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FEATURED

Columnist shares story of a loose Toyota truck

By Stephanie Leonard

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A “restaged” shot of the scene of a humbling safety lesson about manual transmissions, parking brakes, physics and a tough truck. The parking brake is set.

Photo courtesy Stephanie Leonard

By Stephanie Leonard

When I drive my old truck out the lane and onto the gravel road, a little flashback from a few years ago jars my memory. I’ll pass it along because there’s a safety lesson in the story. Maybe a few safety pointers in fact, when you look at it in hindsight.

For about 10 years, I had two old Toyota trucks from the “before Tacoma” and “before Tundra” era when the model was simply Deluxe Long Bed. I’d bought the second one — a 1994 — thinking it would be the “parts truck” for the one I’d bought new in 1992, and that had run up more than 260,000 miles.

They both had manual transmissions, a lot of miles, some rust, dings and scrapes, but they just kept running and running and running.

The expected demise of the '92 wasn't occurring. So I kept on driving them, wondering sometimes if I should get rid of one — but which one? You get attached to your old truck(s)!



A few years ago, I drove the black truck out my lane, and stopped on the road so I could put something in the mailbox. I'd quit using the parking brake much because it was stretched and didn't hold the truck on a hill(!). I was in the habit of finding the perfect spot on a road or parking lot where the truck wouldn't roll when I put it in neutral and left the engine running (!).

After I walked back seven or eight steps to my mailbox, I turned around to see my truck rolling in slow motion with the driver door hanging open.

It's hard to describe the surge of thoughts in one's brain at a moment like that, especially for a person who can spend seconds trying to remember a word that "starts with..." It's like your brain produces a fire hose of clear thoughts, while your eyes take in the disaster-in-slow-motion before you, and it all occurs in one or two seconds:

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"Oh God [substituting a more heavenly word than the actual word] my truck's rolling — oh God I know it's not safe to try to jump into the truck because people can get run over doing that and I'm glad I know that — that's good! oh GOD! the wheel is turned from when I came outta the lane and the truck's gonna go in the ditch — oh that's bad! don't go running after the truck, oh man is anybody around to see this? That'd be bad! well this is the mercy killing for the truck I

love, maybe that's good, that solves a problem, oh my God, it's ROLLING UP OUT OF THE DITCH INTO MY YARD? Like Lazarus rising from the dead, oh that's bad — WHAT A TOYOTA!"

I was standing frozen on the road beside the steep ditch in disbelief until the truck popped up over the crest where my yard meets the ditch. It was an "I can't believe this is happening" moment, and I realized "Blackie" — as my mechanic named it — nearly stopped after the front wheels cleared that crest. Nearly. This part of my lane and yard slope down and my truck started to pick up a little speed. Again.

At this point, I bolted full throttle into the ditch to run after the truck and tripped in a tangle of grapevine, weeds and poison ivy, landing hard like a belly flop or racing dive, and popping up like a jack-in-the-box as best I could to run-climb up the bank to catch my truck.

That slight left turn of the front wheels that put the truck in the ditch now proved to be the saving grace, because it kept the truck from going straight down the hill, and pointed its path almost in a big circle, now headed back into my yard's incline. I caught up and vaulted into the seat — probably a miracle that I didn't miss, given how out of breath I was and bunged up from falling — and stomped the brake.

I was sweating, with grass and leaf stains on my knees, elbows and hands, but victorious because that truck and I lost momentum at just the same time.

I often think "best day of my life!" after a close call when you know the worst that could have happened but didn't. This is one of those experience examples that stick with me in a way that resonate more than general safety lectures do, and it flashes every time I drive out my lane — with the one old Toyota I still have.

I am hoping that during this busy season ahead, you'll take heed of the close calls and personal experiences that you've had — or that have been shared by others — as reminders that any day you finish up work and get home in one piece is a new "best day of your life."

And that sharing your own safety lessons is a way to look out for others.

*Steph Leonard is an industrial hygienist from Riverside, Iowa. She is recently retired from the University of Iowa and is still driving her '94 truck. Email her at **stephanie-leonard@uiowa.edu**.*