**Off the Road**

By DANIEL DUANE

I never thought I was a car guy until the day my little blue Toyota truck died. In fact, on some level, I had contempt for guys who cared too much about what they drove. Proof that I didn’t share their affliction, in my mind, was the fact that I had been driving the same beat-up base model Toyota pickup, with camper shell, for 23 years, ever since my father sold it to me for $4,000 in 1992.

I had a strict maintenance philosophy — all necessary oil changes and tune-ups — but I never spent a dime on fixing dents. Because again, I was not that kind of guy. I cared about reliable transportation, nothing else. My truck, in other words, represented anti-materialism, anti-attachment, a refusal to identify with material possessions. The banker with the Porsche was the guy with the problem. Not me.

My truck also represented utility: As a rock climber in my early 20s — sometimes with my dad, sometimes with buddies — I slept in the back a hundred times. In my later 20s, 30s and 40s, I drove the coast a thousand times with my surfboards in back. When I remodeled my house, I ferried many imperial tons of lumber in that truck. I made literally dozens of dump runs too, schlepping tens of thousands of pounds of construction debris. (On Saturday mornings, my daughters would sit beside me on the bench seat with blueberry muffins, chanting: ‘‘Treats in the truck to the dump with Dad! Treats in the truck to the dump with Dad!’’) It always ran. I turned the key; the engine started.

Then one day last winter, while I was driving in rush-hour traffic to go surfing at Ocean Beach, the engine died. My little truck had never failed me for any reason other than lack of fuel, so I asked the Highway Patrol to tow it to a gas station. I filled the tank, but it still wouldn’t start. So I had it towed to a mechanic, who said it would cost $700 to diagnose and probably twice that to fix.

I called my wife to say that my truck was finally dead. I felt a lump in my throat. Then I cried. Like, really cried. I thought: *That’s weird, I’m crying over a car. What’s that about?* I came up with psychological explanations: *I’ve been really tense lately, feeling money worries.*

The next day, I cried again. I thought, *Maybe it’s all the memories of climbing with my dad and my buddies in my 20s.* My wife told me we could afford to buy a new car. I found that hard to believe, but she smiled and said it was true. She offered to go right out and buy a new Toyota pickup. But I knew that a pickup was a dumb car for a city family with two kids. No, I said. We’ll get something more practical.

The mechanic knew a salvage yard that would give me a few hundred bucks for my truck. I called and made a date to meet their tow-truck guy. I got there first and saw my old pickup for the last time, and I bawled my eyes out. This time I had to face the truth: I loved that damn truck, and I wished I had a farm so I could park it out back and sleep in the camper shell a few times a year until I died. I saw that I was deeply attached to a vision of my past self, but also to a vision of the future, half-conscious until now. I wanted to be that guy still driving to the beach at age 65 in my 40-year-old truck with a sun-yellowed surfboard in the back, still surfing serious waves because I never gave in to all that materialistic stuff that makes guys give up on the physical life in pursuit of the money to buy fancy cars.

The tender vanity of that fantasy, and of my whole dumb attachment to this truck, somehow made me think of the final scene of the original Rambo movie. After Stallone has practically destroyed a small town in Washington State, his old commander talks him down. Rambo starts crying, weeping really, remembering a Special Forces buddy named Joey and how they talked about Las Vegas and cruising in Joey’s ’58 Chevy convertible, and through his sobbing we see that inside even the toughest American man is a little boy who never grew up. I’m guessing that scene popped to mind because I was a car guy after all, and because I dearly wanted to go home again and drive all the way into the mountains with my dad.

I said to the truck driver, ‘‘Hey brother, I need a favor.’’ I really called him that — brother. I don’t know why. ‘‘Will you take a picture of me with it before you tow it away?’’

I got the feeling that he’d done this before, and that he didn’t mind.

‘‘Lot of years,’’ I said. ‘‘Hard to say goodbye.’’ I bumped the top of my fist against my heart.

He looked at me with compassion, the way a strong man does when confronted with a vulnerable man.

He said, "You got to let go."

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(Write a PE that begins, "I never thought I was until ..." with an I had/Then structure.)