

I Too Once Owned a Precious Sleek Red BMW*

One morning, the weather was cool and pleasant. Again at 7:00, I drove my brand new BMW to the pool for a swim. Upon arriving at the building, I noticed a few vehicles already parked outside. And so, I placed my car next to them, locked it, and then remembered its location before heading to the pool with my backpack.

An hour later, I stepped out of the structure and walked toward my car, feeling refreshed and energized. And then, I stopped short. Most surprisingly, I found my red auto had turned into blue. I couldn't believe my eyes. I gazed again, and again it was blue—dark blue. I double checked if it was the spot where I had parked. It was the exact location. However, why was the color wrong? Besides, why did my BMW also transform into a strange make—Ford? At this moment, I felt a surge of fear, disappointment, and trouble rising from the bottom of my heart, spreading to my chest and head, turning slowly into horror, despair, and loss, which finally engulfed my entire body and mind . . . “I've lost my new car!” I muttered to myself. “How am I gonna tell Dad? How am I gonna look for it? Can I find it? Should I call the police?”

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It was a warm day in March, 1988. A gigantic greenish gray sedan moved slowly through the old blue iron gates of our compound and sailed elegantly onto the wide gravel and cement road by the pretty Japanese-style garden as the afternoon sun glinted off the windshield. It did not stop until it reached the façade of the big house. The front passenger door opened and Dad jumped out, smiling broadly. Then the front door on the right was also pushed open. Uncle from Lugang, one of Dad's best friends, appeared, also beaming. Dazed by the dramatic arrival of the men and vehicle, I hurried toward them.

“A new car I just bought. Volvo.” Dad explained to me excitedly, pointing at the spotless car. “Look. The front and back are long. The bumpers are sturdy and scratch-resistant. There're also solid collision avoidance strips on the sides. This vehicle is as strong as a tank!” It was Dad's first car. He was very proud.

My driving skills were limited at that time. I also knew very little about cars. I only remember the model was 740GLE with a 2000cc engine, and the license plate number chosen was 703-0155.

“I don't drive,” Dad said, “but you and your Uncle from Lugang can give me rides. Practice driving often. Sharpen your skills. When I don't need the car, you may drive it to work.” Hearing it, I almost shrieked with delight.

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It happened twenty-eight years ago, in 1994. Mom was no longer alive. Dad and I had moved to the condo building, in which we were living. At the end of that year, for safety reasons, we decided to give the old Volvo away and buy a new car. I couldn't recall if it was Dad or my idea. Anyway, among so many different makes, we decided to check out BMW. One clear afternoon, therefore, we went together to the BMW company in town. I was unable to control my excitement.

There were several models being displayed at the spacious shop. As soon as I caught sight of a dark red—ruby red—two-door coupe parked next to the French window, I couldn't take my eyes off it. I have forgotten what kind of engine it had. Maybe I did not care about it at all. I was attracted to the sleek, dazzling appearance of the sports car. I was not a fast driver. Nevertheless, I could imagine while I was navigating it on the streets and the Tunghai campus, where I was teaching, how people would shoot amazing glances at it and how proud I would feel. Dad, nonetheless, did not like it. “Not practical,” he said, shaking his head. “The doors were too big. It would be a problem getting on and off the vehicle.” It was Dad, who would pay. I had to comply.

Surprisingly, Dad liked a four-door sedan 318i with an 1800cc engine, manufactured that year. To comfort me, I figured, he selected the color which was exactly the same as that of the coupe I was fond of. After bargaining for a while, Dad agreed to pay the price one million two hundred and seventy thousand New Taiwan dollars.

One month later, the new sedan arrived at the company. Instantly, we went to see it and drove it home carefully and excitedly. At the entrance, however, we discovered that the bottom of the car was a bit too low. It would hit the white tiles under the iron gates. As I was frowning, Dad strode inside the house immediately and came out, gripping a 30-centimeter-long hammer in his right hand. He quickly knocked part of the tiles off with the tool to make way for the shimmering BMW.

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One day, I drove the new Volvo, taking Mom and one of her sisters Auntie Number-Two to visit their parents, brother, and sister-in-law in Jungong, in the north of Taichung.

I couldn't recall what day it was. Chinese New Year holidays perhaps. As I was driving the two ladies home that afternoon, the wide Dongshan Road, connecting Jungong and Taichung, was full of cars and pedestrians. I wanted to change to a road with sparse traffic. Therefore, I made a right turn at the first intersection.

There was sparse traffic on that road indeed. Nevertheless, it was unfamiliar to me and much narrower. The two sisters, who hadn't seen each other for a long time, couldn't stop chatting in the backseat. Reluctant to interrupt them to ask them for help, I continued speeding on. Thinking that turning left was the correct direction, I quickly made the turn when we reached a fork in the road. To my great surprise, I found instantly I came to a dead end.

It was an alley, which was almost as long as the Volvo. Not only that, the alley was also very narrow with a small ditch on each side, and there was traffic, though not much, on the road behind the car. With limited driving skills, I wouldn't dare back up. Mom and Auntie Number-Two, who didn't drive at all, widened their eyes. A crowd soon gathered behind us, watching and talking. Feeling a knot tighten in my stomach, I shifted uncomfortably in the seat, not knowing what to do.

At this moment, a young man, who looked like twenty-five and a university student, came to the window to my left and offered to help. I agreed immediately. Then he went behind the car and started to motion to me. Not understanding what he was trying to convey, I asked him to take the wheel and back up himself.

When he skillfully and quickly drove the vehicle back onto the street, I almost shouted in excitement. The two passengers breathed a sigh of relief.

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This BMW was not the coupe I fell in love with at first sight; however, since it had been purchased and was undeniably a famous car, I liked it. I placed an exquisite cloth frog toy, given by a friend, on the dashboard. Even now I still remember the license plate number Dad picked—LM-7585.

I drove the car to school every day and always put it in the parking lot near my office. One morning, right after I got out of the vehicle with my bag, ready to lock it, a professor from some department, who I had never met before, came over. Circling around the car, he did not stop admiring it. I beamed. When Uncle Number-Two, one of Dad's brothers, found that I got a new BMW, asked me to let him try it even though he himself already owned a pastel green BMW 520i. I consented of course. After he drove it for a while, he said it was incomparable! He added that the engine and the other parts under the hood were neatly placed and covered. I was overjoyed. A foreign colleague of mine asked me what kind of engine the car had. As I only cared about the make and color and knew nothing about engines, I proudly answered that the engine had two functions—manual and automatic.

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Dad had a Japanese friend, who was returning to Tokyo after a visit. Dad decided to take him to the airport in Taoyuan and asked a Taiwanese friend of Dad's to give them a ride there with the Volvo. They agreed to meet at our house at 12:00 on that day.

That day arrived. Nonetheless, it was past 12:00 and the Taiwanese friend hadn't yet showed up. Annoyed, Dad then declared that he needed me to take the task instead. I couldn't believe my ears for I had never had any experiences driving on highways. Knowing there were no other options and Dad would sit by my side, I finally nodded.

We drove out of the garden and headed westward on Taichung Harbor Road, eventually getting on Highway No. 1, leaving the city and continuing going north. The lush sap-green trees lining the road rushed by in the opposite direction. Looking out at the sprawling expanse of mountains and fields before me, I savored the speed and comfort, sitting behind the wheel.

We arrived safely at the airport, in time for Dad's friend to board the plane. Almost immediately, Dad and I drove onto the highway again, racing toward home. It was late afternoon and the traffic was heavy. We had to inch forward. All of a sudden, the car trembled slightly. Then we both heard a low booming sound. Not until I jammed on the brakes, did I realize our car might have been hit by the vehicle behind us.

"Don't move," Dad said in an unhappy tone. "I'll go look."

"O.K.," I replied nervously, watching him opening the door and getting off.

Only seconds later, the door was opened and Dad came back in. "Let's go," he said, looking relieved.

I released the brakes and moved on. "Well? Is our car OK? Any dents?"

"It's fine," Dad grinned. "The bumper's real good."

"Was that car damaged?" Curious, I asked.

"I don't know. I didn't look. It's them that hit us. I just looked at our car." Dad answered.

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I used to go swimming at a pool in town around 7:00 almost every morning. The pool was in a two-story building on a busy street. I would park my car on the side of the road outside the structure and had a swim for about an hour. There were many vehicles parked there and I went swimming very often; therefore, every time I needed to remember the location where I left my car. After getting the new BMW sedan, I drove it to the pool.

One morning, the weather was cool and pleasant. Again at 7:00, I drove my new car to the pool for a swim. Upon arriving at the building, I noticed a few vehicles already parked outside. And so, I placed my BMW next to them, locked it, and then remembered its location before heading to the pool with my backpack.

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slowly into horror, despair, and loss, which finally engulfed my entire body and mind . . . “I’ve lost my new car!” I muttered to myself. “How am I gonna tell Dad? How am I gonna look for it? Can I find it? Should I call the police?”

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One late afternoon after class, with the Volvo, I first drove a colleague home on campus and then made a U turn and went uphill toward the main gates. On the way, I drove over a speed bump instilled on the road without slowing down. I could feel the bottom of the car hit the ridge slightly, but I didn’t mind. I just continued driving through the gates down Taichung Harbor Road at the speed of 50 kilometers an hour. Mom and Dad were waiting for me for dinner at home.

As I reached Liming Road, half way of the trip, the light was turning red, so I waited. At that time, it was getting dark and lights came on. The traffic was heavy, horns blaring. I gazed out the left window and spotted a middle-aged man in the idling car next to mine leaning out the window and pointing at me, which was distasteful and annoying. I turned back instantly.

“Bang! Bang! Bang!” I heard some knocks on the same window of my vehicle and glanced over. It was a thirtysomething man looking at me anxiously. That man making gestures toward me in a public place was rude enough and this man, who knocked on my window, was even more repulsive and offensive. I refused to roll down the window. Pointing at the road behind my auto, he was explaining something I couldn’t understand. He just wouldn’t leave, his expression almost imploring. The honking of the car horns continued . . .

Not until this moment, did I realize something was wrong. Immediately I rolled down the window and listened to the man. “Ma’am,” he said, locking eyes with me, his voice pleading, “gas has been dripping from your car. It’s been happening for a while. Very dangerous. Kill the engine.”

My heart started to pound wildly. I panicked. I didn’t kill the engine. Instead, gripping the wheel, I drove through the intersection to the side of the road and stopped the engine. Then I rushed to a payphone nearby and called Dad for help.

The accident occurred on campus when my Volvo hit the speed bump, causing the gas pipe to loosen. As a result, dark, sticky 95 unleaded gasoline, like water dripping down from an unfastened faucet, started trickling onto the road wherever the car went . . .

After the vehicle was repaired, I recounted the incident to some of my relatives and friends. They all concurred that I was very fortunate. They said that in that journey, if a person had accidentally thrown a burning cigarette butt onto the gas on the road, the butt might have ignited the trail of the gas and eventually the flames might have engulfed the entire car . . . The words sent a chill through me. My jaw dropped.

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Mustering my courage, I called Dad, who just got out of bed, telling him that I had lost the car. He was as shocked and furious as I had anticipated. Clenching my teeth, I was speechless. Then I went to the nearby precinct to file a report. Seeing my miserable appearance and to comfort me, the policeman drove me around the neighborhood in a patrol car to search for my vehicle. It was the first time for me to ride in a police car. I had to admit that I felt excited then, which alleviated my pain a little bit. The nice policeman felt reluctant, but he still informed me that quite a few BMW owners had lost their autos and speculated that the chances of retrieving mine were low. Hearing this, my heart plummeted.

I didn’t want to go home. I didn’t want to see Dad, afraid of his temper. Nonetheless, I encouraged myself to face the music. What would come would come. Therefore, I dawdled home. Suppressing his anger, Dad told me he had contacted the insurance company. Then he gave me a lecture until the calm returned. I listened quietly.

I called Xiajin, who is a good friend of mine and had already had a couple of rides in the new car, and relayed the bad news. Stunned, she gave me her condolences. Then she suggested that I phone a live radio show and ask the host to announce my loss on the program to see if the audience could help look for the missing vehicle. At first, I was not sure if I wanted to go public or if it would be effective. On second thought, it was a way to spread the word and get assistance, so I called. Even now I can still recall my nervous tone on the phone. It turned out that the host kindly accepted my request and made the announcement instantly.

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One clear early morning, I was driving the Volvo on Taichung Harbor Road, heading toward Tunghai. Twenty minutes into the journey, just after crossing the Fazi River, I noticed a young man, probably a university student, rushed to the side of the road and waved to me, looking nervous and worried. I pulled over and asked him what had happened through the open window. He said his friend had been injured and asked me if I could take them to the emergency room of the General Veterans Hospital for treatment. The hospital, which happened to be right across from Tunghai, was a place I was familiar with. At this instant, my mind flashed on a scene that happened only a few months ago. One day Mom was very ill and needed to see a doctor immediately. At Dad's request, Uncle Number-Three, the other brother of Dad's, took Mom, Dad, and me to the same hospital with his sky blue Citroën. Thinking that I should learn from the uncle, I straightened my back and gave my consent to the young man. He ran to some shade and brought back a man of his age. He carefully supported and assisted his friend, who had a weary expression on his face and a slight limp while walking. When they came closer, I saw part of his head was covered with blood. After they slowly and awkwardly got into the backseat, I suggested that the nice man chant *Namo Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva*, an enlightened being who helps humans, for his injured friend. Then I turned back and sped off right away.

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Uncle Zhang, a friend of Dad's, who was knowledgeable, came to visit us. When he learned about the missing car, he told us that I might have been targeted and followed by the thief for several days so that he could understand my daily routine. Then on that particular morning, he unlocked the door by some means and drove the vehicle away.

Not until then did I remember what had happened before I went to the pool that day. As I was getting the car out of the front courtyard, I found an old auto parked right in front of the gates, blocking my way. The driver, a dark, thin, middle-aged man, was sleeping in the driver's seat. I had to wake him up and asked him to drive away. In the meantime, I noticed a young stranger acting weird, hiding behind a pillar across the street the moment I saw him. These two incidents were most bizarre, and yet I decided it was none of my business and was in a hurry to go for a swim. Consequently, I forgot them very quickly.

Uncle Zhang speculated that the two men might have been the ones that had tailed me for days and eventually taken the car. This reminded me of the opinion of another friend of Dad's, Uncle Chen. He once shared with Dad and me startling information that after a BMW was stolen, normally it would be taken to the south of Taiwan, torn apart, and then sold in parts. If not, the snatched vehicle would be shipped to the mainland instantly and put on the market at a high price there. Upon hearing this, Uncle Zhang was certain that we would never get our car back.

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I couldn't recall where I was going on that particular morning that year. Anyway, I was driving either my Cefiro or Toyota Altis on the busy Minguang Road in downtown Taichung. As I was turning left to Pingdeng Street, I carelessly bumped into a deep blue or black BMW sedan, which appeared to be brand new.

I heaved a frustrated, regretful sigh. Although it was only a minor collision, I needed to apologize to the driver, deal with the accident, and above all, pay a large amount of money. Unnerved, I got out of my vehicle. What emerged from the BMW was a rich-looking, slender, young woman in her thirties. She was wearing a stylish, expensive dress, billowed by the flattering spring breeze.

She proudly strode to the spot where the two autos collided. I arrived there almost at the same time. Examining the possible damage, she declared instantly in a cheerful voice, "Not too bad."

Then she turned to me and said with a friendly smile, "No big deal. I bought a comprehensive insurance policy. It provides coverage for such an incident. You don't need to worry."

I couldn't believe my ears. I was so lucky to have run into her. Not only did she not mind the damage I caused to her new expensive car, but she even said nice words to comfort me!

"Thank you so much!" I bowed to her, my heart swelling with respect and gratitude.

"You're welcome," she answered. Then she returned to the BMW and closed the door. The car disappeared gracefully at the corner of the street.

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A few days later, another friend of Dad's came over to visit Dad. I opened the gates for him. When he found that I was home, but the BMW sedan wasn't, he curiously asked me why the car was gone. I had recovered from the loss of the vehicle, so I joked, "Someone's borrowed it."

"It's an expensive car," he said. "You didn't mind lending it to other people?"

I shrugged my shoulders, heaved a sigh, and replied, "He insisted on borrowing it. I had no choice."

A friend of mine was quite young, and yet he had the ability to predict people's fortune. When he learned about my lost car, he smiled gently and said that, according to his insight, red was not my lucky color when it came to vehicles. It turned out he was correct. Just a few days before my car was stolen, I strangely experienced stomachaches whenever I drove it. Then I asked him what color was right for me. White, he said.

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One laid-back afternoon, I received an unexpected phone call from the Lexus company in Taipei. The lady on the phone mentioned that they had identified I owned a Lexus sedan and that the upcoming date for its regular service was approaching. She expressed their interest in inviting me to participate in a plan. She went on to explain that their maintenance division intended to assess the quality of customer reception provided by their employees at the Taichung branch. She asked if I would be interested in collaborating with them. If I agreed, an inspector would be sent without the knowledge of the Taichung branch to coordinate with me on the day of my car's maintenance. For this task, I would be awarded two thousand New Taiwan dollars.

Bristling with excitement, I really liked the proposal, which I had never heard of before! It felt like a mystery unfolding in real life, both fun and intriguing! The best part was that I didn't need to write a script or memorize lines. There wouldn't be a director either and I, an actor, could play freely as an agent or spy. What was more, there was some compensation involved, although not a significant amount. I had been receiving regular car maintenance services from the company for several years. Whether it was at the reception or in terms of auto repair techniques, their service had always been satisfactory. They had never let me down. I was confident that their performance this time would also be successful. I wouldn't hurt anyone. Therefore, I accepted the offer. The date was set in ten days. Immediately, I called the Taichung company for a 1:30 reservation and notified the woman who proposed the idea. An acting lover, I couldn't wait for the coming of that special day.

That day finally arrived. I excitedly drove my Lexus to a gas station near my house and picked up Mr. Xu, the inspector from Taipei. Mr. Xu, about thirty-five years of age, was dressed casually and looked amiable. He was not like a man on business at all. We concurred that we would play friends and that we could talk about anything except for the mission.

We arrived at the company on time. Our receptionist was a Mr. Li. Probably thirty years old, he was medium height, wearing a white shirt and black trousers like his colleagues. He politely invited us to a spacious well-illuminated waiting room, scattered with some round tables and brown sofas. As a tradition there, Mr. Li crouched down and clearly explained the various maintenance items and the estimated cost and length of time—two hours. Then he stood up and left. Mr. Xu and I exchanged looks and smiled. While we were waiting, we chatted leisurely on different topics and savored free Häagen-Dazs and coffee at the same time.

There was a glass wall behind us. Through the glass, we could see a massive factory-like room with various models of Lexus vehicles and a dozen or so technicians in uniforms working on them. However, we did not hear any noises at all thanks to the soundproofed wall.

In less than two hours, Mr. Li returned and showed us the maintenance checklist including car cleaning. The cost was the same as what he reported earlier. Then he led me to the cashier and I paid with my credit card. It wasn't until Mr. Xu and I drove away that he stopped waving good-bye and turned.

Both Mr. Xu and I marveled at Mr. Li's performance. He not only knew his duties well, but was also responsible. We agreed that we had easily and successfully accomplished our mission. After pocketing two thousand dollars in cash given by Mr. Xu, I dropped him off at the same gas station. Then, I continued driving toward home, singing loudly as the intriguing mystery play came to an end.

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The intolerable vehicle search period finally ended in about a month. My BMW had not yet been recovered and the culprits responsible were still at large. Because of the comprehensive insurance policy Dad had chosen—What a smart man!—we were reimbursed nine hundred fourteen thousand and four hundred dollars. The insurer stated that based on the policy, they could only pay us such an amount for we owned the car for exactly thirty days. They explained that if the auto had been stolen one day earlier, we would have been compensated forty thousand dollars more! Dad and I didn't know what to say after hearing this. I did some calculations. The BMW was purchased for one million two hundred and seventy thousand dollars and after using it for thirty days, we received nine hundred fourteen thousand and four hundred dollars for compensation. This amounted to twelve thousand dollars per day of usage! Although he was the one that paid for the car, Dad only took two short rides, resulting in him experiencing the most significant loss.

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Almost every Taiwanese, eighteen-year-old and above, could drive a motorcycle. Riding a motorcycle was as easy as pie, but not for me. During my university days, I attempted to learn how to ride one—the easy-to-handle 49cc moped. However, I crashed into a brick wall in my house's garden almost immediately, which made me pale and unnerved. I concluded that motorcycles were not my cup of tea.

A few years later, one of my cousins was admitted to a medical school—a significant event for my family. To celebrate his achievement, Uncle Number-Two, his father, bought him a silver stylish 90cc Vespa scooter, which was every young man's dream at that time. Summoning my courage, I asked my cousin if he could teach me how to ride his new scooter. He kindly consented.

One day, we decided to have a lesson on the wide paved road with light traffic behind our house. However, just moments later, I lost control of the scooter and ended up in a ditch at the side of the road.

I couldn't fathom how sad my cousin must have felt, and at that moment, I made a solemn promise to myself that I would never attempt to learn how to ride a motorcycle again.

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Since the BMW was gone, we had to consider getting a new car. I suggested to Dad that we opt for an Audi, also a German-made car with a solid reputation. Nevertheless, Dad was determined not to purchase another imported vehicle. As a result, we ended up with a Nissan Cefiro, which was manufactured in Taiwan. It was white. After the Cefiro, we bought a white Toyota Altis. Subsequently, we got another one of the same make, model, and color. About seven months before Dad's passing, he surprised me with a Japanese Lexus ES240 in a stunning starfire pearl shade. Recently, I decided to replace it with a Lexus UX250h. Staying true to my preference for safety, therefore, I selected the color white once again—eminent white pearl.

Since the Cefiro time, everything has been going smoothly and safely. I no longer get stomachaches and no vehicles have been stolen. I can't remember the last time I thought about the ruby-red BMW, admired by many and very dear to me. It's become history.

* Revised from the essay *My BMW* by Hsiu-yao Wu.