

## Cheap Is Expensive: A Marine Disaster

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

One thing I've learned in my lifetime is if something seems too good to be true, it probably is. Every day, so many of us are glued to televisions and see people become rich overnight on game shows. Growing up, kids receive a lot of messages that you can become rich and famous without an education. Throughout America, there is a belief you can get something for nothing. One of the most successful men I ever met, a man who owned numerous auto dealerships in Detroit, once told me that "Nothing is free and there are never any deals." This is surely true.

Several years ago, I bought a mobile home on the beach in Malibu, and the story behind it is very strange. At the time, I was pretty involved in giving speeches at various law schools around the United States and considered myself a national expert in advising [law students](#) on how to [get a job](#). I was enthusiastic when my fiancé invited me to go a Pepperdine [Law School](#) party with her friend who was in her last year of law school. When I got to the party, I was surprised no one recognized me from my various law school lectures. However, no one there seemed very interested in a [job search](#). There was a lot of liquor and craziness going on at the party.

I introduced myself, and started recommending various job search strategies to the students I met. The evening didn't go well. People would excuse themselves after a few minutes when I would pause in my conversation to reflect on one job search strategy or another. I was sipping a Diet Coke and feeling very fortunate to have this "street level" experience of meeting law students first hand. I had been a [law professor](#) five years before and was now "in the trenches" with a group of law students, finding out first hand what their lives were like.

These kids seemed more interested in partying, however, than speaking with me.

About an hour into the party, I realized things seemed to be thinning out and I couldn't find my fiancé anywhere. I looked around and saw a lot of people going into a bedroom. I walked in and saw my fiancé's friend taking a huge hit from a bong. Other people were standing around also waiting to enjoy the marijuana.

In front of a group of stunned students, I walked up to my fiancé and said, "This is outrageous!! I am getting out of this party now! I cannot believe you are allowing yourself to be in the same room with this!"

The people in the room all laughed, including my fiancé. I was horrified this episode might get around to law schools and somehow destroy my reputation. I have never done drugs in my life and the fact my fiancé was associated with it was even more shocking.

"I am a major figure in the national [law student job](#) search scene!! I am leaving! There is no way I can be associated with this sort of stuff and you should not be either!" I told her in front of the group. I was acting as if I was the President of the United States and she was my wife carousing with people doing drugs. People were laughing at me and I realized I must have looked ridiculous. I stormed out of the party and realized my fiancé was nowhere to be found. I got in my car and drove home.

The next morning my fiancé called me from her parent's house in Santa Monica and asked me to come get her. We fought, basically about my belief that as an important national career figure for law students, I could not be associated with her friend's marijuana use. I am from the Midwest and my fiancé grew up in Los Angeles and attended school with people like Paris Hilton. People think differently in Los Angeles. She thought I was out of my mind for being angry with her for hanging out in a room where people were smoking pot.

Because I didn't want our neighbors to hear us fighting, I decided to drive along Pacific Coast Highway. We drove for quite awhile before I finally stopped to turn around. We pulled over to the side of the road, still fighting, and that's when I saw the mobile home on the beach. It was for sale. Boy did it look ugly! It looked so ridiculous I was confident I could afford it.

In case you don't know, Malibu is not a place where there are typically mobile homes on the beach. In fact, the mobile home I purchased is the only one I know of directly on the beach in Malibu.

To say this mobile home was run down would be an understatement. It was the first "structure" ever put on this beach, sometime in the 1950s. Imagine what its interior looked like after 50+ years of use and zero renovation. An 80 year old man was living in it. I was love struck. My purchase of this mobile home went off without a hitch. Despite the fact we were in a real estate boom at the time, it'd been sitting on the market for some time. The [real estate agents](#) seemed astonished anyone was interested in it.

"Whatever you want," they kept saying as they wrote up the purchase contract. Incredibly, the owner was so eager to get rid of it, he let me take possession of it and move in without even getting financing for a year, and I paid him a nominal monthly rent.

After a day or two of relaxing in this mobile home, I realized it was not all it was cracked up to be. Living on the water is fun. However, when you are in a 500-square-foot mobile home from the 1950s, it can get pretty cramped. There was no heat or air conditioning in the mobile home, either, so the living conditions were pretty spartan. After a couple of weeks, I decided I needed to get a boat and this would make the experience of living in Malibu much more enjoyable. My plan was to anchor the boat about 100 yards from shore and then use it on the weekends. In theory, this was a good idea. I started to look on eBay and it didn't take me long before I found my dream boat.

It was a 15-foot Sea-doo jet boat that'd been used for only a few hours. The purchase price had been an incredible \$22,000 but the owner of the jet boat had put a "buy it now" button on the listing for \$5,000. This looked too good to be true and I decided I had to purchase the boat. I could not believe my luck in finding such a good deal.

I sent a guy who worked in our warehouse to pick up the boat and when he arrived he became a little nervous. In fact, when

he came back with the boat, he hinted the seller of the boat may have had an unusual sexual affliction. He looked a little shook up.

"What happened?" I asked.

"It was weird. When I got there, she had a video camera and started filming me the second I arrived. She asked me to climb under the boat and to rub it. She then started saying stuff like 'Look at the camera and say you like it while rubbing it hard! Tell me that it's nice and feels good and tap on it. Look at the camera and say it is smooth and hard while rubbing it!'"

The whole situation sounded very strange to me but I have heard weird sex stories in Los Angeles and I figured this was another one of them. A few weeks before I'd been on a freeway interchange in a traffic jam on a Sunday afternoon. I thought there must be a huge basketball game or something at the Staples' Center, but instead there was a porno convention. It took me 30 minutes to get through an interchange that should've taken no more than a couple of minutes. This is the kind of stuff you see only in this part of the United States.

I thought I would anchor the jet boat about 100 yards off the house where the tide never went below. I also did a lot of research and determined I would need what is called a giant "mushroom anchor" in order to build a permanent mooring for boat. I found a marine supply store on the East Coast and ordered a buoy, mooring anchor, and all sorts of other items to build an official mooring in front of my house and my neighbor's homes. It cost me a couple of thousand dollars but the sea captain I spoke with in Maine assured me what I was purchasing could handle "gale force winds" and would keep the boat anchored. My plan was to use a sea kayak to travel out to the boat when I wanted to go on expeditions. I would use the boat to travel to and from the shore.

Since you may not be from Malibu, I have to assure you this is something that's highly unusual. People who pay millions of dollars for a house do not want to see a \$5,000 boat permanently anchored in front of it. In fact, I am not aware of anyone who had ever built a mooring in front of their house in Malibu either before or since this episode. The claustrophobia of living in a 500-square-foot mobile home on the beach can drive people to do strange things. I assured myself, however, this is what my neighbors must have realized when they moved to a stretch of beach that included a 65-year-old mobile home.

My plan was to put the mushroom anchor on the boat and then launch the jet boat in Oxnard. I would then travel 20+ miles up the coast and drop the mushroom anchor and mooring. The entire procedure was going to be quite difficult because the mushroom anchor weighed hundreds of pounds. A man who worked in our warehouse had picked up the boat for me, and he recommended a couple of his friends from Mexico who spent their days standing in front of a U-Haul looking for work help me.

"Do they know how to swim?" I asked him. He checked and only one of them did. Therefore, the plan was to use three of his friends to place the giant anchor on the boat, launch the boat, and one of them would travel up the coast with me in the boat to launch the anchor. Despite having a mobile home that was gradually being subsumed by the sea, I was feeling very enthusiastic about having purchased a boat. I was also excited to brag to my neighbors about the boat. My neighbors were getting a little annoying. The day we moved in, one came over with his wife.

"Look, they bought the lot!" the man said to her. I was actually proud I had a new home and he was calling it a "lot." My neighbor, who resided immediately next door, came by periodically and told me he was amazed our home had not been washed out to sea but assured me it was "going down" shortly and that "I better not be there" when it did. Being a boat owner would put me on par at least to some degree with my neighbors, I thought.

When we finally got the boat launched and started going through the harbor, everything seemed like it was going pretty well. The anchor was resting in the front of the boat and we had to travel very slowly because the front end was practically in the water. After about five minutes I was feeling very good about everything, but then I saw a boat screaming towards me with lights flashing. Since I had never captained a boat before in my life I could not imagine what was happening. I thought I might be going to prison due to the mooring sitting on the front of the boat.

Hillario, my helper, looked terrified. "Inmigracion!!" he told me with a terrified look in his eyes. It was the Harbor Patrol and they pulled us over and made us go to the side of the harbor. They asked me if I had flares, a whistle, life jackets, and all sorts of stuff you apparently are required to have in order to take a boat into the ocean. Incredibly, they said nothing about the giant mooring sitting in the boat. I had none of these things and they wrote me several tickets and told me I needed to take my boat over to a local store and purchase these items before I could venture into the ocean legally. I explained to Hillario in Spanish he was not being deported and he was incredibly relieved. Thankfully the Harbor Master didn't pursue it when I explained to him Hillario had no identification. After spending a couple of hundred dollars on life jackets and other required supplies, we headed over to the Harbor Patrol office to show them what we had purchased and they were kind enough to cancel all the tickets. The whole episode must have taken us over two hours; however, we were now prepared to venture out into the Pacific Ocean towards Malibu.

We were soon out in the sea and the boat was handling very well. Despite the massive mooring, she was amazingly agile and picking up speed. We could feel the wind in our faces and the entire event was very enjoyable. A couple of minutes into the journey I saw another boat rushing towards us. This boat was larger and looked very official. As it got closer, I realized it was the Coast Guard.

"Hi, we've already been pulled over and we're all set!" I told the man who boarded our boat. This guy was serious. He had a gun and I thought Hillario was about ready to get deported for sure.

"That was the Harbor Master who is from the County of Ventura," he told me. "I'm with the United States Coast Guard and we have jurisdiction over the ocean."

"Oh, I'm sorry ..."

"What the hell are you doing with that giant mooring in your boat? It is so big we saw it from over a half mile away."

I had no idea what to say. If I told him I was about to launch an illegal mooring off the coast of Malibu, he would not like it. Actually, the more I thought about where I was planning on putting my mooring, the more I realized it was probably an international shipping lane. Cruise ships, freighters, and all sorts of stuff went by daily. I wondered what they would make of my little jet boat if I ever made it out there. I hoped they would not run it over.

I had to think quickly on my feet. I started thinking about the past few minutes.

"This is a jet boat," I told the man from the Coast Guard. As I was speaking, I realized I could see myself and Hillario perfectly in his sunglasses since they reflected directly toward me like mirrors. "This boat is fast and these waves are

incredibly big. With this giant anchor here, I prevent the boat from flipping over in the waves. I am trying to be safe. You should see how fast this thing is."

"That's so cool dude!" the guy from the Coast Guard said. "I totally understand. These jet boats are so kick ass! I want to get one but my wife would kill me!" I could not believe what I was witnessing. I thought the guy must be the biggest idiot I had ever encountered. Just like that, he let us continue and gave me some sort of "hang loose" type surfer sign as we motored away.

Some time later, we found it was an incredible feat launching the anchor in front of our house. Luckily, a man on a jet ski boarded the boat and somehow we managed to all get the mushroom anchor in the water and build the world's first mooring in Malibu.

Hillario, however, could not swim. For over an hour I tried to convince him to jump in the water and swim to shore but he refused. Eventually, it got so bad I pulled the boat up to an area no deeper than his chest and pushed him overboard. Despite the fact he could have simply just walked to shore in the water he sat there flailing and screaming for help. I was very close to shore and screamed to a couple of surfers who were wading in the water to help him get to shore. They refused.

"I am a commercial litigator. There is no way I am getting involved in this one. I do not want the liability!" one of them told me. They just stood there. After about 10 seconds of me screaming to Hillario to just "walk" in Spanish, he figured it out and walked to the shore. Apparently, he had lied about his abilities as a swimmer to get this job.

It was a wonderful sight. All weekend I tied a kayak to the mooring and jetted up and down the coast in my little jet boat. I felt as if I was the smartest resident of Malibu ever.

All week at work I was looking forward to a wonderful weekend with more boating adventures. On Wednesday, a call came in and a secretary rushed into my office.

"Harrison!! One of your neighbors called and said there is a boat sinking right in front of your house! I have no idea what they are talking about!" I had no idea how one of my neighbors tracked me down. My neighbors all had pretty nice houses in Malibu and did not associate much with white trash like me who lived in the mobile home. I called my neighbor back. She explained to me the boat was filling up with water and her feeling was that something called "a bilge pump" had stopped working. The bilge pump turns on when water comes inside the boat from waves and then pumps it out. My neighbor told me the best thing I could do was purchase a battery and come out and install it in the jet boat. She told me I should also purchase a pump and pump out some of the water.

"It's going to go under soon if you do not get out here!"

I rushed out of work and went to a marine store and purchased a battery and a pump for the boat. When I got home I noticed the boat really was sinking and it looked pretty bad. It was so far out; however, I could not see it very well. I got in my kayak and started paddling out to the boat. The sea was very rough and it was a struggle to get out in the kayak. When I finally made it to the boat I realized there was so much water in it I might not be able to pump it out. I hooked up the little electric pump I had purchased to the battery and started trying to pump the water out. There was so much water and so many waves there was nothing I could do.

The last thing I remember is a giant wave coming inside the kayak. I am not sure how it happened but the car battery had so much charge to it the water electrified in the kayak, and I started getting electrocuted! I jumped out of the kayak and into the water and the kayak went off drifting into the distance. I swam towards the boat. Given the wave that'd just hit it, I figured the boat was going to completely sink within the next 10 minutes or so. I was panicked. There were rough currents and I guessed I might be too far from shore to make it if I swam. In addition, I was about ready to lose a \$5,000 boat to the sea.

I considered my options and realized the only thing I could possibly do was to cut the rope between the boat and the mooring. I would pray the sea would take the boat and I back to shore. I was very lucky to have a knife with me. My kayak appeared to be drifting towards the shore and I figured my little jet boat and I might be able to achieve the same. I prayed we would.

Over the course of the next several minutes the sea did carry us back to shore. The boat was half way under water but it started going towards shore and got very close. At this point a small crowd of my neighbors had formed and they rushed out and tied ropes to the boat and tried to assist me in keeping the boat in one place. The problem was the waves kept trying to take the boat out to sea. At this point, it was probably 3:00 or 4:00 in the afternoon and for the next five hours or so, groups of my neighbors and I all struggled with the boat. Eventually, by using winches and lots of rope, we were able to secure the boat after it was low tide. We had ropes running 20 feet from various homes on stilts out to the boat. It was crazy.

One of my neighbors brought out a large bottle of tequila and we were all taking sips while trying various maneuvers to secure the boat. It was an exhausting experience and required the effort of over 10 men. By nightfall we had secured the boat. The boat was still filled with water and it was all inside the engine compartment. I actually do not know what we thought the next step was. I am assuming in the morning I was going to drain the water out of the boat.

I fell asleep quickly that night, but around 4:00 am I awoke with a jolt. I am usually a good sleeper. But that night I could not go back to sleep. I had a sixth sense something was wrong. I was very nervous and wanted to go look at the boat. It was about 100 yards from my house up the beach so I couldn't just look out my window. It was pitch black and very difficult to see. I had a powerful spotlight flashlight I had purchased unnecessarily months before at Sam's Club and fired it up. It was like a giant beacon. This light was so powerful that you could hit the clouds with it. I had never seen anything like it. I put on some sandals and a coat and started walking down the beach. The closer I got, the more I realized I couldn't see the boat--all I could see was the rope coming out of the houses and appearing to go into the sand. Finally, the truth of what was going on was inescapable: The boat was buried beneath the sand. In fact, all I could see was the rope going directly into the sand. Apparently, the tide, waves, and current had decided to bury the boat under the sand while I was sleeping.

Incredulous and shaken, I walked back home and managed to go to sleep. I got up an hour or two later and managed to get a hold of the guy who had picked up the boat in our warehouse. I told him to go to Home Depot and pick up at least 10-15 guys and purchase a shovel for each one of them. I explained the boat was buried under several feet of sand and we needed to get it unburied. By 8:00 am there were at least 15 men on the beach digging. We dug and tugged on the ropes but could not move the boat. We were also using winches to try and move the boat and it was so heavy the winches were breaking. I am lucky no one was killed. The winches have cables on them and the cables were snapping and then flying back to the people operating the winches. It was so bad we started using blankets from my house and the people were operating the winches behind the blankets so they were not hit by cables when the winches snapped. The boat was a disaster. It was completely filled with sand in the engine compartment. It must have weighed three times its normal weight.

By 1:00 pm I realized that absolutely nothing could be done. The boat was not moving. For the next hour I sat in my house while my workers barked back and forth to each other in Spanish about how insane this entire exercise was. I realized I needed to find someone who was an expert in this sort of thing. My neighbors no longer thought this was funny. There was a boat buried directly in front of their homes. I decided to walk down to a lifeguard station on the next beach over. When I got there, I found a man who looked like he had been a lifeguard for the past 50 years. I had never seen so much sun damage. I'll call him "Leatherface."

Leatherface told me he'd been working on the beach for 30+ years and had never seen anyone as big of a jackass as me. He told me he had been watching this episode from the outset and had never seen anyone stupid enough to build a mooring. Despite the fact he'd witnessed the entire episode with the kayak, he told me he was not even sure he would have rescued me if I started drowning because I might be better off dead.

Leatherface told me I needed to call a service called Marine Assist to come out and help move the boat. He explained they would bring a giant tug boat and pull the boat back to the harbor. That sounded pretty good to me.

I called Marine Assist and they told me they would send out a tugboat for \$500 and \$175 an hour, but if I wanted them to swim to shore to hook up the boat they would charge me an additional \$300 to bring along a swimmer. I told them I would swim out and grab the rope to hook up to the boat and they agreed.

An hour or so later a giant tug boat arrived about 50 yards out to sea. My neighbor let me use his kayak and I started making my way to the tugboat. I got hit by a wave and flipped the kayak. Between the tug boat captain screaming something at me and all the commotion, I lost the kayak and paddles and soon was standing on the tug boat. The guy on the tug boat asked me questions about what was going on and then shook his head. "I've never heard anything like this" he told me. He then proceeded to lecture me just like Leatherface had about how stupid I was.

Lots of people have never heard anything like what I've told you so far, nor what was to come next. In fact, one of my ex-employees decided I must be a pathological liar after I told him this story. It is really hard to believe.

The tug boat captain told me once I swam to shore I should hook the rope to a couple of strategic points on the boat then proceed to have the 15 illegal aliens push the boat. He assured me this would get it out to sea. I agreed. For the next hour, the tug boat tried to pull the little jet boat out but simply couldn't extricate it from the sand. It was a Herculean task. Several times the tug boat captain called me on my cell phone.

"It's not moving!" he would say, as if I was not there.

"Keep trying!" I would encourage him.

"Ok!"

Eventually, after over an hour the tide started coming in and miraculously the boat began to move. After several tries, the boat started drifting out to sea. At this point, there must have been at least 30 spectators in addition to my workers. No one on the beach had ever seen anything like this before. In fact, several of my neighbors had come home early from work to watch the excitement. As the tug boat started towing the little jet boat away, my neighbors began to clap and the workers were giving each other high fives and hugging. It had been a long ordeal and we were all very excited. The tug boat operator was even excited and blew a really loud shipping horn and he towed the little jet boat away.

The neighbors and everyone standing around looked really relieved. As I walked towards my house with around five shovels under my arm, I noticed a British neighbor of mine looking very intensely towards the tug boat and my little jet boat being tugged away. I realized he had not been part of the celebratory excitement in the past few minutes. In fact, he was quite focused.

"Something is wrong," he shouted from his deck. "The boat is sinking!"

Sure enough, I looked out and the tug boat appeared to be backing up. I looked and I could not see my little jet boat anywhere. My cell phone rang and it was Marine Assist.

"This is a disaster! The boat has sunk!" the tug boat operator told me. He had conferenced in the owner of the Marine Assist Company. "I'm going to have to call the Coast Guard about the sunken boat." The next few minutes were a blur. What I do remember is a Coast Guard helicopter showing up within the next few minutes and making a rapid couple of passes over the area where the sunken boat was. My heart was racing. My neighbors were all alarmed as well. I looked down at my phone at some point and realized I had received four or five messages in the past few minutes from Marine Assist.

I called them right back.

"The Coast Guard says we are going to need to call in divers and do an emergency extraction," they told me.

"A what?"

"An extraction. You cannot just leave a boat on the bottom of the ocean."

They explained to me they were going to have to send in divers to float the boat to the surface by attaching blow up devices to it.

"This is out of our league. We are going to need to call specialists and another boat."

It was also explained to me that the "extraction operation" was going to cost up to \$5,000. An hour or so later, a boat with a bunch of divers arrived and the rescue operation began in earnest. By the time the rescue was complete, I couldn't see anything because it was dark. I did receive a call at some point that they were now headed back to Ventura Harbor with the boat and it had taken longer than expected to complete the rescue and therefore more credit card charges were required. I was also given a complete report from the divers about what was wrong with the boat.

Apparently, there was a huge gash/hole on the bottom of the boat that had been cheaply covered up with some epoxy. When I'd left the boat sitting in the water, it had all dissolved. The cheap price on eBay and the bizarre behavior with the video camera finally made sense.

When the boat got to the harbor, it was so heavy with sand it couldn't be put on the trailer. A flatbed truck needed to be called at 2:00 am to tow it away.

This was how I learned that cheap is expensive. If something looks like too good of a deal, it probably is. In the case of the jet boat, it ended up costing me much more than the purchase price, just to do mandatory rescues on it.

## THE LESSON

When you buy something cheap, it's likely to be expensive in the long-term; things that seem too good to be true usually are. When you are approached with an attractive deal, remember that nothing comes for free and there aren't any no-strings-attached deals.

---

<https://www.harrisonbarnes.com/>