



## "Reading the Spycar"

by Tom Lukas

The 1800 Volvo, indelible upon memory and imagination as it is in lasting power. Re-badged and re-branded simply as Spycar, from sea to shining sea four times now, my '72 1800E has become a vehicle of intrigue equipped to zip through danger, a.k.a. "The World's fastest independent bookstore."

Mask or no mask, it's Swedish genius distilled in steel: a crafty set of curves on the surface, tireless drive train beneath the bonnet. A ride as sporty as any spy's.

The route of my first trip cross-country is significant. First of my spybook series, Special Operations is set in Goddard, Massachusetts. My hometown of Auburn, Massachusetts — the town in which Robert Goddard flew the world's first liquid-propelled rocket in 1926, and as such became the father of space travel — lies at the eastern end of Interstate 90. My residence at the time of that tour was Seattle, standing at the westernmost point of I-90; my Book Tour route ruled by thematic unity.

Although each of my books features an amazing car (screw your wig on — my new thriller Blood Rain, to be released this year puts Nailor in a Pagani Zonda) I regard "spycar" generically as a cultural icon transcending genre, series, or varied spy-heroes we've witnessed tearing up the silver screen. A video I posted on my web site asks, "What is spy?" The P1800 becomes part of the answer.

But first, "What is Volvo?" To consider the brand over decades, the question itself yields clues; polish vs. principles, style vs. safety — even when to do so might be the road less traveled — a theme that seems Volvoan to the bone.

Growing up near Boston throughout the 1960s and 70s, Volvo defined a wise and well-to-do- Brahmin class, unlikely to part with the family silver under any circumstances, and even less likely to end up in a fix to require it. The drivers of these blocky sleds went about in Oxford cloth, khakis and Weeguns — well before it became a "look." Staid, sober, practical, and matter-of-fact, to own the Volvo signaled sense over sensibility, a healthy indifference to the fashionable — in itself the haute icon of independent thinking — embodied by corners to demonstrate a savvy that it's hip to be square. . .

Until, equipped with fins and contours, the fuddy-duddy duckling we called Volvo became a swan for those few years 1800s were built — a blink, in Volvo years. Under the hood, years later, the 122 horsepower heartbeat of this car still serves quiet reminder of Volvo's core values of human life over luster; the 1800s' epicurean lines can boast of an ultra-safe track record, a spy I'd ride with anywhere.

Safety and reliability, even when unfashionable. Transcending layers of polish, even when you got it in spades. These are the thematic

notes combining in the major chords of my spybook series, beginning with Special Operations, published in 2014. Next my thriller Blood Rain, set Rome Italy's stunning new fine arts venue Centro Congressi La Nuvola, a.k.a. The Cloud, in Rome, Italy, gives us a soft-target attack that could define the westward march of some serious, yet ill-advised bad guys.

Each character from the heroic ensemble featured within these books represents a sly resourcefulness latent in the competing, yet necessary elements of style vs. staid reliability. Working well after retirement in counter-terror ops, his fingernails still dug into fundamentals of right and wrong is the plodding and methodical Detective Nick Giaccone, who begins to sound like an old Volvo, particularly the squarish kind . . . until paired with the rest of the series' ensemble. Series character Professor Cannon Nailor brings on the fins and contours. As day job he's a professor of English, cover for his role as the pioneer of Literary and Textual Forensics for the FBI, a sought-after consultant in terrorist cases granted access to supercars confiscated by the the United States DEA, or Italy's Guardia di Finanza. Tall, confident, and a champion field archer, Cannon Nailor is almost too cool to be real.

Although pure fiction, these heroes first came to life in Special Operations, which I wrote in memory of my brother Patrolman Stephen Lukas, killed in the line of duty in Auburn, Massachusetts, January 1, 1986, which I undertook as an act of good conscience, a process I began in 1991. This 2014 publication turned into my 7800 mile, fifty-eight day Special Operations Book Tour back to Auburn, Ma where I was raised, and where Steve was killed. Thomas Wolfe wrote: "You can't go home again." I found this to be a gross exaggeration.

I shall never forget the August, 2014 evening I read from Special Operations at The Auburn Public Library — the library where I had, as a second grader, won a writing contest and been awarded a prize by Esther Goddard, widow of the late Dr. Robert Goddard.

What sheen remains on the Spycar's paint job (best viewed at ten paces) echoes Volvo's values, as "communicated" by their cars over the years, either through squared lines, or the occasional flourish, that the people riding in their cars are at least a click more important than paint and polish that makes them gleam — not a bad rule to be reminded of in today's world.

The Spycar has hereby been unmasked. Beneath its colorful skin of graphics, its cocktail shaker driving lights, and its genuine theatrical smoke screen maker — a storytelling shtick on a platform built on legend: a 1972 P1800E Volvo.

To "Go home again," I have discovered, mostly consists of forward motion. In my case, west to east. Always east. Now, back in Massachusetts for what looks like the long haul I put the finishing touches on my sequel Blood Rain, an anti-terror tale at the edge of the Adriatic that celebrates the courage and bravery of the people of Europe, where lie the front lines of a set of world tensions I fear might be world-changing, much as we're safer than some motorheads might have us think.

To look at the deciding spycraft dramatized in Blood Rain I'm home again. Like the man who forgot something, the words of Thomas Wolfe fade, refreshed by those of T.S. Elliot: "We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time."

With Blood Rain in the can, my next book tour should be trans-Europe, home of ancestors, where I can express my admiration and thanks in person.

See you there. I'll be the one driving the Spycar. ☺