



• "If you open driver's door with the key left in the switch, warning buzzer will warn you of being robbed."

This chilling statement appears on page four of a fascinating enigmatic little booklet entitled *Owner's Manual—Model S30 Series Datsun 240Z Sports*.

I am continually amazed at the number of potential maiming and electrocution victims who never read owners manuals, and feel that to do so would impugn their vast technical knowledge and, in fact, their masculinity.

I know one guy who was chased around his kitchen by a runaway electric carving knife that wound up boring its way through a wall and into the next apartment because he failed to note in the booklet that came with the piece of junk that there was a concealed emergency switch built into the plastic imitation elkhorn handle specifically designed for when the thing got out of hand and began carving up its owner.

As a student of Owner's Manuals I have come to appreciate their subtlety of style, their hints of evils to come, their buoyant acceptance of disaster. Like all literature, the works invariably reflect the national characteristics of the country origin. A turn of phrase here, a curious word there. Each country has its own. Even the spelling is tell-tale. "T-y-r-e pressure" is not going to be found in a Pinto manual.

I learned to love Owner's Manuals at a very early age. I was nine. On Christmas morning I received that ultimate of gifts—a Lionel electric train! I laid that track faster than ten-thousand Coolies crossing the state of Utah for Gould and the Railroad Trust. My kid brother was solacing himself by hurling his new rubber dagger at the flowered wallpaper. I got the track set up and hooked the train cars and engine together, hands palsied with excitement. The transformer had about six binding posts and maybe eight feet of twisted pair wire which I feverishly connected to a couple of brass clips on the tracks. I plugged in the trans-

former and, being a kid and basically suicidal, threw the slider on top all the way over to FAST. The house lights dimmed; the tiny engine shuddered like a speared wall-eye pike. For a long, ozone-filled, micro-second the living room was a sea of ice-blue light. The engine and its four cars, including a Union Pacific caboose, streaked down the track spouting flames, screamed across the rug and disappeared under our sofa which was the pride of my mother's life. Almost instantly, the cushions caught on fire. The Old Man came roaring out of the john.

"What the hell now? Fer Chrissake, I can't turn my back for a second!"

Seeing the sofa blazing snappily, he skidded to a stop, his eyeballs rolling, and yelled "THE HOUSE IS ON FIRE! RUN!"

My mother, who was out in the kitchen at the time, laboring over a batch of gingerbread men, screamed "SAVE THE KIDS!" and came galloping into the living room with a dishpan full of cold water. She hurled it on the crackling flames and there was another flash. The lights went out, the refrigerator squeaked to a stop and for seven blocks, electric toasters attacked their owners.

After the police had departed and the Old Man had scraped what was left of the electric train off the underside of the sofa, he said in a low, menacing tone directed right between my eyes, "That'll teach you to read the instruction book." He waved the book in

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More scored cylinder walls, blown fuses and late night visits to the Emergency Ward have come about from people not reading owners' manuals  
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the air, fanning the last wisps of smoke to the ceiling. "It says right here in red print 'Do not ever turn Lever C to Fast before making sure the train is well under way. A severe overload could result if this procedure is not followed.' Okay, stupid, that's your last electric train."

Since the episode of the exploding electric train I have not only assiduously read instruction manuals of all kinds, I have even come to prefer them to other, less creative forms of literature.

Naturally, upon taking possession of my new Z-car, I immediately plunged deep into the rich prose of the Owner's Manual. I might say that as a rule Japanese equipment comes with some of the most mysterious, racy, curiously compelling instructions of all the world's goods. It is obvious even to a casual reader that most of Japanese manuals were originally written in the native tongue and then translated into English . . .

but by other Japanese whose grasp of the intricacies of our language has curious inadequacies—or possibly over adequacies. These manuals tend to be literal to the point of becoming opaque.

I read and re-read that statement on Page four and the more I read it the more mysteriously sinister it sounded. "If you open driver's door with the key left in the switch, warning buzzer will warn you of being robbed." It is printed in extra heavy ink, so it must be significant. But what the hell does it mean? But, what did I expect? Any Japanese owner's manual is filled with these veiled hints and innuendo of skullduggery, hooded figures in the night, dagger thrusts and inevitable catastrophe. After all, let's face it, nine out of ten Japanese movies that the strong-willed can see introduced by the Syncopated Clock at late hours on Channel 2 have giant scaled monsters creeping out of the sea to pound Tokyo into rubble. I have yet to see an American movie starring a giant newt chewing up the Bronx, but the Japanese evidently love this sort of thing and it shows in the owner's manuals they write. For example, "Do not drive with the tachometer gauged at red zone unless otherwise really necessary." Really necessary are the key words in this bit of advice and are pure Japanese.

Visions of a 240Z red-lined, hurtling through the night turning eight thousand rpm fleeing from God-Knows-What other than it traces its lineage all the way back to Godzilla. Gamira, the giant scaled monster is back at the electric plant eating transformers and warding off air-to-ground missiles and only S. Watanabe, the young idealistic physicist, can prevent world destruction. He bravely floors the accelerator of his brand-new 240Z and heedless of "possible damages to engine" roars on into the night to save Mankind.

Now, by contrast, the Germans take the other view, a kind of nicely understated madness that runs through their manuals. My favorite is a line from the owner's manual for the 1973 Mercedes 450 SL: "It is not recommended that the car be driven over 90 mph on ice or snow, especially in mountainous terrain." Presumably 89.5 mph on an icy, snow-covered mountainous pass is all right, but over 90, well, what the Hell, you take your chances. That one line gives you pretty much the flavor of your average Teutonic instruction manual, to say nothing of the average Teutonic mind.

There's another thing about manuals that we students of the genre are aware of. The more complex and detailed they are, the gloomier they become, and in general they reflect the national outlook of the native drivers. For example, any English manual is rich with discouraging instructions about everything from what to do when your cotter pins dissolve due to heavy rains, causing Latch D to release, creating play on Ratchet C (see pg. 12, Ratchet Maintenance) to how to handle the sirocco winds in East Zambia

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when your air filter becomes clogged with tsetse flies. Visions of tight-lipped James Mason-types crouched over the wheels of their rust-ridden Land Rovers, pursued by hordes of spear-hurling Zulus come through loud and clear.

American instruction manuals seem to be written for a nation of people who can't read and have the mechanical aptitude of a coral snake. Little drawings in the Sesame Street style sprawl over the few pages of instructions which come with an \$8000 car. *How To Turn On The Radio; How To Turn Off The Radio; How to Operate The Automatic Self-Emptying Ashtrays; How To Adjust The Air Conditioner*—never the slightest hint of possible trouble. True, an occasional line that says "In case red light goes on, see your dealer immediately" may appear, but that's about as far as it goes. We are basically an optimistic, hedonistic, slap-happy folk who firmly believe that catastrophe is something that happens to the other guy.

In 180° contrast is Japanese manual, which is unabashedly fatalistic. After all, centuries of Samurai warfare, earthquakes, *hara kiri*, and Kung Fu movies have left their mark. Page 29: *Caution—never get under the car while it is supported only by the jack.* Great Scott! It would never occur to the Flashmaster people to warn you that a 6000 lb. load is liable to fall right down on top of you if you start fiddling around under it while

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it's up on the jack. What the hell would you be doing even thinking of 1) anything going wrong with your Flashmaster, or 2) getting your Dior double-knit messed up crabbing under a car? But the basic Japanese pessimism must have its say. Page 6: *If an accident may strain the seat belt, the seat belts should be replaced with new ones.* Now there's something to think about. It would take one hell of a bash to strain the seat belts so badly that they would have to be replaced, and I suspect at that point it might be totally academic.

But I save the best for last. In my 240Z manual there are continually hints of things that go bump in the night and warnings to beware. Page 15: *By pulling up the tumbler switch, all the directional lights flash at the same time to warn other cars that some trouble happened in your car.* I do not brush this off lightly. It may be that Lionel train all over again.

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