

The Centralino

Once I owned an Audi Fox. It was a stick drive, compact, got excellent mileage and handled like a dream. When we moved to Rome, Italy, we took our beloved Fox with us, of course, thinking since it was of European extraction, it would be easy to fix if any problem arose. I had not reckoned on Italy.

One day early in our sojourn there, the windshield wipers suddenly went on by themselves. Nothing on my dashboard or steering column initiated such a process since it wasn't raining. Eventually it stopped but as time went on, sometimes the lights would come on with no warning, the wipers would join the apparent random electronic fun and, on occasion, the horn would start blasting while the heat came on.

After some serious scientific experimentation, namely pulling and pushing various devices under the hood to no avail, one day I removed the plastic cover to some apparatus. There, I discovered, were all the relays, fuses and electronic switches to my Fox attached to a printed circuit board. Bringing the full force of my Masters Degree in electrical engineering into play, scientific method suggested I should pound the damned thing into submission. Sure enough, it fixed all the problems...for a short time. Then the cycle would start all over again. My engineering prowess exhausted, I decided to take it to the Audi dealer, which happened to be on the other side of Rome from my apartment.

So I drove the Fox through traffic, getting out occasionally to lift the hood, bang the plastic top, then hopping back in the car to the tune of hundreds of complaining Italian runty little *Cinquecento* car horns. A half mile later the horn started blasting again, accompanied by its electronic buddies. An hour later and about ten more stops in the middle of traffic, I found myself at the Audi dealer, talking in halting Italian to Pepino, the mechanic. I left the engine running until the expected happened. The cornucopia of electronic devices began the orchestra of rebellious glee. Showing Pepino my intimate knowledge of cause and effect, I bashed the top of the plastic cover. Voila!! Everything returned to normal. "Can you fix it?" I asked naively.

"But of course," he responded with a knowing look. Pointing to the offending plastic box, he said, "It is called the *centralino*. It was placed too close to the radiator, so eventually the board warps and the wires brush against each other causing devices to come on randomly."

“When can you have it fixed?” I asked, much relieved at Pepino’s apparent expertise.

“In approximately six months, *Signore*,” he said. “They can only be obtained in Stuttgart and every Fox in the world has this problem. They are behind in deliveries.” Before I could utter an expletive or two, he just shrugged his shoulders. “I wish I could help.”

Back across Rome, swearing in perfect Italian with all the words my daughters had taught me, I parked the car, presumably for six months, in front of my apartment.

But there is a God. The next day I was asked to go to New York for an important business meeting. Of course I had to put together a presentation with complex spreadsheet backup, and considerable research. After a full day meeting, exhausted, I drove up to Greenwich, Connecticut where we had purchased the Fox at Pray Motors. Harbinger of things to come, I thought? I explained my problem, and received a brand new *centralino*, no questions asked.

Back in Rome I drove the car, horn, lights, wipers and heater coming on regularly, stopping in the middle of horn honking, complaining traffic to raise the hood and pound the damned plastic cover, I finally arrived at Pepino’s garage under the Audi dealership.

“Can you fix my *centralino*?” I asked, a small, smug smile creeping into the side of my mouth.

“Of course, in six months as I explained,” he said, eyeballs rolling to this dumb foreigner.

I pulled out my briefcase, opened it and handed it to Pepino. “Where did you get it?” Pepino asked, “Somewhere in Italy?” “Nope,” I said. “Stuttgart?” “Nope,” I said. “In Europe?” “Nope,” I repeated with a wide grin.

“*Per favore*,” he said. “Where?” I explained the circumstances that got me to Connecticut with all the embellishments.

“Can you get me some more?” he asked with a straight, Italian face.