

# FICTION

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## Mercedes Buyer's Guide

WAYNE KRAUSE CLAIMED TO KNOW nothing about the stuff in the trunk of the car. The car had been his mother's and Wayne said he hadn't been up to sorting through it after the funeral. He did say that he was pretty sure the microwave worked. When it turned out it didn't and the toaster wouldn't keep bread down and both casserole dishes were cracked, Harry Stouffer suspected that Wayne had piled all that junk in just to get rid of it. Harry set the kitchenware, the typewriter, the bags of old shoes, the twelve windshield wiper blades and everything else in the corner of his garage. He vacuumed, sprayed air freshener into the car and tried to forget about Wayne Krause. Things kept turning up in that car though, things that kept Wayne and his family at the front of Harry's mind.

The first time Harry adjusted the passenger's seat he found a letter caught in the shifting mechanism. It was dated 12 January 1969. He spent some time wondering how a 1969 letter might have wound up in a 1981 car. Equally strange, the letter was written as though it was midsummer. It complained of heat, drought and dust. Harry read it to himself three times before taking it inside where he asked his wife to guess what he'd just found in the car. "Another microwave," she said. Her books were fanned out before her. Harry knew she didn't want to be disturbed. The kids were asleep. This was her study time. He read it aloud anyway. Along with talk of weather there was mention of Myrna's health, a planned trip to the seaside and a canceled New Year's Eve party. "Isn't this neat?"

"Yeah," Colleen said. "Neat."

"I think it's from Australia." Harry re-folded the letter, tapped it against his palm. Colleen marked her spot in one book, turned to

read from another. It was still a couple of weeks before exams, but she'd been working like this every night for a month.

"On the radio this morning they said you remember most if you study before sleep," Harry said. "Turns out whatever you were last thinking goes round and round in your brain all night." He waited for a response. Colleen looked up, nodded. "Neat, eh?" She nodded again.

Every night of his life Harry had had a shower before bed. Imagine how much smarter he'd be if he'd read the paper or the encyclopedia. Of course the Stouffers didn't have an encyclopedia. But still.

A week after finding the letter, Harry found thirty-two hundred dollars in a yellow envelope in the trunk. It was tucked under the lining, hidden or lost. He found it while returning the spare tire to its well. But that was a week later. Before finding the money, before Harry had even looked at the spare, he took the Australian letter over to Wayne Krause's place. It was after work on a Tuesday. Harry parked out front and walked across a yard full of toys—a trike, wagon, small slide, a couple of hoola hoops. Wayne lived in a cul-de-sac in the Garrison development, which meant his kids could leave things lying around like that. It also meant his kids could run around in the front yard without worry. If Harry's kids left something out after dark it would be gone by morning. And if they stepped off the sidewalk and into the street they'd be dead. A car would zip along and Bang. Harry didn't like to think about it. He didn't appreciate thoughts like this visiting him. It was true though. Zip, bang. Cars travelled way too fast on Bayshore. All the way down greens fell in line. If Colleen wanted to become an engineer, Harry was fine with that. For starters she could re-engineer the traffic lights on Bayshore.

Harry looked at his watch as he rang the bell. He'd have to make it quick. He hadn't told Col that he was stopping at Wayne's. He counted to ten, rang the bell again. Dum dee dum dee dum. A little girl opened the door. Harry crouched. "Hi kid, what's your name?"

"Lisa Krause." She was wearing a Barbie T-shirt.

"That's a sweet name," Harry said. "I'm Harry. Would you tell your Dad Harry's here?"

"Harry's here," she said, but she was still looking at Harry and hadn't raised her voice.

"Harry who?" Wayne yelled from somewhere inside.

"Harry Stouffer."

"Stouffer?"

"Like the frozen dinners." That brought no response. "Harry you sold the car to."

That did it. There was movement inside; then Wayne appeared, stomping down the hallway, feet, arms and belly all on the move. He looked like a boxer who'd been set loose on the world of doughnuts and fast food. "I don't know what's wrong with that car, but it was running when I sold it to you—"

"No, no, it's not about that—"

"As is, remember. That's what we said." Harry held up his hands, shook his head and looked at his feet. "What?" Wayne said after a pause. "What?"

"You have any family in Australia? Any close family friends or anything?" Wayne filled the doorway and the way he was looking at Harry right now made Harry worry about his size. A man that big could really inflict some pain. Harry's scalp warmed. "Anyone who lived in Australia in 1969?" Wayne kept looking at Harry in that peculiar way. Harry pulled out the letter. He said it had been under the passenger's seat.

Wayne stepped back into better light, read, flipped the letter over, read the reverse. "Helen," he said. The salutation was smudged but the letter had been clearly signed by Helen M. For a moment Wayne stood in silence, then he turned. "Hey, Mer," he yelled. "Get me the phone."

Lisa came out with it. Wayne dialed, stepped into the living room and beckoned Harry. It occurred to Harry just then that he didn't really want an answer. He hadn't spent enough time day-dreaming about the letter; he hadn't even shown it around work. All day it had sat in the glove compartment. And now that it was in Wayne's big fist, Harry was unlikely to get it back.

"Impulse," Harry said out loud. Wayne turned to look at him, but just then someone picked up on the other end and Wayne spoke into the phone. Col often said that Harry had to stop letting impulse carry him away.

Wayne covered the receiver. "Could it be South Africa? It could be, right?" Harry nodded. Of course it could. That hadn't

occurred to Harry. "Helen," Wayne said into the phone. "Helen M." Harry must have assumed Australia because he and Tim had watched a documentary about dingoes a couple of months ago, before the TV broke.

Wayne covered the phone again, yelled for someone to get him a map or an atlas or something. Eventually Lisa brought in a map of North America. Wayne unfolded it, turned it over. "Jesus weeps. A world map. A map with frigging Africa on it."

In the end they used a map on the inside cover of a dictionary. Wayne pointed to South Africa as though Harry might not have heard of it. "That's the spot. Right there." His finger covered half the country.

On the verandah Wayne said he was sorry about all the junk in the car. He waved one of his big hands. "I just didn't want to deal with it. My mother's stuff and all. I get emotional about these things." Wayne pinched the bridge of his nose, closed his eyes and gave his head a shake. It wasn't easy watching someone as big as Wayne get emotional. Harry turned away to give the man some privacy. As he stood gazing down the street, he pictured the collection of wiper blades that still sat in his garage. Who would even have a dozen wiper blades? The rest of the junk Harry sort of understood, but a dozen wipers? The screen door banged and Wayne was back inside. He hadn't even said goodbye.

When Harry got home, Tim was playing tennis against the wall in the living room and Sashi was bouncing on the sofa singing something from *The Lion King*. Harry leaned in. "You'll break the springs, Sashi." Thwack. The ball hit the wall only inches from Harry's face. "Cut that out." It rolled under the stereo, and Harry headed down the hallway. Thwack. "Jesus weeps." Harry liked that curse. He thought he might start using it regularly. In the kitchen Colleen had her books out. Thwack. "Jesus weeps," Harry said again.

"What's that?"

"Why don't we just get a new TV? Something cheap."

"It'll rot their minds."

"It'll calm them down. They're tearing the house apart. Just go look at them." There was a thud that wasn't the tennis ball. Sashi came running into the kitchen and straight into Col's arms.

From the living room Tim shouted, "Wasn't me, wasn't me." Col rocked Sashi a while, then returned one hand to working the calculator. Thwack. "Tim, do that somewhere else."

"Where?"

"Outside."

"I'm grounded."

"In the yard."

"It's dark." The boy thumped down the hallway, poked his head into the kitchen. "What's for supper?" Oh shit. Harry had forgotten it was his turn to cook tonight. He opened his mouth to suggest they order pizza, but he already knew what Col would say. He turned to the cupboards. "Let me think a sec."

"You didn't stop at the grocery?"

"Thought I'd just make something from what we have here."

Sashi was calm now, but she still leaned into her mother, enjoying the attention. Harry wouldn't have minded some attention. He wouldn't have minded leaning into Col and having her run her hand through his hair. Maybe he should jump up and down and fall off the chesterfield even after someone's told him not to. Thwack. "Tim, for Christ's sakes."

Eggs. He'd make eggs.

Harry diced an onion, grated some cheese, sliced a tomato and set a pan on the stove. He cracked eight eggs, buttered bread, and then asked Colleen if she could please clear away her books.

When everyone was at the table, Sashi raised her milk. "It's my turn tonight," she announced. "And I want to make a toast to the Queen."

Tim said, "Boring," but it was Sashi's turn so they all raised their glasses. Harry kept his thoughts about this exercise to himself. With the others he said, "To the Queen."

At 10:47 on Saturday 25 April, Harry found thirty-two hundred dollars in the trunk of the car. The day before he'd noticed that the rear tires didn't match and he'd wanted to check the spare, see if it was the missing mate. It wasn't and getting it back in proved a bugger. Harry ended up pulling the whole lining off. That's when he noticed the corner of the yellow envelope. Straight away he knew it was money. And straight away he knew that unless it was Canadian Tire money or something, he had his hands

on a good chunk of change. He peeked in. Full of twenties. His legs went rubbery. He had to sit. He opened one of the lawn chairs, took a load off and began flipping through the wad. One hundred and sixty twenties made thirty-two hundred dollars. "Jesus weeps." He'd only paid nineteen hundred. And that was a deal. The car was nearly twenty years old and eaten by rust, but it was still a Mercedes.

Harry tapped the envelope against his thigh, money tight in his right hand. Thirty-two hundred dollars. Imagine the things you could do with thirty-two hundred dollars. Col would want to put it into savings or a mortgage payment or something. She might be okay spending some on the kids. Horse riding lessons for Sashi. Tennis lessons for Tim. Although Tim didn't really like tennis. He just liked banging the ball against the wall. He liked comic books, but that would be a waste. What about a new television? The boy would love that. Everyone would. It could be a present for the whole family.

Colleen was on the back porch having her one cigarette of the day when Harry stepped out of the garage. At least Harry hoped it was her one cigarette of the day. He didn't want to ask in case she got upset. It was only eleven. It was early to be having her one cigarette. You could bet she'd be needing another by six. She'd be desperate by nine. Harry considered saying something like that, making it a joke, only then Col turned and noticed him. Instead Harry said, "Guess what I found in the car."

"I don't know. What?"

"Colleen," he said. "Look at me."

"I am looking at you."

Harry threw the money in the air. It took Col a moment to understand what it was, and then she seemed to melt. Harry watched her carefully. More than anything he'd wanted to see Col's reaction. Her eyes grew big and milky. "Harry," she said. "Harry." Her knees went soft, bent a moment. Bills fluttered everywhere. It was like hitting big cash in a game show. The air was money.

"Three thousand two hundred dollars," Harry said. Col brought her hands to her mouth. She ran on the spot, jumped up and down, dropped her cigarette. By now the money was blowing all over the muddy yard. They noticed this at the same time. Some bills were already near the fence. Harry chased after them while Colleen bent to gather what was on the porch. "Kids," she yelled. "Hey kids!"

Harry ran along the fence line scooping up bills. When he looked back, Tim and Sashi were standing at the door. "Help pick up all this money before it blows away." For a moment the kids stood watching their parents scramble about, then began chasing after bills themselves.

When they'd collected all of them, Colleen counted: 158. Two missing. Harry told Tim to hop into Mister Yee's yard, and Sashi crawled under the porch with a flashlight. After Tim found one of the missing bills they gave up. Harry felt a little bad about losing the other, but when he thought about Col's reaction, it had been worth twenty bucks. She'd melted. She really had.

Inside they had Cokes to celebrate. Colleen proposed a toast. "To thirty-two hundred dollars," she said. They tapped cans, drank. "To being rich," Tim said. They tapped cans again and Sashi said, "To being the richest." After the excitement had died a little, Harry called a family meeting. He'd never called one before. It had always been Col, but today he said they had to decide how to spend the dough.

"Har," Col said. "Har." She touched his shoulder. "Maybe we shouldn't talk about it like this. Maybe we should think about it a while, not do anything impulsive."

"We can discuss it though," Harry said. "No harm in talking, right? And I wasn't thinking we should spend it all, either. We should definitely put some aside for savings. More than some. A good chunk. Most of it. But I thought we could do something special with the rest. You've been complaining about having to take textbooks out of the library, so why not buy some? Sashi's been wanting riding lessons and Tim—"

"A TV," Tim said. He said it right on cue. It couldn't have been better if they'd planned it. Harry clapped his son on the back. "That's an idea." He couldn't remember when he'd been happier with something Tim had said. "A TV," the boy said again. It gave Harry a pinch of regret for having grounded him. He'd overreacted. He saw that now. The lamp had been old, worthless really.

"Maybe that could be the present to the whole family. The rest goes to savings or to the mortgage." Harry was trying to make it seem like he hadn't thought this through.

"Har." Col wasn't buying. She shook her head, but then Tim started chanting, "TV, TV." Sashi joined in and Harry couldn't help but grin. "Some text books too," he said, pointing at his wife.

"Everyone." Col raised her voice, but Tim and Sashi kept chanting and banging on the table. Harry took the money out, threw it in the air. It filled the room, rose to the lamp, fluttered groundward like dead leaves. Tim stood to bat at the bills. Sashi began running around the kitchen. Finally Colleen broke into a smile and started nodding. She scooped up some money, threw it in the air, scooped up more, threw it at Harry.

By 4:36 that afternoon they were all watching the new television. Lassie was on. Without cable there weren't many options. Harry couldn't find his glasses but the screen was big enough that he could do without. He was just thinking how he'd want them for the hockey tonight when it occurred to him that there might be more money in the car. Think of all the things they'd left in there. A microwave, a toaster, typewriter, shoes, an old letter and a wad of cash. Obviously not very careful people. Obviously not very well organized. Not that Harry was either of these things, and not that he was complaining, but still.

"What if there's more money in there?" Harry said during the next commercial. "What if they were really rich and just had lots of cash lying here there and everywhere? They had a Mercedes after all. Plus at least thirty-two hundred in cash."

"We have a Mercedes and thirty-two hundred in cash," Tim said.

Harry patted him on the knee. "You're right there son." And then Harry stood. "Who wants to help me search the car?" No one answered. Harry said, "Who wants more money?" and Tim's ears perked up. "If I find more money, who do you think should keep it?"

Tim stood. "Whoever wants some money had better come help." Good old Tim. It was nice to be getting along so well. They'd had a lot of fights recently, and that whole incident with Grandmother's lamp had cast a long shadow.

In the end they all went. Colleen put on rubber gloves, groped between the seats. She found some tissue, a pen, a pair of broken sunglasses and an unsigned birthday card for a ninety-five-year-old.

Tim searched the doors—their pockets, handles, trim panels, armrests and ashtrays. Harry gave Sashi the flashlight and co-



erced her into searching the trunk. He told everyone to keep an eye out for his glasses, then began removing the front seats. He knew this was taking things a bit far, but he wanted to be thorough. By the time he had the second one out, Col and Sashi had gone back inside. Tim was just watching. There was nothing of interest under either seat. Tim tried sitting in one. The springs gave an old man's sigh.

Harry crouched where the passenger seat had been, emptied the glove compartment. Stuck in a crevice was a driver's licence for Barbara Krause. She was pictured in the corner looking startled and pale. It had expired in 1988. Harry held it up to show Tim, but his son had left too.

Harry removed the dashboard cover. Beneath he poked about the instrument panel's wiring, the heater unit, the passages that led to the vents. He began on the steering column, then realized it was six o'clock. It was also a Saturday, which meant it was his turn to cook. He walked in whispering, "pizza, pizza, pizza." Tim and Sashi screamed their approval but minutes later bickered over the toppings as they always did.

While tipping the deliveryman, Harry realized that the money hadn't been lost or misplaced. No one would misplace thirty-two hundred dollars. They'd hid it deliberately. Old people always hid money. They distrusted banks. And if the Krauses had hidden more, wouldn't it be somewhere unusual? He'd have to search the entire car. Every inch.

Harry didn't watch Hockey Night in Canada. Instead he removed the roof panelling, pulled up the carpeting and took the trim off the doors. He checked the rusty bumpers, the rusty wheel wells, looked over the whole rusty underbody. He removed one piece of the side molding just to assure himself nothing could fit in it. He didn't give up until five past eleven, by which time half the car seemed to be strewn about the garage. Harry hadn't found a penny. He hadn't even found his glasses.

On 16 September 1980 a silver Mercedes 126-S rolled off the S-Class line at the Daimler-Benz plant in Sindelfingen, West Germany. It was near the end of the second shift. The red light had been on all day indicating the assembly line was behind quota. What was more, it was Torsten Fast's birthday and his family would

soon be gathered and waiting for him. All the same, Torsten took his time on this last car, examined its heating and air conditioning systems, its instrument cluster and steering column; then he noticed a piece of paper lying on the floor. He bent, lifted it. "Gutten Geburtstag Schatz." Torsten looked about, smiled self-consciously, tucked the note into his pocket and turned fully around. No one was watching. He patted the car and moved on. Torsten gave every car he inspected a tap on the hood. He called it his *letzter Kuss*.

The car left the plant by train bound for the port of Bremerhaven and travelled to Montreal by container ship where it cleared customs and was inspected, tagged and transferred to an eighteen-wheeler at the Mercedes preparation centre. While driving it onto the trailer, Martin Roche brushed it against a concrete pillar. He'd been adjusting the radio so he could listen to something for the few seconds it took to move the car. The contact left a small scrape and a shallow dent, but Roche was the only person to notice. His palms grew damp and his stomach did somersaults until after the driver had signed for the cars and was headed for Markham. The moment the truck was out of the prep centre that scrape could have happened anywhere. Roche swore up and down that he'd be more careful. He'd only had the job two weeks and at this rate he wouldn't last long.

The silver 126-S arrived along with two C-class sedans and a station wagon at the Frank Cherry dealership next morning and Frank had a fit. He spotted the scrape straight off. He had an eye for that sort of thing. He said he'd send it back, said he'd send the whole load right back to fucking Germany. His son-in-law told him they could fix it, but Frank wasn't listening. He gripped his chest. Was someone trying to kill him? Didn't they know he had a heart condition? Frank was at the loading entrance, but customers could still hear. Barbara Krause blushed. The man had to be seventy and here he was carrying on like a twelve-year-old. She tried not to listen. On the way back into the showroom Frank Cherry said he wanted someone fired for this. His face was bright red. Cherry, Barbara thought.

Tuesday evening Harry remembered to stop at the grocery store. He picked up sausages, potatoes and a head of cabbage. The Garrison development was only a couple K away and Harry

found himself turning towards Wayne's place. All the toys were still strewn across the front lawn. It had been a week but they seemed to be in exactly the same spots.

Lisa answered the door. Harry crouched. "Would you tell your dad that Harry's here?"

"Harry who?" Wayne called.

"Stouffer. Like the frozen dinners." Wayne stepped into the hall, wiped his mouth with a serviette. "I'm sorry." Harry stood. "Hope I'm not interrupting anything. Not eating are you?"

"No, no, come on in. Find any more letters?" Wayne chuckled. "My sister and I got a real kick out of that." The screen door banged behind Harry.

"I was just driving by and thought I'd.... I just wanted to know. I could have called for this but I lost your number. Hi Lisa." Harry was having trouble getting to his question. He was no longer even sure what his question was. He wanted to know something. He wanted to know a lot of things. Things about the elderly parents who'd hidden money in their car, the great aunt living in South Africa, the startled face staring out of the driver's licence, the birthday card for a ninety-five-year-old, the windshield wiper blades and all the other junk in the car. He wanted to know about all of these things, but he didn't know how to begin. Wayne was still staring at him. Lisa was staring at him. Neither ever seemed to blink. Harry dug both hands into his jacket pockets, felt the taped arm of his second pair of specs. He shifted from foot to foot. How do you ask? Where do you start?

"Harry?" Wayne said, and Harry took a deep breath. "Something wrong, Harry?"

"I can't find my glasses. I didn't leave my glasses here did I?"

"He leave his glasses here?" Wayne called over his shoulder.

"No."

Harry nodded. He nodded as hard as he could and said he wouldn't bother them again. He waved to Lisa and waited for her to wave back. She didn't.

Ken Krause liked the idea of a scraped car. He liked the idea of saving a grand for a scrape and a dent which they could fix and make imperceptible. Plus there'd be no waiting list. It could be his today. Barbara wasn't so sure. Wouldn't it decrease the resale value?

Wouldn't it rust? And didn't it seem strange to spend thirty thousand dollars for a damaged car? She didn't say all of this, at least not in so few words. She said she didn't like silver. Too flashy, too much glitter. And she spent a long time standing near the one she did like. It was deep green and in perfect condition. Eventually she pulled Ken aside and asked if they shouldn't at least look at some others.

"Lovey, I'm negotiating. Just let me take care of this. Please." But Barbara could see that the only thing Ken was taking care of was that silver car. They'd be stuck with it. She knew it.

In the lounge Barbara lit a cigarette. She shouldn't be upset. It was a brand new car except for the scrape. But it bothered her all the same. For one thing, Jeannie would notice no matter how they painted it. Remember last year when she spotted that mark on Eloise's gown? It was tiny and they'd all but removed it, but in the end Eloise was in tears blaming Barbara for spilling the mascara and ruining her wedding.

When Barbara returned to the showroom, Ken had the silver car on the street ready for a test drive. The two of them circled the nearby blocks, drove the highway a mile in each direction. Ken said it was an Arabian thoroughbred on wheels. Barbara said as little as possible. They parked in the lot. Ken went in for the paperwork. He asked if she wanted to join him. Barbara shook her head, lit a cigarette, switched on the radio. Ken was almost an hour in there, and when he came out he had a toothy, owner's grin. He raised the keys, suddenly a little boy holding the best present ever. It lit her heart a moment. At the car he offered her the keys. "Do the honours?" Barbara shook her head.

Ken pulled out of the lot, made a right onto Drummond Road. Barbara put a hand on his leg, let it lie there. She wanted to ask when they were going to fix the dent, but held back. Two blocks from the highway a snowball hit the windshield. A second hit the hood with a deep thud. Ken slammed his foot on the brakes, brought the car to an abrupt halt. Barbara wasn't wearing her seat belt. Her body hit the dash, her face hit the windscreen. Straining against his own belt, Ken lost his breath. His heart sputtered, clamoured against his rib cage. When the momentum was spent, Ken fell back against the seat and Barbara fell from the dash. She lifted a hand, groped at the arm rest and pulled herself up. "You all right?" Ken said in a whisper.

"Yes, I think." She didn't say anything else. She ran fingers across her body, brought them to her face and sat slumped in the passenger seat.

"Godklamn kids, Jesus." Ken unbuckled, climbed out of the car. He brought a hand to his chest. That had scared him. It really had. His knees trembled. All through his body he could feel it. Jesus, what a scare.

No one in sight. That was always the way. As soon as he drove away the little fuckers would be back. A car passed, horn blaring. Ken got back in, pulled over to the curb. Barbara lit a cigarette. "Give me one of those, will you?" Ken said. Barbara nodded, passed him hers and lit another. "Jesus." Ken banged a hand against the steering wheel and that too hurt.

When Harry got home that night the TV was on. Tim and Sashi were quiet in front of it, faces illuminated by the flashing screen. Down the hall Col was studying at the kitchen table. Harry set the grocery bag on the counter and said he was making bangers and mash. He put a pot on the stove, peeled the potatoes, cut them in half so they'd cook more quickly, then sliced the cabbage, tossed it in the frying pan with the sausage.

Barbara Krause's driver's licence lay on the counter. Harry lifted it as the kids came down the hall for supper. For a moment the sound of Col laying the cutlery evaporated and in that moment, Harry glimpsed beyond Barbara's startled face and into a sorrow that lay beneath. For an instant it could have been his own face in that licence, his wife's, even one of his kids'. It made Harry want to go back into the garage and sift through all those things which had cluttered the car, look for something he might have missed, not money, something more personal, something that would testify for Barbara: evidence she'd been here, engaged, participating.

When Harry turned, Col and the kids were seated and waiting. He set down the licence, walked to the table and raised his glass. "To life," he said. For a moment his children and his wife just looked at him. In all the weeks they'd been making toasts Harry had never offered one, but now he held steady with his glass in the air until one by one, the family raised their cups and toasted life. They drank, and when Harry sat, the family began to eat.