



This was my first visit to Dad's tractor since he left us.

This old girl was one of his million various interests and hobbies. It is a Fordson Diesel Major, and it was one that Dad had to have. She was a 1959 Ford tractor built in England. He was a lifelong Ford fan, and our ancestors are from England, so it just fit.

Dad was a mild-mannered superhero by day, a tractor mechanic some mid-afternoons of his choosing. He was a one-of-a-kind super-genius. He could seemingly accomplish anything he attempted. It wasn't from numerous degrees or decades of classroom education; it was his gift.

I remember asking him one day, "How do you know how to do so many things, Dad?"

His honest and humble response was, "I'm not sure, Derek. I just know. Always have."

Dad truly was a humble man and that statement was his simple, matter-of-fact assessment of his gifts.

"I. Just. Know"

And, when it came to tractors, I just didn't.

Dad shared so many of his skills with me throughout the years, but apparently, the tractor repair gene did not transfer. Where his skills were inherent knowledge, mine were gained through observation, frustration and sometimes, desperation.

I needed this project, though. I needed it to keep my mind busy and to give me purpose. I needed a way out of "robot mode," which may or may not be discussed in the next chapter.

Time to get this story underway...

"Camp" was the name for the piece of property that has now been in the family for three generations. It was part of my grandparent's original farm. When we were young kids, this piece was called "The Pond." There is a spring-fed pond on the lower part of the property that never runs dry. Grandpa and Grandma used to use this particular piece to graze and water the cattle in the summer. My cousins and I used it for the pond's ability to endlessly swallow rocks tossed from the top of the hill. We would plant some rock bass or bluegill in the pond from year to year, and it was fun to watch them grow, we just somehow never got to catch them. Somebody else needed that fishing hole more than we did, I guess.

I had wandered into camp a couple of times since Dad passed. It wasn't the same without him, and I just didn't see a major reason to submit to another inevitable crying jag. I was in robot mode but a hair's width from tears-streaming mode.

Spring was here, and the knee-deep snow was well into its melting phase. Knee-deep snow was easy to navigate. The snow melted in the daylight and froze to beautiful but "slipperier than snot on a marble" ice at night. The transition made for some interesting and sometimes death-defying walks. Measured risk. I measured my desire to walk into camp against my desire to walk without a permanent limp. The fear of a permanent limp was still smaller than the desire for adventure. I do have to say those two emotions appear to be on a collision course, though.

"What happened to Chowen?"

"He tripped on a heart-shaped rock trying to avoid the snot-slippery ice. Fell and broke a hip. The vet wanted to put him down, but the people doctor asked to hold off and see if it would heal up."

I don't want that discussion to happen until much later in life, if at all.

The sun was so bright that day. There were no clouds in the sky, just pure blue. Even in robot mode, I could almost feel the depth of the blue. It was good to feel. The air was crisp but not cold. You couldn't



see your breath, which was a welcomed new outdoor status. The long darkness, the frozen nostrils, and the breath thick enough to see days were behind us. It was so good to be outside and feel the sun on my face again.

I cracked the door on camp, and the familiar sound of time-stiffened hinges fighting to stay stationary hit my ears. The screen door slamming into the main door completed the sequence. It smelled like camp. There was evidence of some uninvited guests in certain areas, but nothing extensive and nothing a few peanut butter-laden mouse traps wouldn't cure. I don't blame the little buggers for wanting in from the cold, I just wish they were more considerate with their restroom habits. Their lack of manners was a death sentence, although it does seem rather steep as I write this out...

I set my giant tote of supplies down on one of the bunks in the bedroom. I packed it full of things I thought Dad would include. Wrenches, screwdrivers, grease guns, jumper cables, rags, hammers...

I knew this wouldn't be the day the old tractor fired up. It was in a state of partial disassembly. That was the problem. I wasn't there for the "dis" so "assembly" was going to be a challenge. I didn't care, that tractor was going to run someday.

It's an old tractor. I'm guessing it is a 1959 model. Old tractors require tinkering and maintenance and by the looks of things, partial disassembly. This 1972 model human is starting to need more and more of those three things as well, now that I think about it.

The fuel tank on this tractor leaks a bit and condenses a bit because it sits out in the weather way more than a bit. Water in fuel tanks makes for lots of problems, rust in the lines being one of the biggest. Dad pulled the old fuel filter system off and crafted a dual filter masterpiece that would catch all the "chunks" before they could find their way to plug an injector. "Chunks" is street slang for "particulate matter." If you say "particulate matter" in a group of tractor guys, they immediately step back a bit from the newb. Soon, you will be asked other profiling questions like, "How many bottom plow are you using?" and "When was the last time you changed spark plugs in that diesel?" There are no spark plugs in diesel engines. I know that. Everybody knows that. Now...

The reason that the new dual filter contraption wasn't installed wasn't something massive like plague or pestilence. Nope, it was that it wouldn't fit. The bracket we made fit perfectly. The first filter bowl screwed in just as it should. The second bowl...didn't fit. It was interfering with the injector pump by about 1/4". Imagine something as huge as a farm tractor not having room to hang two pop-can-sized filter bowls on the side of the engine. You can't just give a glass filter bowl a little extra shove to make it fit. I suppose you could, but if you did, you would have had the same broken filter bowl that I did.

NOT something I am going to bring up in front of the tractor guys.

One of the things in the tote of many tools was a brand spanking new, single filter bowl unit. Dad bought this one before he got sick, but just before. This one would fit for sure.

I took the new filter housing out to the tractor. I was also smart enough to leave the glass filter bowl inside on the table. I had visions of going down on nature's icy slip-and-slide and watching that glass beauty shatter into a million pieces, all in slow motion. The bracket lined up perfectly. This was going to be so much easier than I thought!

Thank you, Dad.

I wonder if all the pieces that came off during the unsupervised disassembly were put into a container labeled "Tractor Fuel Filter Pieces for Easy Reassembly"? Surely, there was a schematic included with the clean and clearly labeled parts. Have you ever worked in an environment where every container was an old coffee can or butter dish, and none were labeled and no schematic to be found? That was my reality. Coffee cans with various nuts and bolts in various states of clean and filthy, usually with a

decent layer of gunk in the bottom from the evaporative process of "soaking" in gasoline or diesel fuel. The soaking process was solid in concept but left a bit to be desired in practice.

No matter, other things had to be done first. I'm not sure what part of the world you are from, but in my part, mud wasps exist, and they are spiteful little buggers. The holes that the filter housing bolted to were full of mud wasp spit. They weren't building nests; they were just being little jerks. No problem, I knew I wasn't going to start the tractor on day one anyway. I'll locate the parts, clean the mounting holes, and come back again in a week or so. I was right in the middle of getting Dad's house ready to sell, and after 45 years of it being our family home, there were many treasures to sort and relocate to another building. The tractor could wait for a bit.

A week or so turned into a month, but the good news was I located the proper coffee can (oddly enough, it was decaf), and it looked like my reassembly was going to be a lot easier than expected. The coffee can was even labeled "tractor"!

It had nuts and bolts and pre-bent metal fuel lines with fittings and everything. Each bit and piece got a fresh cleaning and a new coffee can without sediment or gunk. I was excited for a little respite from hauling treasure, both physical and emotional.

I headed back to camp with all the good bits and pieces. It was another sunny day, and the snow and ice had been gone for quite some time. The grass was green, and there were leaves on the trees. I stood by the tractor, listening to the breeze rustling through the trees and the birds singing. They were just as happy for the warm day as I was. The air smelled so good. It wasn't the "cool, fresh air of the lake" kind of good, but it's as close as you can get to it. The tractor had its own smells. Sixty years of faded paint, countless hours of dusty field work in its cracks and crevices, a little diesel fuel dripped here, and a little engine oil dripped there. It smelled like good memories with Dad.

I was feeling so confident, maybe even cocky. Tools and now, proper parts? I am going to hear the old girl bark to life TODAY.

I inspected my work area and I am happy to report that the battle between mud wasp and man was won by me this time. I held the filter housing and started the first bolt, then the second. So far, so good. I finger-tightened them and took a picture to send to my little sister. She would be happy to see progress. She wasn't pressuring me to get the tractor running so I could get the crops in. My farming days were well behind me. She knew I needed to get it running for far more important reasons and was there for support. I reached in for the fuel lines. It was time to hook those up so the diesel fuel could flow. Something wasn't quite right. They weren't lining up. At all. These were the wrong lines. They may have been for a tractor, but not THIS tractor. Dammit. I was going to have to make lines for it. Guess what store the little town that camp is in doesn't have? It doesn't have a Tractor Fuel Line Builder store. Neither does my town. Or any town around me. I would have to order parts. It should be fairly easy. I'll just get on the phone and tell them I need fuel lines for a 60-year-old tractor from England that has a custom fuel filter system on it. Oh, and the filter housing is aluminum with two bolts in it. That should narrow it down. Can you overnight those for me, please?

It was a setback but not a terminal one. I was closer to success than before I started the day. I wasn't short on projects. This will happen.

I measured every possible route the fuel line might have to take and added forty feet to the order. I ended up needing just over two feet but didn't want to run short, and full disclosure, I only ordered four extra feet. Fuel line was cheap compared to my mental state, but I was still comfortable with a four-foot buffer as opposed to forty. I measured each fitting with my digital calipers. I wrote down the metric and standard measurements, just in case. An English Ford tractor from the fifties had to be standard but I was being extra careful. I called in the order and thankfully got a very helpful tech. He even asked me if the fuel line fittings were standard, tapered, AN (it's a style, trust me), or pipe.

Umm...I'd like black ones to match the line. Send me four of each style, and I will put the rest in a dirty coffee can labeled "The Fuel Fittings That Didn't Fit". Now I'm getting frustrated. That's not a good thing for me. I stop thinking and start reacting. I don't look at things and calmly figure them out. I see them as broken and say forget it with a different F-word. Overnight ship all the parts, even the wrong ones, please.

The parts arrived on Tuesday. It was foolish of me to order them overnight delivery, but I needed some tangible progress. I had every conceivable fitting in my hand. The tractor was going to start.

I stopped and bought a brand new gas can, a yellow one that indicated it was for diesel only. Five fresh gallons of fuel as well. I even dumped it into the tractor because I knew it would run very soon. Confidence was high.

It was time to determine which fitting was the right one. A moment of truth. Tractor truth. I didn't have much gas in my own emotional tank, and I needed a win.

The folks that sent me the fittings did such a nice job. There were four of each style, each in their own bag with the part number and description on it. They even used little Ziploc-style bags.

It became obvious very quickly which fittings were the right ones. It was the fourth style of four. I didn't care. It was par for the course but with success at the end. I measured and cut the fuel line and even left a little extra on each, just in case. There shouldn't be a "just in case" because I had all the right bits now, but better safe than sorry.

I finished the fuel lines... Teflon braided fuel lines are a different kind of animal when it comes to cutting them. Just a little heads up.

I ran the line from the hand pump to the filter. Perfect.

The line from the filter to the injector pump is next, and then it's time to bleed the system. I am so sick of the smell of diesel fuel at this point. It has become part of my natural essence and I don't like it. Doesn't matter, I am so close.

The new line was made from flexible hose as opposed to bent copper and was so much easier to work with. I tightened the fitting into the injector pump, one more to go. Everything is going so well, today is definitely the day. Threaded the last fitting into the filter housing. It doesn't seem to want to go in all the way. Huh.

Maybe there is just a bur in the new housing. Do not force it. Not this close. I disconnected the hose from the injector pump and turned it around. It threaded into the filter housing perfectly.

This can't be happening.

Oh yes, it could be and was.

The reason that it wouldn't thread in properly was because it was the wrong fitting. The baggie it was in? EXACT same part number and description of the other three that worked. Somehow the wrong part was put in the bag. It was a coarse thread fitting as opposed to a fine thread fitting. Three of the four were the right size and thread pitch; one was the right size but the wrong thread pitch. One part stopped everything. *Again.*

"FUCK!!! Fuck this project, and fuck you, tractor! I can't do this anymore!" I dropped to my knees in total defeat, tears rolling down my face. I just needed Dad, and he was no longer available.

I was done. Enough was enough. It was a fistfight the whole way, and the positive attitude I was trying to maintain was gone. "Screw it, rust into the Earth, you stubborn old piece of shit. I no longer care." I saw that broken tractor for what it was. A broken tractor that was going to stay that way for the rest of

its life, as well as mine. I just wanted to hear it run. I wanted to feel Dad smiling down on me for getting it done on my own.

There wasn't going to be any smile, and *I didn't care*. I did care but quitting was easier than pressing on. Who the hell did I think I was, anyway? I wasn't Dad and I certainly wasn't a tractor mechanic. Robot mode was safer for me anyway. The hard, metallic shell of robot mode was very similar to the steel shell of Dad's tractor. Weathered by the elements of time but impenetrable. Dulled by the burning sun and lashing rains, but sturdy. Both shells wrapped a broken unit, whether it be an engine or a heart, but gave the appearance that everything was tip-top and running just fine. The tractor didn't have to plow a field, but looked like it was ready in an instant. I didn't have to show my pain, my sadness or my fear of living life without Dad, but looked ready to take on the world. The tractor and I weren't very different at all.

I don't know how long I sat there crying. It doesn't matter because, apparently, it was long enough. I got up and started packing up my tools. I was numb. I just wanted out of there.

My truck was packed up, and I was ready to leave. I checked the camp again to ensure I didn't leave anything behind. I grabbed a pop out of the refrigerator and headed out. I had a quick thought about how times have changed. The fridge used to be full of cold beer; nowadays it was full of water and a few cold pops. Dad would still have a beer from time to time but rarely, myself, never. I'd spent over half a decade "thawing out" from too many years of soul-freezing alcoholism.

I'd had tons of chats with Dad on this very spot working through the coldest parts of that thawing process. It was a nice feeling to not have a beer cross my mind. The thawing process had definitely taken a solid hold and that was a miracle. I gave the top a nice, slow twist and heard that rewarding hiss. This pop was extra fizzy, and I liked that. I headed to the truck and noticed something out of the corner of my eye. A path where there wasn't one before.

There was a path worn from camp to the tractor, around the tractor, and back to my truck. When I first started this project, there was snow and ice on the ground. Now the tall grass was up to my knees, except for the path worn into the ground. How many trips for tools or pieces and parts or just a break did it take to make that path? I had no idea. Was one more going to hurt anything other than my deflated ego? Nope.

I stood there staring at my damn near done, custom fuel system. I was one piece away from a running tractor. One. Piece. "You know, who cares if a little fuel leaks out while I test out the system? I'll see if I can get it to prime and maybe even try to get it to fire. I'll tighten the wrong part as best I can, then see what happens." - Sometimes I swear I can hear Dad talking to me, through me... Progress, not perfection...

I went through the process of bleeding the air out of the injectors like I had watched Dad do so many times before. Yes, my new system leaked, but only at the wrong fitting. That was positive news. I was just using the hand pump, though, who knows how bad it would leak once the mechanical pump was engaged? What would it hurt to try it, just for a little bit?

I checked the oil and the coolant in the tractor. Sometimes, old tractors leak a little more than diesel fuel. The oil looked good, and I added a little coolant. I wanted to try it. I wanted to see Dad's smile, even if it was only in my mind. It turned out that I really did care, robot mode be damned for this day.

I hit the horn button, which now doubled as the starter button. Remember how I told you that Dad could fix anything? A few years ago, we were out in the field, and he shut the tractor off so we could walk up and have lunch. When we got back after our delicious fare of summer sausage, cheese, and crackers, the blue beast wouldn't start.

"Damn. I knew this was coming. Do you have your Leatherman on you?"

“Here you go, Pop. What was coming?” I handed him my Leatherman tool and stood ready to be amazed. Something cool was going to happen.

“Oh, the ignition switch has been going out for a while now. I have a new one over at the shop; just keep forgetting to bring it over to camp.”

How was he going to fix a bad switch with my pliers???

He didn't. The bad switch is still in its spot. The new “switch”? It's the horn button. He rewired it while we were in the field. Now it honks while it's starting, and it always will.

Today, hitting the horn starter button brought tears. Good memory tears. Missing Dad tears.

It honked and rolled over, and I sat in Dad's seat, trying to hold back tears. Nothing. Not even a puff of smoke out of the exhaust. Please just fire. I shot some WD-40 into the air intake to see if I could coax it into action. It's not great for the engine but it's better than starting fluid. I laid on the starter button. The horn honked, and the engine rolled, but nothing. I let go of the button, but I heard a “chuff” sound as I did. I smelled a tiny hint of diesel exhaust. I was close...

One more time. I hosed the intake down with the secret sauce. WD-40 fixes everything.

The horn honked, and the engine rolled and started to fire. “Chuff, chuff, chuff...”

I laid on that button. I knew it was going to melt, but I didn't care. *Melt you bastard, but start first.*

The 1959 Fordson Diesel Major roared to life! I sat there, watching smoke puffing out of the stack, making all the right noises, and tears held back no longer. I did see Dad smile. I FELT it. I heard Dad say, “Alright, Derek! Nice job!” I slumped over the steering wheel and let the tears flow. It was time to let them out and celebrate that moment. No hard metal shell, no protective armor, just the tractor and me, both working like we should,

I almost didn't get to experience that moment because I lost track of what I was looking at, and, more importantly, for.

I was looking for a connection to Dad. I was looking for validation that maybe, possibly, I was a chip off the old block and that I did learn some things throughout the years of spending time with him. What I saw was a broken tractor and a failed project. *Almost.*

One of the things I've learned and want to share with you is that the transition from having sight to truly using your vision isn't linear, and you don't get a certificate the first time you complete it. It takes time and repetition. Deliberate repetition. It does come more naturally as you practice and time goes by.

It isn't a linear progression; it is circuitous. The times I wanted to quit on that tractor were far more numerous than I talked about here. I'd arrive full of hope and leave with a taste of defeat. The levels of hope and servings of defeat were changing ratios with each trip to camp. I was losing track of my vision every time I looked at that tractor. There were more moments that confounded me. I didn't lose final sight of the true vision until that last fuel-fitting failure. Had I not caught a glance of that worn-in path, I would have left unfulfilled. The tractor would eventually have been fixed, whether by me or someone I hired; that wasn't the point. As I became frustrated, my line of sight narrowed and my vision faded. With the success of that tractor firing up, my vision for the project was restored, and thankfully so. We have to be available for the good stuff when it happens, and the only way that is possible is if we keep our eyes and minds not only open but connected.

Now, when I go to camp, I “see” the tractor, but I visualize Dad sitting on it, honking the starter button *or starting the horn button?* and smiling when it fires up. Sometimes I hit that button for a quick second,

just to make sure I don't forget to keep looking deeper. Maybe I'll fire it up and go for a ride with Dad this weekend.