

The Human Car Wash of Self-Esteem

by Con Chapman

It was one of those dinner parties where everyone had had a little too much to drink, and the conversation around the table had grown more . . . shall we say, spirited. Changes were being rung on the usual male-female antinomies—shopping, burping, etc.—when one of the wives went a little too far.



' . . . and don't get me started on his back hair!'

"Jeff doesn't know which end of a hammer is up," a woman named Sally said with a laugh, which the other women joined in. The men, however, did not. They knew that no matter how inept your husband may be at home repairs, the male ego is such that you don't embarrass him in front of other men on this score.

A chilly silence descended upon the male half of the table, which the women—insensitive clods that they can be sometimes—eventually noticed. I considered my usual gambit for diverting conversation from an uncomfortable topic—"How 'bout

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those Red Sox?”—but it seemed too transparent. I considered bringing my philosophical training to bear on the subject—“Does a hammer really have an ‘up’ and a ‘down’ end, Sally?”—but decided it would only prolong the agony.

“Thanks for screwing in that light bulb—my husband could never do that!”

No, what was needed was “direct action,” as the Wobbly Party used to say. “Sally, I know you probably didn't mean to, but I think you've hit Jeff where it hurts—bad.”

“Well,” she replied, a trifle defensively, “it's true.”

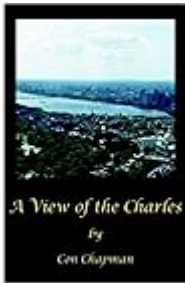
“There are many true things that needn't be said.” I could feel a breeze on my legs from my wife's efforts to kick me, but she was sitting too far away to make contact. “If this matter isn't put right, I'm afraid you two won't have sex tonight, then Jeff will be grumpy next week, his productivity will fall off, his year-end bonus will be inadequate, you two will end up getting divorced, and your kids will drop out of school and end up collecting deposit bottles and sleeping on heating grates for the rest of their lives.”

“Gosh, I didn't know it was that serious,” she said.

“It is, and drastic measures are called for.”

“Like what?” she asked.

“The Human Car Wash of Self-Esteem.”



I looked around the table and saw only blank stares. “I guess this means none of you read my first novel,” I said, and I had a hard time keeping the bitterness out of my voice.

“Uh, I didn’t,” Jeff said.

“Sally—I thought you were going to persuade your book group to read it,” I said sharply.

“We . . . we have so many other books to read first.”

“Chick lit,” I spat out with contempt. “Let me guess: in this week’s selection, a husband cheats on his wife, or he dies.”

“Actually both,” she said. “We wanted something with a happy ending.”

“You know, if just one of you would buy a copy of *A View of the Charles* I might move into the coveted top 8 million books on amazon.com—but no.”

“But—you have so many unsold copies in your garage,” the guy to my left said. “It seems such a waste of natural resources to have your print-on-demand publisher crank out another one.”

I could feel my face reddening, but I couldn’t let my personal embarrassment get in the way of my mission; to save a marriage that was in trouble.

"C'mon everybody—into the living room for the Human Car Wash of Self-Esteem."

"How do we do it?" my wife asked, finally joining in the fun against her better instincts.

"Do any of you remember 'The Stroll'?"

"Remember, you're the oldest one here," my wife reminded me, so I had to explain.

"On American Bandstand, the guys and gals would form two lines, and dancers would take turns strolling down between them."

"That's it—a dance?" Sally asked.

"There's more. As the people make their way through, they close their eyes and we touch them."

"Like running the gauntlet?" Jeff asked, "the Native American form of torture in which an individual runs between a double file of men who strike him with clubs or other weapons?"



"Sort of, but no weapons, and gently, like the soft foam scrubbers in a car wash."

"That wouldn't do much for my self-esteem," the guy to my left—who was now standing to my right—said.

"That's not all we do. We also murmur . . ."

"Murmur?"

"Murmur . . . words of encouragement and support. In Jeff's case, something like 'You did a great job screwing in that light bulb last weekend sweetie,' or 'I can't believe you know how to pump your own gas!' Something like that."

Everyone exchanged looks of bemusement that seemed to say “What have we got to lose?” and “Well, I guess I'd do it for Jeff and Sally,” also “This is stupid but what choice do I have?”

Two women, strolling

Our dinner guests quickly formed themselves into two lines, and it was up to me as host to designate the first human car to be scrubbed. “I think Jeff's entitled to go first, since he's the one's who's hurting right now.”

“Okay,” he said, a bit chagrined to be put in a position of weakness, but still needing the help that only the Human Car Wash of Self-Esteem can provide.

“Go ahead, sweetie,” Sally said with an audible lump in her throat.



Go ahead—you'll feel much better when you're through.

"Okay," he said, as he closed his eyes and began to make his way through the scrubbers of his friends' arms.

"I'm sure you're not as bad as Sally says," the wife of the guy to my left said.

"You can't be any worse than my husband," another said.

As Jeff was softly stroked by his friends, you could see a smile come to his face. When he emerged into the drying zone and opened his eyes, he was a new man, no longer sullen and brooding over the uncalled-for insult to his manhood. "You're right," he said. "That was great!"

"Who's next?" I said, beaming with pride over the one thing I've invented in my life.

"Me, me!" Sally said. She was like that, a real trouper, always ready to make a party truly special.

"Okay," I said. "Any fears, insecurities or troublesome issues we need to address?"

"Well, Jeff *did* make a crack about my weight last weekend."

You could almost feel a wave of female hormones about to crash on the beach of our living room, like the roar of a distant tsunami that is faintly heard from afar—not to wax too poetic.

"Jeff!" the wife of the guy on my left said.

"It's not my fault—she asked me the trick question: Does this outfit make me look fat?"

There were nods of sympathy from the other two husbands. "It's a no-win situation," one of them said.

"All right, let's put the past behind us," I said. "Sally—start strolling!"

She closed her eyes and stepped forward gingerly, where she was met by the soothing caresses of her girlfriends.

"Don't you listen to him when he answers a loaded question," one of them said.

"You're so beautiful—inside and outside," another said.

It was my turn and I struggled for something to say that would comfort her and at the same time wouldn't show up her husband.

"You know," I began tentatively, "the top is the best part of the muffin."

