e had a trim figure for her age and a face that must once have been ravishi ng, but now it showed traces of strain and exhaustion, and the pale blue ey es were dulled with grief. She was wearing a black coat and a simple black hat. She left the door open behind her.

"Mr Buggage," the young man said. "This is my mother, Mrs Northcote."

Miss Tottle, the rememberer of names, turned round quick and looked at Mr Buggage and made little warning movements with her mouth. Mr Bugga ge got the message and said as politely as he could, "And what can I do for you, madam?"

The woman opened her black handbag and took out a letter. She unfolded it carefully and held it out to Mr Buggage. "Then it will be you who sent m e this?" she said.

Mr Buggage took the letter and examined it at some length. Miss Tottle , who had turned right round in her chair now, was watching Mr Buggage.

"Yes," Mr Buggage said. "This is my letter and my invoice. All correct and in order. What is your problem, madam?"

"What I came here to ask you," the woman said, "is, are you sure it's right ?"

"I'm afraid it is, madam."

"But it is so unbelievable... I find it impossible to believe that my husba nd bought those books."

"Let's see now, your 'usband, Mr... Mr "Northcote," Miss Tottle said.

"Yes, Mr Northcote, yes, of course, Mr Northcote. 'Ee wasn't in 'ere of ten, once or twice a year maybe, but a good customer and a very fine gentle man. May I offer you, madam, my sincere condolences on your sad loss."

"Thank you, Mr Buggage. But are you really quite certain you haven't been mixing him up with somebody else?"

"Not a chance, madam. Not the slightest chance. My good secretary over t here will confirm that there is no mistake."

"May I see it?" Miss Tottle said, getting up and crossing to take the let ter from Mr Buggage. "Yes," she said, examining it. "I typed this myself. The re is no mistake."

"Miss Tottle's been with me a long time," Mr Buggage said. "She knows th e business inside out. I can't remember 'er ever makin' a mistake."

"I should hope not," Miss Tottle said.

"So there you are, madam," Mr Buggage said.

"It simply isn't possible," the woman said.

"Ah, but men will be men," Mr Buggage said. "They all 'ave their little b it of fun now and again and there's no 'arm in that, is there, madam?" He sat confident and unmoved in his chair, waiting now to have done with it. He fel t himself master of the situation.

The woman stood very straight and still, and she was looking Mr Buggage directly in the eyes. "These curious books you list on your invoice," she sa id, "do they print them in Braille?"

"In what?"

"In Braille."

"I don't know what you're talking about, madam."

"I thought you wouldn't," she said. "That's the only way my husband could have read them. He lost his sight in the last war, in the Battle of Alamein more than forty years ago, and he was blind for ever after."

The office became suddenly very quiet. The mother and her son stood mo tionless, watching Mr Buggage. Miss Tottle turned away and looked out of t he window. Mr Buggage cleared his throat as though to say something, but t hought better of it. The two men in raincoats, who were close enough to ha ve heard every word through the open door, came quietly into the office. O ne of them held out a plastic card and said to Mr Buggage, "Inspector Rich ards, Serious Crimes Division, Scotland Yard." And to Miss Tottle, who was already moving back towards her desk, he said, "Don't touch any of those papers, please miss. Leave everything just where it is. You're both coming along with us."

The son took his mother gently by the arm and led her out of the office, t hrough the shop and on to the street.

The Hitchhiker

I HAD a new car. It was an exciting toy, a big BMW 3.3 Li, which means 3.3 litre, long wheelbase, fuel injection. It had a top speed of 129 mph and te rrific acceleration. The body was pale blue. The seats inside were darker b lue and they were made of leather, genuine soft leather of the finest quali ty. The windows were electrically operated and so was the sunroof. The radi o aerial popped up when I switched on the radio, and disappeared when I swi tched it off. The powerful engine growled and grunted impatiently at slow s peeds, but at sixty miles an hour the growling stopped and the motor began to purr with pleasure.

I was driving up to London by myself. It was a lovely June day. They wer e haymaking in the fields and there were buttercups along both sides of the road. I was whispering along at 70 mph, leaning back comfortably in my seat, with no more than a couple of fingers resting lightly on the wheel to keep her steady. Ahead of me I saw a man thumbing a lift. I touched the brake and brought the car to a stop beside him. I always stopped for hitchhikers. I k new just how it used to feel to be standing on the side of a country road wa

tching the cars go by. I hated the drivers for pretending they didn't see me , especially the ones in big empty cars with three empty seats. The large ex pensive cars seldom stopped. It was always the smaller ones that offered you a lift, or the rusty ones or the ones that were already crammed full of chi ldren and the driver would say, 'I think we can squeeze in one more.'

The hitchhiker poked his head through the open window and said, "Goin g to London, guv'nor?"

"Yes," I said. "Jump in."

He got in and I drove on.

He was a small ratty-faced man with grey teeth. His eyes were dark and quick and clever, like rat's eyes, and his ears were slightly pointed at th e top. He had a cloth cap on his head and he was wearing a greyish-coloured jacket with enormous pockets. The grey jacket, together with the quick eye s and the pointed ears, made him look more than anything like some sort of huge human rat.

"What part of London are you headed for?" I asked him.

"I'm going right through London and out the other side," he said. "I'm goi n' to Epsom, for the races. It's Derby Day today."

"So it is," I said. "I wish I were going with you. I love betting on horses."

"I never bet on horses," he said. "I don't even watch 'em run. That's a stup id silly business."

"Then why do you go?" I asked.

He didn't seem to like that question. His ratty little face went absolutely blank and he sat there staring straight ahead at the road, saying nothing.

"I expect you help to work the betting machines or something like that," I said. "That's even sillier," he answered. "There's no fun working them lo usy machines and selling tickets to mugs. Any fool could do that."

There was a long silence. I decided not to question him any more. I re membered how irritated I used to get in my hitchhiking days when drivers k ept asking me questions. Where are you going? Why are you going there? Wha t's your job? Are you married? Do you have a girlfriend? What's her name? How old are you? And so forth and so forth. I used to hate it.

"I'm sorry," I said. "It's none of my business what you do. The trouble is I'm a writer, and most writers are terribly nosy."

"You write books?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Writin' books is okay," he said. "It's what I call a skilled trade. I'm in a skilled trade too. The folks I despise is them that spend all their lives doin ' crummy old routine jobs with no skill in 'em at all. You see what I mean?"

"Yes."

"The secret of life," he said, "is to become very very good at somethin' tha t's very very 'ard to do."

"Like you," I said.

"Exactly. You and me both."

"What makes you think that I'm any good at my job?" I asked. "There's an awful lot of bad writers around."

"You wouldn't be drivin' about in a car like this if you weren't no good at it," he answered. "It must've cost a tidy packet, this little job."

"It wasn't cheap."

"What can she do flat out?" he asked.

"One hundred and twenty-nine miles an hour," I told him.

"I'll bet she won't do it."

"I'll bet she will."

"All car-makers is liars," he said. "You can buy any car you like and it'll never do what the makers say it will in the ads."

"This one will."

"Open 'er up then and prove it," he said. "Go on guv'nor, open 'er up and let's see what she'll do."

There is a traffic circle at Chalfont St Peter and immediately beyond there's a long straight section of divided highway. We came out of the circle onto the highway and I pressed my foot hard down on the accelerator. The big car leaped forward as though she'd been stung. In ten seconds or so, we were doing ninety.

"Lovely!" he cried. "Beautiful! Keep goin'!"

I had the accelerator jammed down against the floor and I held it there.

"One hundred!" he shouted. "A hundred and five! A hundred and ten! A hundred and fifteen! Go on! Don't slack off!"

I was in the outside lane and we flashed past several cars as though they were standing still a green Mini, a big cream-coloured Citroen, a white Land Rover, a huge truck with a container on the back, an orange coloured Volkswagen Minibus "A hundred and twenty!" my passenger shouted, jumping up and down. "Go on! Go on! Get 'er up to one-two-nine!"

At that moment, I heard the scream of a police siren. It was so loud it seemed to be right inside the car, and then a cop on a motorcycle loomed up alongside us in the inside lane and went past us and raised a hand for us to stop.

"Oh, my sainted aunt!" I said. "That's torn it!"

The cop must have been doing about a hundred and thirty when he passed us, and he took plenty of time slowing down. Finally, he pulled to the side of the road and I pulled in behind him. "I didn't know police motorcycles could go as fast as that," I said rather lamely.

"That one can," my passenger said. "It's the same make as yours. It's a BMW R9OS. Fastest bike on the road. That's what they're usin' nowadays."

The cop got off his motorcycle and leaned the machine sideways onto its

prop stand. Then he took off his gloves and placed them carefully on the s eat. He was in no hurry now. He had us where he wanted us and he knew it.

"This is real trouble," I said. "I don't like it one little bit."

"Don't talk to 'im more than necessary, you understand," my companion sa id. "Just sit tight and keep mum."

Like an executioner approaching his victim, the cop came strolling slow ly towards us. He was a big meaty man with a belly, and his blue breeches w ere skin-tight around enormous thighs. His goggles were pulled up onto the helmet, showing a smouldering red face with wide cheeks. We sat there like guilty schoolboys, waiting for him to arrive.

"Watch out for this man," my passenger whispered, "e looks mean as the d evil."

The cop came round to my open window and placed one meaty hand on the sill. "What's the hurry?" he said.

"No hurry, officer," I answered.

"Perhaps there's a woman in the back having a baby and you're rushing her to hospital? Is that it?"

"No, officer."

"Or perhaps your house is on fire and you're dashing home to rescue the family from upstairs?" His voice was dangerously soft and mocking.

"My house isn't on fire, officer."

"In that case," he said, "you've got yourself into a nasty mess, haven't y ou? Do you know what the speed limit is in this country?"

"Seventy," I said.

"And do you mind telling me exactly what speed you were doing just no w?"

I shrugged and didn't say anything.

When he spoke next, he raised his voice so loud that I jumped. "One hund red and twenty miles per hour!" he barked. "That's fifty miles an hour over the limit!"

He turned his head and spat out a big gob of spit. It landed on the wing of my car and started sliding down over my beautiful blue paint. Then he tu rned back again and stared hard at my passenger. "And who are you?" he asked sharply. "He's a hitchhiker," I said. "I'm giving him a lift."

"I didn't ask you," he said. "I asked him."

"Ave I done somethin' wrong?" my passenger asked. His voice was soft a nd oily as haircream.

"That's more than likely," the cop answered. "Anyway, you're a witness. I 'll deal with you in a minute. Driver's licence," he snapped, holding out his hand.

I gave him my driver's licence.

He unbuttoned the left-hand breast pocket of his tunic and brought out t

he dreaded book of tickets. Carefully he copied the name and address from my licence. Then he gave it back to me. He strolled around to the front of the car and read the number from the licence plate and wrote that down as well. He filled in the date, the time and the details of my offence. Then he tore out the top copy of the ticket. But before handing it to me, he checked tha t all information had come through clearly on his own carbon copy. Finally, he replaced the book in his breast pocket and fastened the button.

"Now you," he said to my passenger, and he walked around to the other side of the car. From the other breast pocket he produced a small black no tebook. "Name?" he snapped.

"Michael Fish," my passenger said.

"Address?"

"Fourteen, Windsor Lane, Luton."

"Show me something to prove this is your real name and address," the po liceman said.

My passenger fished in his pockets and came out with a driver's licenc e of his own. The policeman checked the name and address and handed it bac k to him. "What's your job?" he asked sharply.

"I'm an 'od carrier."

"A what?

"An 'od carrier."

"Spell it."

"H-o-d c-a--Ó "That'll do. And what's a hod carrier, may I ask?"

"An 'od carrier, officer, is a person 'oo carries the cement up the ladder to the bricklayer. And the 'od is what 'ee carries it in. It's got a long 'andle, a nd on the top you've got bits of wood set at an angle..

"All right, all right. Who's your employer?"

"Don't 'ave one. I'm unemployed."

The cop wrote this down in the black notebook. Then he returned the book to his pocket and did up the button.

"When I get back to the station I'm going to do a little checking up on yo u," he said to my passenger.

"Me? What've I done wrong?" the rat-faced man asked.

"I don't like your face, that's all," the cop said. "And we just might hav e a picture of it somewhere in our files." He strolled round the car and retur ned to my window.

"I suppose you know you're in serious trouble," he said to me.

"Yes, officer."

"You won't be driving this fancy car of yours again for a very long time, not after we've finished with you. You won't be driving any car again, come to that, for several years. And a good thing, too. I hope they lock you up fo r a spell into the bargain."

"You mean prison?" I asked, alarmed.

"Absolutely," he said, smacking his lips. "In the clink. Behind the bars. Along with all the other criminals who break the law. And a hefty fine into the bargain. Nobody will be more pleased about that than me. I'll see you in court, both of you. You'll be getting a summons to appear."

He turned and walked over to his motorcycle. He flipped the prop stand ba ck into position with his foot and swung his leg over the saddle. Then he kic ked the starter and roared off up the road out of sight.

"Phew!" I gasped. "That's done it."

"We was caught," my passenger said. "We was caught good and proper."

"I was caught, you mean."

"That's right," he said. "What you goin' to do now, guv'nor?"

"I'm going straight up to London to talk to my solicitor," I said. I started my car and drove on.

"You mustn't believe what 'ee said to you about goin' to prison," my pass enger said. "They don't put somebody in the clink just for speedin'."

"Are you sure of that?" I asked.

"I'm positive," he answered. "They can take your licence away and they can give you a whoppin' big fine, but that'll be the end of it." I felt tremendou sly relieved.

"By the way," I said, "why did you lie to him?"

"Who, me?" he said. "What makes you think I lied?"

"You told him you were an unemployed hod carrier. But you told me you w ere in a highly skilled trade."

"So I am," he said. "But it don't do to tell everythin' to a copper."

"So what do you do?" I asked him.

"Ah," he said slyly. "That'd be tellin', wouldn't it?"

"Is it something you're ashamed of?"

"Ashamed?" he cried. "Me, ashamed of my job? I'm about as proud of it a s anybody could be in the entire world!"

"Then why won't you tell me?"

"You writers really is nosy parkers, aren't you?" he said. "And you ain't g oin' to be 'appy, I don't think, until you've found out exactly what the answer is?"

"I don't really care one way or the other," I told him, lying.

He gave me a crafty look out of the sides of his eyes. "I think you do care ," he said. "I can see it in your face that you think I'm in some kind of very peculiar trade and you're just achin' to know what it is."

I didn't like the way he read my thoughts. I kept quiet and stared at the ro ad ahead.

"You'd be right, too," he went on. "I am in a very peculiar trade. I'm in th e queerest peculiar trade of 'em all." I waited for him to go on.

"That's why I 'as to be extra careful 'oo I'm talking to, you see. 'Ow am I to know, for instance, you're not another copper in plain clothes?"

"Do I look like a copper?"

"No," he said. "You don't. And you ain't. Any fool could tell that."

He took from his pocket a tin of tobacco and a packet of cigarette papers and started to roll a cigarette. I was watching him out of the corner of my eye, and the speed with which he performed this rather difficult operation was incredible. The cigarette was rolled and ready in about five seconds. He ran his tongue along the edge of the paper, stuck it down and popped the cigarette between his lips. Then, as if from nowhere, a lighter appeared in his hand. The lighter flamed. The cigarette was lit. The lighter disappeared. It was altogether a remarkable performance.

"I've never seen anyone roll a cigarette as fast as that," I said.

"Ah," he said, taking a deep suck of smoke. "So you noticed."

"Of course I noticed. It was quite fantastic."

He sat back and smiled. It pleased him very much that I had noticed how quickly he could roll a cigarette. "You want to know what makes me able to do it?" he asked.

"Go on then."

"It's because I've got fantastic fingers. These fingers of mine," he said, holding up both hands high in front of him, "are quicker and cleverer than the fingers of the best piano player in the world!"

"Are you a piano player?"

"Don't be daft," he said. "Do I look like a piano player?"

I glanced at his fingers. They were so beautifully shaped, so slim and long and elegant, they didn't seem to belong to the rest of him at all. They looked like the fingers of a brain surgeon or a watchmaker.

"My job," he went on, "is a hundred times more difficult than playin' the piano. Any twerp can learn to do that. There's titchy little kids learnin' to play the piano at almost any 'ouse you go into these days. That's right, ain't it?"

"More or less," I said.

"Of course it's right. But there's not one person in ten million can learn to do what I do. Not one in ten million! 'Ow about that?"

"Amazing," I said.

"You're darn right it's amazin'," he said.

"I think I know what you do," I said. "You do conjuring tricks. You're a conjuror."

"Me?" he snorted. "A conjuror? Can you picture me goin' round crummy kids' parties makin' rabbits come out of top 'ats?"

"Then you're a card player. You get people into card games and you deal yourself out marvellous hands."

"Me! A rotten cardsharper!" he cried. "That's a miserable racket if ever t here was one."

"All right. I give up."

I was taking the car along slowly now, at no more than forty miles an hour, to make sure I wasn't stopped again. We had come onto the main Lon don-Oxford road and were running down the hill toward Denham.

Suddenly, my passenger was holding up a black leather belt in his hand. "Ever seen this before?" he asked. The belt had a brass buckle of unusual de sign.

"Hey!" I said. "That's mine, isn't it? It is mine! Where did you get it?"

He grinned and waved the belt gently from side to side. "Where d'you think I got it?" he said. "Off the top of your trousers, of course."

I reached down and felt for my belt. It was gone.

"You mean you took it off me while we've been driving along?" I asked f labbergasted.

He nodded, watching me all the time with those little black ratty eyes.

"That's impossible." I said. "You'd have had to undo the buckle and slide the whole thing out through the loops all the way round. I'd have seen you doi ng it. And even if I hadn't seen you, I'd have felt it."

"Ah, but you didn't, did you?" he said, triumphant. He dropped the belt on his lap, and now all at once there was a brown shoelace dangling from his fingers. "And what about this, then?" he exclaimed, waving the shoelace.

"What about it?" I said.

"Anyone around 'ere missing a shoelace?" he asked, grinning.

I glanced down at my shoes. The lace of one of them was missing. "Good grief!" I said. "How did you do that? I never saw you bending down."

"You never saw nothin'," he said proudly. "You never even saw me mo ve an inch. And you know why?"

"Yes," I said. "Because you've got fantastic fingers."

"Exactly right!" he cried. "You catch on pretty quick, don't you?" He s at back and sucked away at his homemade cigarette, blowing the smoke out in a thin stream against the windshield. He knew he had impressed me greatly with those two tricks, and this made him very happy. "I don't want to be la te," he said. "What time is it?"

"There's a clock in front of you," I told him.

"I don't trust car clocks," he said. "What does your watch say?"

I hitched up my sleeve to look at the watch on my wrist. It wasn't there. I looked at the man. He looked back at me, grinning.

"You've taken that, too," I said.

He held out his hand and there was my watch lying in his palm. "Nice bit of stuff, this," he said. "Superior quality. Eighteen-carat gold. Easy to sell, t oo. It's never any trouble gettin' rid of quality goods."

"I'd like it back, if you don't mind," I said rather huffily.

He placed the watch carefully on the leather tray in front of him. "I woul dn't nick anything from you, guv'nor," he said. "You're my pal. You're givin' me a lift."

"I'm glad to hear it," I said.

"All I'm doin' is answerin' your question," he went on. "You asked me wha t I do for a livin' and I'm showin' you."

"What else have you got of mine?"

He smiled again, and now he started to take from the pocket of his jacket one thing after another that belonged to me--my driver's licence, a key ring with four keys on it, some pound notes, a few coins, a letter from my publis hers, my diary, a stubby old pencil, a cigarette lighter, and last of all, a beautiful old sapphire ring with pearls around it belonging to my wife. I was taking the ring up to a jeweller in London because one of the pearls was mis sing.

"Now there's another lovely piece of goods," he said, turning the ring ove r in his fingers. "That's eighteenth century, if I'm not mistaken, from the re ign of King George the Third."

"You're right," I said, impressed. "You're absolutely right."

He put the ring on the leather tray with the other items.

"So you're a pickpocket," I said.

"I don't like that word," he answered. "It's a coarse and vulgar word. Pi ckpockets is coarse and vulgar people who only do easy little amateur jobs. T hey lift money from blind old ladies."

"What do you call yourself, then?"

"Me? I'm a fingersmith. I'm a professional fingersmith." He spoke the words solemnly and proudly, as though he were telling me he was President of the Royal College of Surgeons or the Archbishop of Canterbury.

"I've never heard that word before," I said. "Did you invent it?"

"Of course I didn't invent it," he replied. "It's the name given to them w ho's risen to the very top of the profession. You've heard of a goldsmith or a silversmith, for instance. They're experts with gold and silver. I'm an exper t with my fingers, so I'm a fingersmith."

"It must be an interesting job."

"It's a marvellous job," he answered. "It's lovely."

"And that's why you go to the races?"

"Race meetings is easy meat," he said. "You just stand around after the race, watchin' for the lucky ones to queue up and draw their money. And when you see someone collectin' a big bundle of notes, you simply follows after 'im and 'elps yourself. But don't get me wrong, guv'nor. I never takes nothi n' from a loser. Nor from poor people neither. I only go after them as can a fford it, the winners and the rich."