

"You Takin' Me to Paisley, or What?"

"Lord have mercy, it's a hitchhiker!" Homer gasped as he gaped out the bedroom window of his brand new 1969 Fleetwood motor home nestled deep in the Oregon piney woods. "And it's a girl." Homer jerked upright on his satin red sheets and shook the sleep from his eyes. "A hitchhiker girl. And a big one, too. Right in this here roadside park." He stared at the figure crouched on a duffel bag by the highway. "Why, Dorothy Elizabeth would just die."

Homer pushed off the red blanket, exposing his lime-green pajamas, and slipped on his blue robe against the chilly fall morning. He jumped up to jiggle the kitchen door bolt—ah, fastened tight—and yanked apart the curtains for a wider view. The round figure sat, plump as a plum, by the highway. "What's a girl doing alone out here in these woods?" He let the curtains drop. "Maybe she'd want some breakfast." He shook his head. "Nah," he muttered. "Can't be too careful." He opened the curtains again. "But heck, it's just a girl."

Homer slid on his orange plaid polyester pants, lemon shirt, and honey-brown shoes, combed down his tufts of cotton-white hair, and grabbed the kitchen door handle. His hand froze on the knob. He clicked his tongue: *tsk-tsk-tsk*. "What would Dorothy Elizabeth say?"

Homer'd never seen a hitchhiker up close. They simply didn't pass through his home town of Hollow, Oklahoma. Back in June, after giving his departed wife a proper burial (her heart got her), he'd locked up his little yellow house on the edge of Hollow and headed west. Free as a cowboy. He'd had enough of the bolted brown shutters, the tight trim fence, the prickly close-cropped lawn.

He remembered that magical morning a few months back, how he'd kicked open the front gate and marched on through like he owned the heavens. How he'd started the ignition of his shiny, new RV and watched the little house fade in the rear view mirror as he turned toward Route 169. He'd vowed to leave the flat land behind, embrace the mountains, the peaks. Maybe even chat with a stranger or two.

But a hitchhiker? Well, that might be taking it too far, though he didn't mind gawking from a distance. In July, he'd spotted three of 'em along the road in the Colorado Rockies, then two more in Idaho in August. He'd craned his spindly neck to get an eyeful as he whizzed past them at 45 mph. *Ha*, he thought, *there's nothing to be scared of, even for an old man like me... unless, of course, the engine conks out.*

"Not likely," he said aloud as he turned from the door and swept his arm in a graceful arc, remembering the big-city salesman in Tulsa. "Not in my brand new Fleetwood, complete with full kitchen, shower, spacious bedroom nook with cherry red pillows and satin sheets." But now that he was safely hidden away in the woods, there one was—a hitchhiker—not fifty feet away. And a girl. In a jumbo-size red coat.

"Aw, a girl wouldn't do no harm."