

Cleanliness is....

The Thunderbird idled at the stop, unsure of which direction to pursue. Hand wash or In-Bay Automatic? The SUV behind him honked, and he turned left toward the IBA. It had been so long, and he was so self-conscious as it was, that he'd rather not opt for face-to-face.

He queued up behind the other dirty cars. As he waited, he examined his conscience. When the light indicated the wash was free, he eased onto the track until the tire sensor blinked.

"Welcome," intoned the automated attendant. "Relax into neutral, release all brakes, and refrain from steering."

The T-Bird shuddered under the rollers. He felt queasy.

"Bless me in this car wash. It has been almost one year since my last cleanse...."

"Go on, my child."

The ribbon-like curtains of the mitter fluttered side to side in the bay as the T-Bird exhaled. He started with the venial sins.

"I accuse myself of speeding, of speeding in a school zone.... I've been indulging too much, too often in high-octane fuel lately and..."

"Yes?"

"And, I can be prideful. I think I let the J.D. Power Best in Class award go to my head.... Car of the Year from *Motor Trend*, too."

"Back in 2002?"

“Yeah,” whispered the roadster. “My father was loved since he rolled out of the Dearborn plant. I don’t know, maybe I’m not a classic like him. Maybe I’m just a throwback.”

“You *are* loved. Your Father knows you by VIN number. He knows your weaknesses and your talents,” advised the attendant. “You have a top-shift, fully-synchronized, five-speed manual transmission. I encourage you to reflect on your life. Pray for humility, simplicity, and joy in fifth.”

“I will. I’ll try. It’s just, there’s something else....” The T-Bird entered the high-pressure rinse stage. “It was an accident, really it was. I mean, I had my stereo up, my windows down, and I was really cruising along. I couldn’t stop in time. I didn’t stop at all....”

He leaked a little washer fluid as he confessed. “I killed a cat today. There was a ginger streak—so fast—and then I felt her limp body thump under my tires.”

The nozzles aimed at his wheels, removing brake dust and build-up. Closed-cell foam wraparounds rubbed his front bumper, washed his sides, and then worked along his license plate area. Rocker panel washers cleaned away the remnants of fur, the smatter of blood.

The attendant counseled the T-Bird and, with great care, assigned his penance.

“Do not despair of Ford’s mercy,” said the attendant. “The Maker has reconciled the world to Himself and sent the Mechanic among us for the forgiveness of sins. You have a contrite heart, and you have His pardon and peace. You are absolved.”

Pink, blue, and yellow triple foamers cleaned the roadster and coated him with protective paint sealant. The spot-free water and forced air dried him immaculately. He exited the bay clean and with purpose.

The T-Bird retraced his morning route until he came to the unfortunate place. He pulled off on the gravel shoulder, but kept his engine running. He popped open his passenger-side door.

“Hello? Is there anyone there?” he asked gently.

A weak meow replied. A chorus of mewling followed. A trio of lonely, confused kittens rolled over each other. His chrome was slippery against their paws. Eventually, they were able to clamber from the wheel well to the floor. Their tiny claws more tickled than scratched his upholstery as they scaled the seat. The sun streamed through the little porthole window, breaking a rainbow across their soft orange backs. They cuddled each other for comfort and purred.

Ford, you know all things, the Thunderbird prayed. You know that I love you.