

## Hitchhiking

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### A Thousand Words

Hi. Welcome to the podcast, "A Thousand Words", for May 10th, 2019.

Have you ever hitchhiked [1]? Have you ever given a hitchhiker a ride or been in a car when the driver stopped for a hitchhiker? It's not an old word, hitchhike. It came into the language only in the 1920s. Cars had to come first. But I imagine one could have hitchhiked from a bicyclist or a wagon pulled by a horse. Hitch means to fasten something to another object, often by hook. If you have a car, you can hitch a trailer to the back of it. And when two people get married, it's a slang term - "Have you heard? John and Mindy got hitched last week." Hike is a journey, more work than a simple walk. So, hitchhike means to hitch a ride when you're too tired to hike.

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Most hitchhikers use their thumb. Others hold up a sign showing where they'd like to go. In an old movie from the 1930s, Claudette Colbert lifted her skirt and showed her leg to stop a car, much to Clark Gable's disappointment, whose own thumb didn't do the job.

California law says this about hitchhiking: No one shall stand in a roadway for the purpose [2] of asking a driver for a ride. But some people still do it. And others pick up [3] hitchhikers. Legal or illegal, most people agree that hitchhiking is dangerous, both as a driver and as a hitchhiker.

In Switzerland, people don't seem to see hitchhiking that dangerous. I've heard that hitchhiking is only illegal here on highways, where it would be dangerous for a car to stop. Others say that with Uber it's no longer necessary.

I've only had two experiences hitchhiking. The first was when I was 7 years old. True, I didn't do the hitchhiking. I was with my step-sister [4], who was ten years older than me. She was responsible for getting me back home from the library. Impatient [5] to wait for the bus, she told me to wait behind a tree while she went to the edge of the sidewalk. I peeked out [6] and watched her put her thumb out at the passing cars. To me it seemed a strange way to get something from someone - I thought that sticking out [7] one of your fingers at somebody was mostly unfriendly. But, to my surprise, a car stopped, and I watched her lean into the open passenger window and speak to the driver. After a while she turned and waved me over. I'll never forget the angry look of the middle-aged man when I got into his car.

My second and last experience, I was on the other side.

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Many years ago I was driving north of San Francisco early in the morning. There were very few cars on the road, and the farther north I drove the fewer cars there were. Along the highway, there are long distances between exits. One can drive ten to fifteen minutes sometimes before coming to an off-ramp [8]. At one point I was alone on the highway, until up ahead I saw a car stopped on the shoulder of the road [9]. The car's hood [10] was up, and a man moved out from behind it and put up his hand. I don't remember if he waved for me to stop or stuck out his thumb. But I drove right past him.

I don't pick up hitchhikers. I've been ruined [11] by watching too many horror movies. But... was this man hitchhiking? He looked to have car trouble. And was his thumb out or did he wave at me? There's a big difference between the two - a huge gap of intention [12].

I watched him in the rear-view mirror [13] getting smaller as I drove away.

Someone else would come along and stop for him. But what if that driver thought the same as me, and we both just drove past him? What if ten or twenty cars before me thought and did the same?

I hit the brakes [14] and pulled over [15]. It took him a minute to jog to my car, and I watched him in the mirror come into clearer view – he was dressed in something like a uniform, baggy [16] pants and a weatherproof jacket, which made me think he might be a city worker, or maybe fire or forest.

“I didn’t think you were going to stop,” he said as he got in.

“I didn’t either,” I said. “I don’t pick up hitchhikers. You’re my first,” I confessed.

“Well then,” he said. “I feel honored [17]. What made you stop for me?”

“Looks like you have some car trouble,” I said as I pulled back onto the highway. There were still no other cars on the road.

“I thought I had enough gas,” he said. “I always forget how far it is between exits here. And the last place I turned off, can you believe it – the gas station was closed.”

“Bummer [18],” I said.

“If you could just take me to the next exit, that’d be great.”

“No problem.”

“So, I’m your first?” he said. He was older than me, by about ten years. “I don’t blame you,” he said. “Brave of you. I don’t pick up hitchhikers either. You never know who’s out there.”

“True,” I said.

“You know, this is a first for me, too,” he said. “I’ve never waved a car down before.”

“It’s probably better,” I said. “But it looked like you needed help.”

“Yeah, a hood up is usually a good signal,” he said.

“Are you trying to get to work?” I asked.

He didn’t answer right away. “No,” he said at last. “I’m between jobs at the moment.”

“What kind of work did you do?” I asked.

“Little of this, little of that,” he said.

He didn’t seem to want to talk about it, so I didn’t press [19]. We were quiet for a while.

“To be honest,” he said, “I… just got out of prison.”

“Oh,” I said. But my brain exploded. All I heard was the word prison. And that he had just got out. Was he let out [20]? Or did he let himself out? I suddenly thought about the baggy, uniform-like clothes he was wearing. I wondered if there was a prison nearby.

Horror film after horror film flashed through my mind – not just about psycho hitchhikers but about evil itself. I thought of Dracula – how Dracula could not enter unless you unlocked the door and invited him in. And without looking at the man next to me who I had invited in, I made an effort to weigh my foot down on the gas pedal [21] and cut the time down [22] to reach the next exit.



We were silent after he said 'prison' and after I said 'Oh'. I was dying to know [23] why he spent time in prison and thought about breaking the awkwardness [24] by making light of it [25] - "So. Prison. Murder anyone to get in?" But I decided against it.

The next off-ramp eventually appeared and I drove off the highway and stopped.

"Sorry," he said as he got out. "I didn't mean to give you a fright [26]."

"No, not at all," I laughed nervously.

But it was the last time I ever picked up a hitchhiker.

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Thanks for listening.

If you liked this podcast, or others you've listened to on our website [podclub.ch](http://podclub.ch), tell a friend. You can also write us a message. As well, you can download our app if you'd like, and we have a vocabulary trainer to help you practice some of the new words you hear.

I'll be back on May 24th. I hope you can join me because I'd like to play a game with you.

Bye for now.

## Glossar: A Thousand Words

[1] **to hitchhike:** to travel by getting a free ride from a passing car

[2] **a purpose:** a reason

[3] **to pick up a person:** to give someone a ride

[4] **a step-sister:** the daughter of a person one of your parents has married

[5] **to be impatient:** not able to wait

[6] **to peek out:** to look at something without being seen looking

[7] **to stick something out:** to hold something away from your body

[8] **an off-ramp:** a short road to leave a highway

[9] **the shoulder:** of the road: the side of the road used for emergencies

[10] **the car's hood:** the part of the car that covers the motor ; the bonnet in British English

[11] **ruined:** badly damaged

[12] **a huge gap of intention:** a big difference between two plans

[13] **the rear-view mirror:** a mirror inside a car that lets the driver see what is behind the car

[14] **to hit the brakes:** to stop the car quickly from moving

[15] **to pull over:** to move a car over to the side of the road and stop

[16] **to be baggy:** loose; too big

[17] **to feel honored:** to feel special

[18] **bummer:** a big disappointment

[19] **to press:** to make someone do what they might not want to do

[20] **to be let out:** allowed to leave

[21] **to weigh my foot down on the gas pedal:** to drive faster

[22] **to cut the time down:** to shorten the time

[23] **to be dying to know:** very excited to learn something

[24] **awkwardness:** not comfortable

[25] **to make light of something:** to act like something is not as bad as it is

[26] **to give someone a fright:** to scare someone