

GRASS

CHARACTERS

THE DRIVER: A 36-year-old woman who is in the middle of moving from Denver to Austin in her pickup. Although she appears calm, she harbors a latent anxiety about this life shift; it's clearly sudden and more dramatic than any she has undertaken before, and she has little idea of what she is going to do with herself after she gets there. She is tired in the way that someone is after driving for several days.

THE HITCHHIKER: A young, 23-year-old man at the end of a long backpacking trip. He too hides an anxiousness about his future, but he is at an earlier point in his life than THE DRIVER. He talks as though he is older and more certain about life than he is, but he likely hasn't had any clue what he has wanted to do with himself since he graduated high school. He is tired in a different way: weary from walking but also always looking slightly behind himself, as though he is waiting for something that could appear at any moment; at present though, his agitation is only subtle.

*Two people sit by a campfire on the side of the highway:
The background is filled by a broad, blank horizon. It is a cloudless late
evening sky, and it takes up as much of the stage as it possibly can;
they're in the middle of the prairie, and there is nothing visible
in any direction.*

*On stage left is THE DRIVER, her old pickup truck on the road
behind her; the back of the pickup is full of furniture, appliances,
cardboard boxes: the whole of her life.*

*Across the fire to the right is THE HITCHHIKER, sitting close to the fire,
but slightly on the asphalt on the side of the road.*

Both are utterly exhausted, and their conversation begins in a state of drowsiness that will eventually build to delirium.

All around them is tallgrass.

THE DRIVER

You can borrow my phone if you want to make a call. Or you can find a phone in Amarillo, I'm sure. I don't know if they have payphones anymore, but I imagine you'll book a hotel anyway. And then someone could come pick you up from there?

THE HITCHHIKER

Maybe.

THE DRIVER

And then you'll be on I-40 all the way back home. And you'll pass through Memphis on the way, that's a fun city; you ever been to Memphis?

THE HITCHHIKER

No, actually.

THE DRIVER

Well, there's plenty to do. My boyfriend worked at a restaurant there, not that I've been, but apparently the food is good. Like soul food, southern stuff.

THE HITCHHIKER

No, I mean, there's no way anyone can come get me that far. That's like five states.

THE DRIVER

Well, your parents at least have to be willing. I mean, they're not gonna leave you stranded across the country.

THE HITCHHIKER

Maybe.

THE DRIVER

Well, then you can take the bus, that's an option. Fare is not gonna be cheap, but if you buy tickets online you should be able to get a decent way back, depending; at least far enough that somebody can come and get you.

THE HITCHHIKER

Hm.

THE DRIVER

Or hitchhike, although that doesn't seem to be working the best for you so far. But I can get you at least to Amarillo, and any kind of city is better than way out here.

THE HITCHHIKER

Hm. Yeah, I mean, I'll be fine. And thanks for taking me, really. I was starting to think nobody was gonna stop.

THE DRIVER

Yeah, I mean it's no problem, Amarillo is on the way already. And I don't blame them, honestly; this is far and away that last place I would expect to pick someone off the side of the road. You're, what, thirty miles from the nearest town? Forty? I mean, the closest place I can think of is Boice, and I was there almost an hour ago. And by foot, that's like...

THE HITCHHIKER

I wouldn't know, I didn't come from that way. And I said, I haven't just been walking. I mean, I have, but not the whole time.

THE DRIVER

Right, yeah. That's seriously scary. I would call the police if I were you, as soon as I'm home. Or a lawyer or something.

THE HITCHHIKER

What do you mean?

THE DRIVER

I mean them ditching you all the way out here, without a phone or anything. That's like attempted murder, man. Imagine if I hadn't stopped, what would have happened to you then?

THE HITCHHIKER

Someone else would, I would hope.

THE DRIVER

And what if no one did? You would starve. You said yourself that you don't have the supplies for a trip like this in your backpack. You would need a big-ass cooler of some kind. And it's not like you're hunting or foraging or whatever. Regardless of whether or not they thought about it, which they definitely did, leaving you here in the middle of nowhere is the same as trying to kill you. It's murder by way of, of- it's gross negligence. Not even mentioning that they left with the stuff that you paid for.

THE HITCHHIKER

The stuff? Oh, the tent. And the cooler. That was all my dad's.

THE DRIVER

Okay? I don't think it really makes a difference.

THE HITCHHIKER

Yeah, I guess. Right.

They sit in silence for a minute.

THE DRIVER checks her phone and starts typing something.

The orange lighting has been dimming, slowly. It's getting dark.

THE HITCHHIKER

So, you're from Denver? That's like Colorado, right.

THE DRIVER *(laughing)*

Yeah, that's like Colorado. I've moved around a bit though. There are some great hikes up there if you ever make it out that direction. There are Rockies, but even outside of the mountains, too; it's a pretty place. I wouldn't blame you if you were done with backpacking now, though.

THE HITCHHIKER

Yeah. Maybe.

THE DRIVER

Sorry. So, you're from... what was it, Connecticut?

THE HITCHHIKER

Maine.

THE DRIVER

Never been. I visited New York when I was like twelve, though. Maine is pretty mountainous, right? Not like here.

THE HITCHHIKER

Yeah, kind of. Not crazy, but there are some. And there's a lot of woods, too, not like here.

THE DRIVER

I miss that kind of terrain up north. Oklahoma seems fine, at least the little bit that I've driven through, but the flatness is just weird.

The horizon is way too empty, and it makes the sky look really big. It's kind of lonely, do you know what I mean? Like I've been driving through the same empty field all day.

THE HITCHHIKER *(quietly)*

Mm-hm.

THE DRIVER

This is what purgatory should look like.

THE DRIVER looks away from the audience toward the horizon.

*THE HITCHHIKER keeps his eyes trained on the fire,
almost as though he's too afraid to look up.*

After a moment, she looks back at him.

THE DRIVER

You must have just graduated recently, right?

THE HITCHHIKER

Uh, no. I didn't go to college. Just wasn't really for me.

THE DRIVER

Just wanted to hike instead?

THE HITCHHIKER

Yeah, like climbing. And, like, seeing places. I went on a camping trip for a few months in Alaska, and then Montana after that. And the Rockies, I have been there actually; did a couple of big climbs with this group I was with. And uh, Spain. I backpacked around Spain for a few months after Montana.

THE DRIVER

Oh, wow. That was all right out of high school?

THE HITCHHIKER

No, I mean, I spent a year at Bard. In New York. But I didn't like really it there. The people were a little stuck up. I mean not all of them, obviously, but I wanted to actually do stuff, you know? I feel like people don't realize that you can just go out and see places and like be in the world, and I didn't want to lose my time to do that; I didn't want to just go to college and get a job I hate and whatever.

THE DRIVER

Um. Yeah, I guess. I mean, I wish I could've spent some time like that out of high school. But it's not totally sustainable, is it? You need money, for one. And people to travel with who won't leave you for dead. Is that still your plan, even after this?

THE HITCHHIKER is quiet for a moment.

THE HITCHHIKER

I don't know. I just want to go home.

*Both are silent for another moment,
and then THE DRIVER moves a little closer around the fire.*

THE DRIVER

Hey. I don't mean that you've wasted your time or anything. I'm just trying to say you've got a lot of your life left to figure stuff out. I wouldn't sweat it, you're lucky enough to be getting out of here okay.

Look at me: I'm getting closer to forty now, and I'm moving and starting over again as we speak. Sometimes things work out and sometimes they don't, and sometimes something works for a while and then doesn't anymore. And then you figure out what to do next. That's just how life is.

THE HITCHHIKER

Yeah. Yeah, I know. Why are you moving?

THE DRIVER

Things just weren't really working out in Denver. I mean, my boyfriend passed away. And before when things went wrong, I would have moved in with my parents, but I'm not going to go live with them now, at this point in my life. And I have the money saved up to move to Austin, that was our plan anyway, for after we were married, so I thought I might as well.

THE HITCHHIKER

Oh, shit, I'm sorry. That's really hard.

THE DRIVER

Yeah.

Both are quiet again, but the silence is less tense than before.

There is a little bit of trust between them now.

THE DRIVER stands up to grab something from the back of the truck.

THE DRIVER

Listen, I'm not gonna make you if you don't want to, obviously, but I did want to camp out here on my way. I've been driving a lot, and I brought my tent and everything. I was honestly probably just going to sleep in the pickup, but you're free to take that and I can set up out here.

Something has suddenly come over THE HITCHHIKER—something between fear and hostility, with a rising note of panic.

THE DRIVER backs away from the pickup.

THE DRIVER

Whoa, whoa. Sorry, I didn't mean to-

THE HITCHHIKER *(standing up)*

No. Take me to Amarillo. Now.

He pulls his hiking backpack off of his shoulder.

THE DRIVER

I'm sorry, I didn't mean to freak you out. It's just that I am really, really tired, and I don't know if I can drive-

THE HITCHHIKER *(beginning to cry, but fighting it)*

I don't care. I'm sorry, but I am not staying here any longer.

THE DRIVER

Jesus, kid. Just take a minute, breathe.

She starts moving closer, and he jolts away, holding his backpack defensively like he might use it, or something in it, to hurt her.

THE HITCHHIKER

Don't touch me.

THE DRIVER *(backing away slightly)*

I'm not going to, I promise. See? We're going to stay by the fire, and I'll be on this side, until we can calm down.

Did something happen? You're not hurt, are you?

THE HITCHHIKER

No, I'm not hurt. I'm fine. I'm just not going to leave this fire until we are in the car and driving that way, which is going to be tonight, because I am not staying in this fucking- I'm not staying in this prairie any longer. Okay?

THE DRIVER

Okay, okay, yes. I hear you. Just tell me what happened, because the way you're acting is scaring me a little bit. Alright?

THE HITCHHIKER

No, you don't understand. I'm keeping you safe. You don't understand. If you move, something really, really bad is gonna happen to you.

The cautious, comforting tone from before leaves THE DRIVER's voice.

THE DRIVER

Are you threatening me?

THE HITCHHIKER

No, god no, I'm not going to hurt you. But you can't go anywhere, and you can't leave the fire. Please, can we just get in the truck and leave.

THE DRIVER

Then tell me what is going on.

THE HITCHHIKER

Just listen to me, please, and get in the truck, and let's go.

THE DRIVER

I'm not moving. Tell me what's going on, right now, because I am this close to leaving without you and calling the police to come pick you up instead.

THE HITCHHIKER

No, no. Don't. Okay, fine. If I tell you, then you'll drive me to Amarillo? Tonight?

He begins to lower the backpack.

THE DRIVER

Sure, fine. Is this about the people you were with?

THE HITCHHIKER

No. I mean, yes, kind of. I was with um, Leslie and Parker, two people I knew from the Rockies climbing group. We were camping out that way, where I was walking from, out in the middle of the prairie.

THE DRIVER

Uh-huh. This is where you were walking from?

THE HITCHHIKER

Yeah, we were planning to stay there for a few days in tents; we brought plenty of food and stuff, but Leslie brought her rifle too, because she wanted to hunt. I thought that was cool.

THE DRIVER

What, did she threaten you with it?

THE HITCHHIKER

No, no, of course not. I mean... well, she never would've used it to hurt me. I liked Leslie, she was cool. We were friends.

THE DRIVER

So then Parker was the one that decided to ditch you.

THE HITCHHIKER

What? Oh, no. I mean, I'm getting there. We were out there for a few days, by this little stream that went through the grass, and it was a terrible camping spot. It was Parker's idea, so no surprise, but the grass was taller and yellower there and it cut up our hands to pull it up. We had to hack out a spot for our tents. And for the fire.

And the horizon was really, really empty, like it is here, except for a line of trees way, way off, and the powerlines over the other way by the road, which was pretty far in the other direction. Oh, and a farm in the distance, or at least a barn. I don't know if anyone lives there, I never got close to it, but I would see it every morning when I went to set the coffee over the fire.

THE DRIVER

Yeah, that sounds like just about everywhere for a hundred miles.

THE HITCHHIKER

But it got weird there. Like every day, I was always looking from our tents at the same landmarks; we would wake up every morning and Leslie would go, “hello powerlines, hello trees.” But at some point, I swear, the barn started getting smaller. We hadn’t moved an inch, the stream was still right there, but every time I looked it just seemed a little further away.

Like the fields would grow at night, stretching out when we weren't looking. And the powerlines would move too or look like it at least. Like they were being pulled away along the wire, slowly. I didn’t mention it for a while, because I thought I was just seeing things.

THE DRIVER

Goodbye powerlines, goodbye trees. No, I know what you mean. It’s like, what’s it called, an optical illusion. Just like how the sky looks bigger around here.

THE HITCHHIKER

Well, that’s what I thought at first. But then one morning, I went out to set the coffee over the fire, and I noticed something new on the horizon. I was fiddling with the kindling, and I look up, and there it is: a dot, something out there that I hadn’t seen before.

THE DRIVER

Dot, like what? Like a building, a tree?

THE HITCHHIKER is crouched again, and his hands are off of the backpack.

THE DRIVER moves a little closer to the fire.

THE HITCHHIKER

No, like a person. Not that I could be certain that's what it was, from that far away, but it had that kind of human familiarity. Like when you see a shape in the distance and you know that it's somebody; like it was looking back at me. It was barely visible at first, but I couldn't take my eyes off it after that. And every time I looked, I swear, the barn would get further and that little dot would get closer, but it was so incremental I couldn't say for sure, and every time I brought it up Parker would laugh at me, and Leslie was always too busy to pay much attention. I even went out a few times to get closer to it, but the grass got so tall out that way that I had to hack through it, and when I finally made it all the way out there, I would lose track of it. I wouldn't find it again until I was almost back to camp; it was driving me fucking crazy.

*THE DRIVER is watching him intently,
as though trying to judge what should be believed.
The sun has set, and the orange light has dimmed
so that the only illumination is the glow of the fire.*

THE DRIVER

And then what?

THE HITCHHIKER

And then Parker got sick. I don't know if it was the meat or the stream water, I mean we had boiled it and everything, but all of us started feeling something awful. Parker got the worst of it though; he was nauseous and burning up. He kept saying it felt like there were nails in his stomach, like something was stabbing him in the gut every time he sat up.

And then one morning, I left my tent, and it was sitting right there. A dozen yards from me.

THE DRIVER

The dot? What was it?

THE HITCHHIKER

A wheelbarrow. It was just there in the grass. I knew what it was; I knew it was the same thing I had been seeing in the distance. We went to look at it. It was old and red with a wood frame and this rusted wheel, and the tray had nothing in it but a film of dirty water. And these tall stalks of grass were wrapped around the handles and sticking up a few feet in the air: that's what I thought was looking at me.

He pauses his story here. The silence builds between them, as he waits for a reaction, until THE DRIVER clears her throat.

THE DRIVER

Um. You know what this sounds like to me? Sounds like you were camped out on a farm, and when the owners were out on the property, they saw your campsite and decided to turn back to phone the cops.

THE HITCHHIKER

No, no, it wasn't like that. We had been there for a while and hadn't seen anyone, and the wheelbarrow didn't look like it had moved in a long, long time.

THE DRIVER

What? You just told me it showed up out of nowhere.

THE HITCHHIKER

Yeah, that's exactly what I'm telling you, but it didn't *look* like that. There was no trail in the mud, and the grass was totally undisturbed. Some switchgrass was even poking through the spokes in the wheel and twisting up around them, like it had all grown there afterward. The whole thing freaked Leslie and I out, so we went back to the camp and decided that we'd pick up and head out as soon as Parker was feeling okay.

THE DRIVER

So why didn't you? I mean, where are they now, when did they ditch you?

THE HITCHHIKER

Well, that night, I had a dream. About the grass.

THE DRIVER is quiet, listening. Something on her face betrays a distrust in this story, even beyond the base unbelievability of it.

THE HITCHHIKER

I, uh, I was at the campsite. At least I think it was, the stream was the same. It was almost dark out; not night, just dim. Like there were thunderclouds overhead, but I didn't see any clouds. And some of the grass had this dark red tinge to it that none of the grass there ever had. And there was a sweet smell like someone was melting sugar or something, but it was sickening.

And then right under my feet, the ground started to move. Not like it was getting up, but like-like stretching. Like the soil under the grass was pulling apart and laying itself back out, and the stream was pulling away from me. I still remember the noise it made, like how the last sound you hear before you wake up is louder than the rest; it was a steady whining, ripping noise like fingernails on nylon, and I woke up.

Parker was sweating through his clothes and looking at me in a panic, saying there was someone outside the tent trying to get in.

THE DRIVER

Who? What was it?

THE HITCHHIKER

I don't know, I never fucking saw anybody. There was this loud, loud tearing at the base of the tent, and the fabric started stretching out from every side like people outside were pulling it off the poles from the bottom up. Parker was gasping and crying, wailing about how he couldn't even stand and there was nowhere to hide in this damn prairie, how they were gonna catch us and we were gonna die. And then the tent started coming down on us and I just, I mean, I had to go, right? I crawled out the other side of the tent, and I just started running.

THE DRIVER

So, what? What are you trying to tell me, that you were attacked in the middle of the night- that you think you were attacked in the middle of the night, and you abandoned your friend when he was too sick to move? I mean, you told me you were ditched. Not the other way around. I don't know how I'm supposed to even believe any of this.

THE HITCHHIKER

No, you don't understand. You're not getting it, I mean the tent was coming down on top of me. I couldn't pull him out, and even if I could, what then? Leslie had the gun, and she was nowhere to be seen. I had to get out of there, I didn't have a choice.

THE DRIVER

Okay. So, what then?

THE HITCHHIKER

I ran. Out in the direction of the barn, or at least where I thought it was; it was way too dark to see anything. I don't know how far I got, but I tripped. My foot caught on something and I landed hard in the mud, and the wind was knocked out of me, but the grass was over my head, so I just lay there listening. I couldn't hear Parker, and I couldn't remember when I stopped hearing him. But then I realized I couldn't hear any crickets either, or even much anything: there were no flies buzzing, no wind, not a sound. Like the whole prairie had just- like it had stopped dead. It was like, you know when you can't hear anything, so your ears just sort of fill in that void? Like it was deafeningly quiet, and all the hairs on my body were pricking up. The grass was standing perfectly still, not even moving an inch. I've never seen anything like it before. No movement, no nothing. Like it was listening.

I just lay there, breathing as quietly as I could, trying not to move a muscle for what must've been an hour, maybe two. Then it started to get a little light out, and some birds started chirping, and when some wind finally came through again, I got up and I started walking.

THE DRIVER

Hm. Toward the barn?

THE HITCHHIKER

No, toward the road. I wanted to get to where we parked the car. But when I got over there, I could already see Leslie coming down the highway with the rifle over her shoulder. She was asking where I was going, and she said she had somehow managed to get lost even though she had barely gone any distance from the campsite. I wanted to explain what had happened, but nothing was getting through to her. We tried to walk back to the tents, but they were just gone.

We couldn't even find the stream. I mean, the barn was in view, so were the trees, but our whole camp had just disappeared. Like we were never there.

*Silence again. It is fully dark now, and the fire is dimming.
THE DRIVER has been moving slowly away during the last part
of his story, and she now stands up.*

THE HITCHHIKER

So then I, uh. Then I walked down the road until you came by. I was going toward the town we had driven from, but it was fifteen miles out, so I was just waiting for someone to-

THE DRIVER

Thirty.

THE HITCHHIKER

What?

THE DRIVER

We're thirty miles from the nearest town, and it is Boice. I checked earlier.

*THE HITCHHIKER stops talking. A silence has fallen over him,
either from his own disbelief or being caught in a lie.
THE DRIVER's questions are pointed now;
she is trying to see his story unravel.*

THE HITCHHIKER

I don't-

THE DRIVER

So, I'm not sure what town you're talking about, because if you didn't come from Boice, then you must have walked through northern Texas this morning, and I know damn well that isn't the case.

THE HITCHHIKER

I don't know what to tell you. I didn't come from that way, I know I didn't.

THE DRIVER

And what about Leslie? Why isn't she with you now?

THE HITCHHIKER

She took the car and left. Once we had given up looking and gone back to the highway, she started screaming at me. Shouting about how I was leading her in circles, that I was hiding something from her. I tried to tell her what had happened, but she wouldn't believe me. She was waving her gun at me, saying I had never liked Parker, and that I'd done something to him.

THE DRIVER

Yeah, I can see why.

THE HITCHHIKER

Look, we may not have seen eye to eye, but I never put a finger on Parker. You gotta listen to me, I mean, I never wanted anything to happen to him.

THE DRIVER

Well, none of this story makes sense. None of it. What makes a lot more fucking sense is what you told me originally: that you were ditched on the side of the road by your friends, and that was probably for some real, actual reason that you aren't telling me.

THE HITCHHIKER

I swear, I'm telling you the truth. I don't know what else to say. Just please, please listen to me. We have to get out of here, you can't leave me in this place.

THE DRIVER

And what do I have to trust you? What do I have to know that you didn't hurt Parker, or worse, and that the moment I turn my back you're not going to do the same thing to me?

*THE HITCHHIKER is beginning to unravel, groveling.
There are two realities now: one in which he is telling the truth about a story
so horrible and unreal that he himself has trouble believing it,
and another in which he has done something awful
and is now pleading on his knees for forgiveness, either sincerely or not.*

THE HITCHHIKER

You have my promise, I swear to god. I'm not a violent person.

THE DRIVER

Were the people who murdered my boyfriend violent people?

*THE HITCHHIKER doesn't know what to say for a moment.
He tries to speak a few times, but nothing comprehensible comes out.*

THE DRIVER

He didn't just pass away, he went missing. With a group of climbers that all made it back safe and sound and said they had no clue what happened to him, just like you supposedly have no clue what happened to poor Parker who was apparently, just like my boyfriend, swallowed up by the earth without a fucking trace. So, when he was left behind in the Rockies at the bottom of whatever cliff he fell from or river he drowned in, and they kept going, were they being violent people?

*She is standing over him now as he is on the ground by the fire,
trying to push himself away from her.*

THE HITCHHIKER *(through tears)*

That's not me, I promise you. I would never do something like that. I didn't want to leave Parker, I didn't, but I had no choice. I regret it, of course I do, I wish so, so badly that I was still at home and that none of this ever happened, but now I'm here, and he's dead.

And if you don't take me with you, then I'm going to die here too.

THE DRIVER turns around and walks toward the pickup.

THE HITCHHIKER

Wait. Jesus, please wait, you have to let me come with you.

He starts crawling after her.

She turns around at the door of the truck and looks at him.

THE DRIVER

Tell me where Leslie was. When whatever happened at the tent was going down.

THE HITCHHIKER catches his breath, his sobs lessening.

THE HITCHHIKER

She said- she said that she went off to pee, and that she'd seen a, uh, a mule deer a few hundred feet away. She grabbed the rifle from her tent and went back to look for it, and she ended up following it to the trees. When she finally got up near it, she said she could see it in the moonlight; that it was just standing there shaking its head around.

She didn't shoot it, though. It looked right at her, and its eyes were nearly bulging out of its skull. Its snout was all stuck together with mud, like it was trying to pry its mouth open but couldn't. It was just looking at her and whining. Grass sticking through its teeth.

The lights fade to black. END.