

# The Mistress

By  
Harold R. Wiltraut

I remember it well! It was a Friday afternoon following Thanksgiving, and any sane person would have been watching a football game and nursing a turkey hangover. Instead, I was lying on a cold garage floor trying to convince myself that I was happily pursuing a rewarding hobby . . . restoring an old car. My neck ached. My arms felt as if they had been holding up the entire world instead of an oxy-acetylene torch. I was chilled to the bone, and to complete my misery, a hot spark had just found its way into my left ear.

As I labored away, I tried to console myself by thinking of all the things I had ever done in my life which could be considered dumber than buying a down-at-the-heels collector car. I couldn't come up with a single thing (except maybe joining the Army) and that only added to my misery.

I had no one to blame for my predicament but myself. I should have been aware of the many difficulties involved in restoring old cars from the many car shows I had attended over the years, and from all the "car-nut" magazines I had devoured. But, apparently not much stuck, so here I lay, on my cold behind.

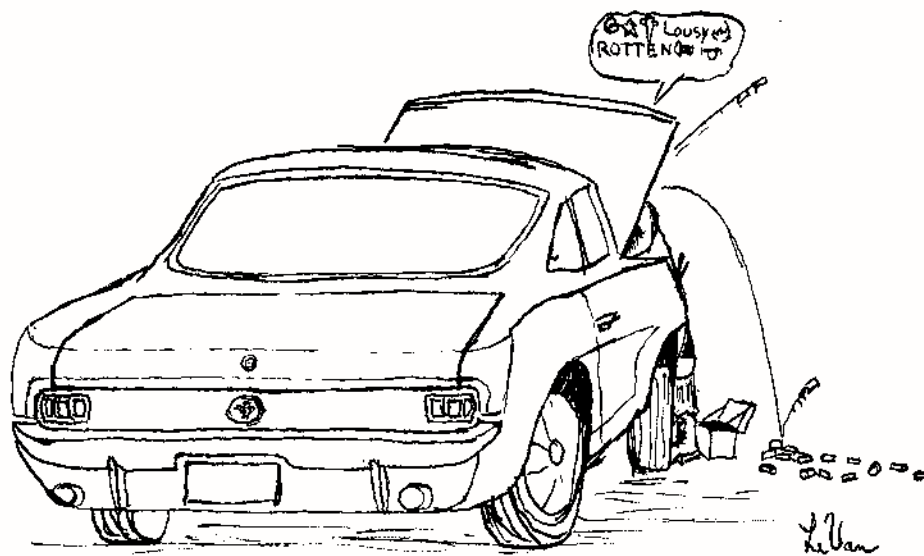
I did have one consolation though, in the form of a good friend, Hoppy Halpin. He was quietly shivering alongside of me, apparently secure in the knowledge that one had to be kind to drunks, mad Englishmen and dreamers such as I who bought clapped-out collector cars.

And I was a dreamer . . . with a dream that had started 18 years ago when I had my first glimpse of a beautiful mistress in the form of a pure-white '65 Mustang convertible. But the mistress now squatting above us had turned out to be a decrepit old lady. Her white paint was grey and cracked, and it hid more colors than a rainbow. She was swaybacked, knockkneed and fatigued. Her "facelift" had been installed with few bolts and much faith. (She jiggled when she moved.) She had lost her I.D. papers and to complete her indignities, she had a buckled rear. As Hoppy and I undressed her further and further we discovered more and more problems, and thus began a year-long adventure in the dubious art of amateur Mustang restoring, (Hoppy actually did most of the work, in his own garage, no less, while I spent a good deal of time just standing around . . . in awe.)

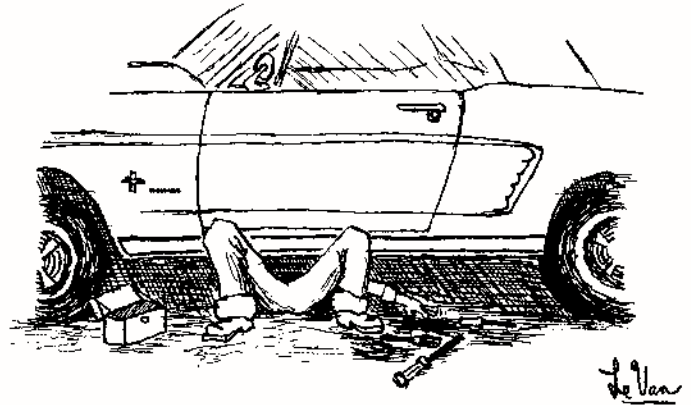
I don't wish to bore the reader with the fine details of this adventure, but I would like to highlight some of the great truths I learned from it. Certain of these truths are so profound they can almost be considered laws. Also, they've had the benefit of multiple testing, not only by me, but by anyone who's ever fooled around with cars, and the results do repeat.

Here then are my learned observations:

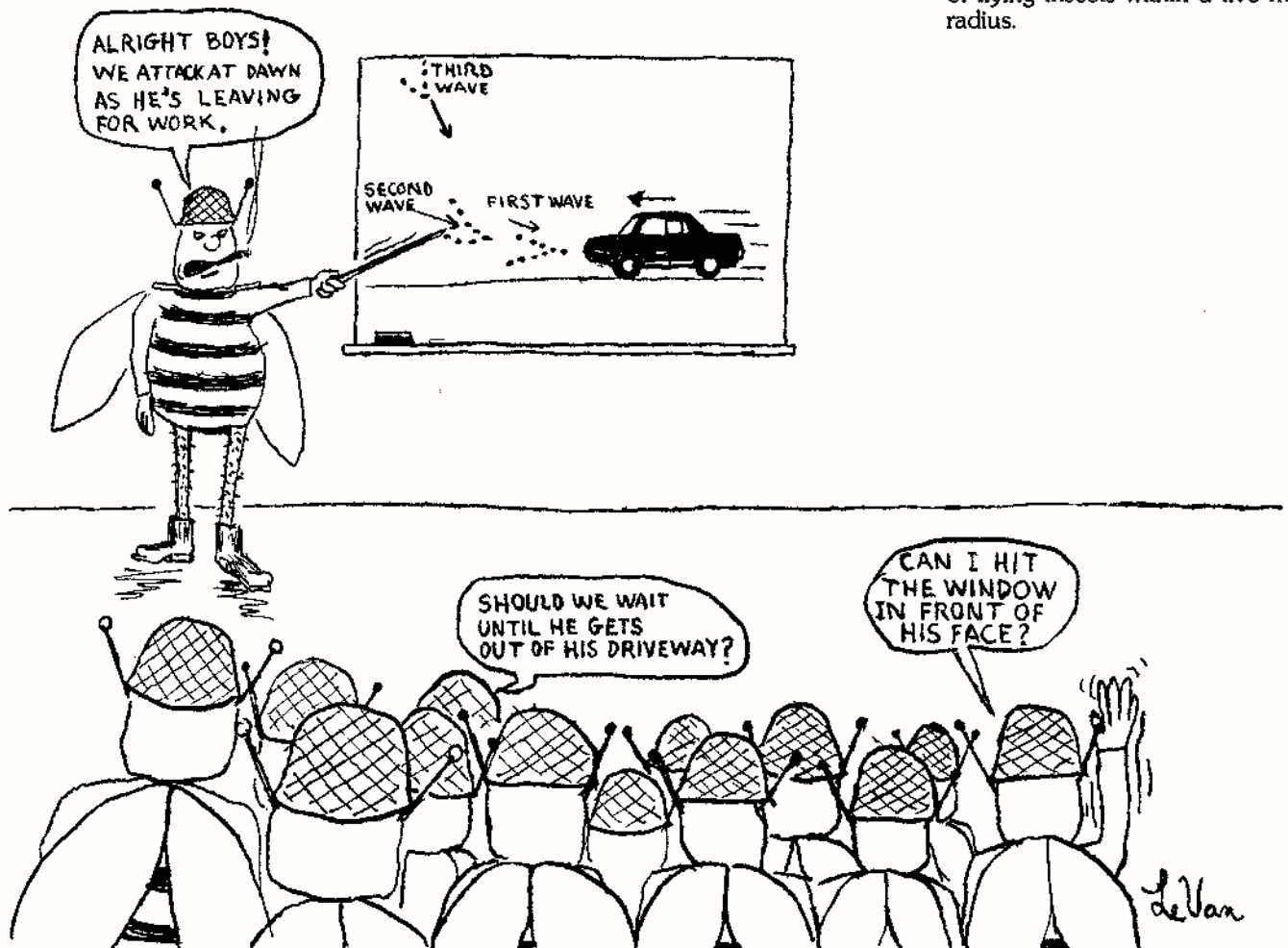
1. All rubber covered electrical cords, air hoses and gas lines have a built-in design characteristic which allows them to become hopelessly entangled when in use. One overcomes this annoyance only by substituting rigid copper tubing for the rubber.
2. The inexperienced (read amateur) eye cannot readily discern a one-sixteenth inch size difference between a nut and a wrench. This problem is easily overcome, though. Simply move the tool box as close to the nut as possible, or do as a photographer does with his exposures; bracket the wrench sizes. The unneeded wrenches can be carried in your right rear pants pocket.



3. Screwdrivers, when dropped on the floor, will always roll at least 1 inch beyond one's normal reach. Avoid this aggravation by always carrying two extras in your left rear pants pocket.
4. If "anything" is planning to drop from the bottom of an old car, it will always wait until one's face is directly beneath it. This simple fact can be verified by studying Newton's 2nd Law of Universal Gravitation, a U.S. Air Force Bombardier's Training Manual, and Webster's definition of the word "obnoxious." Be careful of this one because there's more to it than "meets the eye." Any defense? Not much really, except to at least keep your mouth closed when working under an old car and always carry a wiping cloth in your right front pants pocket.



5. The quality of a new paint job is directly proportional to the number of flying insects within a five mile radius.



6. The human back was not designed to work over, under and around automobiles. This fact might account for some of the grumpy auto mechanics we've all run into at one time or another.
7. Trouble-lights (especially the ones with the little hook) always cast at least 90% of their illumination on areas where it is not needed. Therefore, it is always a question of whether or not the remaining 10% is adequate for the task at hand. It usually isn't, so always carry a flashlight in your left front pants pocket.
8. A certain percentage of the parts removed from a car are not needed when it's put back together again. I might get an objection from Mr. Goodwrench on this (unsafe repair job, you know) but, I have a box of assorted parts in my garage which I know for a fact came from my Mustang, and it runs perfectly fine without them. Incidentally, these extraneous parts can be collected in your shirt pockets or pant cuffs while working.
9. When visiting an auto-parts jobber or flea market, always assume you're going to come away with only one-half the parts you wanted, and that they will cost twice as much as anticipated.
10. Don't automatically believe the parts clerk when he reads from his big parts book and tells you that Part #49303954-0kk103-40 is going to fit your Mustang. This is impressive as hell, but it will not add the required third hole in the flange of the struggle-buggy suppressor when you're trying to install it.
11. This item pretains to auto junk yards, and can at times literally spell the difference between life and death. To stress its importance and to make it easy to remember, I've broken it into two separate parts:

- a. Always carry copious quantities of salt water taffy in your tool box for the junkyard dog. This keeps both him and his jaws occupied.
  - b. Always loudly announce yourself when approaching a derelict car in order to allow the critters which might be inhabiting it, time to make their escape. This can be accomplished by singing, or by banging on a body part and exclaiming "Wow, what a nice straight '66 Fastback."
- There is an important corollary to Part b., however . . . there does exist in this world such a thing as a deaf snake.
12. No one should even consider restoring an old car without the support of good friends and an understanding mate.

Well, there are my Twelve Great Truths of Amateur Auto Restoring. They aren't chiseled in stone, but they are borne out of a little blood, some sweat and much aggravation.

My adventure is over now, but I occasionally think back to that grey November afternoon . . . and to the times of frustration, scraped knuckles and impending bankruptcy. But all is well now, especially when I'm riding around on a soft summer's night, with the wind in my hair, Willie Nelson on the old DeLuxe, and people turning their heads in envy as I pass. Yes, all is well. Hoppy still considers me a friend (I think), my wife has cancelled the divorce proceedings and I'm the proud guardian of a lovely, pure-white mistress (and topless, too). How lucky can a guy get!!!

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