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Oil Pump

It's ok, you can make fun of my Dodge. You're probably just jealous. I know you want it, and you can have it. Sure, it's over 30 years old, but this was my dad's car. If anyone knew how to keep a car running, it was my dad. After I was grown and out of the house, he took the back seat out to carry stuff. He saw no reason to get a pickup when he already had the Dodge, and could carry almost as much, and out of the weather too.

I've seen the thing so full of stove wood the springs are flat, with his loaded trailer hitched on the back. My dad would drive slow on the shoulder and wave people by. "What's their hurry?" He'd say. "Most of them don't want to be where they're going, anyway."

I doubt my dad ever had anyone else work on his Dodge. When he busted something, he knew how to find the part in a junkyard and swap it out—usually better than original. Even the engine. He made a tripod out of logs, unhooked the old one, hoisted it out, then lowered in the replacement he got from some low mileage wreck.

"Like a heart transplant." He said. Hooking it back up, there were connections he had to sort of fake. "Let's see if she runs." And she did. This engine in there now is, I think, that one he swapped in. Or maybe another. Anyway I know the Dodge is ugly, but for me, I've kept it so long because it's as if part of my dad is with me, just motoring down to town.

It's true – he had no concern for appearances. Used to drive me crazy, when I compared him to other dads. His style, in everything, was no style. When I was in high school, man, I pretended not to know him. He didn't seem to notice. How does someone get to where everything they have looks worn out? His boots, for instance, I only remember one pair. The steel toe work boots, with the right toe worn away and the steel all shiny from rubbing the ground. His right knee, too, always patched because that's the way he knelt to work. I bitched to him once about his boots, when I was maybe 18.

“You've got the money, damn it, why don't you get a decent pair of boots?”

He gives me his sad look

“Now is that worth swearing about? If I had new boots, I'd just mess them up.”

After I moved north, he and my mom drove the Dodge to visit me once, and the oil pump seized up when they were still in Columbia, seven miles out. They walked to my place in the rain, got there at night. Luckily I didn't know they were coming or I would have been worried sick. As it was, my youngest went to call the dog in, and says

“Hey – granpa's in the driveway.”

I look out, expecting to see this old Dodge, but it's him and mom walking up, all smiles. Didn't faze them. They left the car by the side of the road in Columbia, unlocked, you know.

“Who would steal it?” He said.

“You have to hope.” I said.

What they didn't know, that night Sylvia, the mother of my children, had been in the middle of splitting up with

me. We tried to put that on hold, act normal, but you could cut the air in our house with a knife.

Dad and I went around the whole next day finding the right oil pump in working condition. Then, after supper, he wants to go to fix it in the dark and the rain. He's all happy like he's got a new toy.

Sylvia drove my dad and me to the Dodge in Columbia, dropped us off, then went home to the kids and their grandma, my mom, who she didn't have five words for.

"Dad!" I say. I'm holding the flashlight. "Are you doing this to save money? Because, I mean, don't you value your time?"

"Well," he says, "no. Not to save money. I'd rather do this work myself than go to some job to earn money to hire someone to do this for me. And, what's more, I get it done right. I don't have to argue when someone tries to cheat me. And, what's more, I like this. It's fun for me—you know that much."

Honestly, I think it's almost true what he says. But two things he always leaves out. Does he care if it's fun for me? Or mom? And does he really have a choice—does he know any other way?

Dad gets the oil pump hooked up, new belt, fresh oil. Then he does his ritual, splashing gasoline on the air cleaner, he calls "farmers choke." Turns the key and *brrratch!* She starts right up. We climb in.

This was a fancy car once. It's got bucket seats, tufted red velour that's worn all dark and shiny, seams opening up and foam sticking out. It smells like old motor oil, and the muffler is loud. We drive about a mile and dad pulls

into a roadhouse parking lot. Neon flashing *Bar Grill Billiards*.

“Something wrong?”

“I’m using some of the money I saved to buy us a beer.”

“But you don’t drink.”

“That was then.”

“But what about mom and...Sylvia?”

“They’ve got plenty to talk about.”

We head inside. I’m looking at my dad. A shambles. But we look alike, for all that.

Dad orders a shot of bourbon and a pint of ale.

“What’ll you have?”

“The same.”

We sit awhile. He orders nachos.

“Dad. We have a philosophical problem here.”

“No we don’t.”

“What are we doing?”

“You helped me out with the Dodge, now I’m buying you supper.”

“But you don’t do this kind of thing.”

“I don’t think you know much about what I do or don’t do.”

We talked, he got the whole story out of me about wrecking my marriage. I ended up driving on the way back to my place. And I was feeling almost good.

So seriously – do you want the Dodge or not? I don’t want any money for it. I just don’t like to see a good thing go to waste.