



• **EDWARDIAN ESTATES.** It was a great looking sign made in the shape of a 4-story high, burnished bronze shield and outlined in purple and pink neon. An *exclusive Residential Community for Adults*. Under this line was painted what looked like a pair of crossed maces or mushrooms, it was a little hard to tell. *Yearly rates available*, and under that was a King Arthur-style yellow jousting helmet with a fading robin's egg blue plume. Behind the sign at the end of a potholed single-lane road were the promised Estates, a raggedy patch of corroding aluminum house trailers festooned with clotheslines, sagging TV antennas, power cables, garbage cans, faded green plastic awnings with rust-streaked supports and the usual collection of '61 Dodges, '57 Ford Galaxies and defeated Studebaker Larks that always seem to gravitate toward trailer parks. The weak washed-out Illinois winter sun didn't help a bit.

"That sure is pretty fancy," I said to the pump jockey who had condescended to put a few cups of Regular into my tank.

"Huh?"

"Pretty fancy." I glanced up at the magnificent sign which was casting a long shadow over the grease rack.

"Oh, y'mean the estates. Yeah, they're not bad. They just put in plumbing. Got rid of the cesspools. Place smells a lot better now, anyway."

"I can just see King Edward checking in." I said this in what I imagined to be my best savagely ironic voice.

"Say what?" He was looking at my credit card as though it carried bubonic plague and a fake name.

"King Edward," I persisted. He squinted up at the sign and I could see his lips moving as he laboriously translated the plain English into whatever it was that he understood.

"You don't see many Edwardian estates these days," I said, filling in the time.

"Hell, they been here for some time," he

answered, scribbling on the Shell receipt blank with a stubby pencil that looked like the butt of a very cheap cigar.

"It certainly is full of turn-of-the-century charm and old English heartiness, with just a touch of modernity to give it dash."

"Yep. I guess you could say that. Me and the wife have been livin' there in the Air-stream for three years now, and it ain't so bad. Except for the damn crickets." His voice trailed off as he applied dirty grease to my windshield from a rag he carried for that purpose. Then I did something I have since regretted, but honest-to-God, I couldn't help it at the time.

"Do you know who this Edward was?" I asked. He stopped pushing the rag around and showed signs of actually listening.

"Edward who?"

"Well, the Edward that this place is named after. It says 'Edwardian', right?" He looked up again at the sign with a strange expression as if he were seeing it for the first time, as if it contained some pornographic message that he had just learned how to decipher.

"Y'know, I never thought of that." He paused in deep contemplation. "Maybe it was named after old Ed Dunkel. Used to be in real estate around here for years. Had real bad bunions. Finally quit and moved his family to Florida."

With that, I drove away from the station to

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I could just picture  
King Edward, resplendent  
in his silk cravat,  
tooling into the  
Estates for an afternoon  
of dalliance amid the  
aluminum hovels

join the stream of traffic heading toward other Edwardian Estates. After a couple of miles it suddenly hit me. What is there in the American soul that forces us to name things, all kinds of things—cars, buildings, streets, even towns—after remote romantic distant (both geographically and in time) alien places and ancient gods and myths? I pictured the decadent elegant King Edward in his watered-silk cravat, his magnificently conceived beard and sideburns, tooling into the Edwardian Estates in a sparkling handsome cab with a demurely coiffed actress from the Follies beside him for an afternoon of dalliance amid the aluminum hovels.

A Cadillac Eldorado boomed past, driven by a squat toad-like creature smoking a five pound cigar, the classic Cadillac owner in full plumage. I glimpsed a brief flash of a stylized chrome nameplate on its side. *El Dorado*. I wondered if that toad had the faintest idea of what that name meant? The

steaming ancient jungles, Montezuma, the relentless *Conquistadores*, the City of Gold. *El Dorado*! I wondered briefly if the guys who made Cadillacs even knew what it meant when they had contracted the name into a non-word.

A Tempest surged by. Tempest, I thought, there's a strange name for a car . . . a raging sea of troubles. Death. Disaster. Agony at Sea.

A battered, smoking mud-caked Buick, shuddered ahead of me, exuding great clouds of billowing blue smoke. Through its dim streaked windows I could make out the bobbing heads of twelve or thirteen hundred children and a few arm-flailing adults beating them into submission. *Great Scott*, I thought (in these secret driving thoughts I tend to be a bit dramatic), an *Electra*! Now there's a name for a car. Electra. Does that crowd suspect who she was and how she brought down the kingdom and summoned Orestes, her doomed brother, from far across the sea to murder his own kinfolk?

*Oh brother on some far shore  
what boots this cruise I carry?*

Shades of Euripides and Aristophanes clunked and rumbled ahead of me, laying down a lethal gas barrage of pungent bile-green exhaust.

Why do we name so many things after cruel avengers? Electra. Tempest. Le Sabre. Why? I had no answer. I still have none . . . but examples are all around. The Barracuda, the Mako, the Cougar, even the Hornet, these are not beasts that one would casually entrust one's life with. Even when objects are named after locales or events, the results tend to be bizarre. There is an apartment complex in Jersey called with simple stark opacity "Stonehenge." Do the renters there have the faintest suspicion of what unspeakable horrors, midnight bloody sacrifices and inhuman incantations were supposedly performed by the ancient Druids amid the slabs of the real Stonehenge? It's a decidedly strange place to name your comfy nest after.

I once stayed at a totally tacky motel named "The Versailles." When I asked the owner how come he called it that, he squatted behind his formica and plywood desk and said: "I dunno. It was named that when I bought it. I figured it was cheaper to keep the name than to have the sign changed. And anyway, it come with a couple hundred cartons of book matches with the name printed on, so I just kept it."

Versailles. The Sun King. The decadent glories of France. The Grand Palace. President Wilson and The War To End All War. We are a mysterious people.

I doubt whether many people ever really seriously think about the names that are tacked onto things. It just sounds good, so the hell with it. But why does "Manta" sound good and not "Guppy"? Maybe we all unconsciously want to be Sun Kings, legendary Greek princes or predatory man-eaters. Yet no car has even been named "Sim-

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ba" or "Grizzly" or "Tarantula." Evidentially some brutes just don't cut it.

As I drove on, I thought about other places and things, and other names. There must be a million seedy boarding houses named "Tudor Arms." More and more we seem to be grasping at the historical past of other countries, hardly ever our own. One day I asked a friend of mine about the car he had just bought.

"It's a LeMans," he answered.

"Do you know anything about Le Mans?" I asked.

"Yeah," he said, "I just bought one. What are you talking about?"

"No, the race," I said. "You know, Le Mans is a famous race, a twenty-four hour endurance race. They have it in this town called Le Mans, and . . ."

"No kidding?" He seemed surprised.

"You mean my car, my new car, is named after a town in France?"

"Yep. It sure as hell is."

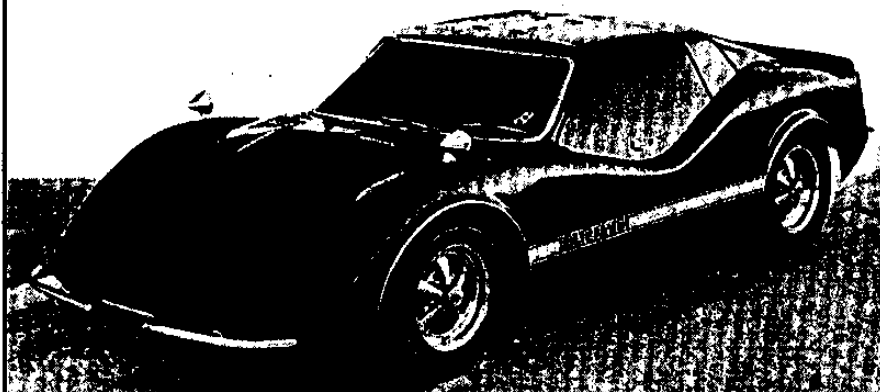
"I'll be damned."

I drove on, wondering about how many guys who drove Catalinas had ever heard of the little tourist trap of an island off the coast of California that their car is named after. I once ran into a guy who drove a Grand Prix who thought the name had something to do with sex . . . but then he just might have been cracking wise for all I know.

Let's face it, though, we're not the only

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It was a mutton meatball stand in the Arab Quarter of Tel Aviv that finally delivered the knock-out blow . . . the sign read *Coney Island Boardwalk*

race in the world naming cockamamie tourist camps, motels, ice cream cones, refrigerators, canned beer and garbage disposal units after mysterious foreign legends and places. One hot, very sultry night in Tel Aviv, I came across a place in the old Arab quarter of the city that just about knocked me out. It was close to midnight and really steamy and hot. A crowd of Arabs were lining up—kids, fat ladies, dogs, the whole lot—outside a crummy open-air shack-like stand on the waterfront. They were jostling each other to buy watery ice cream cones and meatballs made of lamb doused with catsup. The sign over the joint read: *Coney Island Boardwalk*.

Tired old sad Coney Island. Oh well, LeMans is a tired old sad town. We're all searching. All of us. It's just a matter of perspective that determines in which direction we yearn.