

## Washing the Car

Jeff Everts finished his coffee and mentally prepared himself to wash his car. It was a bright, clear Saturday morning, his kids had no soccer or baseball games that day, and there was really no reason why he couldn't wash the car. It's not that he disliked washing his car, he just didn't get any special joy or sense of accomplishment out of it. Back when he couldn't afford to drive nice cars the job was depressing. Washing his car forced him to notice every scratch, dent, rust spot, and other imperfection in whatever clunker he was driving. Now that he could afford to buy relatively new cars washing his cars wasn't depressing, it was just sort of mind numbing. (He could actually afford to buy new cars now, but being an accountant he knew that buying a new car meant taking an unacceptable depreciation when you drove it off the lot.) Jeff never actually noticed whether or not his car was clean, but his wife criticized him for not taking care of his car any time she thought it was dirty. So, Jeff added a monthly "wash the car" reminder to the calendar on his phone.

He got out a bucket, a sponge, and a bottle of car wash detergent. (Paying \$10 to drive through a machine wash was another thing that didn't make financial sense, especially when he could do a better job by hand.) Then he looked in the key dish for his car keys. They weren't there. He checked his pants pockets, and the pockets in the jacket he wore to work on Friday. Still no car keys. He decided to appeal to the all-seeing, all-knowing, all-powerful, Goddess of the Household.

"Honey, have you seen my car keys?"

"Haven't seen them," his wife called from the upstairs bedroom. "Why do you need your car this morning?"

"I was going to pull it out of the garage to wash it."

"Why don't you wash my car instead? It needs it more than your car."

"Great," he thought. "Now I've got two cars to wash." Not surprisingly, her keys were in the dish where they belonged. He pulled her car into the driveway, gave it a quick rinse with the hose to knock off the big chunks, and soaped up the wheels and tires. "Those need to soak for a while," he thought. When he drove it out of the garage he noticed some dirt and crumbled leaves on the floor mats, so he went back into the house and dragged out the vacuum cleaner. He was looking for an extension cord when his daughter Clara stuck her head through the door from the kitchen to the garage.

"Daaaad! Kelly just barfed in the basement. It's really gross!"

He rushed to the basement with Clara. He had seen the dog eating grass earlier that morning, so he wasn't surprised it had barfed. He was surprised that the basement was dark, as the kids never turned off the light.

"Why is it so dark down here?" he asked, stepping into the basement to turn on the lights.

"I turned off the lights so I wouldn't have to look at it," Clara answered.

As Jeff fumbled for the light switch he found the dog barf with his left foot.

"Eeeew!" his daughter said. "Now it's even worse!"

Jeff hopped back to the stairs on his right foot, sat down, and took off his left shoe. He carried the shoe upstairs and cleaned it in the kitchen sink. Then he got paper towels, a plastic bowl of water, and a spray bottle of carpet cleaner. He cleaned up the dog barf, but that left a clean spot so he dragged out the carpet shampooer and cleaned the entire room. He felt a tap on his shoulder as he was finishing the last corner. He shut off the machine and turned to find his son Matthew.

"Can you help me with my trigonometry homework, Dad?" Matthew said. "I just don't get it."

They went up to Matthew's room and Jeff sat down next to his son. Sheets of paper with crossed out work covered the desk, and wadded up sheets of paper lay on the floor around the trash can. It had been a long time since Jeff studied trigonometry, and it had been far from his best subject back then. All he remembered about sines and cosines was that he used to get them confused, but Matthew's homework was about something called arctangents. Jeff wasn't even certain those had been discovered when he took trig. He stared at Matthew's textbook for a long time, reading and re-reading the same paragraphs over and over again, and flipping back to the definitions page, before it finally began to make some sort of sense. Well, it didn't actually make sense, but he thought he saw a way to do the homework. Then came the hard part. Explaining to his son how to do something he didn't really understand himself. Fortunately the book had the answers to all the odd numbered problems in the back, so after a few false starts he and Matthew worked out a process that seemed to give the right answers. Matthew was just completing his fifth problem, solving it without his dad's help, when Jeff's phone started buzzing. It was Mr. Martin, his boss.

"Looks like you got it," he told Matthew. "Just keep doing what you're doing. I gotta take this call." He answered the call as he stepped out of Matthew's room.

“Can you send me a copy of the Clydesdale Audit Report?” Mr. Martin asked. “I’m flying to Tucson tomorrow and meeting with the regional manager on Monday. He just told me he wants to discuss that report.”

“I don’t have it with me,” Jeff said, “but I should be able to log into the office system from home and download it.”

“That will be fine,” Mr. Martin said. “Just send me an electronic copy. I can study it on the plane and print out a copy when I get there, if they need it.”

“Will do,” Jeff said. They hung up and he went into his den and fired up his work laptop. He tried to log into the office network but all he got was a notice saying the network was down for upgrades and backup. He vaguely remembered seeing an announcement about weekend maintenance earlier in the week. When did they say they expected to have the system back up? 3:00 PM? 5:00 PM? He’d saved the announcement in his “Upcoming Events” folder, but of course he couldn’t get into that folder until he could log into the system. Just then his phone buzzed again. This time it was his friend Harry.

“I know it’s short notice,” Harry said, “but do you want to play golf this afternoon? A friend of mine just called. He’s got a reservation at that new club up in Bellmark. Two of his foursome just cancelled because of the flu. If we can make it there by 3:30 we can take their place.”

“I’d love to, Harry, but I’ve got to send some files to my boss and the system’s down. There’s no way I can make it to Bellmark by 3:30.” He saw his daughter Clara standing in the doorway, with tears welling up in eyes.

“Gotta go now. Something’s come up. Thanks for inviting me, but I’m afraid I can’t make it. Bye.” He hung up and put the phone back in his pocket.

“My potato won’t make electricity,” Clara sobbed. “It’s for the Science Fair, and it’s due on Monday!” She led him into her room, where a potato was sitting on her desk with two strips of metal in it. There was a tangle of wires between the potato and a small compass, and more wire was wrapped around the compass. Clara had pushed aside the dolls, unicorns, and other figures that normally covered her desk to make room for this experiment. It struck Jeff that they looked like a gallery, staring into an operating room where a strange Frankentater was being brought to life.

“My teacher gave me the stuff to make this,” Clara said. “She did it in class and it was really cool, but my potato isn’t working.” Upon questioning, Clara dug through a pile of papers in her backpack and produced a sketch her teacher had given her showing how to set up the experiment. Jeff wasn’t a master electrician, but it didn’t take him long to figure out that his

daughter had short-circuited the potato. Fortunately it was a heavy duty potato, so it hadn't caught fire. It didn't take the two of them long to rewire the experiment and pretty soon every time they touched the final wire to the potato it generated enough current to make the compass needle move.

"You fixed it!" Clara said excitedly. "Can you help me make the poster, too?"

"What's supposed to be on the poster?"

"I don't know. How a potato makes electricity, I guess." Upon further questioning, Clara dug through her backpack again and found instructions for the Science Fair. There were actually three posters required, to provide information about the student, a description of the experiment, and the results of the experiment.

"Do you know what this experiment demonstrates?" Jeff asked.

"That a potato is full of electricity?" Clara responded.

"Maybe we ought to do a little research," Jeff said. "I'll get my laptop and. . ." he suddenly remembered the report for Mr. Martin.

He rushed back to his den. The IT department had completed its maintenance and he was able to log into the system, download the audit report, and forward it to Mr. Martin. Then he carried the laptop into Clara's room and together they researched potatoes and electricity. Fortunately, the Household Goddess had the foresight to maintain a small stockpile of white poster boards plus the magic markers needed to adorn them. They were half-finished with the third poster when that same Goddess called them to dinner. Clara excitedly told her mother about her Science Fair project while they ate.

"Aren't you supposed to use that special three section folding display board we bought last week?" her mother asked.

Clara's face fell momentarily. "Oh. That's right. I forgot about that." She turned to her father with a serious expression on her face. "We have to use a special poster board for the Science Fair," she announced in an authoritarian voice.

Fortunately they'd already decided what needed to go on all three panels, so they were able to finish the project before Clara's bedtime. Clara did an excellent job demonstrating the experiment to her mother and explaining how it worked, as practice for the Science Fair judging. Then she got ready for bed.

Jeff had just finished tucking her in for the night when his phone buzzed again. It was Mr. Martin.

“Sorry to bother you on a Saturday night,” he said. “I just got another call from the Regional Manager. He wants to compare the Clydesdale audit with that report we did about that other meat packing company, uh, Better Wines or something.”

“Best Bovines?” Jeff suggested.

“Yeah. That’s the one. I don’t have that one with me. Could you send me a copy? And if you don’t mind, could you jot down a few thoughts about how the two compare? Nothing elaborate. Just a few lines off the top of your head.”

“No problem,” Jeff replied. He downloaded the report from the office computer and put together some thoughts about the two companies. Of course, being an accountant, his thoughts filled three pages and included a comparison chart, with footnotes. He sent this to his boss and was surprised to discover it was time to get ready for bed. Where had the evening gone? For that matter, where had the entire day gone?

His wife was almost ready for bed when he stepped into the bedroom.

“Honey, why is the carpet shampooer sitting in the corner of the basement?” she asked.

“Oh, the dog barfed and I had to shampoo the carpet,” he answered.

“It’s full of dirty water!” she said.

“I’m sorry. I forgot about it. I’ll clean it up tomorrow.” Jeff got ready to take his shower and his wife sat in her favorite chair, by the window, to read before going to bed. When he finished his shower and stepped back into the bedroom she had pulled the curtains back and was staring out the window.

“Why is my car in the driveway?” she asked. “And is that our vacuum cleaner behind it?”

“Oh hell! I forgot about them!” Jeff grabbed his bathrobe and slippers and rushed downstairs. He came back after he’d put away the vacuum cleaner and pulled the car into the garage. He figured he could wait until tomorrow to take care of the garden hose and the bucket of soapy water.

“Are you feeling OK?” his wife asked. “You seem awfully forgetful lately.”

"I'm fine," he insisted. "It's just been kind of a hectic day." He lay awake for a long time, worrying that maybe he was losing his memory.

The next day he was enjoying an after brunch cup of coffee when his son Matthew tossed him the car keys.

"Here, Dad," Matthew said. "Mom said you were looking for these. Sorry I didn't put them back in the key dish."

"I wondered where they were. "When did you use the car?"

"Don't you remember?" Matthew said. "I took Melissa to the basketball game Friday night."

"Oh, yeah. That's right."

Matthew smiled and walked out of the room. "Yes!" he thought. "I got away with it." He had been so wrapped up worrying about his first date with Melissa that he forgot to ask permission to borrow the car. His dad hadn't even noticed. This was good to know. There might be occasions in the future when he would want to use the car without explaining why he needed it. Now he knew his dad didn't pay attention anyway.

Jeff frowned as he stared at the car keys. He could not for the life of him remember loaning Matthew the car Friday night. Maybe his wife was right. Maybe he was losing his memory. That thought troubled him for a long time. Oh well. At least the keys had finally turned up. Now if he could just remember why he was looking for them . . .