

A Life in Five Buicks

by Linda Boroff

Roadmaster

Summertime, Hopkins, Minnesota: I toddle from the back door of the Elmo Park Apartments, skinny in suspended blue corduroy pants. My dark, water-slicked hair is caught just above the right ear by a bobbypin.

Suddenly, I stop short. Looming before me in the driveway is my father's new, two-tone Buick Roadmaster, massively at rest on its tumescent whitewalls. The car, jade and loden green, fills my vision like a whale; as if its mighty grille of chrome baleen could suck up the road. Four incredible tunnels in its side, leading to God-knows-where, attest to its pedigree.

The neighbors have flooded out to gawk, as amazed as if dad had taxied up in the B-24 Liberator he had flown in the South Pacific. The women, pregnant in cotton housedresses with bright scarves wound around their pincurls, stroke the monster's bulging flanks. The men, beer bottles in hand, wear pleated pants into which white undershirts are tucked. They stride up and spank the Buick commandingly, nod at the engine statistics, call it "she."

At my appearance, all turn with tolerant amusement to savor my response. I am gaping at the giant intruder, eyes smoky with suspicion. Attempts to pull me near for an introduction fail. To everyone's delight, my confusion soon resolves itself into a drawn-out wail.

Now it is evening, the air fragrant with the warm raspberries that grow wild behind the project where we live, and also with the faint, fetid odor of the swamp beyond, which will not to be drained until a toddler drowns in it later this summer.

I stand outside the back door, gazing into the kitchen, where my father sits at a gray Formica dinette with an old Army Air Corps buddy. They are holding beer bottles and laughing as they celebrate new cars, peace, youth.

The screen before me sags in its frame; insects aggregate on it, awaiting a chance to invade. Their brethren have struck up a summertime concert out beyond the Buick, poised on its concrete slab like some brooding god of highway thunder.

Riviera

It reigns from the driveway of our new ranch-style home: a Buick Riviera, its blue as rich and deep as the stained glass of Chartres. Ensnared in its pale plush upholstery, I feel like Cinderella in her pumpkin chariot. Shiny windows reflect my outsize new teeth grinning from the passenger side.

My father's remodeling business is booming, and he often invites me to "tag along" as he pitches attics and basements door-to-door. The housewives usually ask us in when they spot me on my hobbyhorse, Pal, a high-spirited thoroughbred of rich brown leatherette, with flaring crimson nostrils and a lush mane of white yarn. "Hi there, cowgirl, that's a mighty fine horse you got there, you betcha." And before they know it, they are talking knotty pine and dormers and linoleum.

He is tall and handsome, my dad, with curly brown hair and a wicked sense of humor. I spend hours trying to emulate his jaunty pilot's swagger. He has built us a beautiful corner house in a tony neighborhood near Lake Calhoun and given my mother a generous allowance to decorate: blond oak, raw silk, rose brocade, and a thick, cocoa brown carpet to roll around on. The house sits on three lots with one of them dedicated to a sandbox, a swing set, and a huge bountiful garden. People slow their cars to appreciate the landscaping.

C'mon," my father says mischievously one afternoon. "Let's go blow out the carbon." I know that under the hood of the Riviera chugs a magical nest of dark coils and shiny pans. Superheated and unimaginably powerful, they create and tame the explosions that propel us.

I imagine the car's chrome innards clogged with soot, which we must now expel at ninety miles per hour in a tamponade of black smoke and red flames bursting from

the tailpipe. The highway uncoils before us like a whip; farms are a green blur. I watch the speedometer quiver at ninety and then inch toward 100 as the Buick enters the realm of pure motion.

Just outside Red Wing, he guides us back down to fifty, which will forever after feel like a standstill. Then, as if anything were needed to make the afternoon more perfect, he buys my eternal discretion with a salted nut roll on our way home.

Roadmaster Again

It isn't much of a recession, but, as Mercutio declares of his fatal wound, "marry, 'tis enough." My father's business has dried up into a pile of debts; our brief, feverish glow of prosperity only a memory; our future dreams a mocking, retreating mirage that we will never reach.

The bill collectors call around dinnertime, and my mother rises to answer, swallowing her food quickly: He just stepped out. A payment is on the way. Fights over money have become the white noise of my childhood.

My father's latest Roadmaster is greeted by my mother not with delight, but with fury. Burnished bronze, this unwelcome intruder sits alone in falling snow, like a grounded eagle.

"We can't afford this. What's the matter with you?" My father tries to look wise, as if he knows something she doesn't, but her disillusionment is impenetrable, and she glares back coldly. Her eyes have narrowed, and a crease divides them now, even when she isn't angry, which is seldom. How can she blame him for his business failure, I wonder, when it is the customers' fault that they are now remodeling their own attics. "Do It Yourself" is the chant that accompanies our march to poverty.

Our home goes on the market just after my 12th birthday, bringing long, melancholy weekends filled with officious realtors and skeptical strangers who poke around in our kitchen and assay the carpeting, eyes narrow with arithmetic. Their children stare wordlessly at me and my younger sister. Nobody wants our house, and there is a lot more eking and borrowing before the foreclosure finally arrives, almost a relief.

Homeless now, we drift to Los Angeles, where my father has family. Relatives grudgingly pony up small sums after collect calls from a phone booth. We rent a motel room with kitchenette in East Hollywood, the walls green and weary, veterans of a thousand familial disintegrations.

Daily, my parents look for work; by night, fights erupt, roaring and gusting like wildfires. We are warned by the motel management about the noise. Sometimes we go for swims in the stagnant pool. A thick orange moon hangs above us. We float like corpses in the tepid water.

My mother finally finds work in a nearby children's store, sweltering in outdated designer suits. My sister and I start school. My father lies on a black Naugahyde sofa all day, reading the want ads, sipping gin and devising dubious schemes to recoup his finances. Deals "fall through" he says—evoking for me an image of something hurtling earthward through a dense forest, hitting branches, landing broken and dying. His creditors soon find him again where he huddles; first one—and then many in a rush, persistent and abusive.

One night, his suitcase clatters suddenly into the living room, and my mother stands above it, eyes dark with fury. He had borrowed five hundred dollars from a loan shark.

"When I got off work, some little man threatened me," she shouts. "I gave him my paycheck. How will we live? She grabs my sister and sinks her nails into the squirming girl's shoulder. "What in the hell did you do with five hundred dollars while we were starving?"

My father follows the suitcase, arms dripping with neckties. "I didn't know he'd come to you." He shakes his fist and the ties sway. "For eighteen years I worked for you. I broke my heart."

"He threatened me!"

"I've got to get out of here. I'm dying." My sister and I begin to cry, although we have been expecting this for a long time.

"Let him go," screams my mother. "Him and his goddamn pills and his goddamn booze. There's always money for that, isn't there?"

Outside, my father sits, jowly and misunderstood at the wheel of a rented Ford, curtained with suits and shirts. The car hums to life, coughs loose its emergency brake, and backs hesitantly out of the driveway. A quick shift and it is away. The night rings with sudden silence.

Camaro

The mighty arches of the San Francisco Bay Bridge pass over my head like the ribs of a dinosaur. I think about those people unable to cross the bridge without counting them.

“Tell me about your father,” says Cliff.

“All I know is he called this afternoon wanting to get together. Apparently he traveled out here with some woman, and things fell apart and she took off in his car.”

“When did you last see him?”

“I have not seen my father,” I reply, “in eight years. I don’t know what he’ll be like.”

“Well, you met *my* father,” Cliff says. His parents had visited from Bakersfield two weeks earlier, and his father had, as promised, displayed the physique and mentality of an Alabama State Trooper guarding a speed trap circa 1954. Packed tightly into a booth at the pancake house, he had polished off a platter of pork chops, cornbread and easyover eggs while declaiming loudly on hippie treason. Cliff’s mother, smelling strongly of mint, sat wordless, eating nothing, observing her husband with reddened blue eyes of pure Southron hatred. Cliff told me later that she had found and drunk about half a bottle of tequila while he and his father were out buying a lug wrench.

Cliff’s blue eyes are flecked with amber; his thick brown hair brushes his collar. At twenty-one he is already a master of the amused deadpan, and he is a good bet to hurt me deeply one of these days. His parents have gifted him a new Camaro for graduation, and riding beside him makes me feel shiny, new, and well-maintained too.

My father is staying in one of those hotels that appear at first hopeful glance to be only a little seedy, but is really extremely seedy. I spot him at once in the lobby, swaying slightly beneath the fluorescent lighting, arms stretched toward me. He is

pudgier than I remember, his skin grayish and loose around the mouth. He shakes hands solemnly with Cliff, and shoots me a wondering glance.

We have dinner and embark on a spree through San Francisco. At one bar, a drunk sits alone looking morose, and we invent a history for him, a reason he drinks.

“He tried hard all his life,” says my father about the drunk. “The bastards just wouldn’t let him live.”

“He can’t do anything right,” comments Cliff. “He found himself alone....”

“He done her wrong,” I say.

The pavement in front of my father’s hotel is slick now from the foggy drizzle that had begun around midnight. He climbs stiffly from the car.

“I’ll walk him in,” I tell Cliff. The lobby is not as deserted as it should be at 3 a.m. People are wandering about sleepless, smoking, unwilling to be alone in their rooms.

“Goodbye Linny,” says my father.

I hug him and say “Goodnight, Daddy.” As I return to the car, I realize that Cliff and I have grown so close tonight that we will probably get married. He looks at me pensively, having figured that out himself. When I turn back, my father is still gazing after me from the lobby, hands hanging limp at his sides, head slightly cocked.

Century

I am an advertising copywriter working in Palo Alto, divorced, with a nine-year-old daughter who looks like Cliff. I drive a 1986 Buick Century Custom, an impulsive purchase after my father died years before of a heart attack. Somehow, driving a Buick keeps him a little closer in spirit.

So I leave my office on a warm, sunny October afternoon for the commute south to Santa Cruz over Highway 17, a sinuous black python notorious for head-ons. I grip the steering wheel of my Buick, intent on survival, eyes darting about with primal alertness evolved over millions of years, called on now to dodge not leopard or lion, but Audi; not charging aurochs but careening Range Rover.

When the traffic stalls—as it often does—I look beyond the asphalt to the young redwoods, fernlike and primeval, and to the yellow poppies and blue lupine bobbing

gamely in the hydrocarbon exhaust. Sometimes I murmur little prayers for the road kills, tarry, feathered clumps and featureless gray fur patties scattered on the shoulder.

As I approach the summit, hemmed in by other commuters, the Buick begins to jerk and shudder. Dammit a flat drifts into my mind seconds before the asphalt ahead rears up and rips asunder like a bar of licorice. I slam on my brakes at the lip of a widening gash as the side of the mountain to my right trembles like Jell-O and falls away with a roar, sliding and tumbling onto my car. Trees, their moorings scaled away, drop, still upright, straight down the mountain.

The air turns white with dust, and the car shudders at the boulder that finally breaches its back door. Dirt pours in across the seat. I glimpse myself in the rearview mirror, perhaps for the last time, looking rather puzzled and nondescript.

Then, as abruptly as it had started, the earth quiets and settles, though something keeps cracking like pistol shots. The dust clears, and I see to my left, the very top of the concrete center divider barely visible above the dirt. Covering the road now is everything that, seconds ago, had been a hundred feet above us.

It is October 17, 1989, 5:17 p.m. They call it the Loma Prieta Earthquake, and I have nearly been buried alive. My only thought now is to get to Santa Cruz, but the road ahead has ceased to exist. Boulders are still bouncing down the mountainside like ping pong balls.

A couple of truckers make their way through the trembling debris to my driver's side window: "You alive?" They wrench open my door and I clamber out with no dignity, my pencil-skirted business suit caked with dust. "Whole mountain's gonna go inna minute," one of them says, and I say, "Didn't it go already?" But no, there is still plenty of geologic time poised above us. I consider running, but to where?

"See if she'll start." A trucker climbs into the driver's seat and turns the key, eliciting only a feeble cough. He tries again, and suddenly the Buick rises from the dead with the sound of a hundred lions competing for mating rights.

Six men rock it loose from its crumbled matrix, which opens a car-sized hole in the debris. I get in, push on the gas with a shaking foot, and the Buick miraculously begins to limp forward, yawing like a drunk on its broken suspension. One by one, we creep down the mountainside, over the buckled, rock-strewn pavement. The roots of

upended trees oddly resemble the configuration of a lightning flash, I note, and also the heart's circulatory system illuminated by echocardiogram: fractals? I keep my foot on the accelerator, and the car keeps rolling, around the tree trunks, through the sand and the dirt. Somehow, it finds a way.

Nearing Scotts Valley, we come down off the hill at last, and the highway re-emerges. I nurse the Buick past people who stop their stunned wandering to point at me and shake their heads. There must be sirens, but I am in a state of deaf, numb panic that recedes only when my daughter dashes toward me from the yard of her now lopsided school.

Days later, an insurance adjuster lifts the Buick's hood and gasps. The engine is buried under rocks and dirt. "I can't believe this thing actually ran, he says, shaking his head.

"Ran pretty well," I say, channeling my father. I open the trunk and get out the jumper cables and a notebook of ideas for a novel that I have been carrying around for several years. I take them to where my friend is waiting.

Century Again

There are as many roads to penury as there are paupers to follow them. Today, I'm on my way to sign over the pink slip on "Moby Dick," my white 2000 Buick Century, as security on a loan, so that I can pay my rent, three weeks late and counting in the wake of a layoff. My destination is a storefront in a bleak San Jose strip mall between a liquor mart and a shoe repair shop. A fuchsia neon sign beckons: "Fast Cash! Paycheck Advance! Auto Title Loans!" There, my signed pink slip will net me \$1900, which I pledge to repay at an interest rate of about ninety-six percent.

I back out of my carport, find a jazz station playing rueful sax, and hit the road. The rain that threatened all morning arrives now in earnest, and the mist on my windshield quickly turns to tears, as if to make up for the ones I'm holding back. Somehow, my whole life seems prologue to this ordeal. It could be worse, I console myself, which only reminds me that it may indeed grow worse. The wipers begin beating time to the scold in my head: why didn't you, why did you, why didn't you, why did you?

“It’ll be okay, mom,” says my daughter, guessing the reason for my silence. She sits beside me now, as she always has, and in a way nothing has changed—although her once downy head has grown into an avalanche of blonde-streaked waves, and the rattles and sippy cups have given way to a plastic box of eye shadow that she dabs on in the passenger mirror. I understand, without taking it personally, that to not follow in my footsteps is for her almost a career goal in itself. Financial turmoil has shaped her life since her father left us when she was three years old.

I merge onto Highway 280 south; the road nearly empty on this Saturday morning. As the miles unreel, I cannot resist backtracking mentally over my own highway of choices that delivered me to this pass. How many wrong turns? How many dead ends, detours, directions unheeded? Or is the problem deeper still? The map is wrong. The destination does not exist.

Perhaps, as my father’s daughter, I am just genetically wired to be broke. My inborn character quirks always seemed to have veto power over good intentions and resolutions. By age seven, I was already displaying the traits that have cleft my life like a fault line: impatience with saving, impulsive overgenerosity, dislike of routine. Reading Aesop’s fable of the grasshopper and the ants, I quickly identified with my gangly orthopteral soul mate, shivering out in the cold with his inedible fiddle.

South we hurtle from Palo Alto, where I had presumed to live so that my daughter could attend its top-ranked high school. And was that another wrong turn, I wonder, hearing her reel off anecdotes of snobbery, anorexia, and grade grubbing?

After years of battling a commute so brutal it inspired articles in foreign magazines and enduring a manager who gnawed at me like a polar bear at a whale carcass, I have decided to work freelance.

Fiction was calling me: story plots scratched on the message pad on my bedstand or scribbled on the back of parking stubs or the flap of an envelope as I drove. These potential novels existed now only as wads of lint at the bottom of my purse.

And what makes you so special, my roadside Greek chorus now chants. Do you think yours is the only quiet desperation, the only stifled ambition? You are a bundle of plastic twine floating on your daughter’s ocean, lying in wait as years pass to wrap

yourself around her wings with your poverty, neediness, and irrational ambition. You...
writer!

Last week, I had dusted off my interview suit and explained to a succession of loan officers that I was a “freelance technology writer” and needed only a little “bridge loan” to see me through to the next big project.

What else could I have said? That I’m a perennially aspiring novelist whose short stories are probably read solely by other hopefuls? That I have spent the last eight years trying to shoehorn myself into Hollywood’s clenched consideration, resulting in one low-budget feature and four options simmering in a perpetual broth of revision? As a borrower, I am about as appealing as a glass of silicon wastewater.

I walked out of the last bank and stand in the parking lot feeling sorry for myself. Then I looked at my Buick as if seeing it for the first time. Finally paid off after eight years, it has been through a lot. In 2005, it was repossessed in the rain at 3 a.m. by a couple of husky young men, who had it up on the tow truck by the time I emerged in a ratty bathrobe, holding my Lhasa Apso. “Put some shoes on,” one of them said.

The Buick looked forlorn and reproachful and a little silly, its capacious rump elevated by a chain, its grille tipped into a puddle. When a copywriting windfall enabled me to redeem it a few days later from a dusty San Jose repo-yard, a friend said admiringly, “You always land on your feet.” But her metaphor was wrong. I had not yet landed. Today looks and feels more like a landing. And not on my feet.

It takes two or three passes around the block in what is now a freezing deluge to find the auto loan storefront. We park, and my daughter, impatient with my umbrella, leaps out and makes a dash for the door which looks close, but is actually far enough away for her to get thoroughly soaked. I come up behind her, and she grins sheepishly, the rain bedewing her face and lashes, the damp tendrils of hair pasted to her fresh, unconquered skin. “Young Girl Caught in a Downpour,” I mentally title the artwork. We wrestle open the door, and a line of people turns at the cold, wet draft, one or two actually smiling in commiseration. They are mostly poor and minorities: young mothers with children hanging from every limb; gray-headed veterans in bill hats with numbers on the front.

The young woman at the window smiles too, although the line is long, the paperwork complex, and her computer capricious. She hands us a battered camera to photograph the Buick's VIN number and its odometer. My daughter waves me to a chair and ducks outside—again without the umbrella—although the rain is now coming down in sheets from a truly biblical sky, occasionally riven by trees of lightning so close you could almost grab their molten trunks. Seconds later, massive thunderclaps trigger little screams from the women. The veterans flinch, their jaw muscles working.

When my daughter re-enters, I pull off her soaked outer sweater as though she is a kindergartner and help her on with my own.

“Thanks, Mom.” The people in line titter. I catch the eye of an elderly lady, and she beams at me, a universal smile of motherhood. And all at once, everything is all right. It's more than all right. Why, the Buick is merely fulfilling another of the roles it was intended for. Like reindeer to the Inuit, it is both transportation and sustenance.

So we all watch the rain subside and a cold blue sky emerge amid turbulent clouds, a fresh wind whipping the treetops. The line slowly shortens, and at last, I am presented with a bale of papers on which I provide my signature in about forty places. The clerk counts out my money in small, used bills, and feeling far from dissatisfied—even a little rich—we get back into the Buick.



Linda Boroff graduated from UC Berkeley with a degree in English and currently lives and works in Silicon Valley. Her suspense novel *The Remnant* has recently been accepted for publication. Her fiction and nonfiction appear in *McSweeney's*, *The Write Launch*, *All the Sins*, *Epoch*, *Cimarron Review*, *Parhelion*, *Crack the Spine*, *Writing Disorder*, *The Piltdown Review*, *Eclectica*, *5:21 Magazine*, *Thoughtful Dog*, *The Satirist*, and other publications.