

## The Same Road for the First Time

The cars seem to speed up as they pass me. I think it is a response to the guilt people feel when they don't pick someone up on the side of the road. Not that anyone that hitches expects anything, but everyone who drives by feels a pang of responsibility, a responsibility to commit an act of kindness. Perhaps people are so conditioned to fear strangers, trained to believe hitchhikers are dangerous, that their instincts to help are immediately quashed.

I stand by my pack, limbs fatigued from the long day, wondering how long it will take to get a ride. I'm in no rush; I have nothing to go back to. The clouds had amassed in dark gray blobs earlier in the afternoon, dropping hailstones, rain and other mysterious precip on me and the surrounding peaks. Despite my late start and poor position as the inclement summertime weather approached, a break in the cloud cover had remained haloed around my location throughout the day. I watched mountains across the valley get hammered while I relaxed in relative comfort.

Now it is mid-afternoon, approaching evening, and I watch sedated as the cars pass me by. I am a walker. Legs have been my most reliable vehicle, and I always struggle to resist the urge to begin walking in these situations. Yet the closest town is 25 miles away. So I stand and wait, right arm slowly rising up and falling down with each passing person. The thumb is optional.

A black beat-up pickup slows to a halt fifty feet down the road from me. I gather my gear, toss it in back and hop in thanking the driver profusely. I always wonder if my thanks are too much. Nah, I think, better more than less when a passenger in a stranger's car. "Hey thanks so much, I really appreciate it." The man hastily clears off his passenger

seat for me and I settle in and buckle my belt. I always have a burst of energy and a smoothness in conversation while hitching. A little shot of adrenaline will loosen anyone up. “So where’re you headed?”

His response is choppy, with a thick Mexican accent. “Oh, Leadville.”

“Great!” I was hoping for a little more on the first ride, but I’ll take it. “Do you live in Leadville?” He goes on to describe his work, his home, his life, accented with lots of gestures whenever he can’t get the meaning across in English. I learn his name is Juan. He’s thirty-four and from Chihuahua, Mexico, two hundred twenty miles due south of El Paso, Texas. He is the youngest of eight children, and several of his siblings came with him to Colorado. He came to the states ten years ago and moved to Leadville. While Juan is talking I look around the cab of his truck. It’s a workingman’s truck, with worn jeans and flannel piled in the backseat, an extra pair of beige steel-toe boots behind the driver seat. Trash from snacks and coffee cups litter the floor at my feet, and the truck smells like work. It reminds me of my Dad’s shop growing up.

He offers me sugary orange o’s, and I gratefully accept one. Juan carries the conversation for a while but then falters off. I can tell he’s enjoying the company but is self-conscious about his English. As long as I keep asking the questions and showing interest, he is glad to keep chatting. He lives in Leadville but commutes year round to the nearby resort town of Aspen to lay asphalt. In the summer its an hour and a half over Independence Pass to Aspen, but in the winter, when snows close the pass, Juan has to drive a grueling four hours one way to get to work. I am flabbergasted. I cannot fathom making a commute like that, yet Juan stoically nods and tells me he’s been doing it for ten years.

The conversation lulls and I gaze out the window at the familiar terrain around me. These high mountains have been the backdrop to many trips, many drives, memorable and not. They seem different today. The old pick-up, charred with red rust around the hood and wheel wells, creeps into Leadville, once a booming mining town reaping the land of gold and silver. Perched above ten thousand feet, the town that was once the center of Western American culture now rests quietly amidst Colorado's highest summits. Now home, Juan drops me at the northern edge of town. I thank him again, wish him luck, and watch him pull a u-turn back into town.

Belly full of sugary-o's, I stand roadside and watch the sun set through the thick clouds hanging so close overhead. The air chills fast and I zip up my jacket, pull a cap on my head. The cold goes straight to my bladder and I rush down the embankment to relieve myself in a fit of steam. I climb back to my pack and assess the scene.

Strategic standing location is key to getting a ride quickly. One must give the driver a clear line of sight so they have time to react, and an extended stopping zone for easy pull-off and slow-down. Standing in a well-lit position, especially at night, makes one appear less like a bandit and more like someone in need. I look around me and relocate fifteen feet down the road before setting up the thumb. After ten or twenty cars I am convinced the location could be improved upon and move again.

The purple curtain drops as dusk settles on the valley. Headlights now illuminate small cylinders of the road surface. A dark green sport-utility vehicle slows to a stop nearby. I grab my gear and run over to the passenger door. Again, the thanks flow. "Hey thanks a ton, I really appreciate it."

“Yeah, sure, hop in. Where are you off to?” The car is clean and smells of new leather.

“I’m headed down to Boulder but anywhere in that direction would be great.” The dash is lit up with comfort adjusting lights and dials. I’m pretty sure I could adjust the temperature of my seat to the degree, but I avoid the temptation.

“Well, I live in Frisco so I can take you that far. What do you do?” The conversation begins with a question from him. The flow of words is opposite of that with Juan. Prompted with a quick question, I provide a quick response which the man uses to launch into a narrative about a warrant from 1978, a speeding ticket on Monarch Pass, and a jail cell in Gunnison. He’s pretty positive that the warrant shouldn’t have been for him because he was living in a different state at the time it was issued and there is no way that a warrant could have gone twenty-nine years without notice and the cop that pulled him over was excessively stiff and he wasn’t even speeding and they’ll be hearing from his lawyer in a couple days. “Oh by the way, my name is Rob Simmons.”

Climbing up over Fremont Pass, the information inundation continues. Rob is a civil engineer working with a firm in Frisco. His firm handles projects at several big ski resorts including Vail and Aspen. My girlfriend is an environmental engineer, so I ask, “What is the difference between environmental and civil engineers?”

“Well,” civil engineers deal with pipe connections to water and sewage lines and arranging electrical hook ups but anything above ground would be structural engineer work, you know foundation laying and building codes but environmental engineers would be doing the site surveying and deciding whether a project can occur in a

particular place with zoning laws and land use codes and what the impacts might be to that specific location, he responds.

I nod. I had touched the dashboard dial several minutes prior and my seat was beginning to warm up. I am interested in what Rob is saying but I can't keep up. At some point we shift to politics and I "Really?" and "Wow, I didn't know that." my way through another half hour of conversation as I am regaled with his strong political viewpoints and emphatic support/disapproval of certain public figures of Summit County and Colorado. He details certain responsibilities of the governor's office and walks me through the election process of Frisco's city council, with footnotes. I realize we are exiting the interstate, and Rob is saying goodbye. "Good luck getting home and with the rest of your schooling. I'm sure you won't have any trouble getting back to Boulder, being the geography man that you are!" (I study geography). I thank him again and he is gone.

Shouldering my pack I walk across the road from off-ramp to on-ramp and set up underneath a street light. I am trying to remember if hitchhiking is illegal on an interstate and if the on-ramp counts when another large pick-up pulls over next to me. It is big, a dark shade of shining obsidian. A silver toolbox stretches across the bed. I jog up to the door and open it up. "Hey thanks a lot, I really appreciate it." I had barely been waiting ten minutes.

"Yeah, no problem. Where are you going?" He has a Mexican accent but it is subtle. He speaks well. He is hunched over to his left, his eyes are bloodshot and he is sniffing. I tell him Boulder and he says he is headed to Denver and can drive me that far. I was hoping once I got on the interstate I'd be able to cover more ground, and now I would make it most of the way home.

“Yeah thanks, that would be great!” The man is wincing a little and seems to be favoring his left side. I learn his name is Rudy, he’s thirty-four and from Chihuahua, Mexico, two hundred twenty miles due south of El Paso, Texas. He came to the states nine years ago and moved to Denver. He began working for a man in Denver as a carpenter, and within a year owned his own framing business and now has projects all along the Front Range, the I-70 corridor and up into Steamboat Springs. He runs his own crew and is headed home from a jobsite in Silverthorne. As he was finishing up today, a large plank of wood fell off of its supports and onto his chest, knocking him over. He was pretty sure it had broken two of his ribs and he was waiting to get back to Denver to go get them checked out. He had broken ribs before, when he was younger, and remembered what it felt like. The crew had gone home and he had been at the job-site alone.

While Rudy is talking I look around the cab of his truck. It is a workingman’s truck, full but uncluttered. I guess it is a relatively new purchase because the interior is in such good shape. We could have fit a third comfortably in between us if we needed, and probably another four in back. The engine sounds strong and healthy.

I notice Rudy’s in quite a bit of pain, wincing and groaning mid-conversation, yet he is still willing to talk and smile while we chat. He tells me about his family back in Chihuahua, the girl he got pregnant, the house, the small town, the reasons he had to leave. Training as a welder in Mexico, he could have made decent money but still left it all behind. He talks about life in the states, the other girl he got pregnant, his American wife. It turns out the woman that had his daughter here in Denver is pretty crazy and is now stalking him. But his wife, yet another woman, stands by him, and although her

parents weren't excited about the prospect of a Mexican son-in-law, they were finally beginning to accept him.

The highway skirts by under the truck's tires as Rudy tells me his story. It is painful for him to talk yet he keeps talking. He seems interested in what I have to say, my story and my opinions. I am eager to hear more about his life at home and here in Colorado. He goes back to Chihuahua every couple of years to visit his parents, but he doesn't like to stay long. Too much twisted history and idle baggage. His mom and dad have been able to come to Denver several times to visit him. We talk about women, how they're crazy, why we love them. I tell him about my girlfriend. He tells me about the women in his life. The conversation is relaxed and low key but continuous.

I gaze out the window at the familiar terrain around me. I have driven this route over a hundred times to a multitude of places, but it seems different today. The glow produced by the Front Range's two point five million inhabitants climbs into view as we descend Floyd Hill. Mother Cabrini stands tall on a hill to our left, but I don't see her. Soon we are surrounded by the lights of Denver and its satellites. The street lights stand taller and closer together, the lanes expand in size and number, neon signs and fast food restaurants multiply. Rudy is saying "Goodbye." and I am saying "Thank you." He drives away.

I stand in a gravel lot wondering at my next move. Large commercial trucks belch exhaust around me and long lines of cars flank them on both sides. I try to remember bus lines and names but the maps escape me, so I begin walking. Rudy's ride took me slightly off route, into foreign territory, and I try to gauge my position. He had told me which highway headed north to Boulder but I am unfamiliar with the area and intimidated by

the sheer volume of cars on the road. A maze of overpasses, underpasses, ramps, and bridges lie ahead, but I press on.

Eventually I find what I believe to be the proper road north and set up with the thumb up. After the first hundred cars drive by, I start talking to myself. After a couple hundred more I start talking to the drivers, asking them why they won't pick me up and singing songs about the color of their car. When no cars are near I dance around a little but promptly stop when the next wave arrives, fearful of frightening my potential carriers.

Night has fully fallen and I anticipate waiting a long time for a ride, especially in an urban area where people are even less trustful than they usually are. An excessive number of cars pass me by and I decide it is the spot that is at fault, not my disheveled appearance. I shift to a better lit locale one hundred fifty feet closer to the highway. When a pulse of people come by I am careful to tilt my head back enough to catch the light of the streetlight above. This is so new friends can see how friendly my face is and feel compelled to get to know me.

Time and cars pass by. A small red sedan pulls over a hundred feet ahead and I am ecstatic. I hustle to the passenger door and slide inside. "Hey how's it goin' . Thanks a bunch for stopping, I wasn't sure whether anybody would or not." He had dark curly hair, dark skin, and a soccer jersey on. I didn't recognize the team.

"Well, you are in a pretty odd place to look for a ride." He also has an accent but I cannot place it. I agree with what he says and smile. "Where are you headed?"

I find out he lives in Louisville but is willing to drop me off very near my house in Boulder, out of his way. My day's journey is almost at a close. I learn his name is ()

and he is from Columbia. He is on his way back from a U.S.A. v. Columbia soccer match in Denver. Columbia won 1-0. "This is the first time I've ever heard of Columbia playing in Denver," he tells me. I could tell he was excited about the victory. The team hadn't played well for the last several years and now they were finally having a good year.

We talk a little longer but my mind wanders and the conversation trails. It has been a long day and the prospect of home has allowed my mind to relax. The dull whirl of rubber pulling on asphalt lulls me into sedation as I watch the night pass by. We are in Boulder and Miguel is saying goodbye. I thank him and walk away.

I have ten minutes walk left to my door. I am comforted by the familiar surroundings, the empty streets under buzzing yellow lamps, the street names and buildings I know, the steps I've taken before. Then I realize that this whole day had been familiar, yet different. I had traveled this road before, yet today felt like the first time. What has become a routine drive today was an experiment in existence. I had peered into four lives, invited in for the duration of a drive and kindly dropped off. I had paid for my ticket with an ear, and was sent off with a smile. I marveled at the ease with which I had been offered the life stories of these men.

I will be hitchhiking again, to experience every road for the first time.