

## ***“Isetta Adventures and Bad Karma”***

by

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When I was in high school our band director had a tiny BMW Isetta that we reveled in carrying up to a second floor landing at school almost weekly. It didn't seem to bother him much, and he would just drive it down the steps and cruise on home. But somehow the enjoyment that little car gave us all planted a seed of desire in my brain that germinated over the years into a passion for these little cars.

Grazing in the shadow of my fifty-year mile marker, I decided if I was ever going to own a BMW Isetta, it would probably have to be now or never. After all, I could always claim temporary insanity, or a “mid-life crisis” to justify the expense. My wife was skeptical about the idea, but seemed content that my mid-life craziness didn't include some 20-year-old bimbo as part of the aging process. After a lot of searching for just the right car, I finally found a totally original and un-restored 1958 Isetta 300 for sale in a near by city. It took a bit of creative financing and a lot of gentle persuasion to satisfy my wife the little BMW was a wise investment opportunity, but I eventually convinced her how much we needed it and what a great deal it was. Not only that, but (according to the owner) the car was in “driving condition” and we could start driving it right away without any additional expenses! She wasn't thrilled about the “we” part of driving it, but consented to the purchase so long as I was absolutely sure it was both safe *and* reliable.

Upon seeing the Isetta for the first time after trailering it home, her initial reaction was, “Oh honey, it's so cute... but it's so SMALL! Are you *sure* it's reliable and safe to drive on the highway with the big cars?” Without a second thought I replied, “No sweat, honey, it's perfectly safe, and hey, it's a BMW so it's certain to be reliable, right?” The next day, after diligently reading the original owner's manual from cover to cover and learning the unique intricacies of operating a 41-year-old piece of Munich engineering, I decided it was time to take the little Bimmer out for his first spin around town.

With confidence high, I strode into the house and announced the time had come to debut our baby Bimmer to the public, and would she like to take a little drive down to the Dairy Queen for an ice cream cone? The terrified look on her face told me she wasn't at all thrilled about the idea of hurtling down the highway in a car that weighed only slightly more than her washing machine, but

she finally agreed, so long as I promised not to go over 30 miles per hour. I enthusiastically replied, "Sure, honey, no sweat, it'll be an *Adventure!* All you have to do is keep that good karma coming and think positive thoughts."

Saying a little prayer (at least I think she was praying because her lips were moving and her eyes were closed), she climbed in beside me and closed the door. "What's that smell", she asked? "Oh, don't worry about that, the muffler just has a little hole in it." This was a real understatement, considering the Swiss-cheese looking muffler hanging from the exhaust pipe, but hey, no sense in playing into her fears, right?.

Now, we live at the top a hill, and it's pretty much all down hill into town. Heck, we could almost coast to the Dairy Queen if we had to. After making very sure there were no cars coming either direction, we eased from our driveway out on to the highway and headed toward town. There is a traffic light about halfway down the hill into town, and up ahead I could see the light had just turned red, so I eased down on the brake pedal in anticipation of a slow descent to the intersection. What I experienced was a brake pedal that headed south to the floor, and no significant decrease in speed. Glancing over at my wife, I noticed both of her hands were clinging to the grab handle and her eyes were closed tight. Probably just as well... as she missed how we shot right through the red light with no brakes. The rest of the hill into town was negotiated with a little bit of parking brake now and then, and she never even noticed the beads of sweat that had popped out on my face.

As luck would have it, our local NAPA auto parts store is in the same little mall as the Dairy Queen, so as we coasted into the parking lot, I casually mentioned that I needed to pick something up at the auto parts store, and I suggested that she just walk on over to the Dairy Queen and order ice cream cones for both of us, and I'd meet her there in a couple of minutes.

As she headed across the parking lot, I quickly dropped down under the car just in time to see what was left of my brake fluid dribbling from a blown brake hose. Pulling a six-inch crescent wrench (the only tool I had the forethought to bring with me) from under the seat, I disconnected the brake hose and popped into the NAPA store. Wonder of wonders! They actually had a Mercedes brake hose in stock with ends that fit my car's connections, even if it was a few inches too long. I also bought a small can of brake fluid and had the new hose on and the master cylinder filled in less than 15 minutes. Of course, I couldn't bleed the brakes properly and the pedal still felt pretty squishy, but I figured the brakes would work good enough to get us home. I drove across the parking lot and stopped in front of the Dairy Queen where I could see my wife

through the window, patiently finishing her ice cream cone, though mine was a gooey white puddle on the table in front of her.

When we got back in the car she asked me, "What's that smell?" Sniffing the air, I replied, "Oh that! No sweat, honey, just a little spilled brake fluid... nothing to worry about". Now, at this point, I'm thinking to myself, hey, we've got all the bugs worked out now, right? There's not much else that could go wrong, right? So, instead of turning right from the parking lot to go back home, I turned left into town for a leisurely cruise down the main drag in our new toy.

About a mile later, the engine began to cough and sputter. I calmly mentioned to my wide-eyed wife that we must be low on gas (though I had put two gallons in the tank the night before), and I'd just move the fuel lever over to the "reserve" position. Reaching back, I tried to rotate the little handle to the reserve position... oh crap! It's *already* in the reserve position! Now what?

As the one cylinder engine gave a final cough and quit completely, I somehow managed to coast to a stop in the center turn lane with cars buzzing past us at 40 miles an hour from both directions. Smiling at my wife, I said, "Think positive thoughts, honey. Remember, this is an *Adventure!*" Well, there was no way I could fix *this* one without her knowing about it, but as I turned the key one more time, the little engine sputtered to life and we managed to pull around the corner and into a church parking lot where it promptly died again.

Hmmm? This can't be anything major, let me just take a quick look at the engine. As she stepped out of the car I heard her mumble something about walking home, but just then I was hit with a bit of automotive repair genius! It's gotta be a clogged fuel filter! So, leaving her to work on a small sewing project she'd brought along, I dashed across four lanes of highway traffic and into another auto parts store where I bought a new in-line fuel filter, 3 feet of new fuel line, and the appropriate hose clamps.

Installing the little "squeeze-type" hose clamps with only a crescent wrench for a tool was easy compared to talking my wife into letting me use her little sewing scissors to cut the fuel line to length, but eventually I had everything back together. However, when I cranked the engine over, it *still* wouldn't start, and it didn't take much more cranking before the old battery finally gave up the ghost for good. Looking over at my wife with a not too confident grin, I said, "Some day we'll look back on this and laugh, honey. Think happy thoughts. Remember, this is an *Adventure!*" The sun was just going down behind the trees as, with an icy tone in her voice, she replied, "I want to go home... I don't *like* adventures".

Okay, I thought to myself, there's one more thing to check before we call someone to come and tow us home. Opening the engine access door behind the seat, I pulled on the spark plug wire, and what do you know... it came off in my hand. "Isn't that supposed to be connected to something" my wife asked sarcastically? "Well, yeah", I replied, "it's *supposed* to be connected to the spark plug, but look, the little screw-on thingy at the end of the spark plug is missing." Hmmm? It must have just vibrated off. So, back across the highway to the auto parts store to buy a new spark plug. Actually *any* spark plug will do because all I really needed was the screw-on tip, and I didn't have a wrench to change the plug even if I wanted to. I screwed down the new spark plug tip (it was the wrong threads for my plug, but it screwed it down nice and tight anyway), and re-attached the spark plug wire.

I was just beginning to explain to my wife how to we might push-start the car (me pushing and her popping the clutch at precisely the right moment) when a high school kid in his monster truck pulled up just to ogle the Isetta. He generously offered to give us a jump start with his jumper cables, and in no time the little engine whirred to life. Thanking the kid, I turned to my wife and said teasingly, "You know, honey, I think you've just got bad karma when it comes to my little car. I guess we should probably go home now, huh?" "*You Think???*" she replied.

Driving back through town at a stately 25 mph, I must have misjudged my wheel tracking a bit, because with a jolt, we hit a pothole and the left rear hubcap promptly popped off. Watching out the side window in fascination, the little hubcap rolled right on past us, across the highway, and straight into the oncoming traffic lanes. Miraculously, no cars were coming from either direction so I pulled over and stopped, intending to jump out and grab my cherished BMW hubcap. However, as I was climbing out of the Isetta, I looked back just in time to see one of our local police cruisers turn the corner on to the highway, and without even slowing down, ran smack over the little aluminum hubcap, squashing it flat as a tortilla. I left it there in the road.

The rest of the drive through town was uneventful until we started up the long hill toward home. I had enough speed to make it up the hill to the red light we had blown through earlier, but then the engine started sputtering again and died at the intersection. "I don't like this car very much" my wife said looking straight ahead through the windshield, "and I'm *glad* we won the war". About this time a woman and her three children were walking by with armloads of groceries, and all three kids cheerfully dropped their packages and volunteered to push us around the corner and into the nearest parking lot. A quick check of the gas level, fuel lines, battery and spark plug revealed nothing visibly wrong,

and when I turned the key it started right up. Hmmm? Okay, we only had a half-mile to go and we'd be home safe and sound.

With the engine racing, we darted across the intersection and hit the highway at a dead run. In short order I had all of the engine's 13 horse power screaming up the hill in third gear when suddenly, whatever was left of the muffler disintegrated into no muffler at all. Grinning, I turned to my wife and yelled over the incredible noise, "Hey, kinda sounds like a race car, doesn't it?" She just stared straight ahead and didn't answer me. Sputtering and choking, we finally made it to the top of the hill and into the driveway just as the engine died again (the fourth time in two hours). With my ears still ringing from the new "open-ended exhaust system", I said, "Boy, that was quite an *Adventure*, huh?" My wife let out a deep sigh, climbed out of the car, and walked on up the driveway to the house without saying a word.

Leaving a trail of muffler fragments along the driveway, my neighbor and I managed to push the little Isetta up to the house and into the shop just as it was getting pitch dark. Over the next few weeks I installed a new muffler, bled the brakes, and removed the gas tank where I found enough rust to clog the fuel lines on the space shuttle. I flushed the gas tank and coated the inside with a sealer, and the little Bimmer has been running like a champ every since.

But do you think I could get my wife to go for another ride with me now that the Isetta is running "reliably"? Her answer was not only NO, but the last thing she muttered as she walked back to her sewing room was something about hell freezing over. You know, I don't think some women regard "*Adventures*" the same way that men do, and when you mix "bad karma" with a temperamental piece of German engineering that's older than 99% of the cars on the road, you could be in for a very long day.