

Human Cargo

"The new management team in Detroit is a far more thoughtful group of leaders perhaps than many, many years ago, when safety wasn't as high a priority as it is today."—Transportation Secretary Federico Peña

A GUY WATCHES A COUPLE OF NIGHTS of prime-time television and discovers that he needs—needs—a new car. I'd been perfectly content with the one I have, but to sit through a few episodes of *E.R.*, *Frasier*, and *Northern Exposure* and the dozens of intermittent "21st-century" car ads trumping a "vast array of new technology" is to take another gander at one's crusty old 20th-century car and find it wanting. Every few minutes comes another checklist of crucial safety features I apparently don't have: crumple zones, side-impact beams, steel safety shells, all-speed traction control, and on and on. Clearly, safety has become an imperative for Detroit. "It is a world of total confidence," croons Martin Sheen about the new Toyota Avalon. "Experience the tranquillity." I'm ready to join that club.

But first, some amplification. An ad for the Dodge Neon vaunts its safety features, so I call up Detroit for a few more details. The Neon is "extremely safe," Chrysler's Michael Mihelich tells me. Its side-impact beams, he explains vividly, are "kind of like a roll cage on a race car. It duplicates that."

Yes, yes. I want one of those.

"It's a very safe car," Mihelich reiterates. "It passes all the government safety standards, of course. We have our own internal Chrysler targets that it passes, which are above and beyond the government standards."

MIKE LUCKOVICH
FOR SPY MAGAZINE

Our cars are equipped with the ultimate safety feature! Those little styrofoam packing peanuts!...



Above and beyond—that's exactly the kind of corporate rigor I'm after. Just to confirm, I place a second call, to Clarence Ditlow, director of the Center for Auto Safety in Washington, D.C. I ask him about Chrysler's exacting internal standards.

"They're basically bull," he says.

The Neon, it turns out, is not one of the many cars already meeting the 1997 government side-impact standards. "You can have a side-impact beam, but that doesn't mean you are going to have great side-impact injury protection," Ditlow explains.

By law, *all* cars sold in the United States have had some sort of side-impact protection for more than 20 years. And side-impact "beams" are nearly as common as seat belts. "The [1997] standard requires more than just a beam," Ditlow says. "It requires an energy-absorbing structure in the side of the vehicle such that you won't have a life-threatening injury. While they may have a beam, they do not meet [that standard]."

He suggests I find out how the Neon performs in government crash tests. I put that question to Chrysler's Mihelich, who suddenly runs out of selling steam. "We don't give out all the numbers on that," he demurs.

A few hours later, I get the same clammy response from a spokesman for Hyundai, Bill Wolf, regarding the Elantra sedan. This is the car that Jeff Goldblum smarmily endorses on TV as having been designed for the protection of its "precious" human cargo. Wolf and I have a lengthy, detailed chat about "transverse-mounted engines" and a 4-wheel, "independently modulated" anti-lock braking system, but when we come to the question of crash tests,

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