The Hitchhiker

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Abstract

The sun warmed the crisp autumn air. The hitchhiker looked anxiously down the road...
fire made a low rumbling sound as it passed up the stove pipe. Outside, the wind buffeted the tent, but inside everything was frozen, motionless. The dealer held the deck of cards in midair, the game forgotten.

"Here," said the sergeant.
"Your men will eat at 5:30 tonight."
"Is that all?"
"Yes," said the clerk.
"Any ships come in?"
"No."
"Thanks," said the sergeant. "Shut the door when you go out."

The door slammed shut and the hum of talk started again, loud and angry at first, but quickly fading away as the muffling blanket of boredom settled down. The dealer shuffled the deck and began to deal rapidly and silently. The sergeant flopped over on his back and stared at the quivering canvas. "21 days and still no ship," he read. "21 days and still no ship."

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THE sun warmed the crisp autumn air. The hitchhiker looked anxiously down the road.

"Maybe the next one will stop," he thought. "I hope so. Been here for 45 minutes already."

He fingered the gold discharge button in his lapel absentmindedly.

A 1940 Ford came around the corner. The hitchhiker's arm went up, the thumb extended. The car slowed down and stopped abreast of him. He opened the door and got in.

"Only going down the road a bit," said the driver, "but you're welcome to ride that far."

"Okay. I'm getting kinda tired standing here."

The driver shifted gears and the car moved down the road.
"Been out of the service long, son?"
"About six months, but I think I'll go back in. This civilian life ain't so hot."

The driver turned to look at his rider. A look of amazement spread over his face.

"Thought you boys would be glad to get out and stay out?" he said.

"Well, I was glad to get out, but now I'm going back in. The Army wasn't so bad. Hell, you ate three times a day, and had a roof over your head, and usually some money in your pocket. It wasn't so bad."

"Can't you get the same now?"

The veteran stared at the driver.

"Are you kidding? The way this country is today! Things have changed since the war. Or haven't you heard?"

"Yes, I've heard."

Silence fell. The hitchhiker looked out the window at the passing landscape.

He thought, "This guy must have a screw loose. Seems to think I'm nuts because I want to go back in."

His mind wrestled with the thought, and sought to justify his stand.

"Hell," he said to the driver. "the way things are now, you're a helluva lot better off in the Army. No worries about high prices, meat shortages, housing shortage. Besides we'll be back fighting Russia pretty soon, and I'd have to go back in again anyway."

A slow, sad smile crossed the driver's face, and its sadness lingered in his eyes.

"Guess you're right about things being kinda bad right now. But this country has been in a tight spot before, and has always managed to get clear."

"Oh, yeh, the country will be all right, again. When it does and things get back to normal, I'll get back into my civvies again, but not before."

Silence again settled. The hitchhiker stole a glance at the man on the seat next to him. The sadness was still in his eyes, and the same smile had returned to his face.

"Son," the man asked, "who's going to straighten out the mess?"

The hitchhiker looked at him in wonder.

Well, the big wheels in Washington, I guess. I don't know. All I know is I ain't worrying about it anymore. I did my share
in France. Let some of the guys who sat on their big fat cans all through this war figure out what to do next. They made all the money then. Let them work for it now. They got off pretty easy so far. Now let them sweat awhile. Me, I'm going back in, and take it easy now."

"I know, son. You did your share overseas. Maybe you're right. I guess you boys have done enough for your country. Can't ask you for anymore, I guess."

The outskirts of a small town flashed by the car. The driver slowed down to enter the main part of town.

"This is where I stop, son."

The car pulled to the curbing of the town's main street, and stopped. The hitchhiker opened the door, and got out.

"Thanks for the lift, mister."

"Not at all. Good luck to you, son." The driver smiled his sad smile as he said it.

The hitchhiker slammed the door shut, almost angrily, and the Ford pulled away from the curb, turned right at the next corner and disappeared.

"What a queer duck he was. You'd think I was committing a crime, joining up again."

He shrugged his shoulders and glanced down the road looking for an approaching car. The autumn sun didn't feel quite as warm.

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**My House**

* J J S, Jr.

Old ghosts tread silver grey soft dust—
Dead actors acting out dead plays—
And figured on the furniture
Old dragons twist across old lies.

This house is old with mockery,
And every day new ghosts are born;
Our little scene, this pantomine,
The ghosts will walk through on the morn.