

# Grand Theft Auto (a true story)

by Gita M. Smith

She is a widow, has grown children (one of each) and granddaughters (but no grandson, yet). She has pollen allergies; her son bought his home in Conyers, Georgia, (three bedrooms two baths, a small dining room but a nice kitchen) for only \$35,000 -- or was it \$38,000?

All this and more she tells me in a stream of pleasant Southern drawl and Marlboro Light smoke outside the Madison Car Wash. She is hoping her daughter will produce a boy soon, "because she's 30 and it wouldn't do to wait much longer -- birth defects, you know."

I sit like a stone with ears. The woman seems determined to tell me -- an imperfect stranger -- every detail of her life, from medical history to the color of her sofa cushions. She proceeds to explain that she is having her car washed because she is going to Georgia to visit her children for a nice long stay.

How foolish can one grown-up be, I wonder. I could be anybody. I could be a burglar. With no effort at all, were I so inclined, I could ask her address and she'd tell me.

The Car Wash is short of help and our cars are taking twice as long as normal. Just as I start to tune her out, she brings me back to full attention.

"...and my husband bought a Buick Grand National."

"Ah ..did you say *Grand National*?"

"Yes. After he passed, my son took it over."

"So, your son, who lives in Conyers, has a.." I'm squeaking pitifully, "a *Buick Grand National*?"

"Oh yes, it's his baby. He let it get stolen from an AT&T parking lot, though."

I am about to say '*what a moron to park a BGN without putting The Club on the steering wheel and Lo-Jac on the car*' when she continues.

"They found it," she says, "and it was in the process of being stripped, but the robbers hadn't gotten to the engine yet. My son has restored it piece by piece until he got it perfect."

I forgive her, after that.

I forgive this foolish overtalker of a woman for boring me witless because, for a shining moment, I am one degree of separation from the last truly great limited edition American muscle car. It was manufactured in 1982 and 1984 to mid-1987 in small batches. General Motors stopped production, but not before every car reviewer in 50 states ran out of adjectives.

One writer called it "a brick shithouse made from Waterford crystal."

Back in 1986, a brash and speed-addled writer named P.J. O'Rourke test drove the BGN for the April issue of AUTOMOBILE magazine. He took the car out into the middle of Nowhere, Mexico, and drove it at top speed, *off-road* for a day and a night. I am talking badlands, y'all. I am talking strut-breaking, axle-wrecking, wheel-bending, paint-peeling conditions and balls-to-the-wall, testosterone-drunk driving.

The Buick Grand National never flinched. It took the punishment and said, '*Thanks, Boss.*' Back in the garage, the mechanics could find no damage to the test car, although a number of armadillos were heat-seared to its exhaust pipes.

And so, as I watched my new friend tip the car wash guys and slide into her everyday Honda, I rushed to her window and said, "Please tell your son you met a lady at the car wash who respects him for fixing up his BGN."

She chirped, "Oh, would you like to meet him? I can give you his number!"

For a split second, I almost said yes. But then, realizing all too well what the penalty is for grand theft auto, I just said, "I better not."

