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Detroit meets the Dreaded Potato Beetle.

JEAN SHEPHERD

• The time has come for a Modest Proposal. Charles Lamb, whose name has appeared in more crossword puzzles than the Egyptian Sun God, made his Modest Proposal in a time of great turmoil that was besetting his country. His proposal, which dealt with the potential nutritional value of infants during the potato famine among the Irish, was universally greeted with horror, revulsion and even downright antagonism.

We have our own problems. Indeed, the time has come for a Modest Proposal dealing with the turmoil of present-day America; strife abounds, social change is everywhere and even starvation threatens in some quarters. Just as the potato was the very core of the Irish economy, so the automobile is the lifeblood of the American economy. And we are in famine, comparatively speaking. At least Detroit is in famine, which means America's bellies are lean and nervousness can be seen on all sides.

My Modest Proposal, which I set forth with the gentlest of heart, attempts to deal with this famine.

One of the basic causes for the Irish potato famine was the curious fact that the Irish never bothered to plant carrots, beets, rutabagas or even lima beans—nothing but potatoes. Potatoes everywhere. The Irish ate potato bread, potato pancakes, potato meatloaf, even potato bon-bons. Naturally, this potato fixation left the Irish wide open for disaster, and it came in the form of the insidious potato blight. The potato beetle, which had no taste for beets, carrots, rutabagas or lima beans, went insane over spuds. Within a short time, the beetles had devoured all the potatoes, and the Irish were left with nothing but a few peelings and an odd fish or two to sustain them.

The Irish have not yet recovered from that blight. True, they have shifted somewhat to Bushmill's, but the potato fixation dies hard. Only drastic measures had any hope of providing salvation for the poor Irish. Lamb proposed such a salvation and was immediately shot down in flames. Naturally, and for many of the same reasons, I expect my drastic measures to go the same way. Nonetheless, following Lamb's courageous example, I propose to make them.

One thing that any casual observer knows about potatoes is the fact of their deadly sameness. One potato is incredibly like all other potatoes; the potato is curiously without the slightest trace of personality.

Functional, yes. Reliable, sober, long-wearing but crashingly dull. No matter how you fancy up a potato, no matter how fretfully ingenious the cook, a potato remains always a potato.

So it is, unfortunately, with the product that yearly pours out of Detroit. Dullness is the potato beetle of the automotive world. I say "unfortunately" because I, personally, year after year hope to be excited, captivated, moved uncontrollably to buy the new models. I am for Detroit. I am not their enemy. In fact, I am as concerned over our potato famine as Lamb was over his.

Now for my proposal: One of the mysteries of today's disarray is how the giant, ponderous industry in Detroit could have missed, totally, one of the great social phenomena of 20th century American life. And the evidence of that phenomenon threatens daily to inundate us, though Detroit has persistently ignored the obvious: America has discovered its past. I repeat, for the benefit of Grosse Pointe: *America has discovered its past*, with a vengeance. In fact, it is totally in

GARY VISKUPIC



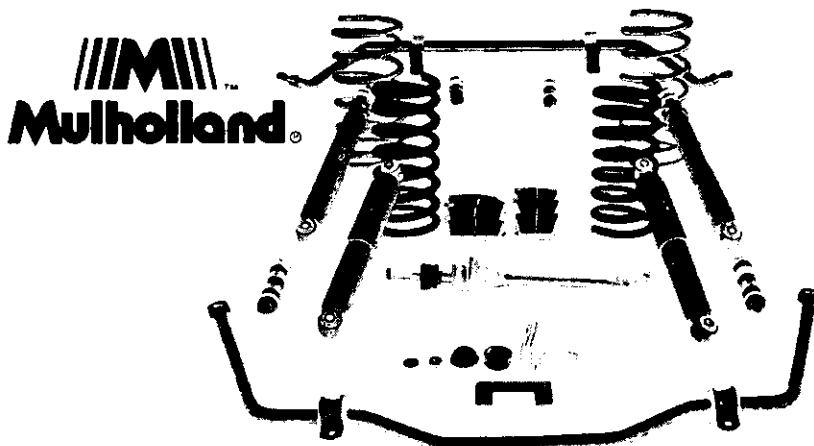
love with its past, young and old alike busily rejecting the present.

The clear-eyed sharpies in Hollywood and on Madison Avenue who have seen this are now rolling in wealth and bursting with prosperity, as well as private tennis courts, yachts and French mistresses. Take heed, Detroit. Every movie producer worthy of his Guccis is frantically planning bigger and better productions based on America's gaudiest period in the past, the 1920s and early '30s. Jack Nicholson's whole career is based upon his ability to fit America's image of the "typical" 1930s con man, or private

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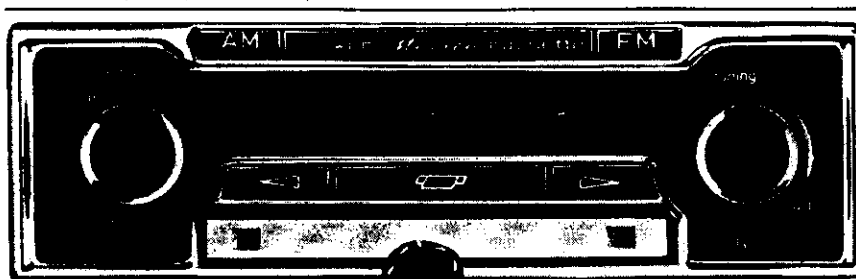
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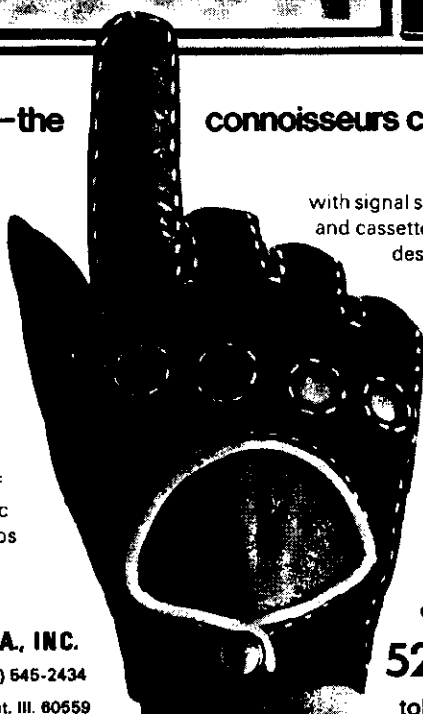
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JEAN SHEPHERD (CONTINUED)

eye, or demon lover. If *The Sting* had been set in 1976 Chicago, it would have been just another B picture.

Yet Detroit has ignored the vast riches that lie mouldering in its vaults. The time has come to open those dusty files, to unlock the enormous wealth that is just waiting to gush forth. I recommend that Chrysler, which has had more than its share of potato blight lately, lead the way by announcing that in 1977 it is bringing out, for the carriage trade, the 1932 Packard Straight Eight landau, options to include cut-crystal vases, matched alligator luggage and a mother-of-pearl interior trim package. The actual engineering drawings and plans are there practically for the asking. Dodge could simultaneously reintroduce the supercharged 1936 Auburn boat-tail Speedster, complete with folding windshield, rumble seat and cordovan leather upholstery. For the less affluent or more conservative, Plymouth could announce the 1934 Hudson Terraplane in either the four-door or two-door model, with a sporty business coupe available.

I sincerely predict that within minutes of such an announcement, Chrysler showrooms would be thronged with wild-eyed purchasers waving money and demanding immediate delivery.

Naturally, Ford would counter with an announcement that all this Pinto Stallion and Mustang Cobra II and LTD jazz had been wiped off the boards, and for '77 they were going with the 1928 Jordan Playboy. There has never been a better car ad written than the one showing the girl in the Playboy, her hair blowing in the wind, and the headline, "Somewhere west of Laramie . . ." Good God! Compare this to poor old Hugh Downs hawking Granadas and you can see why the industry is in trouble.

The vaults in Detroit are crammed with fantastic goodies that could save the industry the way *The Sting* resurrected Paul Newman. The Duesenberg SJ would be a sensational substitute for the Eldorado. Even I would line up for that one. How does a spanking-new '41 Continental grab you? Or a mean-looking 1936 Cord roadster? I don't mean a reproduction; I mean Detroit could turn out the real thing. It did it once, and it could do it again. I wonder how many of us there are today who would break their grandmother's arm for a brand-new 1930 Model A sport roadster—a true economy car, the answer to today's fuel crunch. And a factory-fresh air-cooled Franklin Six with varnished artillery-spoke wheels might just be the answer GM has been looking for.

They are all there, waiting to be harvested. Take heed, Detroit. The Irish farmers refused to plant carrots too. After all, Detroit, all you have to do is bend the metal a little differently from the Pinto and the Fury and you may come up with *The Sting* or *King Kong* or even *Gone with the Wind*. Maybe I am suggesting, as Lamb did, that we eat our own babies. Better than famine and the dreaded potato beetle.