

The Full Car: A California Saga (1968)

by Richard Melo

A daytime moon is a lucky charm, but how does one explain a moon that shines by day? It's not as difficult as a nighttime sun, which is at least ten times as rare. A nighttime sun turns night back into day, which explains why you don't remember seeing one.

Two sleeping people, a young man and woman, slump against each other in the backseat of the car, and despite the majesty of the sites along California's Highway 1, they only see the play of the sun through their closed eyelids in the moments when they are half awake. The driver and the hitchhiker they just picked up catch sight of the daytime moon, when the highways curves are just right, through the soft blue tinted glass along the top edge of the windshield, but they are more distracted by the cliffs, ocean, and fresh air, not to mention each other.

'Seeker eyes, that faraway look'

—You sure don't seem like the type to move heaven and earth to say hi to a pretty girl.

—Tsk, you don't know me that well.

—I know you well enough that you remind me of my uncle.

—Jesus Christ, what is your insinuation? That I'm queer?

Now listen here, miss . . .

—Hey, why so touchy all of the sudden? You never even met my uncle. For all ya know, he could be King Stag.

—Yes, or a regular playboy's playboy. It's just that I've heard this many, many, many times. What are the odds that I keep reminding the teenyboppers I meet . . .

—I'm not a teenybopper.

— . . . the teenyboppers I meet of some or other Uncle John-Jacob-Jingleheimer-Jackrabbit Smith fellow. That's what I always hear, that Cyril gives off queer vibrations, Cyril moves in a homosexual rhythm. I don't know what these birds are talking about.

—Quick, let me see your eyes.

—Not while driving. I'm not supposed to take my eyes off the road. If you only saw my driving record, you would know what I mean.

—Turn your head just a little so I can see your eyes. Now was that really so hard? Just like I thought. You have seeker eyes, that faraway look.

—Can we change subjects and talk about what happened five minutes ago, because I am very agitated.

—Take it from the top, my darling man.

—We're driving along, south, almost to Big Sur, me and my backseat compadres, and I see you standing by the side of the road looking like you need a lift.

—I heard you coming a mile away. You might want to get your muffler fixed.

—I put on the brakes, skidded right by you.

—You almost went through the guardrails and over the cliff, but I'm the one who's lucky to be alive, lucky I wasn't run over.

—Something came over me. I threw it in reverse, composed myself, rolled down the passenger side window. 'You need a ride?'

—'Not going your way,' which is true, I wasn't.

—'Stick with me long enough, babe, and you'll get where you want to go.'

—What a great line, but it's not why I knew I was going to ride with you.

—I have no idea where the charm came from.

—It wasn't the line that made me get in the car. I couldn't see you that well, but it looked like you might have seeker eyes, that faraway look. That, and you reminded me of my uncle, who is a sweet and gentle person. I asked your name.

—I said Cyril.

—Knowing your name made you less of a stranger.

—You never seemed like a stranger. I almost broke my neck over you, and do you know why I did it?

—Let me count the reasons. I have a nice figure. My skirt shows off my legs. My sweater is tight enough to accentuate my form, but I always hear it's the boots that catch a man's eye.

—It was your hair, actually. I like it up like that. When I saw your hair, I couldn't stand the thought of driving another inch.

—Aw, you make it sound like love at first sight.

—Love? We just met, Cyril says as she scoots closer and reaches up to mess his hair. He goes on: —I was thinking I wanted to get to know you better. That's when the car nearly skidded off the road.

—It was your way of proving a point, Mister Man.

—What point was I trying to make?

—That you're not like my uncle, even though you really are.

—Gee, I liked it better when you said I have seeker eyes.

—When I meet a man with seeker eyes, that faraway look, I want to fall into his arms.

—Then what?

—Then comes kissing. Not just kisses, French kisses, the soft kind. Our mouths devour each other, and not just that. The handsome stranger with those eyes places his open palm over the small of my back, pulls me close, and we put our hips into it. It's like dancing, moving slowly together, so soft and slow. The thing is you have the same eyes as the man of my dreams, but he isn't you. It might not sound like it, but this doesn't say as much about me as it does you.

—You shouldn't be inconsiderate to ol' Cyril.

—This is going to be the start of a beautiful friendship.

—Like Romeo and Juliet.

—You don't have to get sarcastic. What we have is something beautiful already. We've cleared the air. We know what

lines to cross and when to step back. It took us just fifteen minutes. My parents have been married twenty-five years, and they never made it this far.

—I haven't even asked your name.

—Yvonne, pleased to meet ya.

—You know I'm not queer.

—Let's not talk about that now. We have our whole lives to talk about that.

—I don't want to spend my whole life talking about that. What do you want to talk about?

—Anything. For instance, how can anyone think straight with all that snoring?

In the back seat, there's a young woman in a blue merino wool sweater over a blouse buttoned up all the way, now wide awake, silent, sitting up straight, and staring ahead. Her skin has a freshly washed quality, remarkable form someone on a long road trip down the coast, and her hair is perfectly even in length just over the shoulder. Beside her sleeps a dark-haired boy in even darker sunglasses, his head slumped against her shoulder and his nostrils rattling with the force of his snoring.

—I'm used to it. The rest is good for him.

—It's getting more obnoxious. I never heard snoring like that before. What's he on? Did he OD?

—No.

—We should get him to the hospital.

—No hospitals, no hospitals. Unless the doctors are in the movement.

—This is serious. People die from overdoses.

—My man Sandoz back there is straight as an arrow, not that he has anything against drugs. It's just he's broke all the time, and a man's gotta eat. He's tired, that's all.

—I never heard no one snore like that before.

—That's because any young buck spending the night with you just pretends to sleep.

—That's not a nice thing to say, and I do know what loud snoring sounds like. I have two brothers. No, it's not like that. Stop giving me that look. Keep your eye on the road.

Yvonne slides away from the driver and turns her attention to the young, buttoned-up woman in back.

—Why so quiet, Sweetie? Don't you have anything to say?

—Julie never says much, says Cyril. —She's learned a very valuable lesson, never to say anything when you're angry. No doubt it's my reckless driving back there that has her ticked off. Any risk of harming a hair on the head of her sweet Rip Van Winkle back there.

—Sweetie, you shouldn't keep things bottled up. If he's a crummy driver, tell him to slow down. If you have something to say, just say it, let it out. It feels so good to get all that pressure off your shoulders.

—It's not that simple. She was raised Catholic, quite devout actually, raised not to say much. She escaped from a convent in Portland, Oregon to take care of our golden boy Sandoz back there.

—Escaped.

—She went over the wall.

—Climbed it?

—There were vines.

—Now she's with him? Yvonne whispers, —They make a cute couple at least.

— She doesn't like that she had to quit.

—They sound like my parents. My mom treats my dad like royalty, gives him a real monarch complex. The neighbors can't stand him.

—Sandoz and Julie ain't like that.

—Ain't? Now you sound like a hillbilly.

—Can't help it sometimes.

Then out of the blue, Julie takes a turn to speak: —I didn't leave St. Andrews to take care of Sandoz. I left so I could dedicate my life to ending the war.

—I forgot to mention that, says Cyril. —It just so happens there are secrets wrapped up in Sandoz' mind that can help the anti-war movement.

'Half the effort he puts into succeeding at nothing'

Julie speaks again: —Don't go thinking that when I'm angry I have nothing to say. It's only when I'm angry that I have something to say.

—Why do you think Sandoz can stop the war?

Before Julie can answer, Cyril jumps in: —Let's just say there was a secret experiment, Project Mindblender or something like that, you get my drift, the way they name those things, and they asked for volunteers. Auggie Sandoz was a natural. He was ROTC at Cornell, though not your average soldier type, not officer material by any stretch, and the way he sees it, any day he isn't shipped overseas is a good day, the best day of his life, and he'd like to live the rest of his life just like that. He knew the experiment was psychological in nature and that it was run by Pentagon brass, and he thought that after five minutes with him, they would see how screwy in the head he is and want to keep him as far away from war as possible. Even in wartime, the U.S. Army doesn't want bums like that. What Sandoz didn't know was that brainwashing was part of the bargain. The experiment didn't turn out so good, at least on Sandoz' end. He gets these headaches now, all the time, and worse, what happened to him goes straight to the top, the innermost sanctum of power, the same movers and shakers who got us in this mess in Viet Nam and can just as easily get us out.

—What did they do to him? Yvonne asks.

—They turned him into a time bomb. Listen close, and you can hear the tick-tick-tick.

—All I hear is snoring. How do you know he was brainwashed?

—Because he can't remember a thing about the experiment.

—I can say this: If he can't remember anything about what happened, that says there's more you don't know than what you know. Here, I'll play the devil's advocate: How do you know he didn't come down with a terrible case of something, say, like amnesia? Maybe he fell and hit his head, and that's all that happened.

The driver picks up his story: —He walked out of that government shrink office thinking two hours had passed, but when he saw the afternoon paper at a newsstand, he realized it wasn't two hours, it was two weeks. First thing he did was march right back to that shrink office except it was now vacant, those cats had split. He was terrified at first, the thought of having gone missing for two weeks on the shrink's couch, but then he discovered his life had gone along just fine without him. Like he thought for sure he had lost his job at the burger joint, but as it turns out, they didn't miss him one iota and gave his fat paycheck just like he had shown up for his shifts the whole time he was missing. His history papers that were overdue had been turned in, miraculously in a hand just like his own, while he had no memory of writing a single word. His roommates didn't say much but acted like he had never been away.

—Maybe all that happened just before he bumped his head.

—That's just it. Auggie Sandoz is a bum. He never turns in his classwork and can't be bothered to show up for work half the time. He only keeps from getting kicked out of school because of his parents' connections. What are the odds he decided to turn over a new leaf like that just before a whack on the head turned his brain into scrambled eggs?

—It could happen.

—You don't know Sandoz. If he put in half the effort he puts into succeeding at nothing into succeeding at anything, they'd hand him the Nobel Prize.

—What a fantastic mystery! Yvonne says. —I know just what to do.

Shereaches into her purse and pulls out an Agatha Christie paperback.

—We can act like detectives and make sense of all the clues.

—We don't have time for any Sherlock Holmes business. Besides, there aren't any clues, other than Sandoz' dreams about a secret beach, and all we can do is drive down the coast and hope we find it, and if we don't, we'll stop in Long Beach where there's a hypnotist who's part of the movement who can jog his memory, and if all else fails, there's electro-shock.

—Why would he do that? Doesn't electro-shock make people lose their memory? I thought you wanted him to remember.

—When you multiply two negative numbers, what do you get?

—A positive.

—The hope is that since he's already lost his memory, another round couldn't hurt.

—Isn't it painful?

—It's a small price when it comes to ending the war. He wants to go along with it. Of course, we could change direction and head straight back to Berkeley now if only he could remember his dreams. His dreams are the key to his subconscious, and his subconscious holds the answers to all our questions.

—I can never remember my dreams.

—Neither can Sandoz most of the time. That's why it's so important that he sleep. The more he sleeps, the more he dreams. The more he dreams, the better chance he will remember.

—I don't know that I could sleep under all that pressure.

—Neither can Sandoz most of the time. His sleeplessness was getting very bad. He was dragging his feet around his apartment in Ithaca all night every night without sleeping a wink, his roommates were ready to give him the boot, and he would then spend every waking daylight hour trying best not to succeed at anything. He can only sleep in a moving car, so we drive. We drove three-thousand miles across the country so he could sleep and to come look for his secret beach. Now we are on Highway 1, so we drive Highway 1.

'A monster is what they made out of me, a regular Frankenstein'

—Goddamn it people, I'm not even asleep, says a male voice in the back seat.

Yvonne turns and looks at Sandoz: —Why, hello, bright eyes.

—Oh, man, how long have you been awake?

—Just a while.

—So that unearthly snoring was like a put-on?

—Nothing will prick your ears faster than hearing your name come up in conversation.

—Yvonne, she says, extending her hand.

—You look like, you look just like Brigitte Bardot.

—You're kidding, right? That's a new one. I'll take it.

—That was goddamn inconsiderate, man, pretending like you were asleep.

—Don't listen to Lyin' Jack Lemonseed here. All he tells are lies.

—So rude, faking like that.

—I'm just glad you didn't tell Yvonne here what they made out of me.

—Let me guess. A secret agent?

—Guess again.

—An assassin?

—Nope, a monster is what they made out of me, a regular Frankenstein, and maybe an assassin, no, yes, definitely an assassin, a ticking time bomb, just like Cyril said. I found a pistol in the lapel of my gabardine jacket, a pea shooter really, and I had no idea how it got there. I threw it out the car window somewhere in New Mexico, then a couple days later, another one appeared, in the same pocket, the same jacket.

—That is strange.

—His assignment has begun. Our mission is to thwart it, says Cyril.

—There are times when I fall into a trance and go through all these hand motions, motions like I am assembling a rifle, you know, like the kind mobsters carry in a violin case, then ready, aim, fire! What is happening to me? Have I lost my mind?

—You talk like you're acting out a part in a spy movie. All right, Mr. Lee Harvey Junior, who do you suppose you've been programmed to kill? Hubert Humphrey?

—The Hube? Nah, wouldn't be worth the trouble.

—There's always Little Kennedy.

—John-John?

—Teddy. What about Bobby Dylan?

—Now there's an original idea. No one expects the assassination of a singer.

—This conversation is making me sick, Julie says.

—Face it, Cyril says. —You're just as curious as the rest of us.

—Can we change the topic? Julie asks.

—That's the \$64,000 Question: Who is Sandoz gonna kill?

—That's not the question, Julie says. —It's a distraction.

The question is who did this to him, and what was the intent, and how can they be stopped. They must be stopped.

—When I dream, I don't see names, faces, targets. I see a beach. It's like when they scraped away my memory, they didn't get them all, because I can remember the beach. The beach is surrounded by sea cliffs. The sand is fine, and there are magnificent breakers pounding the shore. It's a surfer's paradise, though no one is surfing in my dream. The beach is unpeopled other than me. It's the place where they don't want me to go, because when I get there, everything that happened to me will become apparent. The problem is I have no idea where it is. It could be in California, Southern California, Baja California. We drove cross-country to start at Santa Cruz and work our way down. I might remember when I fall into a trance. You see, there's a stimulus, a trigger that sends me into a trancelike state. I never know what it is. One time it was a rock 'n' roll song come on the radio. Next time the same song came on,

nothing. There's a hypnotist in Long Beach I'll see, if we make it that far without finding it first. I'm not optimistic.

—Why?

—Hypnosis doesn't work on me. It might have once. They programmed me not to hypnotize again so easily.

—Do you see that pooch?

—Where?

—By the side of the road. Slow down.

—You should give your passengers fair warning when you're going to hit the brakes.

—There is something about the pooch. It's like I know him.

—Looks like he's thumbing a ride.

—Nah, just scratching fleas.

—That dog has a funny look in his eye. I wish I could put my finger on it.

—Roll down your window so we can talk to him.

'Lying doggo'

Cyril, Julie, Yvonne, and Auggie watch in amazement as the dog by the side of the road stands up on his hind legs and saunters to the car with a fluid stride, quite humanlike.

—Oh my God, you're a human being! Yvonne says to him from her rolled down window.

—You mean you couldn't tell? says the dog.

—I think I need glasses.

—This dog disguise works wonders, what more can I say?

—Lying doggo.

—That snout is so fake. I don't know how you ever had me fooled.

—Why would anyone do such a thing? asks Yvonne as she steps out of the car and holds her door open so he can take the middle seat. —Disguise yourself in a dog costume, make yourself out as such a convincing dog.

—Sure beats prison, the dog says as the car pulls back on the road. —Especially when there's talk of Death Row.

—It just seems like a lot of trouble, Yvonne says.

—I'm able to come and go as I please. Can't ask for better than that.

—What did you do?

—They say I killed a man.

—Stop the car, I'm getting out, Julie says. —Sandoz goes with me.

—I'm innocent, baby. That's their scene, the police, the F.B.I. Any time they want a black man off the street, they throw out the accusation of murder. They think all black militants must have killed someone so they might as well pull a frame job. I bet they can't even name who they think I killed.

—We didn't know all this when we stopped for you. Maybe you should get out.

—See what I mean, the dog says, speaking directly to Yvonne. —You were saying why go through all the trouble of disguising myself as a dog. This is the kind of thing I'm talking about. If I were still playing the part of the dog, we wouldn't be having this conversation.

—Is it true, have you killed anyone?

—My aim's not so good. Have you?

—I haven't even been in a fistfight since elementary school.

—Been on the run a long time?

—A few weeks. Long enough to cause some havoc among the F.B.I. Apparently, it's an insult to their manhood to be out asking questions about a dog. You all right if I stay? I sure could use the ride.

—When I saw you along the road, you sure had me fooled, says Yvonne. —Your frame is so slight, but I don't know how I was fooled, you sure had me fooled. That's an extraordinary talent.

—There you go, do I need to read your Mark Twain to you? White people are always trying to bestow black people with

supernatural powers that we use to educate you and solve all your problems. You remember how Jim has to bleed for Huckleberry to learn that a Negro man is just like himself. I got news for you. Just because you fooled yourself into thinking I was a real dog doesn't give me super-duper powers or make me any less of a man, uh-uh. I won't solve your problems for you, but when I am in my human form, I am happy, no overjoyed to educate white people on their own white people stuff, and you ask why I prefer to stay a dog. All men are created equal. All men are created equal. Do you hear the words? It was a white man that said that. You might also want to say that women are created equal to men, and I will give you that. Women can do everything men can do except maybe play linebacker for the New York Jets, but I am not even sure about that, I mean there were some East Germans in the Olympics built like a Sherman tank. Let's for now just say all men are equal and say that means everybody, and I am not making this up, when white people say all men are created equal they only believe it when they are looking in the mirror.

—Quoth the man in the dog suit.

—It's only a costume. I never stopped being a man for Chrissake. You want to know what a killer looks like? Take a look at that boy there.

Along the side of the road is a convertible with its hood up and a blonde, well dressed kid waving a tire iron to get their attention.

'That one out there is a bad seed'

—A killer? Why do you say that?

—The car he is driving is not his own.

—How do you know?

—You can tell. He's not the type. I have known killers. No, not all the killers I have known were black, but when a black man kills, it is out of self-defense. Find a killer who likes to kill for the sake of killing and you've found yourself a white man. That's the vibe

I get from that one out there. During my time as a dog, I have developed an instinct about people. Call them animal instincts if you must, and don't think of me any less as a man. That one out there is a bad seed, he says as he places the dog mask back over his head.

—I know him, says Yvonne. —That's Bobby Beausoleil. He's an actor. I met him at an audition in L.A. It's Bobby Beausoleil, but he doesn't seem like the Bobby Beausoleil I know. There's something wrong with him.

Bobby Beausoleil approaches their car and knocks on the passenger-side window. —Hello, Yvonne, he says while she's rolling the window down.

—Hi, Bobby. You got car trouble?

—Blown hose. Nothing I can fix right now. I need a lift to Frisco.

—Sorry, says the driver. —We have a full car, and we're headed south. Shouldn't be too hard to find someone to give you a lift.

—Listen, the heat's on me. I need to get to Frisco.

—What did you do, Bobby?

—I might have killed a guy.

—You don't know?

—He was bleeding pretty bad. I didn't stick around long enough to find out if anyone was going to call him an ambulance. Now scoot over, I'm riding with you to Frisco.

—Sorry, it's a full car going in the opposite direction.

—That mangy dog is taking up a perfectly good seat.

—He's our dog, and we are very protective of him.

—I'm nobody's dog.

—Shhh, did you hear that?

—Hear what?

—That dog just said something.

—Must be your imagination.

—Bullshit.

—Put the gun away, Bobby.

—What kind of crazy magic shit do you have going on?

—Nothing, Bobby.

—That dog is dead meat, says Bobby Beausoleil as he releases the pistol's safety.

—He's shooting at us.

The driver peels out, as the passengers duck in their seats amid a popping sound.

—Do you think he'll come after us?

—He'll either forget about it or wind up in jail.

—Such a pretty boy, such a shame.

—Glad I'm not the only one with bad aim.

Cyril holds up his hand as he has something he wants to say: —I want to get a thing or two straight. I am New Left with ties to S.D.S. and the Communist Party of America. Come to think of it, almost all my friends are brazen communists, either that or F.B.I. informants. I have enemies in high places, but never ever has anyone shot at me, not until we bumped into that friend of yours.

—How was I supposed to know he'd lost his mind? Bobby's fallen in with the wrong crowd, a musical combo, a bunch of singers.

—It doesn't exactly sound like Up With People.

—The girls in the group are tough and can kill you with their stare. They are looking for a record deal, and the leader of their band, Charlie, has a screw loose. Bobby wasn't like that before. He was a freak, but a regular freak. He liked music, he liked to get high, liked getting kicks, and he was beautiful.

—What do you mean by tough girls?

—I mean like girls with knives in their purse and they pull them out to pretend to stab you and they grit their teeth like this.

—Remind me to stay away. That's not my scene.

'All bottled up, afraid to admit what scares you most'

An hour closer to their day's destination, the moon long since set, and the human dog now asleep in the backseat in the middle of the other two, Yvonne and Cyril strike up another conversation.

—Tell me one of your secrets, she asks.

—Why should I want to do that?

—Because that's the kind of love affair we have. It's the best kind of love affair either of us has ever had or ever will have. What we have right now, with each other.

—I like your legs.

—You do? That's a start. If you weren't so queer, I'd sleep with you, be your first, show you how it's done, only you don't care how it's done. Your loss. Tell me something else.

—I don't like this game.

—Now just slow down. Everyone keeps secrets, it's only natural, but you don't want to turn into one of those people keeping secrets from yourself, all bottled up, afraid to admit what scares you most. Now close your eyes and think about what makes you most happy. Don't say anything. No one needs to know what it is. What makes you most happy is a secret between you and you. When you open your eyes, remember what it is. You can make that happiness your life's pursuit, and no one else needs to know.

Cyril thinks about it for a moment. —I like your legs.

—Why do you think that is?

—I guess it's because I wish mine were more like them. So soft and smooth. Am I queer?

'Things need to happen right now'

—Here we are, so what do you think? Pfeiffer Beach, is this your secret beach? It's very beautiful.

—This isn't it, Sandoz says. --As much as I'd like it to be, this isn't it. This might be the most beautiful spot I've ever seen.

—You and your secret beach. For all we know, it could be Viet Nam.

—The secret beach is also beautiful. It might be in Mexico. Can we go to Mexico? Bobby Beausoleil won't think to come find us in Mexico.

—I don't know, man. Mexico might be the first place he'd think to come look. I just don't know how long I can stick with you. I want to get to the bottom of this mystery, find out what they did to you.

—I know who brainwashed me. It was this giant. I can see his oblong face as if he were standing right here. We have to go find him. He's south of here. He's in L.A.

—The problem is I'm running out of time, man.

—There's nowhere you're supposed to be.

—That's just it. The clock is ticking. I am twenty-two years old, and things need to happen right now. If I am going to be social, political, and economic catalyst, if I am going to put a whopping thorn in the Establishment's side, I can't spend weeks on end driving around looking for haunted beaches.

—What about the rest of you? Is anyone still with me?

—I'm still with you.

—Of course, the nun will follow you until the end of the earth. She didn't have plans other than a life of prayer. She won't be missing out to follow you to the end of the earth.

—I'm with you, too.

—Of course, the human dog is with you. He's got a murder rap he's trying to beat.

—I'd like to stick around.

—I didn't think you'd say that Yvonne. Out of all of us, you have better things to do.

—We haven't solved the mystery yet, she says.

—Stay with me until Long Beach, says Sandoz. —There's a hypnotist in Long Beach. If that doesn't work, I'll catch your drift, but in any case, will you take a look at the ocean, the friggin' Pacific Ocean. We made it all the way from Ithaca to see this, and goddamn, if this wasn't worth the trip.

END

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