

Karma

By Warren Florence

I drive an old car: a trust-worthy 1966 Volvo 122s, the color of a faded tennis ball. It's neither green nor yellow. Instead, as a runny-nosed kid said, "the color of the guts of a caterpillar."

I'd stepped on a few of those black, prickly little caterpillars quite a few times growing up. Every time, a pale yellow gushed right out. The crawdads (most commonly known as crayfish) my brother and I used to round up from a meandering creek down a large hill from our house, gushed orange. I can't recall why my brother and I we cut them up as often as we did. Bees oozed a brighter yellow. A magazine-flattened roach splattered white. Ants didn't gush anything. We found that odd. But they squirmed something awful when you tweezed them under a magnifying glass. We held steady the black handle while the magnifier, the size of a dinner plate, scorched the red fella to black. What they didn't leak from the inside they made up for in smell. Just about anything else we accidentally shot with our BB Gun, say, squirrels or birds or even any one of my brothers' legs...those all bled as you would expect.

From experience, this kid was dead-on with his assessment. I had to hand it to him: He knew his insect gut colors. My car is caterpillar-gut yellow.

Once every six months I can't take the culmination of new little noises it makes. Ultimately, I've ignored signs for a new muffler or brakes, so I take it to a local, although questionably reputable guy with lots of enthusiasm.

"No problem," he tells me. He identifies clearly all the parts I'll need. But what I really hear is, "The so 'n so is doing so 'n so and you'll need a thing 'a ma bob here, and..." walking under the elevated car, "here, here and here." I hear for sure, "Parts will be cheap. We'll have it back in a jiffy." It's never in a jiffy

and I always catch him charging me almost 200 percent more than what the parts cost. “Did I do that?” he’d ask, completely shocked. “Hey, you know what? You’re a special customer...I’ll knock off the price.”

I’m a creature of habit, so I put up with it.

Not a quarter-mile away, employees at a car rental agency know me by name. “Where are you going this time?” a representative would ask. Or, “Who are you interviewing?” But on the day I absolutely can’t take the rattle and squeaks any longer, Parris Island is having a Marine Corps graduation and no cars are available. The new recruits are heading to off to get laid some place, I guess, before being shipped to whatever hell is next. A new plan was needed.

To supplement my writing career, which has yet to be a full career, I teach tennis to men and women, but mostly to kids between fourth and twelfth grades. To one family in particular I had grown very fond. Not because the two high school boys were among my first lessons when I arrived in town. Nor because they recognized brilliance and spread the good word about a miracle instructor. But because they were genuinely nice folks.

From the outset, the Millers were kind and offered anything they had, should I need assistance. They offered the keys to their jetski, and lent me one of 200 cars in their driveway—I exaggerate—when the “caterpillar” took longer than (to be expected) expected.

To my home they delivered, not the Ford Sport Trac, or the Jaguar, or the convertible Beemer (each, of which, I’d been lent in the past!), but the paint-peeling green Pontiac mini-van, with its space-aged long nose and a dashboard so deep it met the front bumper. Like the sons, I didn’t want to be seen in it either. Alas, I am not a beggar or an overly picky chooser, and therefore grateful, for it cranked quickly, had a working radio and the potential for a speeding ticket.

* * * *

Monday, 3:05 p.m.

As anyone does when blue lights flash on your tail, I acted natural, expressively mouthing no music playing, nodding my head in an exaggerated way to show that I, officer, am simply singing and minding my own business on a nearly deserted road. Of course I saw the law enforcement car (too late) positioned perfectly for those menacing speeders. Of course the officer likely saw the taillights flash bright red when it was too late, and the van's nose dip quickly forward—a sure sign of guilt. What I was really singing were many variations of a popular, but forgivable word, shit! Oh, shit! Bullshit! Shit. Shit. Shit. Still, I expected the officer to zip by and nab a suspected drug thug, or soon screech into a bank parking lot to take position. I simply kept driving. I acted shocked, dramatically giraffing my neck into the rearview mirror, pointing to myself high enough so the office can see *me* questioning *him*. The cat mouse game was over once the siren blared. The last ticket I received was almost two years, when, in fact, I was driving another friend's car.

A rather serious looking woman swaggered along side the van, her hand on her holster. Not the sexiest of police women I've seen in Playboy, but deserving of respect, nonetheless. Using a tone all officers apply when asking how long you've been a secret agent for the Soviet Union, she asked, "You know how fast you were going?"

"I don't think very fast."

"You don't call 46 in a 35 fast?"

What was I to say? "No, I do it all the time. You know you do, too." If I said yes, then it's mockery of the law. If I say no, it's being sassy. So I simply gave her my drivers license and explained how I'd borrowed a friend's car for a few days.

In a few minutes I'll have my county-issued blue piece of paper, narrowly legible with the weather conditions, street of said incident, where to pay, and her name.

3:25 p.m.

She was probably still verifying the information I gave her on the borrowed car. I had five minutes to drive the three minutes more it took to reach the tennis courts and private school kids: one in the first grade, the other in third. Both cute as buttons and eager to learn. The mom's cute, too. I loved teaching on Mondays.

3:27 p.m.

I had exactly three minutes to be there on time. *She's sometimes late picking up the kids at school, or I'm late on an afternoon conference call with an editor. A minute here or there won't really matter.*

3:30 p.m.

Her scribbling so far had taken 20-25 minutes. *How many boxes did the woman have to fill? Had the forms gotten longer, more detailed? Is she sick back there, or what?!*

3:40 p.m. (On the cell phone.)

"Verizon 411 connect. Can I help you?"

"Yes, thank you. Beaufort, South Carolina."

"Your listing?"

"Beaufort County Police Department Dispatch, please."

"Thank you. I can connect you to..."

"Please go ahead."

A moment later...

"Dispatch."

“Hello. My name is Warren Florence. I’ve been pulled over for speeding. That’s not why I’m calling however. The officer is taking longer than usual to write a ticket, which would imply I’ve been pulled over before...and I have...and I’m sure I’ve deserve it. But I know from watching “Cops” that I’m not allowed to get out of the car. Could you please check on car number (I’ve since forgotten)? Is she sick, or does she need help. I’m being sincere. I’m getting a little worried. We’re getting close to 45 minutes.”

“Let me check. Hold on the line.”

“Thank you.”

A moment later...

“Sir?”

“Yes.”

“Sir...she’s waiting for backup. Sir? Sir?”