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A Defining of Character

On June of 1986, I was living with my dad in Crystal Beach, Texas, which is just across the ferry from Galveston. My mom phoned stating that she had a birthday present for me and asked if I could come and pick it up. She informed me that her step-brother had given her a 1967 Chevrolet C-10 pickup truck. She let me know it wasn't in the best shape. She went on to say that it ran well, and she thought it would be a great first vehicle for me. She also mentioned that she wanted to divulge her sorrow for kicking me out of the house, thereby forcing me to go live with my dad. I expressed my sincere gratitude and then hung up the phone. I went outside, located my dad on the patio, and told him what my mom said. I asked him if he would mind giving me a ride to my mom's house to pick up the truck. She lived about three and a half hours away in New Iberia, Louisiana. He agreed, and said he would take me there in the morning. Something grand was in store for me. I never would have imagined that this truck was going to assist in defining my very character.

That evening I had a thousand things going through my mind. I was trying to picture what the truck looked like and what it would sound like. I tried envisioning how I would look behind the wheel. I was imagining showing it off to all of my friends. I thought about what it would be like driving it down the beach, and all the girls would be staring at me. I vividly imagined driving with the girl of my dreams to a secluded area of the beach. There, we would

sit in the truck, making out, and occasionally peeking out at the setting sun. I had a difficult time sleeping that night from all the images passing through my head. I thought, "Wow, it's going to be great having my own truck."

I was up bright and early the next morning. By the time my dad came out of his bedroom, his coffee was on the table, I had his thermos filled, and I was ready to go. We didn't eat any breakfast that morning. My dad never ate breakfast, and I didn't have an appetite because of the excitement of having my own transportation. We left the house at about 8:00 am. It was a grueling three and half hours, but we finally arrived at about 11:30 am.

The truck was parked by the side of the house under a big beautiful pecan tree my mom has in her yard. The truck was painted a shiny gold color. Some of the paint was chipping here and there where I could see the original baby blue underneath. It confirmed what she had told me on the phone, that it was nothing special; nonetheless it looked like a dream. Mom met us in the drive way as we pulled up, where she must have been nervously waiting for us to arrive. I gave her a hug and told her how nice it was to see her. She kissed me and returned the greeting. She turned to my dad then and asked him if he would like to go in the house for some coffee. He accepted the offer, and they departed leaving me to my inquisition.

I went to the truck and opened up the hood to see what it had underneath. I found the typical motor with a one barrel carburetor and old rusty exhaust manifolds. I was amazed to find that there was a ton of room under there. I could have literally climbed in there and sat down on the fender next to the engine with plenty of room to spare. After making my observations, I left the hood open, went to the cab of the truck, and opened up the driver's door. I could not believe how spacious it was inside. It appeared as though five people could sit

comfortably inside, on the large bench-style seat. It had an old plaid seat cover hiding the cracks in the dark blue vinyl underneath. I hopped in behind the steering wheel, which was the largest I had ever seen. The inside of the cab was the original color. It was in the same baby blue color I had seen through the chips on the outside. Everything looked old; it kind of had a nostalgic look to it. The speedometer was the kind that had those real big numbers. It went all the way up to 130 mph. The ignition switch was located on the dash panel further down and to the left of the old radio. The radio was one of those that had only AM stations.

Above and to the left of the radio was a choke knob, when pulled, it assisted the engine in starting when it was extremely cold outside. I looked all around, but I couldn't find the indicators that would let me know which gear I selected. That's when I looked down and noticed there were three pedals near the floor. One pedal was the accelerator, another for the brakes, so the last one must be for the clutch. Ok, so it was a standard, but the only shifter I saw was on the steering column. I had never seen before a shifter on the column in a standard transmission vehicle. As it turns out, it was a three speed transmission. I knew how to drive a standard, so I didn't think this was going to be a problem as long as I figured out where all the gears were. Then I adjusted the seat so I could depress the clutch completely. Following that, I pressed down firmly on the brake. With great anticipation and a little bit of anxiety, I reached over for the keys and turned the ignition. The engine started right up and purred like a kitten. It felt very smooth despite its obvious age. I looked all around to make sure the area around the truck was clear, and then I slowly released the brake. After that, I gently eased out on the clutch, and it began to pull forward. I pushed the clutch back in and moved the gear shifter to another position. This time, as I began to release the clutch, the truck began to move

backwards. Ok, so I found what I believed was first gear and reverse, and I thought to myself, "The others should be a piece of cake".

Now it was time to go for a ride. I put the transmission back in neutral, opened the door, hopped out, and shut the hood. I hopped back in, pushed in the clutch, and put the transmission in reverse. I checked all around and behind me, before releasing the brake. I had to adjust the mirror just slightly in order to see properly. Then I backed the truck out of the yard and down the driveway. I stopped in the middle of the road, put it in first gear, and off I went. Just as I suspected, shifting gears was no problem at all, after I found out where they were. I drove around the neighborhood several times. I remember smiling with pride as I passed other cars on the road or people standing in their yards. I drove back home, parked the truck, got out, and walked around it a couple of times before going into the house. My mom asked me what I thought, and I told her it was wonderful. I thanked her several times for her gift. It was the best present I had ever received.

My dad and I left about an hour later and headed back to Texas. On the drive back, I was thinking of ways to improve the truck. I decided to paint it black on the outside with a tan color scheme on the inside. I would put some bucket seats in it and black carpet. I was definitely going to change the radio to one more modern. I wanted to put in a CD player, an amplifier, some six by nine speakers in the doors, a couple of tweeters overhead, and a woofer behind the seat on the floor. I would build a console between the seats where I would mount the gear shifter and remove it from the column. I decided to pull the engine out to rebuild it. I would slide in a high compression cam, some pistons and rings, and beef up the heads to match. Then I would go with a high-rise aluminum intake and a chrome carburetor with an automatic choke.

For the exhaust, I would slap on some headers, with titanium pipes going back to a couple of Flow-Master mufflers. The rims, I wanted, were solid cast-aluminum; they were very popular at the time. I really liked the wide look, so I decided to go with some sixty-inch tires. As we got closer to home, I came out of my contemplation. My dad followed behind me most of the way back. He must have known I was going to be in a dreamy state, so he probably wanted to stay behind and watch out for me. Just a few miles from the house, he pulled ahead, and led the way.

I immediately began to make the modifications to the truck. It took me close to six months from start to finish. My dad taught me how to work on the engine, so I did most of that part by myself. I had a friend in school, whose father had his own paint shop. He helped me out with painting the body, and the inside of the truck. I picked up some seats from a junk yard and had them upholstered for a great price. It was an awesome experience and accomplishment for my age. All in all, it was a very easy project. The truck looked absolutely amazing once everything was done.

I decided to name her Suzy-Q after the Credence Clearwater Revival song. It was the beginning of a very long and wonderful relationship. I vowed to treat her right and to be faithful. For twenty-two long years we went everywhere together. We went to the drive-in with my first girlfriend. Suzy-Q was with me when I got my first dog. We went to the beach almost every weekend. I can remember a couple of times, when she almost got impounded for tickets I had failed to pay. But luckily, every time I get hauled off to jail, there was a friend with me who was able to take her home. We drove all over the U.S. We spent some time in Florida and even in Los Angeles. We went to Kansas in the middle of winter, when there was six feet of

snow on the ground. I took her to Niagara Falls, Canada, and even Chihuahua, Mexico. It's hard to remember all of the friends who rode with us or the good times we had. I believe we met people in just about every state, and I still talk with many of them. Suzy-Q was always faithfully by my side, and she was there with me through thick and thin.

She was with me when I got married and also for the divorce. She was there with me when I had to bring my dog to the vet and have her put to sleep. That day she brought me safely home, even though I couldn't see the road for the tears in my eyes. So many years and miles have gone by, but I can still feel that horrible pain in my heart and the lump in my throat. I still remember the first beach we went to and our senior prom as well. I even remember the first job we had. What I can remember most is her sitting outside in the parking lot, waiting patiently for me to get off, so we could go for a ride together. Sometimes, on the way home, we would stop at the sandbar and take a dip. Other times, we would go pick up my girlfriend and go to the lake to have a swim. On the weekends, we liked bringing the whole family to the river for a picnic.

I don't think I would be the person I am today without Suzy-Q having been in my life. I went from child, to man, from husband, to father. I was a carpenter, a painter, a salt mine worker, a mechanic, a soldier, a communications tech, and a motorcycle rider coach. Suzy-Q was there by my side, and she really helped define who I am today. She never really gave me any problems to speak of. Sure, I changed a transmission or two, and a flat tire here or there, but nothing really major. Working on her was nothing compared to modern vehicles.

Inflation started going up and gas got higher and higher. Nearly all of my life, I moved around a lot, from place to place. I jumped from job to job never really establishing myself. As a

result of this lifestyle, the job I had when the economy started sinking, didn't pay a whole lot of money. I was forced in to being unfaithful to Suzy-Q. I had to settle for something more economical. Suzy-Q sat in the yard day after day, month after month, and year after year. Every once in a while, I liked to just go and sit inside the truck. I would reminisce about all the fun we had, the places we went, and the people we met. Sometimes, I would even start her just to hear her purr again. She had a unique smell that even to this day I can still catch on a breeze. I received many offers to sell her over the years, but I always refused. Finally, I got tired of watching her waste away, and I accepted an offer to sell her. I will never forget the day that I made this decision. Even now, so many years later, it still creates a lump in my throat and brings tears to my eyes. I know to most people it was just a truck, but to me, it was so much more. Though nearly every memory I have to this day, some good, some not so good, she was there. Sometimes, it's difficult to remember a time without her. I believe I sold her to a man who will take care of her. I am even more certain that she will as be good to him as she was for me to all these years. After having been with her for so long, now it's very hard to believe she's gone.

Sometimes, I still look out the window thinking I'll see her sitting outside, sitting there, waiting for me to come out, and go for a ride with her. There will never be another Suzy-Q for me, mostly because that chapter in my life is now closed. It closed because I changed my focus. I used to think about only the moment. In other words, I made decisions on impulse. If I felt like packing my things and moving to Florida, that's what I did. I did it with no fore-thought of the consequences or the repercussions. I wasn't concerned with settling down, nor was I worried about what my life was going to be like in the future. I met a lot of people whom looked at the

world through different colored glasses. As a result, this gave me an open-minded perspective on life and instilled in me some of the beliefs I have today. I have many different cultures in me, which allows me to be more rounded in my life. When others will hold back in fear, I will jump in courageously, usually feet first. I know from past experience that the only way to fail at something is to stop. I focus on the long term now. My sites are set at least about five years out. It is possible that I was wrong for living as I did for all those years, but I wouldn't have it any other way. I will always cherish the memories from that time gone by. I will always remember the first day I saw her and the last as well. She helped define the very character of the person I am today. I am proud to have had her by my side.

Good-bye Suzy-Q, good-bye.