

BA-BA the CAR

He came sputtering out of the night, the low ba-ba's swelling as he approached the light. It was dark save for the light gone red, the double yellow lines vanishing into gold-dust behind him. He stopped and idled, watching the red-eye above him shimmer, the only sound a quiet reverb on the near-empty street: ba-ba-ba-ba-ba-ba-bab-ba...

He was a car. And he drove the night. A deaf-mute, he made but one sound in his world of silence - ba. He stood there in his mechanic's overalls, a ballcap with a Chevy insignia perched cock-eyed on his head, a steering wheel gripped tightly in his light-brown hands, flashlights dangling on each side of his small thin frame, waiting for the light to change. It suddenly clicked to green and he was off, under the light, through the intersection of South Street and Nelson Avenue, the ba-ba's disappearing into the darkness.

He was a good driver.

One cold December night down by the railroad station as I was getting into my car I saw him in the rear-view mirror. He was stuck in the snow. I watched as he rocked back-and-forth, his skinny legs taking four-or-five choppy steps forward then four-or-five choppy steps back. He repeated this maneuver over-and-over again, faster and faster, and then paused. But just for a second or two. Then he wedged his right foot into the snow pile behind him and began to accelerate, rapidly increasing his ba-ba-ing while bouncing his foot up-and-down. He was spinning on the ice under the snow. It was difficult and he looked concerned. I could almost detect the smell of burning rubber. Suddenly there was a loud "BA!" and he flew out of that parking space like a projectile, stood and idled for a moment, accelerated, then drove off.

He was also a careful driver.

He would signal a turn with his flashlight blinking, and then always looked both ways before he made it. He always stayed in lane. Never passed on the right. Or on a double-yellow line. Yielded at all yield signs. Stopped at all stop signs. And obeyed every traffic rule and regulation to the letter.

But he had his dreams...

Late one night we, my friends and me, caught him in our headlights exiting a Grand Union parking lot. We followed him for awhile and watched as he pulled over to the side of the road. He walked back toward us some 50-feet-or-so, stopped and bent down like he was looking for something. Then he walked back to where he started, thrust his leg high in the air and looked like he was climbing into something. He put on his flashlight/directional signal and slowly pulled away. We were puzzled.

"He's not a car anymore," said Barry, hunched behind the wheel, an impish smile dancing across his pudgy face. "He's a truck! A FUCKING TRUCK!...A delivery truck, and he

was checking his rear lights!" and Barry, thrilled by this Ba-Ba metamorphosis, went off in a fit of laughter, pounding on the steering wheel like a crazed primate. I had never seen him so happy. And after that night Barry followed him religiously - nearly every night of our Senior year of high school - and would regale us with the previous night's Tale of Ba-Ba.

He saw Ba-Ba in the town dump one night. Old Luther, who ran it during the day often forgot to lock the gate, figuring I guess, "What the hell can anyone steal, anyway?" There were rats in there the size of mountain lions, but they sure as hell didn't bother Luther. He used to eat his lunch with his feet up on an old milk case and the rats would jump over his outstretched legs like pole-vaulters. Luther just shooed them away like so many flies. The rats didn't bother Ba-Ba either.

That night Barry saw that Luther had left the gate open. Inside was Ba-Ba. He was standing there sizing up this huge mound of garbage that had been dumped earlier. "All of a sudden he sprang into action," said Barry, imitating Ba-Ba, "revved it up, ba-ba-ing a million miles-an-hour, built up a head of steam and drove right into that pile. He hit it at full speed, going ba-ba-ba at full throttle, his feet and legs disappearing into that huge pile of shit and who knows what else. Then he backed up, revved it up again, and WHAM! hit that pile again. He did it again and again, slamming into that big pile of shit. For a long time. It was like it was his job. He was dedicated to it, like he was a bulldozer or some other piece of heavy machinery."

Yes, Ba-Ba had his dreams...and his disappointments.

One night we were in Miller's - the local bar - when Ba-Ba came running in, his arms flailing about and ba-ba-ing faster than was humanly possible. Tommy Miller, one of the two Greek brothers that owned the place, tried to calm him, but he couldn't. Poor Ba-Ba was completely out of control. So Gus, Tommy's brother, called the cops as we gave Ba-Ba a hit of scotch to try and level him off. A few minutes later Shorty the Dick came sauntering in like John Wayne in Rio Bravo - come to save the day from the "killer" Ba-Ba...he had delusions of grandeur. He asked Tommy and Gus what had happened, and as he did all hell broke loose. Ba-Ba launched into this wild explanation that was all arms and legs flapping about, his ba-ba's in overdrive. Shorty stared at Ba-Ba like he was an alien from some other planet or time-frame. And Ba-Ba? He started running from one side of the bar to the other, his arms spread wide like an airplane readying for take-off. He's going hog-wild and Shorty knows he's got a full-blown lunatic on his authoritative hands. So he pulls out his trusty six-shooter and points it at Ba-Ba, yelling - at a deaf man - for him to stop and freeze. He finally realizes that Ba-Ba can't hear him whatever he yells or how loud he yells it and that B-Ba is trying to tell him something...not attack him. Shorty very nearly shot Ba-Ba.

Ba-Ba then motioned for Shorty to go outside. Onto the street. He wasn't going to run away, just show stupid Shorty what had happened. Shorty did go, but held his gun on him anyway. A crowd started to gather outside and everyone in Miller's watched from the big picture window as Ba-Ba ran back-and-forth in a parking space out in front of the bar. He

was gesturing wildly and ba-ba-ing a hundred miles-an-hour. Finally he just stopped, sat down on the curb and cried. Shorty stood over the vanquished Ba-Ba with his gun trained on him, when Ba-Ba reached out into the parking space like a blind man. He reached out trying to touch something or other, but it wasn't there anymore. It was his car...it had been stolen.

A few days later we saw Ba-Ba in a used car lot after it had closed. He was checking out the cars, kicking tires, eyeing the chrome, running his hand along the shiny metal. He stopped at a Chevy Impala and checked it out, but his eye caught something else on the other side of the lot. It was heaven on earth, his dream come true - a long, sleek, pink Caddy convertible. He circled it like a bullfighter. Got down on his hands and knees and checked it out from top to bottom, front to back. He checked the chassis, stood on the front grill to check the sweep of the tail-fins. He was in ecstasy. Nirvana. We finally drove away, leaving Ba-Ba - smiling ear-to-ear - to savor the dream.

A few nights later we saw Ba-Ba up by the By-Pass. He was dressed all in pink with pom-poms on his ballcap and big, soft white dice hanging from his neck. He arm dangled, cool-like, at his side as he one-handed his steering wheel. He was cruising. Just cruising. Every night thereafter he drove up to the By-Pass to check out the river of cars that headed this-way and that. He'd stand there idling his engine and watch the Impalas, the Hornets, the Continentals, the El Dorados and the Olds 88's flow by. He watched it quietly - that river - his feet drumming the concrete roadway softly. His ba-ba-ing was like a cat's purr. It was like he wanted in. Wanted to get into that river.

After his nights at the By-Pass, Ba-Ba would cruise down South Street, driving cool past the girls hanging at the Marathon. He'd stop, rev his engine, ba-ba like a horn sounding, and wave to any girl that took notice. Then he would circle the block and do it again. And again...

No one saw him that last night, back up at the By-Pass after cruising South Street. No one saw him standing at the entrance ramp watching the cars fly by. No one saw him shuffle his feet, rev up his long, sleek, pink Caddy and start ba-ba-ing down that entrance ramp. The cars, going 70, 80 and even 90-miles an hour, and there came this big pink Cadillac with Ba-Ba the Car at the wheel, moving slowly down the ramp and stopping at the end... like the sign said. No one saw him stand there with his engine on low-idle, ready to make his move: to leave the streets behind and get into that river of cars. No one saw him put on his directional signal. He was getting into that river of dreams; that river of steel and glass and rubber and chrome that could take him where he wanted to go. No one saw him stick out his left arm, the flashlight fully extended from his finger-tips. He was letting them all know that he was coming, he was getting in, maneuvering his big new pink Caddy into his place in the river.

And he crossed that rubicon into the slow-lane of the By-Pass, his arm thrust proudly out, pointing West, to where the sun had just set over Bear Mountain. And suddenly he was in. In traffic. In the river.

His ba-ba's must have taken him a few steps, and exhilarated at being in his dream, his steering wheel pressed to his chest, as a scream of metal on metal, brakes locking and squealing, tore through that night on the By-Pass. He must have turned, the headlights of the oncoming car illuminating the happy smile on his dark face. But that oncoming car drove as though it didn't even see that long, sleek, pink Caddy convertible, and it plowed into it broadside as - I'm sure - Ba-Ba tried to steer out its way. He was flipped - the cops said later - over the hood of that car and he and it disappeared into the darkness...as the river went on its way.