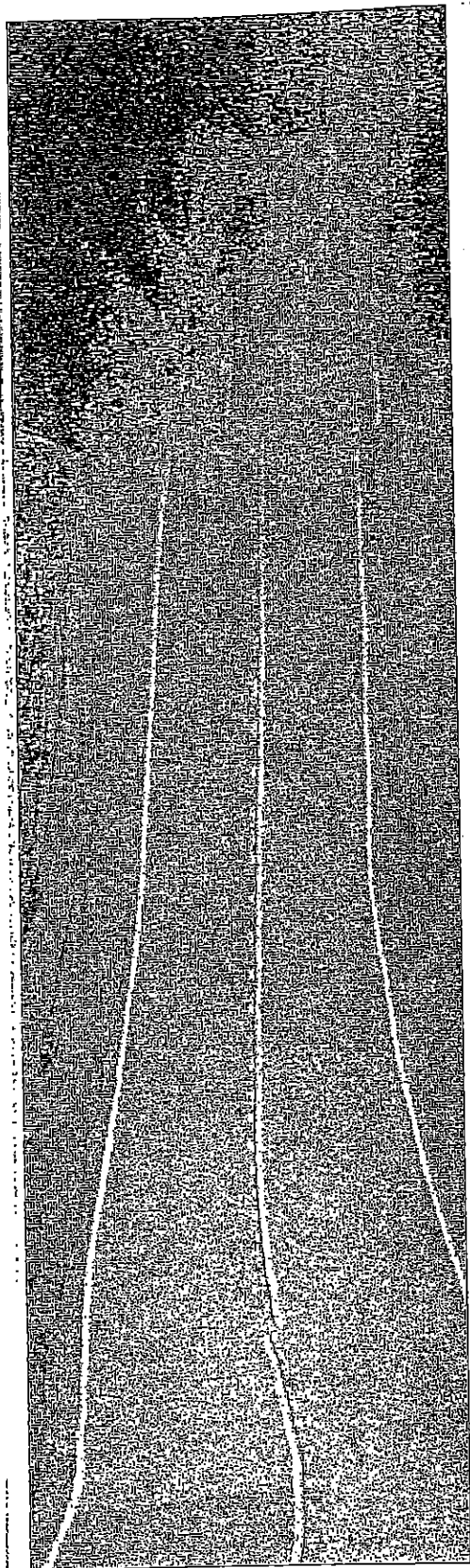


---



---

2. Why do you think this story is called a modern legend?

She was already walking toward the car. "Sure do, mister. Thanks."

"You're lucky it's me. You can stand on this road for hours at this time of night without seeing a car. And then you never can tell who is going to stop. You hear about all sorts of terrible things that can happen."

The girl didn't say anything. She just climbed into the back seat of the car.

"Where you going?" Joel asked.

"Middletown."

"This is your lucky day, that's where I'm going too. Where in Middletown do you live? I'll take you right home. No sense in your wandering around town in the dark."

She gave him an address, which Joel recognized as being in one of the older and poorer sections of town. He didn't know that part of town well, but he figured he could find it easily enough.

Joel switched on the interior light and turned to get a look at his passenger. Perhaps he had overestimated her age. She might have been only sixteen, it was hard to tell. She was quite pretty, but looked worn and tired. Her hair, wet from the rain, hung down to her shoulders. Her dress was also wet and rumpled, and had a curiously old-fashioned look. Probably second hand, he thought.

Joel had wanted to ask the girl what she was doing on the road at three in the morning, but there was something about the way she looked at him that made him feel he shouldn't ask that question. It was really none of his business anyway. If she wants to tell me, she'll tell me, he thought.

The girl shivered slightly.

"You must be cold. I'll turn the heater up, and here, take my jacket."

The girl thanked him, wrapped the jacket around her shoulders, and lay back in the seat, her eyes closed. She seemed to fall asleep almost instantly.

Poor kid, thought Joel. She must be exhausted. I wonder what happened.

Joel drove on in silence. He didn't even turn the radio on for fear of waking his sleeping passenger.

It didn't take long to reach town, and he found the address the girl had given him without much trouble. It was the worst house on a bad street. In fact, the house was so dilapidated that it looked deserted, and Joel wondered if he had somehow gotten the address wrong.

"Is this the place?"

There was no answer, so he repeated the question more loudly. Still no answer. Sound sleeper, he thought. He turned around. The back seat was empty.

Joel's first reaction was surprise, but that was quickly replaced by fear. He hadn't stopped the car since he had first picked up the girl. He checked both back doors, and they were locked from the inside. There was no possible way for anyone to have gotten out of the car. Yet the girl in the white dress was gone.

Joel just wanted to drive away and forget the whole thing. But he couldn't. He had to try and find out what had happened. He went up to the house, half hoping that no one would be there. But as soon as he knocked he saw a light go on inside.

The door was answered by a thin, sad-looking old woman wearing a shabby robe.

"Yes?"

For a moment Joel was startled, for as he stared at the old woman's eyes they reminded him strongly of the eyes of the girl in the white dress.

"I'm sorry to disturb you at this hour," he began haltingly. "I know what I'm going to say will sound crazy. But I've just had the strangest experience of my life."

Joel began to relate the story of the girl he had picked up on the deserted road. As he talked it sounded more and more unbelievable, and he began to feel more and more foolish.

8. The girl's old-fashioned dress and Joel's jacket are examples of foreshadowing. What other examples of foreshadowing do you find in this story?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

4/ To speak *haltingly* means to speak unsurely, without confidence. Why would Joel speak haltingly to the old woman?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

dilapidated rundown, in poor condition  
reaction a response

But he told the story all the way through, with all the details he could remember.

The woman listened patiently, her lined face registering no emotion. Indeed, she looked as if she were listening to a familiar tale. When Joel finished she said, "Where did you say you picked the girl up?"

Joel told her.

"That's my daughter Laura," the old woman said. "She's dead. She was killed in an automobile accident on that road ten years ago. She was coming home from a party.

"You're not the first young man to have had this experience. It usually happens on rainy nights. She was killed on a rainy night like this one. She seems to be trying to get home.

"Laura's buried in Oaklawn Cemetery just outside of town."

Joel had expected to be called crazy, but he never expected to hear a story even crazier than the one he told. He didn't know what to say. He just mumbled something about being terribly sorry, and walked away. Before he did, he caught a glimpse of the name on the door of the house. It was Kearns.

By the time Joel got back into his car and drove away, he had begun to convince himself that the whole experience had never taken place, that it was all a **hallucination** brought on by extreme fatigue. Things like that happen, he thought. That must be it.

He shivered in the cold. Only then did Joel realize that he didn't have his jacket on. He stopped the car and searched for his jacket. It wasn't there. He had given it to the girl in the white dress, and she had taken it away with her.

Now Joel could not let the matter rest. The following day he went to Oaklawn Cemetery. With the help of the caretaker he was able to locate the Kearns family plot. Sure enough, there was the grave of Laura Kearns. She had been just sixteen when she died, ten years earlier.

Draped over the tombstone, neatly folded, was Joel's jacket.

**emotion** a feeling

**hallucination** a vision that is not real