

Twilight on the El Camino · *Leslee Becker*

WHEN I FIRST WENT into the business, my father told me: “Buying a car is one of the most important decisions people have to make, and it’s not to be taken lightly.”

He used to sell Buicks. He had his own dealership, Bahr Motors, which used to be a real showcase. On the Fourth of July, he had the whole fleet polished, and I rode with him in the parade, in a black Roadmaster, Dynaflow, four portholes. I’d lob candy to kids, wave, and pretend I was a war hero.

My father owns a small wrecking yard now. He’s seventy-two, and he tells people he’s in the salvage phase of his automotive career.

I work at Del’s Auto Mart. I’ve been there eleven years and run the place, more or less. We sell used cars, ones that Del picks up all over the country. I work weekends and extra evening shifts, even though I’m tired of the job and don’t like being away from my family. I love my family and wouldn’t be sticking it out at Del’s if it weren’t for them. I want good things for them.

Del’s got this ice cream philosophy about cars. “Imagine you’re driving down the road,” he tells the new salesmen, “and you get a craving for ice cream. You got it in your mind that a vanilla cone will do, so you pull into the first place you see, and it’s one that offers plenty. Now, once you eye forty flavors and all kinds of extra concoctions, you think vanilla’s going to satisfy you?”

So we make ourselves available and give the customers trade-in deals no one can match, and all kinds of extras—tape decks, TV’s, radials, turkeys, and barbecue grills.

We’ve got one of the biggest places on the El Camino, one you can spot a long ways off because of the revolving ’54 Thunderbird perched out above the banners and lot on a tall pole. We needed the extra visibility of the Thunderbird because this strip of road is plastered with car places.

People tend to remember Del’s television ads too. His latest TV angle is to pass himself off as an evangelist. He appears in a red robe behind a podium, and Del’s a short man, thick necked and chested, so all that shows are his shoulders and head. On our TV set at home, his hair looks potato chip-colored. In the ad, Del hollers about time running out, and

then, as the car's wheeled in, his voice drops, just like he's in the presence of the vessel of salvation. All of us salesmen wear identical three-piece suits and stand flanking him on the stage as Del's Disciples.

My kids laugh whenever they see the ad, and the first time I saw myself on television, I decided I had to change things. I started on the weight first. I dieted and took up running. I'm up to an hour, and whenever I go out, I pretend I'm some figure of interest, and all my actions are being monitored by cameras. I imagine winning an important prize at the end of my run, and crowds of cheering people applauding, and my father, right up there congratulating me.

I gave up smoking too. I'm into my fourth week without cigarettes. I started the habit when I was fifteen, and when I tallied up the years—twenty-five of them as a smoker—I got scared and went cold turkey. I thought I'd see or feel a big difference by now with the diet and all, but I haven't. I'm just hungry all the time. I miss the sweets and the satisfaction I got from cigarettes, and I've been accounting my edginess lately to the longing I have for things.

They say it helps to picture yourself as a non-smoker, to remember the part of your life before you smoked and to project yourself into the future without seeing cigarettes. I didn't have any trouble with the early part, but as I tried to see my future, a little knot began to fist up in my stomach. It wasn't connected to cigarettes, as much as to the image of myself getting older and further away from the early and good part of my life, and moving into something sad and probably wrong.

The job, I knew, was responsible for a lot of my dread. It just doesn't suit me, and I don't know how my father sold cars for as long as he did. I'm hoping something will happen soon to make everything different. I feel I'm on the edge of something, maybe something important and dramatic.

Last night, it felt close. I was out running after dinner and began to notice, really notice, other people's homes—their careful lawns, the landscaping, the shape and condition of houses. I was outside of one—a big mansion of a place—at dusk. A patch of light from one of the tall windows hit the center of the lawn just as I was approaching the house. I stopped and looked inside and saw a family sitting at a table under a big, bright chandelier, a man, woman, and a little boy. That's all. But it held me, and I felt very sad.

This morning, because I overslept, and because of all the El Camino

traffic, I got to work late. Del was sitting at his desk in his glassed-in office, involved on the phone. He looked at me and then his watch, but he left it at that. I got a cup of coffee, sat down, looked to see if I had any messages, and started to read the *Chronicle*. I read an article about a family who'd been evicted and couldn't live anywhere else but in their car, in one of the scenic vista stops south of the city on 280. A husband, wife, and two kids. I leaned over my desk and showed the story to Bill, this guy who's been at Del's almost as long as I have.

"Jesus," he said. "If old Del sees that, he'll try to sell them something bigger. Is that a new suit, Charlie?"

"No, I've had it awhile. I took off some weight."

"Wish I could," he said. "Maybe I should join one of those fitness centers."

"You don't need that. Just run. I feel a hundred percent better with that and giving up the cigarettes."

"Yeah," he said, like he was resigned to stay the way he was.

I got up and helped myself to another cup of coffee, thought about taking a doughnut, but didn't. I was watching the salesmen and the bookkeepers, yawning, hoping the time would rush toward lunch, when Del came over to the coffee urn.

"Did you call that fellow back, Charlie? The Toyota?"

"Not yet, Del."

He shook his head, went to the window, and thumbed me toward it. I looked out and saw this elderly man in a mulberry leisure suit, work boots, and a western hat.

"Hey," Del hollered across the showroom, "we've got a live one, a real LD." A lay down, an easy mark.

The man was inspecting a Datsun pickup. Del grinned as Bill and a couple of salesmen came to the window.

"You know what hemorrhoids and cowboy hats have in common?" Del asked.

Bill rolled his eyes and the other salesmen continued to gawk at the old man.

"Sooner or later every asshole's going to have 'em," Del answered.

The guys laughed. Then one started flipping a coin to see who'd take the man. Del yanked a wad of bills from his pocket, pulled out a twenty, put it on my desk, and smoothed it out.

"Twenty bucks says the old man's looking for . . ."

"A Chevette," one of the salesmen said.

"Whadya say, Charlie?" Del asked, sticking his face close to mine.

"He's got a right to look," I said.

"Jesus, he's kicking the tires," Bill said.

"I knew it," Del snapped back. "Yeah, if someone could sell that hick a suit like that, old Charlie here ought to be able to sell him a car."

"A vehicle," this young salesman said, laughing.

I should have said something. I wanted to, but instead I walked outside and stood in the middle of the lot, hearing and seeing the plastic banners overhead, flapping at me like tongues. The man was looking at a Cutlass Supreme when I introduced myself. He had to lean toward me, crooking his head in my direction to hear me over all the noise. He shook my hand.

"A fine automobile," he said.

"It sure is," I said. "Want to get in, get a closer look?"

"Nope," the man said, running his hand over the fender. "It's out my league."

"It's not as expensive as it looks. That's the real beauty of it. Our finance plan might surprise you," I told him.

"Nope," the man said.

"We don't get many Cutlasses. People hang onto them."

"Came here with my boy. It's his first car. That's him over there, Mr. Bahr," the man said, pointing to a tall, skinny kid eyeing a cherry red Mustang with a "RED HOT" sign propped in the windshield.

I knew this about the car. It had been wrecked. The bearings were blown, and the suspension joints were bad, but Del had his boys restore it. They gave it a paint job, body work, and a set of new tires. It was one of Del's specials, and when one of us sells a car like that, we get something extra to sweeten up the commission, usually five or ten percent, under the table.

"Mr. Bahr, this is my son, Roger," the man said as we approached the boy. "He's at the community college, studying Computer Science. Plays basketball too."

"Play a little hoop, huh?" I said, and the kid looked at me a minute and then looked back at the car.

"Sure is flashy looking," the man said.

When I told him the price, he winced. "Mustang's got great resale value," I said. "It's a classic now."

The kid started asking me about the engine.

"Roger knows a lot about cars," the man said.

"Can I take it for a spin?" the kid asked me.

"Why don't you look around, son?" the man said. "You want to take your time on something like this."

"It's my car, Dad. I want to give it a test run, all right?"

"No law against that," I told him. "Just so you know what you're doing."

"I know what I'm doing," the kid said.

I got the keys, and the kid left, leaving me and the man in the lot.

"You sure do have a lot of automobiles here," the man said. "My boy knows all about them. I used to. Course it was easier then. Can't tell them apart no more though. Just a bunch of letters and numbers now."

"That's right," I said.

"Ford makes that car, don't they?"

"The Mustang? It's one of their best sellers."

"They're reliable," he said, like he was asking me for assurance. "I had a Ford pickup once. They got a reputation."

The kid pulled into the lot, banging on the horn. He was beaming when he got out of the car.

"I want it, Dad."

The man started to press on the fenders to check the shocks.

"McPherson Struts," I told him. "The best."

The kid lifted the hood, and his father checked the oil stick. He stared at it, then held it close to his nose. Then he got down on his hands and knees and peered under the car. I glanced back to the showroom area to see if anyone was watching, but they weren't. When the man stood up, he took off his hat and wiped his brow.

"It runs fine, Dad," the kid said, staring into the engine.

"Maybe we ought to look around some more, son. Wouldn't hurt to check around," the man said.

"Someone else will get it if I don't."

The man looked at me. "Is that right, Mr. Bahr? Are there other interested parties?"

"Well," I said, and paused a moment. "Cars move in and out of here pretty fast. We haven't had the Mustang long, and we're a high volume place, as you can see."

"You know anything about the previous owner?" the man asked. "Last thing I want is to get somebody else's headache."

"Last thing anybody wants," I said. "We've got records in the office, and in the glove compartment there's a maintenance log. But I'll tell you this. It's been re-painted. The Mustang didn't look like this when we got it."

The man nodded, and looked at me as though he appreciated getting privileged information. The kid shook his head and walked away from us.

"That's the one he wants, all right. He's got his mind made up," the man said, walking over to his son.

"Look," I said, joining them. "Why don't you two take your time, talk things over by yourselves. I'll be inside. There's no rush."

The man thanked me, and I returned to my office. Del's twenty was still on my desk. When I saw the man and the boy heading toward the showroom, I put the twenty in my pocket. They wanted the car, they told me. I got the papers from bookkeeping and gave them to the man. My hands were shaking.

"Too much coffee," I said.

The man studied the forms, signed his name, reached into his pocket for his wallet, and started counting out cash.

"You're doing the down payment in cash?" I asked him.

"Doing the whole thing," he said, counting out the bills.

"I can knock off a hundred then," I said, which is where I would've started dropping the price anyway if he hadn't gone for it outside. "I can give you that as sales manager," I added, looking to see if any of the other salesmen heard me. "I've been here a long time, and I can tell you it's a rare experience to see cash again. You wouldn't believe what happens here. Most people think it's the buyer who gets taken, but we've been ripped off plenty, and we've had to absorb the losses. Lot of bad checks, and a couple of times I've gotten stuck with stolen cars. Of course, I didn't know it at the time, but it happens, even though we go out of our way to check vehicle ID numbers."

"Is that a fact?" the man said. Then he stood up, shook my hand, and looked directly into my eyes. "I got the one my boy wanted. It was good doing business with you, Mr. Bahr."

"My pleasure," I said. "Yeah, I can remember what it was like getting my first car." I smiled at the boy. "I'll bet you can remember yours too," I said to the man.

"Uh, huh," he said, and then he and his son headed toward the door.

"You have any trouble during the warranty period, even after, you come back and see me," I shouted.

I watched them leave the lot. Then I handed the money and forms to bookkeeping. I took a couple of doughnuts back to my desk, ate them, and sat at my chair, pretending to look busy. I let the other salesmen take care of the customers who came in. Then I went into Del's office.

"I sold the Mustang, Del," I told him.

He seemed distracted, like he was waiting to hear something extra.

"And the Toyota?" he said, looking over my shoulder at the showroom area.

"I'm waiting for him to get back to me."

"Oh," he said. "Give him a call, will you, Charlie?"

"Sure." There was a short silence. "He paid cash, Del," I said. "The man who bought the Mustang."

"He probably doesn't trust banks."

"Yeah," I answered. "He went for the original offer."

Del didn't say anything. He straightened some papers on his desk, then he reached into a drawer, brought out a nail clipper, and began working on his left hand, the thumb nail, which ticked off cleanly and landed on his desk. He brushed it off and stood up.

"Del," I said. "I need to leave early. Personal business."

He didn't say a word.

"Toothache," I said. "It's been driving me nuts. I shouldn't have eaten those doughnuts. That made it worse."

"Okay, Charlie. I'll have Bill take care of the Toyota."

"Thanks, Del," I said and got up to leave. "Oh, I meant to tell you, the kids love the new commercial. They get a real kick out of it."

"Oh, yeah, well some son of a bitch wants it off the air, claims it's sacrilegious."

"Christ," I said, shaking my head. "Well, it caught the bastard's attention, so it's doing the job for us."

I left his office, feeling foolish and ashamed. I got into my car and headed north. I wasn't going fast, and that seemed to bother everyone who passed me. That's when it hit me: it was this place, this whole peninsula, that was all wrong—too much fast-made money, no sign of struggle of any consequence.

I saw the sign for 80 East, and the possibility of being somewhere else seemed the most important thing, right there and then. What I wanted was a direction I could point to and arrive at. It was like the time I had driven in a snowstorm outside of Tahoe with Peg and the kids. I was scared and tired and kept feeling I'd come out of it, that just over the hill and the next curve, it would be clear.

I could go east, maybe to Ashtabula, Ohio, the place my father left during the Depression to come to California. I could take the same route he took, only in an opposite direction, and maybe, by following things back to their source, I could start all over again.

Ohio, I kept thinking, and I remembered when I was little how it seemed like a magical place. I almost made it to Akron once. I was a semi-finalist in the Soap Box Derby. I built the whole thing myself, the way you're supposed to. My father supervised me to make sure I followed the rules exactly. My entry was all hand-done. I painted it blue and white and called it the Custom Cruiser. I couldn't eat or sleep the night before the race and kept going out to the garage to check things over.

The kid who beat me couldn't have built his machine by himself. His father had to have had a hand in it. I had a hard time not crying when I lost. Then my father gave me one of those talks that didn't make sense at the time, only made me madder.

"Charlie," he told me, "you only lost a race. Think of what he lost."

I was thinking about that and almost forgot where I was. I started to feel very hungry, took an exit, and went into a convenience store. I loaded up with sweet and salty things, and as I stood at the check-out counter with my assortment of food, I knew the clerk and other customers were making assessments about me and my appetite. The woman ahead of me was pretty, well-dressed, tanned, with wheat-colored hair that looked professionally styled. Everything about her had a kind of mathematical precision and elegance that spelled money. She looked at what I laid on the counter, and then she looked at me with a small smile.

"For my kids," I said, gesturing toward my food.

She kept staring at me. "You're one of those TV personalities, aren't you?" she asked me.

I looked away from her and faced the little bleacher of gum and candy by the register. "I've done some spots," I said.

"I thought so," she said, then took her bag and left.

I glanced around at the other people in the store. I added some gum to my collection, asked for a pack of Marlboros, and while the clerk totalled my purchases, pretended to look annoyed at the wait, like I was in a real hurry to get somewhere.

The woman was in her car outside. Over the growl of traffic, I shouted to her: "It's hard to go anywhere these days without being recognized."

She backed out and pulled away, and when I got into my car, I kept saying, "Jesus, Jesus."

I tore into a candy bar, then another. Then I smoked a cigarette, which made me feel dizzy at first, and then it felt better.

On the drive back, I kept hoping Peg would be home. I rehearsed all the things I wanted to tell her.

She was baking, standing by the oven, when I came in. The house smelled good.

"You're home early," she said. "Is anything wrong?"

"No," I said. I went to the liquor cabinet and poured myself some Scotch.

"Want me to fix you something to eat?"

"No, I'm not hungry," I said, sitting down at the table. "You wouldn't believe what happened to me today, Peg."

"What happened?" she asked. She sat down across from me, and I looked at her eyes, a particular blue, dark, that never quite comes across in pictures.

"I lied, Peg. I sold this man a car. What I really wanted to do was to tell Del off, but I didn't. I told him I had a toothache. Can you believe it? A grown man making up stories to get out of work?"

She smiled and shook her head. "You're so hard on yourself, Charlie."

"It gets worse," I said, this nervous grin coming over me. "The man I sold the car to. I wish I hadn't done it. I lied to him too."

I waited for a reaction, a sign of disappointment, but she looked more confused than disappointed.

"Del had a hand in it, didn't he?" she said.

"Sure, in a way, but I'm the one who sold the car. Jesus, I even told the customer I was the sales manager."

"Is that all?" she said. When she started to get up from the table, I put my hand over hers.

"Let's go upstairs," I said.

"I found this recipe for monster cookies, Charlie. You know, they get sixty cents a piece for them downtown.

"Peg, let's go upstairs."

She turned the oven off and we went upstairs. She sat on the edge of the bed, undid her apron, and took off her shoes. She patted the spot on the bed next to her, and even though I knew what I wanted and needed was to make love, I couldn't do it. We held onto each other, and we kept quiet for a while.

"I'm dying for a cigarette," I finally said.

"I'm so proud of you for giving it up," she said, taking my hand.

"God, I'm so sick of that job, Peg. I wish we could get away, a trip, do something different."

"We can't afford it, can we?"

"I don't know, but I'll work on it."

She looked at the clock. "I better go and get the kids." She kissed me on the forehead. "You stay here and relax."

I stayed in bed after she left, thinking about how good Peg was to me, and that she deserved better. I kept seeing myself at Del's, playing up to him and doing the same thing to the woman at the convenience store. I felt sad in general, but especially for Peg.

I went downstairs, made myself another drink, and took it and the atlas outside to the lawn chair.

It would be secondary roads the whole way, I decided, to give us all the chance, especially the kids, to really see things. And my father would be with us, going over territory he hadn't seen in fifty years. I traced my finger over the route, lay back in the chair, and looked up. Some thin clouds threading the edge of the sky were starting to spool and drift toward the center.

When the kids came outside, I was feeling better. "Daddy's got a big surprise for both of you," I said, and Peg smiled with me. "We're going on a trip."

"Oh boy," Ellen said.

"On a plane?" Bobby asked.

"By car. Across the country. See," I said, pointing to the atlas.

"When?" Bobby said.

"How about Christmas?"

"That's a long way off," he said and looked up at his mother.

"Well, how about tonight? How about eating out? Wherever you want."

"Road Runner," Ellen said.

"Okay, Road Runner it is. We'll go over to your grandfather's afterwards. How about that?" I said, getting up from the chair.

"There's nothing to do there," Bobby said.

The good feeling was wearing off by the time we reached the restaurant and got seated. We ordered a large pizza with the works, and when it came, horns and sirens went off. Everyone looked at our table for a minute, then returned to their eating. I burned the roof of my mouth, and some of the sauce dribbled onto my chin and shirt.

"How come we're going on a trip?" Bobby asked. He picked a mushroom off his pizza.

"Because," Peg said, "your father wants us all to see the country."

"We're going to Ohio," I said. "Where your grandfather's from."

"Ohio," Ellen said, making funny shapes with her lips.

"Ohio?" Bobby repeated.

After we left the restaurant and got home, the kids rushed into the house as if they were glad to get away.

"Charlie?" Peg said, coming around to my side of the car. "Aren't you coming inside?"

"Later," I said. "I need to get something. You need milk or anything?"

She shook her head. "Once the time comes, they'll love the idea of a trip."

"I know," I said, and then backed out of the driveway.

The TV was blaring at my father's house, and he had dozed off in his chair. I punched the set off, and he woke up and looked at me.

"Charlie," he said. "I didn't hear you come in." He rubbed his eyes. "Must have fallen asleep." He turned on the light and stared at me with a puzzled expression.

I looked down at my shirt. "Took the kids out to dinner and spilled some food on me," I said.

"You ought to put some water on that before the stain sets," he said and started to get up from his chair.

"I'll get it, Dad," I said and headed toward the kitchen.

"What?" he said, following me.

"I said I'll get it," I shouted.

I could hear water dripping below when I turned on the faucet. I opened the cabinet under the sink and saw a pan filled with water. I emptied it and took a look at the pipe.

"You should get this fixed. I could call this plumber I know for you."

He shook his head. "You know what plumbers get now? The pan'll do."

I got underneath and started messing with the pipe.

"Leave it alone, Charlie. Come on, let's go in the living room and sit down. Forget that, Charlie."

When we returned to the living room, he started picking through some mail. "I've got something to show you," he said. "Look at this." He handed me a brochure that showed a new line of wrecking trucks.

"They call it state of the art, Charlie."

I looked at a device named "The Jaws of Life," a huge toothed contraption for prying smashed cars open.

"This one caught my eye," he said, pointing to a big truck, filled with elaborate machinery. "I've been thinking about getting a new truck. Of course, this one's top of the line, more than what I need."

"It's nice, Dad," I said and lit a cigarette.

"Smoking again, huh?"

"Afraid so."

"How are Peg and the kids?"

"Fine. They ask about you all the time. Want to know when you're coming over again."

"What's that?" he said, cupping his hand behind his ear.

"The kids, Peg, they want to see you again."

He nodded. "So, you went to dinner tonight, you say."

"Yeah. To Road Runner. The kids love it. We had a great time."

"Good. How's the job going?"

"Real busy, Dad. I must have inherited it from you," I said, leaning toward him. "Del says I'm his number one man. I think he's going to put me in the assistant manager slot."

"You're his number one man, aren't you, Charlie? I saw him on the TV, you too. Must have cost a bundle for those ads."

"He can afford it. A woman recognized me today from television. At the Quik Trip."

"Is that so? At the Quik Trip? You know, I tried some of those low cholesterol eggs, Charlie. They don't taste right."

"Have you been taking your medicine?"

"Excuse me?"

I raised my voice. "Your medicine. Have you been taking it?"

"Yes, I've been taking my medicine. It kills the appetite, Charlie. Did the doctor say that the day we went in?"

"I can't remember."

"Say, they're having an antique auto show at the Cow Palace. We should go, take the kids. I'll bet Bobby'd love to see those cars," he said and looked down at the floor and then at me. "Everything all right, Charlie?"

"Sure," I said. "I made a big commission today, Dad."

"You always liked cars," he said, and both of us kept quiet a minute.

"You'll never guess what happened today," I said. "This fellow came in, would've gotten stuck with a real lemon, but I wouldn't allow it. I may have lost some money, but I came home with something else."

He nodded and looked like he was waiting for more of the story.

"It's not worth it, is it? We're not doing anything down there we can be proud of," I said.

"Is business falling off, Charlie?"

"No, that's not what I mean. I put my foot down, Dad," I shouted. "No more bad deals."

"Good for you, Charlie," he said, slapping his leg.

"Things are going to be different now, starting with a vacation. We're going to drive across the country. How'd you like to see Ashtabula again, look up some old friends?"

He pondered it for a moment and looked at me as though he knew what was going on. "You don't have to do that for me, Charlie."

"No, I always wanted to see it for myself."

"I doubt if I'd know anyone there anymore," he said, "and besides, what about my business? Who'd take care of things?"

"I don't know, but we can work something out."

"What'd you say?"

"I said I've got to work out some things. Look," I said, getting up. "I better be going. I'll get that pipe taken care of for you, and we'll all go to the auto show."

“Thank you, Charlie. Work on that smoking now.”

“I will, Dad.”

I went outside, saw the kitchen light go off and the TV come on. I went out back, out of view of his window, lit a cigarette and walked over to his salvage area. The moon was big, and under its light, all the cars looked solemn and dignified. I got in behind the wheel of an old Chrysler and looked out through the cracked windshield, where the glass bulged. I placed my hand in the center and slid my fingertips over the starred lace of cracks and wondered what the person felt right before he crashed.

I leaned back into the upholstery, which gave off a familiar smell, and I remembered what it used to be like, lying down in a car, watching crowns of trees and squares of sky glide by when I was a kid, off for a drive, my parents in the front seat and me in the back. Sometimes I'd get car sick, and we'd stop and pull over so I could get air. Then my mother would take me in her lap, hold me, and tell me to find something solid to look at. I'd focus on the hood ornament or my father behind the wheel, and then I'd forget about being sick and would ride along, pretending I was on an important mission, responsible for reading the maps and the territory. When we got home, I liked believing I had led my family to safety.

I got out of the Chrysler and into my own car. There wasn't much traffic on the El Camino, and what there was of it was moving slowly, from one stop to the next. Behind me, and as far ahead as I could see, was a spine of lights, giving everything a yellow flush, shiny and new-looking, like whatever was there under that glow must be worth having.