

CONFESSIONS OF AN

EGG OWNER

GOTTA' ADMIT--THE GUYS GOT GUTS... WHAT AN OUTRAGE TO MODERN MAN... GOOD GRIEF!... WHAT'S IT GOING TO BE WHEN IT GROWS UP---PROBABLY HANDY FOR THOSE FOREIGNERS BUT I'D RATHER DRIVE MY JET GOOFER "12" ANYDAY.. WHAT IS IT, ITALIAN--GERMAN---FRENCH? LOOKS LIKE A BUG, Y'KNOW!

GENTLEMEN----- IF YOU DON'T MIND!



I'M JUST an ordinary man, exceptional in no way: neither famous nor talented nor rich. Under usual circumstances, I'm not the least bit adventurous. Conservative in tastes, I look for the orthodox in life. And when it comes to automobiles, I like something not too different from the machines my neighbors own. Yet I have never been consciously guilty of trying to keep up with the Joneses. I'm just an ordinary man.

Or rather, I was, B.E. — Before Egg. The Egg in my case is an Isetta — a BMW Motocoupe, what they call in Europe a scootermobile. I own one, and that's my point. People of my ilk just don't. It's out of character.

It all started with our need for a second car. Not just any second car, but one that was economical to buy and run, easy to maneuver through heavy traffic, and suitable for my wife. Something she could use for taking the kids to school and doing the marketing. The need for this vehicle arose unexpectedly. My wife — otherwise a fine woman — simply announced one evening that she had made her last run for the 8:11. We live out in the country — a part of Connecticut that's called exurbia by people who live elsewhere — and I commute to New York; so it was either buy a second car or hire a chauffeur. That was that. Trouble was, I couldn't see buying another monstrous sedan — we already half-owned a Ford. I'll be frank: the problem was a financial one.

My teen-age son suggested a solution. What we needed, he said, was one of those cool little European bubble cars — a cross between a motorcycle and a midget car. A scootermobile. He showed me the ads in the New York papers, "Isetta 300 — World's Most Talked About Small Car — World's Cheapest Car to Buy and Run!" From the illustrations I could see that it was something you might talk about. But would it fly? Or rather, would it sustain life in crowded city traffic? In my jaundiced eyes, it had the makings of the most deadly suicide weapon since the Brooklyn Bridge. You certainly couldn't trust your wife and kids to it — it was just too small. In Connecticut we have lots of Buicks. And Packards. And Oldsmobiles. My God, this contraption would be run down by Volkswagens! I said no.

Next, my son brought me an ad from some British motor-ing journal: "If you're fed up with inflation, shocked at the

cost of living, sick of counting every penny, then here's news to set your heart dancing: a *real* car with four-wheel safety and a proper chassis for £84 less than the next cheapest!" The ad — and my son — went on to expound the Isetta's many virtues: 70 miles to the Imperial gallon at 50 miles per hour — tubeless tires good for 40,000 miles — four wheels — room for three (small) adults — unobstructed four-way vision — direct access to and from the pavement through a single, front-opening door — and a trouble-free, air-cooled one-cylinder engine.

"One cylinder!" I exclaimed incredulously. "In the year 1957 I am to return to a motor vehicle having but *one* cylinder? Never!"

The economy angle did appeal to me — the Ford was getting about thirteen to the gallon, not to mention oil. But really, a one-cylinder, *one-door* coupe! Until then two doors had always been my idea of utter poverty.

From out of nowhere came a salesman — again the work of my son, who by now had become the scootermobile's greatest living exponent without having ever seen one in the flesh. This first salesman was followed by a second, then a third. Scootermobiles had obviously staged a successful invasion of our shores. BMW, Messerschmitt, Heinkel, Goggomobil. I now knew what had become of the German armament industry.

The Isetta salesman was most effective — he was the only one offering parts, service and immediate delivery. On top of that, he arrived in a demonstrator — a machine he called the USA Model 300 De Luxe. I could hardly believe my eyes. At first it looked like an Easter egg on wheels — whence the

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Egg Owner

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nickname Egg. I walked around it once, but the change in angle didn't help. There was something of Professor Beebe's bathysphere about it. Certainly it looked better qualified for excursions on the ocean floor than for shopping trips in Connecticut. Obviously it was related more to airplanes or motorcycles than to automobiles. The construction was typically aircraft: a tubular steel frame covered with sheet metal, glass and canvas. Such a concoction had no place in my life. I could see little method behind such Teutonic madness.

The salesman was smart. He said very little, but what he did say hit home. "This is the perfect answer to second-car needs. It's fun to drive, safe, economical, takes half the parking space of a conventional car, does sixty with ease, and you'll get forty miles to the gallon. Also, anybody—but anybody—can afford it." To hear him tell it, the Egg was kind of a poor folks' Volkswagen—costing some \$800 less than its formidable rival from Wolfsburg. I asked what the exact delivered price was (the ads had said \$998, but we all know what that means), and the salesman spoke right up: \$1100 with radio and a few extras. I said no. In addition, I tossed in a little philosophy: while the Egg was certainly not a conventional vehicle, I was a conventional man. This had less than no effect. The salesman countered with the "take her for the weekend—no obligation to buy" ruse. He didn't even take us for a demonstration ride—just presented us with the owner's manual (in German) and left via taxi.

There it sat, cluttering up the driveway. What could I do? I decided to become better acquainted with the little devil.

The Old World craftsmanship was immediately evident—no file marks, no paint drippings around the edges, no slovenly metal work. I had to admit the little thing was beautifully made. But the thought of a head-on collision with even a bicycle was paralyzing.

Getting in was no problem—the whole front end opened wide and we just walked in, turned around and sat down. Me, my wife and the smallest of the three kids. I began by crushing my good hat, and a portion of my head, against the tubular cross-member over the driver's seat. My own fault, everybody said. The engine started up very quickly and had the sound of a power lawnmower, only deeper. It turned out to be directly under the seat, and it produced a full *thirteen* horsepower. The hand brake was located just under my left thigh. At least you couldn't forget to release it before moving off because you couldn't get at the clutch until you did. In fact, you could never forget it completely, even when it was off.

Brake, clutch and accelerator pedals were where you'd expect to find them, only smaller. The gear shift lever was on the left

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Egg Owner

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and seemed to grow out of the front wheel well. There were four forward speeds and reverse—each well marked and the whole thing just the opposite of any pattern you might already know. And all done with the left hand. A lot like BMW motorcycles, my son told me.

With much ado, we were off . . . with a neck-snapping lurch. I didn't quite have the "feel" of the clutch, and my feet were obviously too big. Once running, however, things went pretty well. I was immediately surprised at the sense of security and stability the Egg induced. There was nothing flimsy about it, despite its lightweight construction. Felt so good that I quickly lost control at the end of our driveway and entered the highway broadside-to. In sight of family and friends. Unfazed, I shifted up to second, making mild passes at fourth and reverse on the way, and settled down to a cruising speed of about seventeen miles an hour.

You have to drive an Egg to believe it. Words alone will not do. It was a lot like riding in a portable fishbowl. Steering and handling turned out to be lots of fun. Finding true third and then even fourth, I got her up to fifty, then almost to sixty on a slight downhill grade. For several brief moments I felt master of my fate. But it didn't last. Heading for home on a secondary road, I found that rough stretches of pavement produced a profound pitching and yawing, and it was necessary to slow to twenty-five in order to survive. The wheels were very small—4.80-10's—and the Egg handled like a large baby-buggy overloaded with groceries.

The salesman had said much about the Egg's "lively" performance. What is "lively" to one man is snail-pacing to another. Fortunately, I'm a snail-pacing kind of guy. Whatever may be said of actual performance, it *sounded* like it was really moving. And up to about thirty, I guess it really was. The engine seemed to be quite slow running, and you knew it had only one cylinder. It was enough to keep you from being run over, but not much else.

When the salesman returned Monday evening, I was convinced: we didn't want an Egg. The salesman was glib and, to the rest of the family, convincing. I ended up signing on the dotted line—but for only one very good reason. The Egg was so scuffed up from the weekend's trial runs that I was ashamed to return it. No obligation to buy—indeed!

We owned an Egg—perhaps the first in all Connecticut. And for the first week everything went well. While the novelty lasted, my wife and kids couldn't see enough of our shiny red scootermobile. Each evening I'd come home to find the driveway crowded with teen-agers taking turns at the wheel.

But by the weekend, things had changed. The Egg was to be *mine*. Wife and kids wanted the Ford back!

"What do you mean, I've got to use it? We bought it for you and the kids, remember? For going to school and doing the shopping."

My wife's reply was devastating in its lack of logic. She and the girls found the Egg embarrassing. They felt funny, stared at, self-conscious, too out of the ordinary! The girls simply refused to be seen in it: "Mom, if you're driving the Egg, don't bother to pick us up. We'll hitch a ride home." My wife's bridge club friends concurred: the Egg was an eyesore. What's more, my mother-in-law forbade my wife to drive it on Main Street — it brought shame on the entire family. That was the killing blow.

The Egg was mine, for better or worse—by popular demand. My keys to the Ford were confiscated. It was either the Egg or nothing. Reluctantly, I set out to make friends with it. After all, it stood between me and the train station.

The Egg's attention-getting properties were its most serious drawback. It wasn't just transportation, every ride was an event. Suddenly I was an object of public ridicule and merry-making simply because I'd had the ill fortune to inherit a beastly little freak from across the seas. People stared. Not just the children, but the pointing, gesturing, gesticulating parents as well! Some shouted words of encouragement. Others treated me like the brave, demented fool I must have been.

With no warning, I found myself traveling thirty miles per day by Egg—fifteen to the station, fifteen back. At first even the simplest maneuver was a challenge. I'd have been as much at home in the Nautilus. I couldn't tell which gear was most appropriate at which speed. I'd try second, decide the engine noise level was too high, find third, discover that my speed had fallen off to twenty miles an hour, and return to second and those screaming gears again. First was hard to find when you were at a standstill and impossible to engage when you were moving. Second was hard to find when moving, and you didn't want it from a standstill. Neutral seemed to be most effective of all.

Arrivals and departures were a nightmare. On the open road you could always ignore the idle threats and exhortations of passers-by. But at the station, where you actually had to get out and lock up or unlock and get in, you were vulnerable. I prepared some stock replies. "Yes, I like it." Or, "She is a pretty little thing, isn't she?" Or, "Gets me where I'm going, and that's the main thing, now isn't it?" Or, "Wouldn't be without one — actually, this is my *second*." It helps if you're a born liar.

Performance—or the lack of it—became a matter of constant embarrassment. English racing bikes, some of them with mere women aboard, made a habit of whipping by me on a particularly bad hill near home. I ended up going miles out of my way to avoid the field of combat.

Radio reception was poor, so I had one

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Egg Owner

continued from preceding page

of those long, whip-type antennas rigged up in back. This was a mistake. "Hey, fellah, what are yuh? Radio controlled or somethin'?" Or, "Watcha got there, Mister - one o' them intercontinental ballistics missiles!" I took to working late at the office in order to return home after dark.

Parking was no problem—the Egg being only 7½ feet long, 4½ feet wide and (in case you wanted to park it *under* something) 4 feet and 4½ inches high. However, at the station it was important to park well back in the parking space and not with the front bumper against a retaining rail, as others did. Otherwise a few unsuspecting souls would turn confidently into an "empty" space, only to find at the last tire-screaming moment—the Egg.

And there was the matter of the surreptitiously planted notes. For the first month I'd leave the train, walk to the Egg, and find several "good-natured" messages under the wiper blades. Some were scribbled on business cards, others on the backs of old envelopes, others on wives' shopping lists. Some were even typed in advance - probably dictated to some highly amused secretary. "Got to hand it to you, Mac—you got guts!" Or, "What's it going to be when it grows up?" Some were frankly insulting: "Your car (?) here plus \$3000 cash and I can put you in a brand-new Chevy Six Two-Door. Act now—the market for your bug can't last!"

Yes, the Egg seemed to induce high-spirited playfulness in people of all ages. My wife and I left the movies one evening to find our poor little Egg beached high and dry on the sidewalk, carefully wedged between a store front and conventional car parked at the curb. College boys, the theater manager said. After all, the Egg weighed less than 800 pounds—a small load for four or five healthy young men. We—the manager, four or five healthy young men, and I—moved her back into the street; and we—my wife and I—learned to watch TV.

Unable to beat the Egg - no pun intended—I joined it. I stopped fighting the situation. The change was psychological. I bought one of those natty caps with the belt in back and found it gave me more self-confidence. (If you're going to act like a fool, might as well look like one, too.) Soon I didn't mind being stared at—in fact, I encouraged it by smiling openly at other motorists. I took to doing extra shopping on weekends just to be seen around town more. I acted as though there was nothing to be ashamed of.

I learned a few tricks of the trade and applied them regularly with good effect. Parking nose-to-the-curb between two conventional cars, for instance. Preferably on Main Street. This was a real crowd pleaser, especially on Saturday mornings in front of the hardware store.

When fortunate enough to have a passenger new to the Egg—and believe me, most passengers were—I went through another good piece of stage business. Behind the seat was a control not found in

"ordinary" cars—the reserve gas supply. (There was no gas gauge, and the main tank held only three gallons - enough for maybe 180 miles. The reserve tank held another eight-tenths of a gallon.) At the first noticeable miss of the engine, I'd say to my passenger, "Oh, oh - time to switch over to the reserve." reach back—without looking, mind you—and flip the lever. All very professionally done. *Wonderful* effect.

Then the inter-office memo came from the Boss. He and I had never been close—matter of fact, we'd only met once, the day I was hired. Now he wanted us to come to supper. Scrawled at the bottom of his note were these ominous words: "And bring along that *thing* of yours. Want to see just what you've been up to."

We drove the six miles to the Boss's place in a state of panic. Obviously we'd committed a breach of etiquette and social good sense by acquiring our Egg. Now we were going to pay for it. We skittered to a noisy stop at the Boss's front door, prepared for disaster.

Surprise, surprise—the dinner was a huge success. I made one bad mistake—giving the Boss his demonstration ride *before* supper and *after* two drinks. He couldn't get enough of it. One ride around the neighborhood and he asked to solo. After a couple of ear-shattering gear changes (he didn't understand the clutch either) he had the hang of it. After fifteen minutes of sprints around his long circular driveway, he had mastered what owners call "the Isetta slide" and gone on to bigger and better things. I've never before seen a man so quickly and willingly seduced by a piece of machinery.

Three days later and mine was not the only Egg in our part of Connecticut.

Today, if I may say so, I am a new man. Ordinary, except for my Egg. Where once my Egg and I were strictly an odd-ball combination, today we are a much-respected, even beloved landmark in the community.

Today, in my quite way, I am something of a civic leader. Thrice I have been honored at luncheons proclaiming my virtues as a pioneer, a pace-setter, a man who—despite initial opposition from certain bigots and narrow-minded reactionaries—led the way to a more civilized, sensible mode of transportation. I have been elected to the Chamber of Commerce, the Civic Betterment League—and yes, I am president of the local Isetta Owner's Club. Truly, I have prospered in business, in my community, at home.

I blame it all on the Egg.

People no longer laugh at my Egg. Most sensible machine, they now say. Shows lots of common sense - and a good dash of Yankee ingenuity. There's just no sense in driving some gigantic sedan back and forth to the station. Yes, sir, most sensible machine.

I am happy to report that we have even had our first exclusive Egg Owner accident—a breath-taking collision right in the station parking lot. Two broken headlights, a dented body shell and some scratched paint. The two participants were seen to embrace moments after the crash. That's what Egg-owning can do to you . . . I mean *for* you.

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