

New-car smell: Intimations of heaven

by [Lillian Daniel](#) in the [March 7, 2006](#) issue

When you get to the car lot, you have a decision to make—which way should you go? If you turn right, you enter beautiful show rooms with sparkling new cars that deserve their luxurious placement on plush carpets and under glass roofs. It seems a shame to think about actually driving these cars. Here the sales people are enthusiastic and chipper, the rooms are bright, the bathrooms tidy. The cars seem at ease too. They are an elite family, all with the sleek, beautiful lines of a particular brand.

If you turn the other way, toward the used side of the lot, you come to cars that do not sit inside glass houses. They're left outside, exposed to the elements. Far from being an elite family of automobiles, these are mutts, cars with a variety of names. They look sheepish and awkward, even orphaned, with sad scratches and faded seats that may have survived a family of five and a couple of dogs.

I learned all this when I cruised into the car lot in my American boat, a Buick Century station wagon with 140,000 miles on it. It's not exactly the European driving experience. But if you've ever dreamed of being the captain of your own tugboat, or longed for the excitement of steering a garbage trawler, this car is for you. As I pulled my steamer into port, I could sense the guys on the used-car side getting up, putting on their game faces and winding up their words of welcome. I quickly learned that there is no such a thing as a "used car." These cars are "pre-owned." Used-car sales have marched into the world of political correctness, a world where people like me are not "short" but "vertically challenged."

But they're right to change that name. "Used" implies that the car is battered and soiled, and suggests that one will find chewing gum wrappers stuffed into the seats and stains of spilled milk on the rug. "Pre-owned" suggests that some lord of the manor owned the vehicle. Not that he ever drove it, mind you; he owned it like a fine race horse that is rarely ridden. If only the new-car lot wasn't there to break the illusion. Once you glance over into the world of the new, you wonder what it feels like to shop there, in the promised land.

In that moment of envy, it's easy to forget what seekers of real new life know is true: a new car is new only for a day. Then it too will break, wear, tear and, even worse, depreciate. That famous new-car smell lasts only as far as the driveway out of the car lot, and then the car becomes like all the others—used. Nothing in this world gets to be new for very long.

“For I am about to create a new heaven and a new earth,” Isaiah tells us, as God told him. “The former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight. No longer shall the sound of weeping be heard, or the cry of distress.” In a world of war, floods and shaking earth, it's hard to imagine this kind of newness, one that is more profound than any new-car smell.

All my life I have driven used cars. I remember the first car of my childhood—the “jolly green giant,” a light green station wagon that made a clunking sound as it lurched into the driveway.

Then we drove a Pontiac Phoenix, one of those ubiquitous gray cars that every family seemed to have back when the hatchback was the latest automotive invention. The Phoenix was another used car, of course, but the name implied that it had risen out of the ashes. As the years and repair bills mounted, my mother called it by other names.

I was a teenager in the 1980s, when a spirit of economic optimism swept the suburb where we lived. My mother purchased our first new car, a chrome-plated Chrysler New Yorker that symbolized the decade with its padded seats and gentle rocking turns. That car needed to be big. It was meant to carry our family into the upper middle class, to carry me through some tortuous teenage years and to carry my mother through a divorce from a man who did not believe in new cars.

No car could carry all that weight, but on the first day we believed that it could. “Breathe deep,” my mother said, “It has new-car smell.” And, as if predicting that one day I would go into the ministry, she added, “This may be the only time you ever smell it.” I breathed in the scent. Imagine my disillusionment years later when I saw at the car wash, on a shelf with all the air fresheners, a bottle labeled “new-car smell.” Often what we think of as new is nothing but “new-car smell”—the illusion of newness, a label to cover up the dings and rust spots of our used-up lives.

Our faith offers a bigger vision of a new heaven and a new earth, where newness comes not through our purchasing power, but through being known and owned by the One who makes all things new. While the world takes new things and leaves them used, perhaps in God's economy we've always been pre-owned, and new life, not "new-life smell," is just one turn away.