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BACK IN A BIMMER AGAIN
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Quite frankly, I thought my days of lusting over cars had long gone. The memories seemed satisfying and sufficient: a super-smooth stick-eight Ford in my teens, access to my brother's classy TR-3 (while he was away in the Army), and a somewhat homely but oh-so-memory-filled '58 Chevy during my years at Lafayette.

Marriage redirected my passions and I settled into a pattern of stylish but sensible Detroit models. Everything seemed fine until the spring of 1972, the period I now refer to as my automotive epiphany.

I can't recall what brought BMW's to my attention. Virtually unknown in the United States before 1968, BMW first attracted the eye of upscale young people with its now-legendary 2002. Although less muscular than a comparably-priced Oldsmobile 442, this boxy baby could negotiate back roads and take tight turns better than anything America had ever seen.

But I was married, had a child, and thought I needed something a bit more substantial. Luckily for me, BMW chose that exact time to come out with the Bavaria, a roomy, four-door sedan with a spirited, silky smooth six-cylinder engine. The more I devoured the hyperbolic articles in the auto mags, the more I wanted that car.

It had it all: power, performance, incomparable safety — and a base price of \$4,775. And, because the dollar was in a very nice relationship with the Deutschemark, I could pick up my BMW at the factory in Munich, blast around Europe for a few weeks, and ship it back for the same price as taking domestic delivery! How could I resist?

Well, of course, I didn't.

Those were wonderful driving years in the early 70's. As members of a rather small fraternity, BMW owners couldn't meet each other on the road without a salutatory flash of the high beams. And if our cars drew more perplexed stares than smiles of admiration, that simply added to BMW's reverse-snob appeal.

Life in the fast lane slowed for me in 1978. I left the security of a fifteen-year career in broadcasting to start my own business, we bought a new home, and, facing some significant engine and transmission expenses, I decided to sell the Bavaria.

It was a particularly gloomy time because I sensed I might never own another BMW. With the sharp decline of the Jimmy Carter dollar (and the company's decision to seek a more affluent market), prices for BMW's had rocketed by 600%. From my slightly pinched Puritan perspective, I knew I could never spend that much on basic transportation.

Of course, life is full of ironies. Just as I had been one of the early customers to buy from Otto's BMW, they became my first (and most steadfast) client. For the next eleven years, I was surrounded by forbidden fruit. Even worse, in order to write persuasively about the product, I found myself periodically test driving every model. Talk about pleasure/pain!

By early 1989, and almost imperceptibly at first, my perspective began to change. Domestic car manufacturers, whose price increases in the early 1980's had lagged behind their foreign competitors, had joined the "sticker-shock" game with a vengeance. No longer was there such a disparity between a top-end American land cruiser and a BMW.

That did it. With encouragement from my daughter and dispensation from my wife ("if you want a standard transmission — even though I'll never be able to drive it — go ahead and get it"), I took the plunge into a newly-designed (black and beautiful) 5-speed 5-series.

It was as if I'd never left. Within minutes after the break-in oil change, I was rediscovering the pleasures of blurred scenery along remote Chester County roads. Snicking from gear to gear, I found the tach and my pulse soaring in tandem. It wasn't long before Susan injected a note of reality: "at this rate, you're going to lose your license in a month."

So, naturally, I got a radar detector. Now, before the local constabulary start frothing, let me say I do not make a habit of speeding. While I may blow through an occasional short section of serpentine rural roadway, I maintain a demure pace in all populated areas. Really.

Then why the radar detector? I couldn't help it. Returning home from Florida recently, I happened to read a very persuasive ad in U.S. Air's in-flight magazine. It seems Cincinnati Microwave, makers of the very popular Escort and Passport detectors, have once again broken new ground with a battery-operated, palm-sized unit called SOLO. And, with me in mind, they pictured it with a set of BMW keys.

What could I do? I had to have one. As an aside (for those who care about such things), I must tell you that SOLO is one slick unit. No power cords, no rechargers. Just a tiny magnesium case with user-friendly controls, superb detection capabilities, effective (and adjustable) audio and visual alarms, and up to 200 hours of continuous surveillance from one nine-volt battery.

While a bit pricey at \$345, SOLO has some other very appealing features. Its discrete profile enables it to be tucked away almost anywhere. Thieves will be discouraged to discover that once the battery has been removed, SOLO cannot be reactivated without inserting the owner's code-embedded "key." And if you forget to turn it off? SOLO takes care of it by shutting itself down thirty minutes later (but not before announcing its intentions with a distinctive alarm).

If you've forgotten how friendly mid-Westeners can be, call Cincinnati Microwave toll free (1-800-543-1608). They'll chat about their products — and the vagaries of radar enforcement — as long as you like.

As for me, I'm playing it safe. Being back in a Bimmer again has turned out to be just the right tonic for this middle-aged guy — and it's much too good to foul up with speeding tickets.

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