

# SQUIRREL

Robert L. Penick



IMAGE: Jane Zich

Robert L. Penick's work has appeared in well over a hundred different literary journals, including *The Hudson Review*, *North American Review*, *Plainsongs*, and *Oxford Magazine*. He recently published the chapbook *Exit, Stage Left*.

The rain whipping down from the north stung Wilson's eyes and caused him to duck his head into a cowering pose. He had been stuck in the pitch-dark of I-59 for hours, since a semi driver dropped him at the Heidelberg exit at 10:00 p.m. Now it was all rain and no traffic, and the only thing left to him was to keep walking and hope for a bridge to camp under until morning. It had only taken twelve hours to get to New Orleans from Nashville. Now it seemed he might never make it back home.

Occasionally, a big truck would thunder by in a rush of light and spray, but none stopped for the water-logged hitchhiker. He couldn't really blame them. The last thing a guy making payments on a hundred-thousand-dollar rig needed was a road rat dripping all over the upholstery. If only that drywall job in Slidell hadn't been filled. And if wishes had wheels, he'd have a way home. Just keep moving; there has to be a bridge crossing this highway somewhere. No, he answered himself, there does not. That is a faulty supposition. Now shut up and keep moving. It can't rain much longer, can it? Ask Noah.

A large, black SUV zipped past, hitting him with a fine mist before the taillights came on and it pulled into the emergency lane a hundred yards down the road. Wilson took off after it at a slow jog. He had been fooled twice on the trip south, running at full tilt just to have the vehicle speed off as he got there. Loping along, he half-decided if this happened again, he would just step over the guardrail, lay down, and marinate until morning. Fortunately, the car was still there when he arrived. Hearing the doors unlock, he jumped in just as it began moving again.

"Thank you so much for stopping." He arranged his little backpack on the floor between his feet.

"You looked like a drowning monkey out there. I had to throw you a line."

He looked over at the driver and involuntarily cried out. He appeared to be a border collie, or whatever that dog was on the old *Lassie* television show. He sat upright, leaning forward with his hands—or paws—on the steering wheel. The windshield wipers slapped back and forth for a full minute before he let out a great sigh.

"I know, I know. Everyone has the same reaction. Everyone asks the same question: 'How the heck can a dog drive a car?' Well, it's easy. *Hand controls*. Right here. See?" He patty-caked on the steering wheel. "Nothing to it. I believe I actually have an edge over other drivers, since it's a shorter neural pathway to control the gas and brake."

"Damn," was all Wilson could immediately offer. After a few moments he added, "I'm impressed."

"I've been overachieving my whole life, proving people wrong. Runt of the litter, you know. Low expectations. When I started school, they said, 'There's no way this kid belongs here...'"

*Kids are goats, not dogs*, Wilson thought.

"But I did well all through grade school. I mean, during recess I was *the man*. Everybody wanted to play with me. Held my own in reading and social studies. Absolutely murdered long division. After sixth grade I was home schooled, but that's a whole other story. The name's Phineas, by the way. No idea what my parents were thinking. Hey! There's a truck stop coming up. Do you mind pumping gas? Credit card's in the console."

They pulled into the Flying J and parked next to a pump. Wilson opened the door and stole a peek at Phineas while fishing out the credit card. Totally a dog, with tail slowly curling back and forth.

"Checking out that fine posterior, eh?" he asked, then cackled. "Don't feel bad. You're only human, and I spend a lot of time in the gym. Ha, ha!"

Just pump the gas. They were heading toward I-65, a rapid, well-traveled artery that would return Wilson to Nashville and more familiar miseries. His wet clothes had heated up in the car and he felt like a long-steeped baguette. As the gas poured into the tank, he resolved to obtain some verifiable facts from his host. Name, home town, how he did on his driving test. Returning the nozzle, he climbed back into the car.

"Credit card," he announced, dropping it back into the console.

"I trust you, buddy. If you were a crook, you wouldn't be drowning beside the interstate. Say, what left you there in such a deplorable state? I'll bet the details would make for a good Dickens novel."

And just like that Wilson was knocked off the trail in his search for information. He started with the recent history, the fight with his girlfriend and the job waiting for him in the Big Easy if he could make it there in a day's time. How the job was filled, or never existed, or only existed for someone not named Wilson. Before he realized what he was doing, he'd recounted his whole existence, going backwards and landing at an event in first grade where he was berated by a teacher for pulling the ponytail of the girl seated in front of him. Phineas felt that was a life-shaping moment, and Wilson didn't disagree. The dog opined:

"It wasn't a matter of temptation as much as an appreciation of beauty. We want to interact with the people and the objects that we love. There are peanut butter sandwiches in the glove compartment, by the way. But we want to approach the divine, to caress the ideal. I once heard a reporter for the Daily Racing Form talk about Secretariat winning the Belmont Stakes, setting a record that will never be broken. He said the race seemed a foregone conclusion and the odds were extremely low. Yet thousands of people still bought tickets, not to cash, but to keep, to have some of that magic in their lives. We all want that, a dusting of immortality on our shoulders, a connection with perfection."

"She was a darling little girl," Wilson answered. "Her name was Dolly, caught a lot of Dolly Madison jokes back then. And *Hello, Dolly!* after we saw the play. And that cloned sheep in the news, she was named Dolly. Yeah, I bet she occasionally wanted to murder her folks. Was an honor student until high school, then dropped out. Last time I saw her she had meth mouth—it destroys teeth, you know—and looked like somewhere there was a stripper pole with her name on it. She deserved better."

"Most of us deserve better," Phineas answered. "Look at me. Do you know how hard it is for me to get a booth at Waffle House? I have to slip in, pretending to be someone's service animal. Then I try to explain and people really go nuts. They say that "fair" is a concept for children and losers at three card monte. Knowing that doesn't always help. Still, we persist. Why? Because we must. Because the tattered rags of joy we tear from life are usually enough for another day, another hour, another moment. As long as we don't string these enchantments too far apart, we can soldier on. Self-delusion? Perhaps. But it beats the darkness following us. It beats the chasm beneath our feet."

Wilson finished his sandwich in awe.

"That was very moving. Why aren't you famous? You could be a great writer or philosopher."

"I'll let you in on a little secret. Do you remember President Obama's first election night victory speech?"

"Sure. 'The road ahead will be long. Your climb will be steep. I promise you we'll get there.'"

"That was me."

"Wow! That's world history, right there. You wrote that?"

"Ghost writer, of course. Imagine the image problems. Imagine the controversy, the distraction. 'Dog Tells President What To Say.' I keep a low profile, but I do good work."

The rain abated and a hint of sunrise was showing itself as a thin gold line across the horizon. They were in Alabama now, approaching Birmingham. Traffic was beginning to pick up, and a steady stream of fog-shrouded vehicles passed them going in the opposite direction. Suddenly, fatigue and a world-weariness overtook the hitchhiker. When he got back to Nashville he would have to start anew. Again. Bussing tables or wiping down vehicles at the car wash or dropping in at the temp agency to cobble together employment a day at a time.

"What's your take on all these folks?" Wilson asked, indicating the traffic. "Everyone rushing about, making noise, breeding new people. What's the point?"

Phineas gave a tremendous yawn that showed all his teeth, then said, "I go with the existentialists on that question. Life is ultimately meaningless, and it is our task, our purpose, our burden to imbue it some sort of cognitive framework that makes sense. Reduce suffering, spread kindness like a golden plague, or try to die with more toys than anyone else. Take your pick. Aristotle said—**SQUIRRELI!!!**"

Before Wilson could connect the Greek philosopher with a tree-climbing rodent, Phineas had cranked the steering wheel hard to the left, taking the SUV across two lanes of traffic and into the median. It bottomed out, then launched itself across two lanes of oncoming traffic. Shooting across the emergency lane, it hurtled down a ravine, with only weeds and branches visible through the windshield. At seventy miles an hour it struck a formidable tree that stopped it cold. The impact threw him violently forward into the exploding airbag. The morning became a dark, dreamless sleep.

Regaining consciousness, he saw both doors were open and a paramedic was leaning in, cutting off his seat belt. He sat still, getting reoriented, while a neck brace was fitted on him. Then he was put on a backboard and carried up the steep slope, a state trooper leading the way and stomping down the undergrowth. As they transferred him to the stretcher, he asked after Phineas.

"Whoever was driving must've run like hell, the trooper told him. "Hot car and all, I'd run, too. You do have the right to remain silent, by the way."

The vehicle was stolen in California from the Golden Globe and Emmy-winning actor Peter Dinklage. That explained the hand controls. After being x-rayed, medicated with Tylenol, and handed an invoice for nearly two thousand dollars, he was transported and booked into the Shelby County Jail. A detective came by his holding cell, very friendly, offering to be of assistance.

"I believe you. You were just hitching a ride, and I'll tell that to the judge at your arraignment on Monday morning. But you've got to help me out. I need to know about who was driving that car. Description, what he's wearing, that sort of thing. Did he give you a name, where he was from? Any details at all?"

Looking at the man's face, all fake-earnest and expectant, Wilson realized how completely, absolutely, and exhaustively out of luck he was. No one would believe, ever. Ever, ever, ever.

Squirrel.

