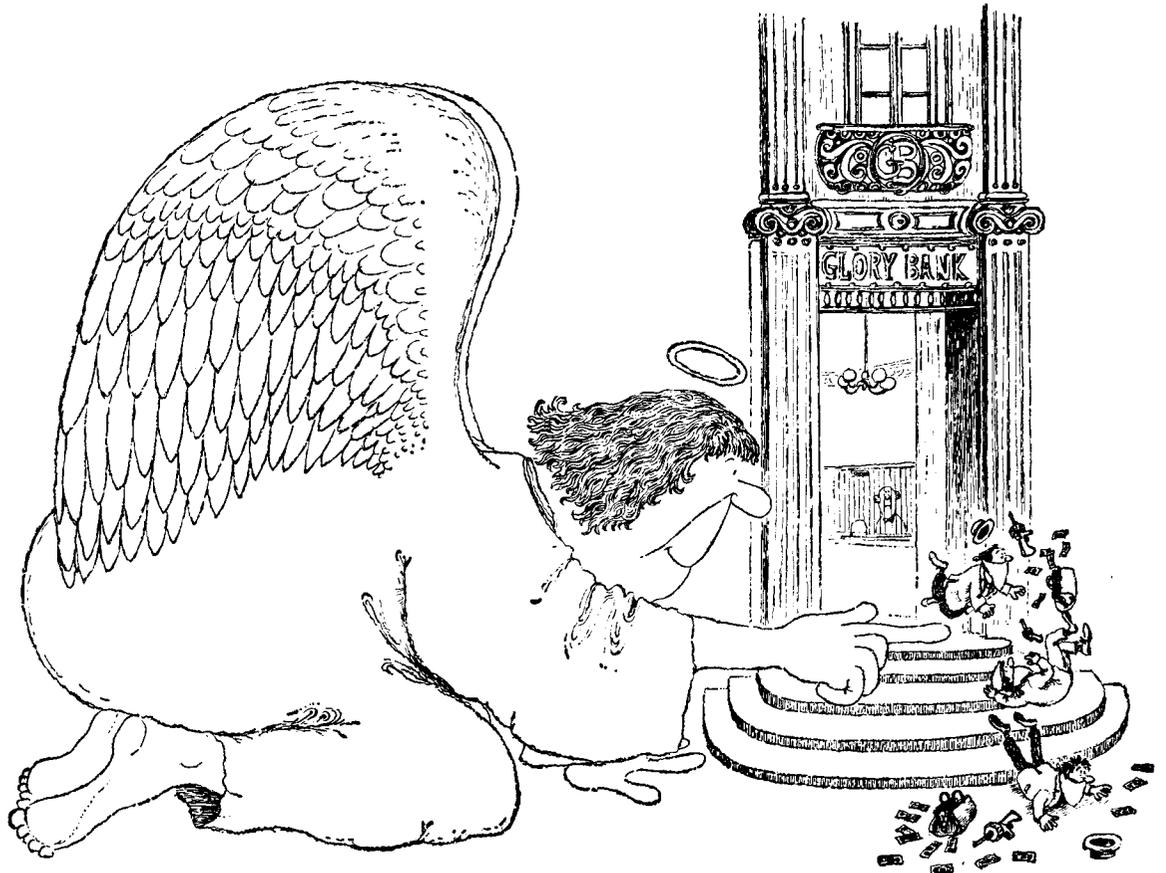
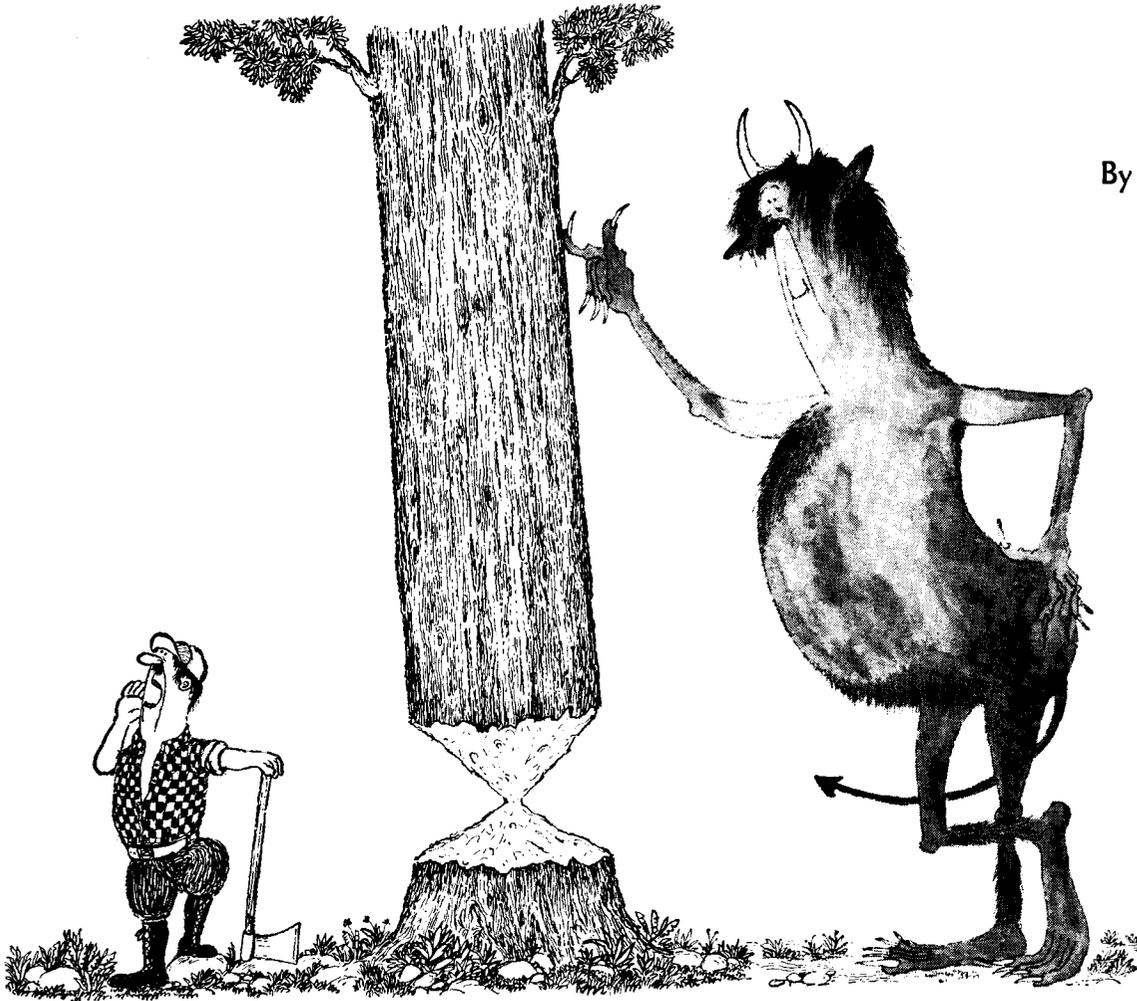


By Fernando Krahn



Nightfight

With the Nicest Guy in Town

MEG GREENFIELD

“**I**T’S A DEAL,” said the headline over the lead story in the *Wall Street Journal* on June 13—“Savvy Buyers Haggle With Shrewd Salesmen in Auto Showrooms.” A sub-head hinted at even more exotic things to come. “Both Ignore ‘Sticker’ Price,” it declared, “Try To Outbluff Each Other by ‘Mooching,’ ‘Lowballing.’”

It turned out that one of the *Journal’s* staff reporters, Ronald G. Shafer, had recently spent two weeks at a Chevrolet agency and was prepared to share his findings with the public. Thus, readers soon discovered that “mooch” was salesmen’s parlance for a comparison shopper, while a mooch who turned up five minutes before closing time, with a view to Armageddon then and there, was known to the trade as a “night-fighter.” “Lowballing,” on the other hand, was one of the salesman’s many forms of revenge—a teasingly low price mentioned to engage the customer’s interest but only to be honored in the breach.

As one who had recently put in some time on the other side of the car-bargaining table, I was naturally interested in Mr. Shafer’s account, which confirmed much of my own experience. Automobile salesmen, he disclosed, promise immediate delivery of goods they do not have, capitalize on the confusion and weariness of their clients, and have developed a certain skill at talking a person out of what he wants and into what the dealership has had trouble getting rid of. (“I don’t want to be the one to talk you out of your life’s dream,” one particularly successful approach is said to have begun.) Then there was the matter of the preliminary “pounce,” whereby the salesman found out a number of things he needed to know through what Mr. Shafer described as “seemingly normal conversation.” This struck me as the most perceptive observation in the piece, although it may not have been intended that way. At no time did the salesmen’s

conversation seem normal to me: what it seemed was seemingly normal.

At first, I will admit, I enjoyed the give-and-take. Having been forewarned, I was accompanied by a male friend with a better business head than mine, and I was also equipped with a list of special features to avoid—dual carburetors, for example, designed to help me take the turns at Le Mans; \$94 worth of vinyl addenda, if not in fact errata, that go by the name of “interior decor.” So protected, I had a rather romantic, Bagdad-on-the-Potomac feeling about our early encounters. However, it passed.

We spent the better part of two steamy afternoons wheeling through the Virginia and Maryland countryside in search of all those “nice guys,” “friendly ex-GIs,” and similar purveyors of the “best deal in town” whose affectionate messages I had been listening to on the radio. Few of them, of course, *are* in town. They are to be found in an array of shapeless roadside arrangements that do not quite qualify as places, let alone as suburbs or even shopping centers. There, in outdoor heat and glare, business is conducted under yards of pennant-bedecked clothesline. I mention this only because it was my view that the irrationality which eventually overcame me and which my friend diagnosed as a simple case of hysteria could in fact have been due to sunstroke—a definite hazard when buying a car. At its most acute, it took the form of a sudden, overpowering desire for a Fudgsicle that caused me to lose interest entirely in the negotiations at hand, which had just reached their most delicate point.

But that is a little ahead of the story. Mr. Shafer, for all his apparent objectivity, has spoken for the auto salesmen. I believe that there is another side to this thing, and also that there are more of us than there are of them. By “us” I mean unreconstructed mooches.

“**H**ELLO, FOLKS, my name is Jim Davis.” That is the way a car salesman approaches a customer, and I am not simply offering a typical fictitious example. It is my distinct recollection that all the dealers we met that day were named Jim Davis, although my friend disagrees, claiming to remember at least three who were named Fred Davis. We do agree, however, that all of them came with certain standard, non-optional, built-in features. They would extract your first name by way of introduction, get it slightly askew, and then offend you by using it throughout the conversation. To correct them would have been to condone this chumminess, so we could only sit back and let seeming normality take its course.

All of them had also achieved an absolutely frightening smile that they wore perpetually, and they had other disconcerting ways of displaying both their probity and warmth. I, for example, simply do not trust a person who can look me straight in the eye. The people I know adopt that particular attitude only when they are about to tell me a lie or, worse, to reveal that they have uncovered one of mine. Uniformly, the salesmen peered into our eyes.

In fairness I should say that there were certain differences between them and not only where price was concerned. One wore tinted glasses and had only cars with plastic tops; another delivered the hyah-fella vernacular pitch through an all but impenetrable Erich von Stroheim accent; a third, who was extraordinarily rosy in complexion, appeared to have painted himself all over with something.

Each transaction, however, did seem to begin the same way. We would enumerate the exact specifications of the car I wished to buy. Jim would then advert to a strike in Metuchen, New Jersey, that had seriously depleted his stock and slowed his deliveries. He would also take the opportunity to probe for any hostilities toward labor we might share by characterizing whatever was going on in Metuchen as a dispute over “washroom” rights, adding on at least one notable occasion, “Heh, heh, heh, heh—eh, Marge?”

His mirth over, he would tell us that any dealer who said he could