

THE SATURDAY MORNING CAR WASH CLUB

BY JAMES ELLIS THOMAS

To be sixteen on a July Saturday was heaven. Our neighborhood really showed out in the summer. Chumps who dragged ass to work all week leaped out of bed on Saturday mornings—it was the best way to cheat the heat. A lawnmower, a grill, a chair beneath a shade tree, anything that involved making something out of nothing powered their need to rise. Even the ne'er-dowells started early on a Saturday. You'd see guys who hadn't caught a weather report in years strolling about like businessmen, on their way to trade chat with their down-the-block neighbors. My mother always said that Pig and Sammy Sam, our local hopheads, liked to get out early on a Saturday because then no one could tell them to go get a job. "It's Saturday!" Pig would say. "Unemployment office closed on Saturday!"

Most fellas between sixteen and married spent their weekend mornings at the Saturday Morning Car Wash Club. Actually, it wasn't really a club, just a run-down, semi-automated car wash two blocks up from Cedar Heights. The structure itself was ugly. Faded, cracked, and tornado-abused, it looked like a pistol-whipped tin man, surrounded by kudzu and non-biodegradables from the Burger King uphill. It was green. The hoses all had leaks in them. The vacuum cleaners were from the seventies, and the change machine was still chewing on the counterfeit five that Pig had fed it two years ago. Yet this did not stop the solitary ride from pulling up to the car wash every Saturday.

Around eight o'clock, the solitary ride, the first car, would roll in and park beside a vac-bot. There'd be a good jam on the stereo. Nothing loud, no need for excessive bass this early. The passenger side would be vacuumed first, then the floorboard, the seat, the back, then the driver's side. Soda-straw wrappers and six-day-old French fries would fly into the garbage can like dirt from a dog's hole.

For breaks, this first Saturday Morning Car Wash Club member would look up and down the highway for cars he might recognize. Then back to work. Sweeping the crack where the seats folded forward, he would finally hear a beep-beep, and then another, and then a honk and a thump of bass. And for the next six hours he would go on cleaning and washing his car, watching the parade of incoming vehicles. As soon as the second Saturday Morning Car Wash Club member asked the first one for a quarter, the meeting officially commenced.

"Man, stop playin' around," I said, as the hooptie chugged closer and closer to the car wash. "You wanna get your ass beat this early?"

Chester had failed to tell me the whole truth about helping him wash his car. "Let's clean the machine," he'd said. I thought we were going to park it in his front yard and break out the water hose and the lemon-fresh Joy. I had no problem with that. What I did have a problem with was the fact that I was now riding in Chester's ugly brown rustmobile, his hooptie, his lemon, his clunker—in other words, his 1978 AMC Pacer.

I wasn't a big fan of the hooptie. Aside from the more obvious reasons for disliking Chester's ride, I charged the car with that most heinous variety of crime: a crime against childhood. Chester and I no longer watched cartoons. When the hooptie's first oil stains appeared on Chester's driveway our toon watching was over. Tools replaced the toons, motor oil replaced the milk in our Froot Loops, and the Bat Signal was answered by a super-inflated Michelin Man, hellbent on avenging bad front-end alignments. Chester's ugly brown rustmobile had killed Saturday morning cartoons forever, and it was about to kill us as well. We were heading toward the one place where ugly brown rustmobiles were chastised on a regular basis—the

Saturday Morning "Back That Hunk of Junk Out of Here" Club. We were motorvating toward an early grave.

"Apollonia needs washin'," said Chester. "That's why I'm takin' her to the car wash. What's wrong with that?"

I jumped around beneath my seat belt. "What's wrong with that? Tommy, Buck, Mann, Leon. All of those fools hang out up there."

Chester strummed his fingers against the steering wheel; last week, he'd wrapped it with duct tape. He said it was for the grip, but I had never once seen Chester drive with anything more than a rotating palm.

"You're trippin'," he said, taking a wide right turn around a slow-moving cat. "I'm grown. Everybody know me, everybody know you. It's the same fools at the car wash that be around the neighborhood." He turned and looked at me; I saw my reflection in his silver, mirrored shades. "You act like you're scared," he said.

"I ain't scared."

"You act like it."

The engine suddenly dropped, idled down, then shrieked back up three times louder. A fat little Vietnamese kid, playing in his front yard, picked up a stick and made as if to throw it at us. He ducked when the engine backfired.

"Do you know what they call this thing?" I asked.

"Apollonia," said Chester, stroking the dashboard.

"Doo-Doo Brown, man, they call your car Doo-Doo Brown. I was out at the pool yesterday, and as soon as I jumped in, everybody got out because they said they'd seen me riding around in the Doo-Doo-Mobile. What's up with that, man?"

Chester grinned. "That's all right though. I see you ain't walkin' anywhere. Punks about fifty years old still ridin' the bus to school, ignorant. This is luxury."

I craned my head toward the roof of the car. Pockets of upholstery sagged



Ellis Thomas photographed on May 25, 2000. He lives in Dothan, Alabama. Photograph by Andrea Artz.

own like small bellies against my face. I just don't feel like getting my ass hit this early, that's all," I said. "Well, don't worry about it. Damn it." "Damn it" was the cuss of the moment. I'd been cussing since way back when, but the new thing that summer was to cuss like Eddie Murphy's father, or at least the way Eddie Murphy sounded when

he impersonated his father—a drunken slur with attitude. Chester's Vernon was pretty good. Mine, on the other hand, sounded like me trying to sound like Chester trying to sound like Eddie Murphy trying to sound like his father.

"For real, though, man," said Chester. "This is where the ladies hang out." "Oh yeah," I said. "The ladies."

"That's right. The ladies," said Chester. "But anyway, I know you don't want to walk up to the car wash with no car."

I thought about that for a second. The Saturday Morning Car Wash Club loomed just a few turns away from our current position. Apollonia's rattle was loud enough to be heard in Botswana. Meanwhile, there I was, afraid to put

pressure against the passenger-side door for fear of tumbling out. Maybe walking wasn't such a bad idea.

"Doo-Doo Brown, huh?" said Chester, palming us into another turn. "We'll see what they call it when we ride off with all the sweet potatoes!" He laughed for a bit, and I would've laughed with him if he hadn't punched the speedometer in order to get the needle to move.

While Apollonia was revving herself into a fit, we slowly approached the hill between us and the car wash. Not a steep hill, if you were riding in anything other than a hooptie, but we were, of course, hooptienauts. Apollonia took to the incline like a pushcart on a roller-coaster track. When we finally crested the hill, I could see that the Saturday Morning Car Wash Club was already in session, at least it was until Apollonia backfired, frightening the members and a war-torn village or two somewhere in the Middle East. Chester looked at me. I looked at Chester. We rolled downhill in a prolonged, gear-grinding lurch.

"Luxury," I said.

"The ladies," said Chester. "Sweet potatoes! I told you they'd be here!"

If only my friend had taken off his shades and looked at his own reflection. There he was, practically kissing the windshield, grinning as we approached the car wash—and the ladies. Mean-

while, his right foot was hammering on the brakes, cheating Apollonia out of a sweet-potato massacre. The only thing more embarrassing than riding downhill in Chester's stalled car was riding downhill in Chester's stalled car toward every single girl that I'd ever planned on asking out. To this day, I firmly believe that Apollonia did more to steady the course of my virginity than my mother, my pastor, or those homemade Converse high-tops that my cousin Meat Meat sold to me back in seventh grade. A true struggle buggy, a true hooptie, forms a clamp around the rider's crotch like some kind of pig-iron codpiece. I groaned as Apollonia shuddered to a halt.

"My hair look all right to you?" asked Chester.

It was barely nine o'clock, and already the Saturday Morning Car Wash Club was packed and vibrant. Not counting Apollonia, there were fifteen vehicles parked at various angles around the lot. Six of them sat inside the wash-and-wax bays. As usual, the guys who were washing their cars felt the need to go shirtless while they soaped. It didn't matter if they were muscular or not—something about a long black hose shooting chemically treated water urged them to work bare-topped. I could understand it if you were in your front

yard with your toes in the grass, airing your car and the funk of your labor at the same time. But these jokers were flexing their pecs inside veritable saunas of industrial-strength detergent. You knew they were showing off for the benefit of the ladies, while the ladies were paying attention to anything but the soap operas. All that wax-o-wax and gunk-o-gunk repelled the females faster than drugstore-brand cologne. The guys never noticed. Most of them were too busy trying to scrape lovebugs off their headlights.

Six girls were at the car wash when Chester and I rolled in. Twice as many fellas were hovering around them. Most of these guys were older than we were, dropouts and two-time seniors, people who seemed to have owned rides all their lives. Some of the girls had their own cars. For the most part, they drove sporty, bright, quick-trip Civics, or Camrys, or whatever looked good behind an airbrushed vanity plate, and they brought them to the club for their boyfriends, or some other shirtless wonders, to give them a wash. Every one of these guys would treat his girlfriend's ride as if it were Cinderella's stagecoach. They'd use illicit waxes, controversial sponges, and forbidden emollients to rub, butter, and caress the various paint jobs. The only no-no was fooling around under the hood. The girls never allowed it. I don't know if it was Daddy's orders or suspicion of shade-tree mechanics, but rarely would you see a guy working on the engine of a girl's car. Their own cars, of course, they butchered no end.

"What's up, Chester?"

"Leon."

"What's up, Lorenzo?"

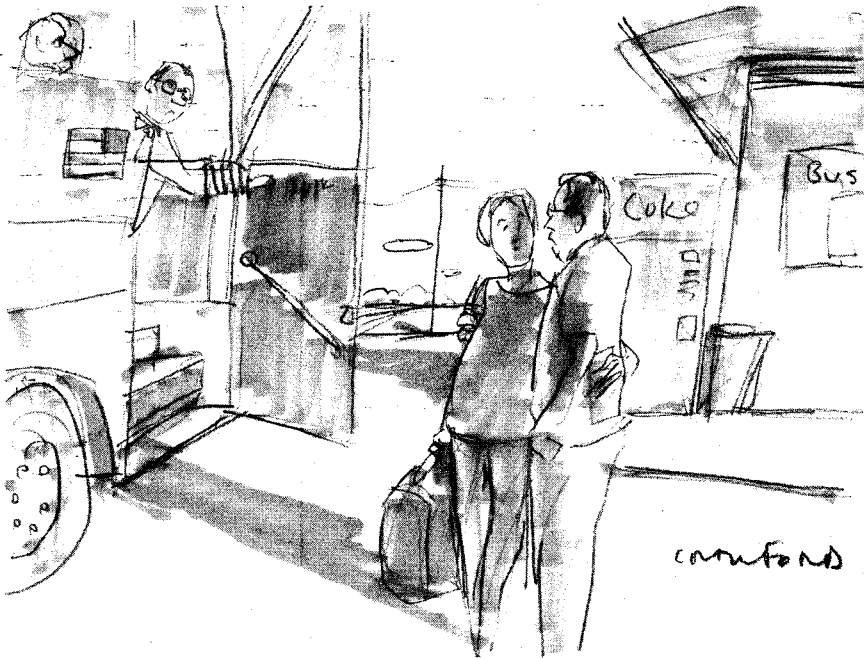
"Leon."

We'd barely got out of the car when Leon slid up with three of his stank-breath friends, all of them with towels around their necks soaking up the juice from their hairdos. Leon was already smirking.

"I like the ride, man," said Leon.

"Yep," said Chester.

"My sister got one just like it." Every time Leon opened his mouth, his boys would snicker. It was too early for an ass beating, and too hot. Leon was only three years older than us, but he'd been handing out a\$\$ beatings in Cedar Heights ever since I was old enough to



"And if things don't work out in the big city, Cindy, you can always come back home to me and Mom and our nightmare descent into booze and pills."

walk to the playground by myself. I was tired of Leon. Maybe if somebody else had beaten my ass for a change, things would have been different, but Leon tended to bogart Cedar Heights ass like a demented Santa Claus who came every day except Christmas. He was a rusty-necked, two-toothed, head-cheese-eating bastard, and he always wore a mesh jersey with nothing underneath and thick gold-rope chains with foreign-car emblems hanging from them.

"Yeah, man, that's a smooth ride," said Leon. "What kind of gas you use?"

"I don't know," said Chester. "Gas." Leon and his boys started laughing. I didn't get the joke. I looked over at Chester, and I could tell that he was becoming upset. The most vicious tool that the bad guys had was always their laughter. Leon had never uttered a funny phrase in his life, but he didn't really have to. His portable laughtrack took care of the rest.

I leaned back against Apollonia. Lime-green engine fluids fanned across the asphalt.

"Damn Doo-Doo Brown!" yelled Leon, affecting "the Vernon." "Doo-Doo Brown!"

Chester folded his arms. "I came here to wash my car, man, dang. Why ya'll always got to be messin' with people? Why don't you go worry about your own car?"

"Shoot, my car clean," said Leon, gesturing back to his black Camaro. "I'm worried about Doo-Doo Brown. That junk start a rustquake, you gonna be washin' every car out here!"

He chortled. I knew what was coming before he could even say it, but he said it anyway. "I hate to tell you this, cuz, but your car is kinda messed up—for real, though. I ain't tryin' to be funny or nothin', but damn. It look like King Kong wiped his ass with a can of Pepsi. Look like a truckload of toe jam had an accident. Look like a roll of pennies with a damn steerin' wheel. I hate to tell you."

But, of course, he told us anyway. At one point or another, Leon compared Chester's car to a three-thousand-year-old foot, *stankin'* dried-up alligator balls, one roller skate being squeezed through somebody's ass, and two roller skates giving dried-up alligator balls a ride

to the liquor store. Chester remained silent.

The more Leon and his boys laughed, the more attention they gathered. Music that had been pounding from the cars was turned down. Hoses were placed back on their hooks. Vacuums were switched off, and, most unfortunately, the girls drew near. No one had said the word "fight," but that's what everyone had heard, and that's what everyone expected. Leon had gained an audience. He'd hyped, he'd promoted, and he'd thoroughly teased; now all that was left was the main event.

"There ain't no room to wash that piece of doo-doo, no way," said Leon. "Why don't you ask your mama for a damn water hose, with those damn stupid shades. It look like you busted up a mirror to make that junk. *Ooh-wee*, let me hold them shades, cool breeze!"

Before Leon raised his left hand to grab the sunglasses from Chester's face, I noticed two things about the crowd that had gathered around us. First, not everyone was amused by Leon's antics. Second, there was a girl standing off to the side whom I had not seen here before. Her name was Le Ly, and she was the one girl in the neighborhood that Chester always got quiet about whenever her name came up in conversation. She seemed out of place, but then again, I hardly ever saw her hanging out anywhere. When Leon raised his hand, I glimpsed her gazing at Chester. I intervened. With my right hand, I caught Leon's rising left.

"You better get yo' hand offa me!" roared Leon. "Walrus-lookin' punk, I'll punch you in yo' damn throat!"

My damn throat gulped. Holding his ashy wrist in my grip, I could feel the tendons wiggling into fist mode. "Do something!" the tendons were saying, wiring me like a traitor from within Leon's flesh. "Do something, man, don't just stand there feeling me up! This is the same fist that de-toothed the entire after-school chess program! Run! Run right now!"

"Race," I said, as Leon wrenched his hand free. "That messed-up hunk of rat turds you got can't beat this ride here. My man Chester says he'll race you for a spot."

"Shut up," said Leon. To my surprise, he stomped off toward the Camaro,

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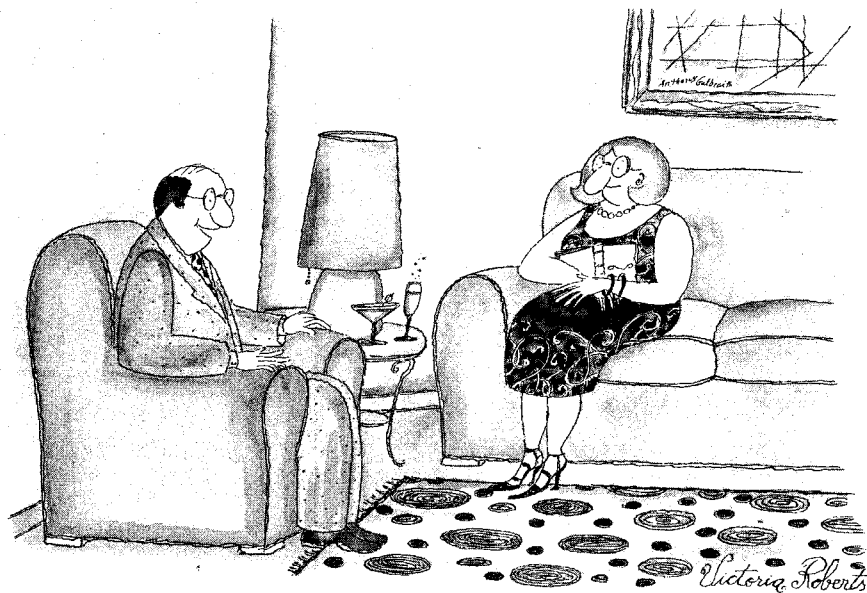


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"No, we're not getting any younger, but why, pray tell, is that such a revelation to us?"

boys in tow, towels dropped in their wake. I'd expected a punch or, at least, a smack. Foolish suggestions often drew smacks. With no smack to be had, the audience became a tense, buzzing mob of color commentators. "They crazy" was their main catchphrase.

"I know I didn't hear you say that," said Chester, turning to me with a frown. He removed his sunglasses and threw them inside the car. "Lorenzo, man, let's just go home."

"Why?" I asked. "Leon's already at home. Leon lives in Cedar Heights, too."

"Yeah, but—"

"Just get in the car, man." I opened the door and stood there until he got in. Making my way around the back of the car, I scanned the crowd for Le Ly. She had moved farther away, but her eyes were focussed on the hooptie.

"You'll thank me for this someday," I said, lowering myself into the seat. It took me a moment, while I slammed and re-slammed the door, to realize that Chester had placed his head on the steering wheel. He was crying.

"They're always messin' with me," he said, sobbing between gasps of air. "What did I do? They're supposed to be grown. How come grown folks always messin' with kids, man?"

I placed my hand on his shoulder. "Be cool," I said.

"Naw, bump that!" He raised his head up and faced the windshield. "Yeah, that's right, chumps!" he yelled, scowling at the onlookers, wiping snot on his sleeves. Leon's engine could be heard in the background. It sounded like an idling tractor: *Bow! Zugga zugga. Bow! Zugga zugga.*

"I can't race that fool," said Chester. "My mama will kill me if I wreck this car. My auntie gave me this car, man, I don't know what you're thinking about."

"Roll up your window," I said. "Nah, forget that. Just lean your ear over."

"What?" asked Chester.

"Just listen, man. I think I know what to do."

It was the oldest trick in the book. With spectators on either side, both Leon and Chester revved their engines. They faced away from the car wash, toward the hill that led to it, the strip being the open road. I stood among the crowd, listening to the protests and disbelief. The general suspicion was that Chester was going to end up in the hospital.

"Let's get this mother gone!" yelled a friend of Leon's. A girl in a pair of pink hot pants stepped in between the two cars. Overhead, the blazing sun made jewels of the rocks in the asphalt. Apollonia seethed. Blue smoke billowed from every pipe.

"Dead man!" shouted Leon, leering from his dark ride.

"Ain't nothin' but a *thang*," said Chester, grinning behind the mirrored sky of his sunglasses. "Here come the sweet potatoes!"

The girl shrieked a countdown. Leon's car launched on "two," taking the hill and then vanishing in a thick fog of exhaust. People were still knocking the dust from their clothes when the first few giggles could be heard in Leon's wake.

"He calls that 'fast'?" said Chester, still sitting in the same position as before the countdown. "That's why his mama got sent to jail for stealin' hot sauce on Christmas."

The crowd had seen it coming. The six-day-old French fries had seen it coming. With the roar of the black Camaro receding in the distance, guffaws and loud talk arose from the spectators. "Told you!" they shouted to each other. "Told you!" and "Damn it!" and "I'll be dogged!" and, most vehemently, "Where my two dollars at?" Apollonia, whose engine was still running, slowly went into reverse, easing herself into the carwash bay made vacant by Leon's haste. Simply put, the hare had hauled tail and now the tortoise was taking up shack in the rabbit's hole. It was a Saturday morning cartoon. The Car Wash Club was hip, but not too hip for cartoons. They laughed and they cackled and they shook their heads. Even Leon's boys were making fun of his skid marks.

"What are we supposed to do when he comes back?" asked Chester, stepping out of the car.

"Pop the hatch," I said.

"Pop the hatch? What's that supposed to do?"

I smiled, glancing around to make sure Le Ly was still there. "It's supposed to open up the back, so I can get the cleaning stuff out. What's wrong with you, man? I thought we came here to wash Apollonia?"

"Oh, yeah," said Chester. A thousand words should have been pouring from my best friend's mouth. This was his hour. People were shaking his hand, but I knew who was really racing his heart.

"Nice sunglasses," she said, eying her own reflection. ♦