

MISTER MUFFET

By John s. Halbert

Late March, 1968:

Even though I was perfectly happy with my red '67 Volkswagen and had piled practically every factory accessory onto it, it lacked the one feature I really wanted---a sunroof. So, when the next model year came around, I traded-in my beloved Bug on another red one that had the retractable roof. In addition to its hideaway top, the new car had a smoother ride than the former car and featured the tall front-seat headrests for the first time.

But when I took my shiny new Beetle out onto the highway, right away I noticed its engine had nowhere near the pep as the one I had traded-in. Raising the hood, I frowned at an arsenal of snaking air hoses and other gadgets that were not on last year's model. It was the first year of all the power-robbing pollution controls that marked the end of the performance era in cars, and the start of the long descent into ecology-based vehicle design. But, it *was* a brand-new car, and had the sunroof I had wanted so much, so I swallowed hard and accepted the torque trade-off for the sliding top.

The first night after getting the car, I parked it in the radio station's driveway, next to the big picture window. Many times that evening, I sauntered into the office and looked out at my shiny new possession. Of course, I had cranked open the precious roof so I could admire it.

At long last, when the shift was over at midnight, I hopped into my gleaming new VW and headed toward home. I had only gone about two or three blocks, when I was startled by a squirming object that suddenly appeared in midair in front of my nose. *A spider!* A huge (for spiders), hairy, orange-and-black garden spider was lowering itself from the edge of the open sunroof down in front of my face! With a yell, I swatted at the creature and knocked it into my lap! It was so big, I actually *felt* it land---as if I had dropped a quarter coin onto my pants leg!

Zig-zagging, the car lurched into a lighted used-car lot where I leaped out. While I searched the front seat for the spider---there was no way I was going to drive any farther with that monster on the loose inside my new car---there was a sudden squeal of tires and a yell, as a big vehicle with flashing blue lights on top screeched up beside me. Whirling about, I was confronted by a pistol-packing police officer.

"All right, Mac, whaddaya doin'?" he bellowed. "Hot-wiring a car? I got ya now!"

"Uh, officer a *spider* in my car on the seat---" I stammered, lamely. "I'm trying to find it," I went on, trying to satisfy the policeman and not let the eight-legged intruder escape.

"Well, go find your pet spider somewhere else!"

"Y---yes, sir right away, sir---" I blanched, climbing back into my VW, whose nickname, "Bug," had suddenly taken on a whole new meaning. I started the engine and drove away, leaving the scowling officer standing beside his police cruiser on the brightly-lit car lot. I raced toward home with all the fun of the new car now cancelled by the knowledge that the spider was still at large. Horrid visions of it crawling up my pants leg or down my collar gave me the creeps.

After what seemed an eternity, I finally screeched up in the driveway and bailed out.

Digging around in the kitchen pantry, I found a nearly-full aerosol can of *Raid*, ran back out to the Volkswagen and emptied it inside the car.

The next morning, the spider was curled up on the back seat---dead.

I had to leave the sunroof open until the smell of the bug spray went away.