

DEEP CLEAN

In Los Angeles, car washing gets beneath the surface

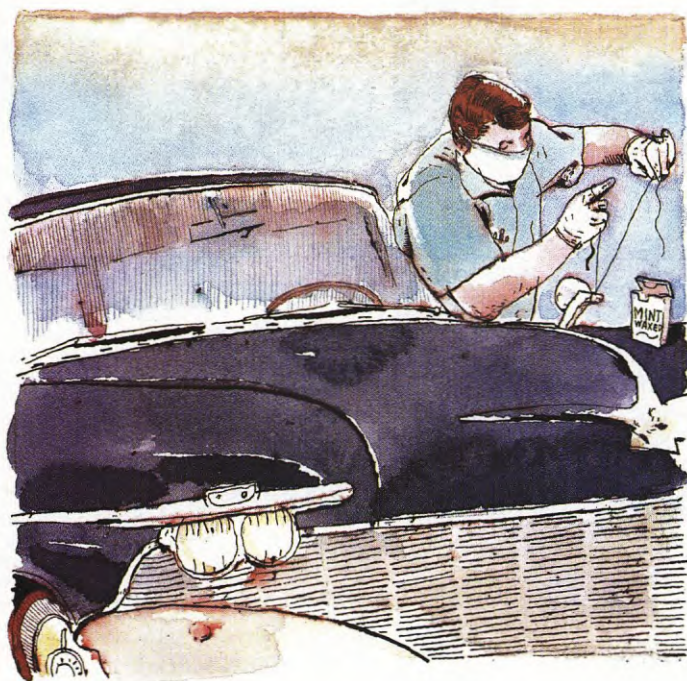
By Edward Zuckerman

Shortly after moving from New York to Los Angeles, I went to get my car washed. The price was \$7.50, which seemed a little steep until I realized that this car wash was different from the car washes I had known in New York City. At this car wash, they washed the car.

In New York, my car had been dragged down a mechanical track and sloshed with soap and water. Then a handful of unmotivated employees had swiped at it with wet rags. I would drive off toward the Queensboro Bridge in a dripping, smudged car that was cleaner than it used to be, but not by much.

In Los Angeles, my car was set upon by what appeared to be an entire village of Central Americans. They vacuumed the interior, attacked the hubcaps with hoses and brushes, ran the car through a mechanical wash—and then washed it again by hand. While this went on, I passed the time browsing in the car-wash shop, in-

Edward Zuckerman's most recent book is Small Fortunes: Two Guys in Pursuit of the American Dream (Viking Penguin).



specting the air fresheners and cassette-tape compilations of Elvis's greatest love songs, as well as earthquake survival kits, metallized packets of emergency water rations, and several books in the Tell-a-Maid series, which contain tear-out bilingual instruction sheets to be checked off and handed to Spanish-speaking household workers (e.g., "Please clean the baby from the waist down"). Then I joined my fellow customers on the car-wash veranda, where I relaxed with a shoe shine and an enchilada while I watched a man meticulously dry my 1984 Nissan Sen-

tra. I tipped him a dollar and drove away feeling clean.

I had no idea how mistaken I was.

Back in New York City, I had worked as a writer of magazine articles and non-fiction books. My most recent book concerned a businessman who, I mentioned briefly, had once worked as a chicken breeder at a Kentucky Fried Chicken restaurant. The jacket copy on the hardcover edition identified him as a chicken breeder. I protested this inaccuracy to my publisher. When the pa-

perback came out, the cover featured a picture of a chicken.

The book got good reviews and the publisher sent me on a publicity tour. I was sitting in a hotel bar one night, preparing for my appearance on a Dallas morning talk show, when programming on the bar TV was interrupted to announce the start of the American air war against Iraq. I was bumped from the show. My book sold 2,462 copies.

I decided to move to Los Angeles to try my fortune as a television writer.

Not long after arriving, I had an

appointment at Steven Spielberg's production company, which is housed in its own hacienda on the Universal lot. I drove up in my Sentra, and the discreetly suited security guard assumed I was a messenger. I realized that this kind of thing could be a problem in Los Angeles. I couldn't afford to buy a new car, what with the total commercial failure of my book and all, but I thought maybe I could get this one to look better. And so I eventually discovered "detailing."

People in New York City do not know what car detailing is. If they have any idea at all, they tend to think it involves the painting of fine decorative lines on the hood and fenders, an art that I believe is known as pin-striping.

Detailing is the cleaning of a car beyond all reason. It typically costs \$100 or more, and it is routinely indulged in by all kinds of people in Los Angeles. Rich executives have people come to their houses to do it once a week. Secretaries (known, in Los Angeles, as assistants) have it done a couple of times a year. The Yellow Pages are filled with ads for detailers promising to employ toothbrushes and Q-Tips in cleaning your car. There are several specialists in the detailing of black cars (which have a stubborn tendency to highlight tiny imperfections in the finish) and many in the removal of "overspray," which is a problem you probably did not know you have. (Overspray is what the wind may carry onto your car in infinitesimal quantities if someone is spray-painting something a few blocks away.)

The parking lots at the movie studios are studded with mobile detailers erecting canopies over cars they are about to work on (no decent detailer will work in direct sunlight; it makes the car too hot to hold a proper wax job). One of my first neighbors in Los Angeles was a sloppy, disorganized woman whose BMW lost its rear window in a crash. Months went by, and she never got around to getting the window replaced.

But once a month she had the car detailed.

My television agent introduced me to a studio development executive to talk about turning my book into a

situation comedy. The executive told me that one of the joys of his life was that his job entailed meeting fascinating people like me, which in Hollywood is the equivalent of "Hello." He said he loved my book and that he would promptly negotiate an "if come" deal with my agent, which meant, as near as I could determine, that I would write a proposal for a situation comedy for free, and if his company sold the idea to a network, then some of the money it received would *come* to me. I wrote the proposal, and the executive loved it. I pitched it to his boss, and he loved it, too. He said, "Let's do it." Then nothing happened for a couple of months. I called the development executive. He said, "Oh, didn't you hear? We passed."

I took my car to Bill Larzelere, a car detailer of such excellent reputation that until recently his business had an unlisted phone number. He got more customers than he could handle through personal referral.

The recession put a dent in his prosperity—the waiting time to get your car cleaned by Larzelere has dipped to as little as a couple of weeks—so he put his number in the book. But there's still no sign to mark his establishment, just a blank concrete wall on a commercial strip in Burbank.

Behind the wall, I found Larzelere working on a partially disassembled 1972 Ferrari Daytona, a show car whose owner had recently driven it for the first time in fourteen years. From the open road he had taken it directly to Larzelere.

Larzelere explained, "When a car's like this"—i.e., driven—"you've got to semi-disassemble it to get it clean. You take the bumpers off, take the grille off, the wheels off." He pointed to the car's gleaming red body. "It has chips from pebbles and bugs," he said. I couldn't see any. "That's the biggest problem you get with driving them. That, plus they get dirty."

Larzelere, with neat graying hair

and mustache, has an unassuming manner. He wears work pants and a work shirt with "Bill" in an oval stitched on his chest. His dogs wander around the shop, and there is a ferret in a cage. Counters are littered with brushes, rags, spray bottles, and rubber gloves. But the work is not casual. The day I visited, a bulletin board held a list of things to be done to a BMW, including "Replace frayed cloth tape around brackets on underside of vehicle."

Larzelere spends ten to twenty hours (at \$25 per) on what he calls a "regular cleanup and polish." Treating the body paint is an eight-step process, starting with sanding and ending with glazing. Larzelere applies three layers of wax from the Brazilian carnauba palm, rubbing it in with a soft fabric used in sanitary napkins (he finds diapers too harsh). He washes the engine and the engine compartment, and he removes everything from the trunk,

including the carpeting, to clean thoroughly there. He waxes the seatbelt hardware. He massages preservative into leather upholstery with his fingertips. He lines up adjacent screw heads so they point the same way. He does a lot of other

things as well, and he does these things not only to old cars that his clients have been so audacious as to drive but also to new cars they bring him directly from dealer showrooms.

Larzelere's customers tend to be even fussier than he is. The owner of a black Porsche was driving through Hollywood one night when, Larzelere recalled, somebody threw "something syrupy, like Coke" onto his car. So he drove straight to Larzelere, arriving at the garage at 1:30 A.M. Larzelere was there (he often works late and sleeps at the shop). He spent an hour and a half cleaning up the mystery substance. He has also made emergency house calls to clients who have driven through puddles.

I asked Larzelere to have a look at my Sentra, which had deteriorated rather alarmingly, cleanliness-wise, in

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the weeks since my \$7.50 car wash, and hadn't really ever been much to look at. It was one of the cheapest cars sold in America when it was new. I'd bought it used for \$1,700.

Larzelere walked toward it cheerfully. "Aha!" he said. "It's dirty. It's filthy. It's from New York." He peered at the paint on the roof. "It's oxidized." He rubbed a finger over the finish. "It's dirty, but it's not just dirty." He rubbed the dirt off his finger. "It's dull, chalky, flat."

He looked inside. "It's Japanese. Not top of the line. The fabrics, seats, are not good. There's a lot of plastic. The carpeting's not good. You haven't used mats." His tone wasn't too condemning.

He examined body nicks and dings and damage from the half-dozen break-ins the car had endured in New York. He was not happy to see bird shit on the roof. "Some cars," he reflected, "are used but not abused. This I have to categorize as abused." He said he could clean it up—or at least "get this in as good condition as you could get it"—for \$700. That didn't include any repairs. If I wanted to cut corners, he'd do the exterior only for \$450.

There was no hard sell. He didn't need the work.

I told him I'd think about it.

I was hired to write an episode for a network television show. Actually, in accordance with standard practice, I was hired to write an outline for an episode. If the outline was acceptable, I would be hired to go on and write the script.

I wrote the outline, and then rewrote it, under the direction of a producer who was also the wife of the executive producer. I followed all her instructions diligently and, when I was finished, waited anxiously to hear if I would be hired to write the script. One usually gets this news very quickly, because hour-long television shows are produced at the rate of one every eight days and the producers tend to start running out of scripts after the

first few weeks of the season. Workable outlines are rushed to the next step. Unaccountably, I heard nothing.

Finally, I was summoned to a meeting at the show's production office. The producer under whom I had worked was not there, nor was the executive producer, but the rest of the writing staff assembled around me in

a semicircle. I awaited their critique. Had I failed to make the story sufficiently emotional? Was the plot still too complex?

The highest-ranking producer present finally spoke. "Ozzie and Harriet [not their

real names] are having marital problems," he said.

I didn't understand.

The executive producer had decided he wanted to divorce the producer who had supervised me. Naturally, he didn't want anything to do with the stories she had developed. The studio had spent thousands of dollars (thank God) for my outline. It was abandoned.

I decided to find a less lofty detailer than Bill Larzelere to work on my Sentra. Consulting the Yellow Pages, I settled on Detail Wizard. "Q-Tips and Toothbrushes Used!" its ad promised. "The Mobile Service That Brings Its Own Water & Power."

Two young men, an animated Salvadoran and a stone-faced Guatemalan, arrived in a van equipped with a water tank and a gasoline-powered generator to give my Sentra a \$139 car wash. They erected a framework of pipes to hold a canopy over the car and began by straightforwardly washing it. This eliminated the bird shit on the roof, but it also exposed some rust spots I hadn't seen before. "The paint," pronounced the Salvadoran, who was the leader of the team. "Is not good." He said they would do what they could.

While the Guatemalan scrubbed my tires, then vacuumed and shampooed the interior of the trunk, the Salvadoran polished, glazed, waxed, and buffed my oxidized paint job.

When he was done with a fender, he invited me to compare it to the hood. To my amazement, it had luster. My car had never had luster.

Pleased by my reaction, the Salvadoran turned confidently to the interior and said, "We have something for the leather." He stopped short when he saw that there was no leather. I asked if he would polish the wood beads on the taxi-style seat pad I'd bought from a vendor at a stoplight in upper Manhattan.

The Guatemalan scrubbed the dashboard with a toothbrush and cleaned out the heater vents with a Q-Tip. Then he scoured the backseat with a stiff brush, removing a black stain that had come with the car. The Salvadoran polished the exterior keyholes. When they were finished, the car looked great. I climbed in to drive it and found a greasy (but clear) film on the steering wheel and dashboard. A little too much cleanser, I supposed. Then I glanced toward the window in the passenger door and was shocked to see it missing. Had the men from Detail Wizard smashed it and fled without copping? I looked again, carefully. The window was there. It was so clean it was invisible.

I read in *Variety* the other day about two animal movies in development at Fox. One concerns a pig who works as a policeman. The other stars "a canine in a witness-protection program who goes to live with a dysfunctional family." It seems the pig script wasn't working out, but "Fox desperately wanted to make a pig movie." So someone suggested revising the casting of the witness-protection picture, changing the dog to a pig, and that's the way it's going to be, at least for now.

Most television writers, of course, aspire to write features. I suppose my own ambition will eventually lie in that direction, but I haven't quite worked up to it yet.

I took my newly detailed car for an expert evaluation to Bill Larzelere, who does not conceal his contempt for most other detailers. ("Some of them can't even wash a car. You get buffer swirls. You get polish in the cracks. That's not what it's all about.") I wanted to know what he thought of Detail

Wizard's work, and I was curious to know what he would have done for \$561 more.

He approached the Nissan with skepticism and a wooden barbecue skewer. "They got the tires to look good," he granted. (The Guatemalan had applied a treatment that turned them a solid matte black.) "They got the paint to do okay," he said. Then he peered closely at the windshield wipers and the vent intakes beside them. "There are splatters of polish here, here, here."

He picked at them with a fingernail. He opened the driver's door and found some glue residue from an old oil-change sticker. He shook his head. "This is the big thing," he said. "They didn't clean the rubber." He ran his finger along the rubber seal at the base of the windshield. It was streaked with gray. He dug his skewer into the crack between the rubber and the glass, and it found black gunk.

Inside the car, the news was better. "It's really pretty nice, considering how bad it was. You didn't have mats. How much did it cost?"

I told him \$139 plus tax and tip, and he exhaled sharply, amazed. "You certainly got your money's worth! It's good for that!"

He opened the hood and examined the paint along the thin edge. "They didn't buff through," he observed. And added, "Whether it was by accident or not, we don't know," which struck me as a little ungenerous. But apparently those narrow edges are notorious trouble spots, where careless detailers buff through exterior coats. "That's one way to ruin a \$50,000 paint job," Larzelere said.

Excuse me?

It seems the Ferrari I had first seen Larzelere working on had a \$50,000 paint job from Junior's House of Color, which is another southern California car institution. And another story.

A couple of months later, I found steady work in television. I sold my Senra for \$750, \$50 more than Larzelere would have charged to clean it, and leased a big American sedan. I drove it about five miles, from the dealership to my house, and admired it gleaming in my driveway. Then I called for somebody to come over and detail it. ■

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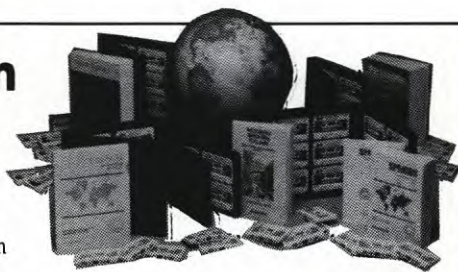
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