

## ERIC HOLZMAN

*Trees Across the River at Sleepy Hollow #8,*  
2016–2020  
Oil and sand on canvas, 30 x 24 in.



COURTESY THE ARTIST

## PETER FERRY

### A Primer on Hitchhiking in the Twenty-First Century

Patrick had figured out how to hitchhike in today's world. Had anyone asked him, he would have said, "You need a sign, a medium-sized dog that is friendly and cute, and a rest area or truck stop. That's where you practice your craft; if you stand by the side of the road, no one will ever stop for you. Drivers need more than a fleeting glance. They need to see your smile, maybe hear your voice. They need to see that you are good with and kind to animals. Not too small a dog, by the way, because people think they are yappy and inclined to nip. No, a border collie or Australian shepherd. And not too large a dog, obviously.

"The real reason for the dog is that no one who is traveling with a friendly dog is going to rob anyone or do a guy harm. I mean, what would you do with the dog after you took his wallet? And of course, the very first thing he'd tell the cops is, 'The guy had a dog.' Now you are going to say, 'Nine out of ten people, maybe ninety-nine out of a hundred, won't pick up a guy with a dog.' That's all right. All you need is that one in ten, that one in a hundred, and do you know how many vehicles pull in and out of a busy truck stop in an hour? So there's your ride. The dog will double, maybe triple your chances. I guarantee it." The truth of the matter was that Patrick usually found his dog in a pound at the beginning of his journey and left it off in a pound at the end. He always called the dog Scotty because there was something about that *sk* sound that seemed to perk up any dog's ears. "That's how scientific I am being," Patrick said, perhaps a little ruefully, perhaps a bit defensively. His was a quiet, insidious offensive against a world that didn't appreciate or value him enough. *Enough* is the key word here because it's relative. It's a matter of opinion. Patrick's older brother, Pierre, thought Patrick was lazy and entitled.

"Now the sign tells people a couple things. First, you are going somewhere; you have a destination. You are not aimless. And you can spell; you are not illiterate. Travel with poster board. Don't tear up cardboard boxes, and use a Magic Marker."

Of course, no one *did* ask Patrick advice on hitchhiking. Nor did anyone ask how to poach a box seat at a ball game or when to draw to an inside straight or how to sleep in the open or to hit a pitch inside out to the opposite field or any of the many things he wrote these little essays about



in his head and practiced aloud without moving his lips while waiting for a ride beside the road. This happened occasionally despite his best efforts, and it happened the day Fast Eddie picked him up just east of Lodi before Route 88 starts climbing.

The big man was driving an ancient RV that rocked dangerously to one side and then the other when he pulled off the road so that Patrick had second thoughts about getting into the vehicle even as he was running up to it. “Oh boy,” he said to himself, but he’d been standing there for almost two hours, and the sun was already on its way down. He did not want to get stranded in the mountains at night. Still, the first thing Patrick said was, “Thanks, man. If you can just get me to the next rest area or truck stop, that would be great.”

“Thought your sign said Tahoe,” said the man. “That’s goddam false advertising!” And there was an awkward moment before the guy erupted in a great laugh, the concussion of which Patrick could actually feel in the passenger seat. He then said feebly, “Well, I just . . .”

“Oh hell, man, I’m just giving you shit. You get out anywhere you want to. Just say the word, and I’ll pull over.” And that sounded simple, but the shoulder was soft and sloping, and Patrick wondered just how easily pulling over could turn into tipping over because the old truck was so top-heavy. All of this was exacerbated by the fact that the driver seemed distracted much of the time and only vaguely aware of the road.

“Fast Eddie,” he said extending his hand.

“I’m Patrick.”

“What’s your pup’s name?” Eddie asked, for the dog was sitting between Patrick’s legs in the footwell of the RV.

“Scottie.”

“Mine’s Scamp.”

And it was only then that Patrick realized a little hound dog with floppy ears was looking over his shoulder at his dog. “Holy shit!”

“Not to worry, man. Scamp is very copacetic. He’s a lover, not a fighter.”

But it was not Scamp that Patrick was worried about. It was the dog he’d gotten the day before at an animal shelter in Petaluma. He hadn’t any idea if the dog was aggressive.

“Put him back there,” said Eddie. “Let ’em sniff it out.” Instantly the two dogs were playing, chasing each other

around the cabin, up on their haunches, down on their backs. “Will you look at that! Already best friends!”

*Hmm*, said Patrick to himself. *A silver-lining kind of guy. A half-full-glass kind of guy. An optimist.* Patrick hated optimists. Just that quickly he was devising a strategy for Fast Eddie, whom in his mind he was already calling Slow Eddie, something about how Scottie had awakened him in a fire or maybe alerted him to a rattlesnake. Something like that. Detected a carbon dioxide leak. Or maybe something original and special: the big guy was a sitting duck with his heavy laugh and cheap sentiment and very obvious neediness. He’d be Patrick’s best friend by the time Patrick got out and waved goodbye.

“It’s Patrick, right?”

Well, it was and it wasn’t. He actually used several names hitchhiking, and usually not his real one. However, he’d been so nonplused by the other man’s explosion of voice and energy and spittle that he hadn’t decided which to use, although he prided himself on being able to size up a driver instantly and fit his name and story to the man, for the people who picked him up were almost invariably male. Only twice had he been picked up by women, and only once by a pretty one, a girl who drove with bare feet and had three toe rings, and that occasion had not resulted in the roll in the hay he sometimes claimed it had. “Let’s just say that we had a meeting of the minds,” he liked to say. It was a line he had borrowed from Brad Pitt. He said it in the voice of a character he called Lancelot, who had actually made only two appearances, one with a driver who was very old and one with a driver who was very young. Patrick had sized up both to be chronically gullible.

Another of Patrick’s several alter egos was Roger, the divinity student who was headed for a berth on a ship in Long Beach, which would deliver him to his missionary assignment in Laos. (When Patrick discovered that Laos was landlocked, he moved Roger’s placement to Myanmar.) He could also be Phillipe, a merchant marine with an awful French accent (he had been born in French Equatorial Africa) and Spiro, who was mute, and Johnny D., whose reason for hitchhiking was that he had narcolepsy and couldn’t get a California driver’s license because of it.

Naturally, then, Patrick was surprised when Eddie asked him if he could drive a stick shift.

“Well, sure.”

“Good, cuz see I got narcolepsy. So you just keep an eye on me, and if you see me nodding off . . .”

*Narcolepsy!* thought Patrick, who had actually come to believe that he had invented the condition.

But it wasn’t a half an hour later that Eddie shook his head and said, “Gotta take me a snooze. Think you can drive this thing?” And so it was that Patrick found himself guiding the old vehicle up and up around one curve and then another while the big man was stretched out flat on his back on the bed in the back snoring loudly. The dog called Scamp was curled in the crook of Eddie’s arm, head resting on his chest as if watching over him.

They were just approaching the summit when Eddie awakened. Suddenly he was sitting up and saying in a low voice, “How you gonna get down that hill?”

“Pardon me?” said Patrick, for he was beginning the down grade. “Want me to go into low?”

Again there was for no apparent reason an explosion of laughter, this one on the back of Patrick’s neck. “No, no, man. That’s *Hombre*. That’s what Paul says to Richard Boone at the top of the hill just before he starts shooting at him. You know *Hombre*?”

“I do not.”

It turned out that Fast Eddie was a great admirer of Paul Newman’s, whom he always referred to by his first name, had seen all of his movies several times, and knew many lines from them by heart.

“How about something more recent?” Patrick asked, trying to find common ground with the other man. “You know Marvel movies? How ’bout *Jason Bourne*?” But Eddie had not seen a movie since *Road to Perdition*. “You know, Paul’s last one. Hey, next rest stop we better give these pups a run, don’t you think?”

Patrick did not think. They had traveled fewer than seventy miles since he’d gotten in the RV. “Well,” said Patrick, aware of the lengthening shadows, “I’m trying to make a funeral in Tahoe at seven . . .”

“Oh bullshit,” said Eddie, but somehow not unpleasantly, “A funeral at night?”

“Well . . .”

“You must mean a wake.” And it was clear that he wouldn’t even buy that story although again, if he’d just caught Patrick fabricating, it didn’t seem to bother him

much, almost as if he expected it or might be doing some fabricating of his own. “Besides, I’m shooting pool, Fats. When I miss, you can shoot.”

“Fats?” said Patrick.

“Scenic overlook!” Eddie nearly shouted. “Perfect!” And in just a couple of minutes Scamp was barking and bouncing and running from one scenic overlooker to another, and Eddie in his big voice was saying, “He won’t bother you. He’s Scamp, king of the world!”

“Dogs are supposed to be on a leash,” someone called to Eddie.

“Never wears one. Doesn’t need one.” And Scottie, who was on a leash, was straining not to be. Patrick made his way to the viewing area, hoping to remove Eddie and both dogs from the parking lot. He called back, “Look at this, Eddie. What a view!”

“Beautiful!” said Eddie coming over. “Look at that, Scamp.”

“Long way down,” said Patrick.

“The fall will probably kill you,” said Eddie.

“Pardon me?”

“Let’s follow that road over there.” And then they were winding up a dirt track farther and higher still until they were half a mile and then a mile from the highway while Eddie was cataloguing all the dogs he’d ever owned and Patrick was surreptitiously looking at his watch. Then there was another dog behind a fence and a woman leaning over the fence. Scamp and Scottie and the other dog were sniffing each other through the fence, and the woman was saying, “They’re really supposed to be on a lead around here . . .”

“Scamp doesn’t need a lead. He rules the world! And this is Scottie and my pal Patrick.” Patrick was a little surprised that the other man had remembered his name, but just that quickly Eddie and the woman were engaged in dog talk, and then the dogs had been admitted to the woman’s property and all three were tearing madly this way and that while Eddie continued his dog litany and somehow the woman was charmed. She crossed her arms and produced a wide smile on her suddenly pretty face; then she laughed out loud at the big man’s stories.

Patrick was looking at his watch again because it seemed as if the other two would go on talking forever, but finally Eddie said that they needed to get going. “Well,”

said the woman, looking up the road, “if you’re going that way, best to put Scamp there on a lead. That woman up there might just shoot him.”

And that elicited one of Eddie’s guffaws. “Oh we’ll be careful all right.” Of course he didn’t put Scamp on a lead, and the little dog ran ahead as Eddie held forth on the best breed of dogs: “Mutts! They are the healthiest and smartest and the most even-tempered. Purebreds are overbred. Golden retrievers go blind, Dalmatians are high strung, shepherds have hip problems . . .” Just then there was a loud report and Scamp was knocked sideways and up into the air. He came down dead. Eddie ran toward him. “Scamp?” he called. “Scamp!” The dog lay on his side and pumped blood onto his coat.

“Scamp? Scamp?” Eddie fell on his knees and began to cry in the same way he did everything else: loudly. “Scamp! Scamp!” he now yelled. He hovered over the little dog but did not touch him.

Patrick approached him cautiously. “Eddie! We better get out of here. That woman’s crazy.”

“She killed my dog! She killed my fucking dog!” the big man wailed. “What kind of . . .”

From behind, Patrick took Eddie by the shoulders. “Come on! We gotta get out of here before she kills us!”

“She killed Scamp. She fucking killed Scamp!”

Patrick could see he was getting nowhere. He stepped in front of Eddie and scooped the dog up in his arms and started back down the road. The big man trailed behind wailing like a child who had just been spanked. He was still wailing when they got back to the parking lot where people turned to see the one man carrying the dead dog, his shirtfront and pants covered in blood, and just behind a second dog dragging his leash and behind him a giant of a man all hunched over weeping.

When they got to the RV, Patrick said to himself but out loud, “What are we going to do now? Eddie, you got a shovel?”

“No, man.”

“You got anything to dig with?”

Ten minutes later, back in the woods, the two men were kneeling on either side of a pit they were digging with tablespoons. “Hold it down at the bottom so it doesn’t bend; I only got two.”

“Think that’s deep enough?” asked Patrick.

“No, man, deeper. Oh Scamp! What am I going to do without you?”

When they had placed the dog in the pit and used their hands to fill it in and then patted it all down, Eddie fashioned a crude cross out of two sticks and put it on the grave. Patrick pushed it into the dirt so it wouldn’t fall over. “Don’t jab him!” said Eddie.

“Don’t worry.” Patrick backed away while Eddie stayed kneeling, his lips moving in what might have been prayer. Patrick looked at the twilight. “Eddie,” he said, “we probably ought to find us a place to stay.”

“What about that wake of yours?”

“There’s no wake, Eddie.” That fact didn’t seem to disturb the other man at all, or maybe he hadn’t even heard Patrick.

What they found was an empty state park. Eddie started a charcoal fire in a campsite grill, peeled the lid off a big tin of beans, which he then set above the flame, put four hot dogs on the grill and turned them with a stick. Patrick watched all of this, uncertain if he was being included or not, feeling almost as if Eddie had forgotten he was there until the other man opened one warm beer and handed Patrick another and sat down at a picnic table across from Patrick. Eddie cut the hot dogs into pieces, emptied the beans onto a plastic plate, and mixed it all together. He pushed half of the concoction onto a second plate and handed it to Patrick. And so they sat and ate, and afterward smoked cigarettes and drank beer well past dark. Patrick kept waiting for Eddie to speak, and as time wore on feeling growing comfort in the fact that he didn’t and growing confidence that he wouldn’t.

Without saying anything himself, Patrick crossed the campground to a spigot and washed the dishes. When he came back the RV was dark, but the door was still open. He peeked inside and Eddie, now facedown on the bed, was sound asleep. Patrick did not know what to do. Finally he eased himself into the RV cabin, nodded for the dog, who followed him, and stretched out on the couch. The dog lay on the floor beside him, and Patrick ran his hand through the dog’s coat. “What the hell?” he said to himself. He was experiencing a strange sense of well-being he had not felt before. He wanted to stay awake so the feeling wouldn’t come to an end, but he couldn’t.

He awoke to dawn, the open RV door, and the smell of bacon. Again Eddie had built a fire. Again he was cooking.

This time there was some talk but not much. There was certainly no explaining away, no apologizing, no confessing, no embarrassment. The two men ate at the picnic table again. Patrick cleaned up again, and Eddie loaded the old vehicle. Just before they took off, Eddie faced Patrick and said, “I want to thank you for stickin’ by me yesterday. I don’t think I could have got through that alone. Come here a minute, buddy.” And Eddie hugged Patrick. Not for very long, but the big man folded himself around the small one and squeezed him.

*Buddy?* thought Patrick. *Could we be buddies?*

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There wasn’t any small talk on the road. Eddie drove and looked straight ahead. Patrick looked straight ahead, too. Then the old RV was pulling into a truck stop and Patrick was looking up, “Time for gas? Want me to do the honors?”

“This is my turnoff, Patrick.” Eddie nodded at the sign above their heads: Salt Lake City 552. “Headed for Utah.”

“Oh, okay. I see.”

“Straight ahead you’re in Tahoe. Should be able to pick up a ride at this place here easy enough.” Together they looked at the truck stop.

Patrick made no move to get out.

“Patrick?” the big man finally said.

“Eddie, how would you like to keep Scottie here?”

“You kiddin’ me? I couldn’t take a man’s dog.”

“He’s not my dog, Eddie. I just picked him up at a pound. His name isn’t even Scottie.”

“It isn’t? He sure as hell answers to Scottie.”

“They all do. It’s a trick. You can call him anything you want.”

“You really mean it? Cuz I’d get awful lonesome riding along without Scamp or anybody at all.”

Eddie looked back to where Patrick’s dog was lying on the bed. He snapped his fingers. He whistled. The dog bounded into the front, bounded right up into Eddie’s lap and started licking his face. “Well will you look at that? I’ll be good goddamned. Isn’t that somethin’?” This went on for quite a while with the dog licking and Eddie laughing and hugging and kissing him and with Patrick looking on smiling, even laughing some himself.

Finally Eddie said, “Okay, boy. There you go. Good boy. There you go. Good boy. Get back there now.” But

even when he did, Eddie kept reaching to rub his ears and the dog went down and rolled over and started making a low, happy moan. “Will you look at that?” said Eddie. “Will you listen to that? Isn’t that somethin’?” Finally Eddie said, “That’s enough, boy. Lie down now. There you go. There you go.”

And when the dog was finally settled, Eddie said, “He’s a mighty good dog. You sure you want to part with him?”

Instead of answering, Patrick said, “Eddie, what would think if I were to ride on with you a bit farther?”

The bigger man turned to look at the smaller one. “Well, sure,” he said, “but I thought you were going to Tahoe.”

“Well, I thought so too, but now I’ve kinda changed my mind.”

**Peter Ferry**’s stories have appeared in *McSweeney’s*, *Fiction*, *OR*, *Chicago Quarterly Review*, *StoryQuarterly*, and *HyperText* amongst others; he is the winner of an Illinois Arts Council Award for Short Fiction. He is a contributor to the travel pages of *The Chicago Tribune* and to *WorldHum*. He has written two novels, *Travel Writing*, which was published in 2008, and *Old Heart*, which was published in June, 2015 and won the Chicago Writers Association Novel of the Year award. His short story “Ike, Sharon and Me” appeared in *The Best American Mystery Stories 2017*. He lives in Evanston, Illinois, and Van Buren County, Michigan, with his wife Carolyn.