

ACCLIMATIZING

By Jean Stephenson

I may be the only person in the world who nearly drowned in a carwash.

The year was 1980. This unsettling event occurred a few days after I had moved from Southern California to Houston, Texas. It soon became apparent that Texans did things differently than the rest of us in a lot of ways, and that their form of automatic carwashing was no exception.

And now, being a broiled fish eating, crisp-cooked veggies, and white wine drinker, I was already struggling through chicken fried steaks with cream gravy, overdone veggies and long necked beer.... Dodging semis that drove 90 miles an hour in the fast lane of freeways.... Observing the male population decorating their neck chains with heavy gold nuggets and their pickups with shotguns... Midnight raids on the mosquito population by haze surrounded tank-like vehicles with red flashing lights which I at first thought were extraterrestrial visitors.

So now I faced a new experience, the Houston carwash

To compound my first unnerving impressions and increase my desire to fly right back to Los Angeles, it had rained steadily since we arrived, real downpours, opening up potholes in the roads and firing up the tempers of the drivers. Water raced violently through the gutters from one block to the next, and I suddenly understood why even well dressed business executives wore cowboy boots. They weren't just for dancing the Texas twostep! When it rains in Houston the water in the gutters are way over the tops of regular shoes.

But now the rain had finally stopped, and my little Toyota was a muddy brown instead of shiny green.. It needed a bath as badly as I needed the sight of the sun through the palm trees.

So I drove around looking for a carwash. I didn't realize I had picked a bad time of day to do this. It was rush hour and the cars seemed stuck together in all directions trying to move. When I spotted a carwash sign at a gas station where cars lined up out to the street waiting to fill up their tanks, I followed the signs around to the little building around back that housed the washworks.

Now in California, in the do-it-yourself carwash places, you drive inside a little house and then sit still while the brushes go back and forth past you. Soapsud cycle, rinse cycle, dry cycle Only problem is a little disorientation because it looks as though the car is moving when it really isn't. You just shut your eyes and this goes away. Nothing seriously scary here.

But in Houston, you drive up to the opening of the little building, carefully steer your car between two tracks, then *drive slowly through* at 2 miles an hour, through the soap cycle through the rinse cycle, and out, then find someone to pay. This I learned from reading the instructions on a crudely lettered sign in front of the gas station.

No person to guide you through this process, so you just have to guess where your tires are. I drove slowly in.

My car seemed to be in the right position between the tracks. Now I was in a rainforest with a heavy storm in progress. Thick soapsuds completely obscured my vision, giant brushes scrubbed merrily away

After awhile I realized I was still being soaped when I should have been in the rinse cycle. I pushed harder on the gas pedal to move along faster.

Nothing happened.

I stepped on the pedal again, to the floorboard this time, still nothing. Things had been going too smoothly. I must have driven up onto the track and was just hanging there, wheels spinning on the soapy rail.

I had visions of getting out of the car for help, which included all the skin scraped off my body by the giant brushes and my contact lenses being in real trouble.

The headlights! I could flash them on and off and someone would come! I pushed the switch in and out repeatedly. Minutes went by. Nobody came. Of course not, stupid, everyone is around at the front of the station pumping gas. I began to breathe heavily. How long would the oxygen inside the car hold out? Would the machinery run out of soap and stop, and if so, when? Chappaquiddick flashed through my mind.

Okay, try the horn, I mean, really blow it. Someone would eventually hear me through all that traffic noise, or would they?

I have no idea how long I had leaned on the horn when the foamy blanket abruptly lessened. As the soapsuds were making their final descent I could see parts of a very angry bearded man at the end of the little building, pulling down a lever which stopped the machinery. He shook his fist at me.

“Dammit” he bellowed, you stalled your engine, you dumb broad. Ain’t you got the sense to start it up again?”

Well, it never had dawned on me that I was stalled. All my concentration had been focussed on keeping my car moving in a straight line while I couldn’t see out of the soapy windows. Couldn’t hear the motor because of all the water

noise. I turned the key in the ignition, stepped on the gas pedal, and my staunch little car moved bravely ahead. Past the angry man who grabbed my money without another word, thank God. Through the heavy traffic all the way home safely into my own cozy garage.

I poured myself a highball glass of wine and drank it straight down. Then I poured a ladylike portion into a stemmed Waterford goblet, and phoned a grown daughter back in California..

“Hi Honey, I’m doing just fine. I’m relaxing with a nice glass of wine after a busy day. I just learned how to use the carwash here and tomorrow night we’re going to Gilley’s and learn how to dance the cotton-eyed Joe! It’s about shaking cow patties off your feet. It’s really fun out here!”