



The Magic Asphalt Sealer Tank

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

When I was in college, my girlfriend had the annoying habit of periodically declaring that the dorms were too noisy for her to sleep. What this really meant was she had decided it was time for me to drive her to an industrial part of town so we could spend the night at a Holiday Inn Express, or a similar hotel. Once we got to the hotel, we would watch HBO on television and go out to eat at Denny's. Since she never really studied much--or at all--the event would invariably result in an argument of sorts when I would demand she turn down the television in the cramped hotel room while I tried to make sense of some Greek philosopher pontificating about the meaning of everything. At some point during the weekend, she would generally tell me she also had "writer's block" and ask me to write a term paper for her while she went shopping for make-up at the local mall.

These were not nice hotels. They were frequently right next to freeways and the rooms were rarely much quieter than the dorms. Semi trucks often sat nearby with their diesels purring in the parking lot all night long. Nevertheless, this need she had to stay in lousy hotels was something I tolerated and were it not for the industrial areas these hotels were located in, I would probably have found myself refusing to go on these short excursions.

The best thing about the areas where we stayed was not that the hotel rooms were cheap. It was that they were in areas where contractors all over Chicago kept a lot of their equipment. There was a little ritual about our frequent trips off campus. We would leave on a Saturday morning and invariably stop alongside the road and look at dump trucks, generators, and other stuff that had for sale signs on them. Since many of these pieces of equipment were parked in front of homes, I would have the privilege of speaking with the owners of the equipment. My girlfriend would generally be sitting in my truck while I looked at these various pieces of equipment and chatted with their owners. Once back in the truck, I would explain to her about what various pieces of equipment did and how it was my dream to have my own bulldozer. She would look very bored by these sorts of conversations and I think she must have wondered to herself what she was doing with me. Nevertheless, she would tolerate it knowing I was also going along with her interest in staying in bad hotel rooms.

On one of our visits to a working class suburb in Chicago, I couldn't believe my eyes. Parked in front of a ranch house was a giant red asphalt sealer tank. It would be one of the most remarkable and transformative relationships I would ever have with a piece of machinery. The owner of the home had the same color Chevy Suburban I was driving parked in front of his house and I believe that this was some sort of sign. I pulled over and sat in my truck for a few minutes telling my girlfriend what a wonderful piece of machinery the tank appeared to be. Eventually, I decided to go to the door of the home and ask the man if he wanted to sell it.

The man who answered the door was a short European-looking man with dark skin and he was wearing a wife beater t-shirt. The outside of his entire house was very dirty. There were a lot of toxic chemicals around this area--open paint cans and so forth. Inside the house, I could see a bunch of little kids running around in white undershirts that appeared to not have been changed in days. The kid's faces appeared to be partially covered in chocolate and other stuff they had eaten recently. Inside, the family appeared to be speaking another language.

I asked the man, "What language are you speaking?"

"The Cant," he stated matter of factly.

I had no idea what he was talking about. I had never heard of this language and only later would I learn after asking him what language he was speaking for the fifth or sixth time that it was a genuine Romani or "traveler" language.

I proceeded to ask the man several questions about this asphalt sealer tank. I was so excited I couldn't believe it. Spring was breaking and soon I would be able to resume doing asphalt sealing around Detroit. I had to make a deal and get this asphalt tank. The tank looked so run down that I was very confident I might be able to afford it. Back at my fraternity house, I had a 15-year old Audi car that I wanted to sell. It had gold rims and was painted with all these strange gold stripes. It looked like it belonged in a 70's German hip hop video. I remember the President of the University of Chicago at the time, Hanna Grey, had walked by me on one occasion while I was parking and appeared to be cracking up. She looked like Barbara Bush.

"Hello!" I told her, happy to be meeting such an important person.

"That's quite a car!" she said in a patrician tone.

"Thanks!" I replied.

The man couldn't believe that a kid was directly in front of his house trying to negotiate to purchase an asphalt tank. I couldn't really believe it either. The tank was quite run down. It looked cheaply made. Even the tires were quite cheap. It had a very cheap pump attached to it that was used to spray asphalt sealer on driveways and more. To me, this appeared to be too good to be true.

"Will you take four thousand for this?" I finally asked the man after we had spoken back and forth for at least 30 minutes.

"Of course!" he said.

After I made the offer, I got the feeling he would have taken four hundred. I was incredibly enthusiastic about this tank, however, because I knew what it could accomplish. With this piece of machinery I figured I was well on my way to making a great living as an contract asphalt sealer.

A few days later, I sold my Audi to a guy who thought he was a rap star from the South Side of Chicago and had the money for the tank. I called the man and told him he could bring the tank by. He was at the front door of my fraternity house within the next hour. There were children all over the inside of his Suburban. There must have been ten kids. I told him to park the tank directly in front of my fraternity house which was directly in front of the entrance to the quadrangles of the University of

Chicago. There were still a few weeks left of school at this point so I was driving around campus for my remaining weeks of school in a giant suburban with a 15-foot long tank attached to the back of the truck. It must have been quite a sight.

When school ended for the year, I packed up all of my belongings, put them in the Suburban, and started driving home to Michigan. I left at around 10:00 pm. It's about a 5-hour drive to Detroit from Chicago. It was a very strange trip home. About two hours outside of Chicago, I got a flat tire. When I pulled over, I realized that I still had a gas pump nozzle sticking out of the Suburban's fuel tank. Incredibly, I must have brought that with me when I left the last gas station. A man pulled over to assist me in a giant semi truck. He was very nice; however, there was also something about him that seemed very dangerous.

"What are you hauling?" I remember asking him.

"Cartilage," he said.

I have no idea what a guy was doing in a giant semi truck at 12:00 am hauling thousands of pounds of animal cartilage but it frightened me. I was fearful that I might be added to his next load of cartilage. I finally got back on the road and rolled into the City of Detroit around 3:30 am. What a sorry sight this must have been with me and my tank. Around that time, I had been doing a lot of writing and research at the University of Chicago about the City of Detroit. I was actually very interested in the sociopolitical aspects of the site, and how African-Americans had been negatively affected by historical discrimination and other factors. As part of my research, I was planning on spending the summer living in one of the worst areas of Detroit. It proved to be one of the best summers of my life.

At the time, there was a new terror tactic going around the City of Detroit that I'd been reading about in the local papers. Apparently, a group of gangsters would drive around in Chevy Caprice's with the lights off and when someone would flash their lights at the car the people in the car would all open fire on the car killing the driver and the people in the car. That night as I drove into Detroit, I saw a low riding Chevy Caprice drive right past me with all of its lights off. I came very close to flashing my lights at it but stopped at the last second when I realized this would be a death sentence. Detroit is so cool in the middle of the night.

As the summer progressed, my red tank and I made a tremendous amount of progress together. For seven days a week, we spread asphalt sealer throughout all of Detroit. I started employing numerous people throughout the scary neighborhood I'd moved into and actually started to feel like I was a part of the community. One thing I can say, is these were some of the nicest people I have ever met. Drug dealers and others spent their time shooting each other. However, around all of this insanity there are many people who are very happy and in no danger whatsoever. If you keep to yourself and do not associate with the wrong people, living in a bad neighborhood is generally not really any different from living anywhere else.

That summer, I hired Rodger. Of all the interesting and wonderful people I've met in my life, Rodger is one of my favorites. Rodger was a former crack addict and weighed about 300 pounds. He'd been doing everything he could to stay out of trouble and deep down was a very good person. He was also very skilled, which came in handy. One day, I lost the keys to a pick up truck we were using and he hot wired it for me. He had a huge family and they all lived in a run down house not too far from where I was living. He also had around 10 kids and was only 30 years old at the time. One of the most remarkable things about living in this part of Detroit was that the women he had kids with had no intention of marrying him. One day, I was waiting for Rodger in front of his house to start work and a couple of very attractive young girls came up to me.

"I want to have Rodger's baby!" one told me.

"Are you serious?" I asked.

Rodger later explained to me that some of the women he had babies with simply declared they were going to have his child and then had proceeded to have his children. I can imagine that Rodger must have been a very good father but it must have been difficult to have so many mothers to keep track of.

Rodger's finest moment came one summer day when we were planning on sealing numerous very large driveways and a few parking lots. I'd filled the tank up to its absolute maximum of 550 gallons. The weight was extreme. Sparks were flying every time the tank went down a large curb.

We would typically pick up the sealer about an hour outside of Detroit then drive into the suburbs of Grosse Pointe and other areas to do our work. On that day, as we were on the freeway with our full load, cars kept driving up alongside me and honking and pointing at me and the truck. The people looked panicked. Without going into much detail, for various psychological reasons, I thought the people were making fun of me and my operation. In posh suburbs, kids used to drive up to me and point and make fun of me, call me white trash and various other sorts of things. On this particular day, the honking and pointing was really too much. I started flipping all of the people off who were doing this. It happened several times that day and I remember telling Rodger:

"I am so sick of these people making fun of us and this tar operation. These jerks need to start working for a living!"

"Yeah, I hear that!" Rodger would say back.

Rodger had won \$5000 in the lottery about six months previously and one of the requirements he had of working for me was that I took him to a party store each day to "do the numbers." I would advance him the day's pay and he would proceed to purchase all sorts of lottery tickets based on events that had happened that day.

"Was that exit 241?" he might ask me when we were getting off an exit in some location.

"Yeah," I would tell him.

Rodger would then proceed to take out a small notebook and write down the exit number with a bunch of other numbers that struck him as significant from that day.

When we got to our first driveway in Grosse Pointe, Rodger came up to me.

"You've got a bad arc weld on one of the joints on the trailer," he told me.

"This trailer? It's fine! This thing is built like a German tank."

I was in the middle of operating a flame thrower to burn grass off of the edges of a lawn. I didn't want to hear it.

I think Rodger said something to me at least once more. For some reason, it simply wasn't registering. What he was telling me was that a major part of the trailer that was securing it to the Chevy Suburban, a giant piece of steel, was about to break off. If this happened, the results would be disastrous. This meant the tank would completely detach from the truck and all 500+ gallons of sealant would continue up the road completely on their own.

We stopped at a gas station in Grosse Pointe City around 5:00 pm to get some Gatorade and some gas for our blowers and other equipment. I never liked stopping in downtown Grosse Pointe because it was quite embarrassing. There would be people in golf shirts walking around and everyone always seemed very excited about being so middle class. I would generally see kids I knew, as well as their parents who were supporting them over the summer. They spent their time in country clubs and drove around in expensive cars. Seeing girls I knew was generally not a lot of fun either. It was not considered a cool thing to be doing such blue collar work but I was actually quite proud of myself.

Rodger and I were tired and still had several more hours of asphalt work before the sun went down. Generally, when we pulled out of any gas station we'd hear a giant "bang" as part of the trailer would bottom out and a bunch of sparks would go flying. This was a sound I'd been accustomed to all summer. As we exited the gas station, I didn't hear a "bang." At first, I was pleasantly surprised by the lack of noise but then I looked over at Rodger. Rodger was looking out the passenger side window of the Suburban. Directly to his right was the tank. It had broken off of the truck and was barreling towards a Banana Republic and an Ann Taylor store.

"I told you that trailer had a bad arc weld," Rodger said.

Hundreds of gallons of sealer covered the front of both businesses and a couple of windows shattered. I couldn't believe my eyes. The tank weighed thousands of pounds. It snapped a light pole in half and went charging into the window of a Banana Republic store. A large blower that was on the trailer went flying through the window of the Ann Taylor store.

There were at least 10 police cars on the scene within a couple of minutes. At least 50 spectators wearing penny loafers, khaki shorts, and polo shirts gathered around. I was covered in tar from head to toe as was Rodger. Rodger was frightened.

"I'm not going back to prison," he told me.

"Prison?" I asked. I knew nothing about Rodger ever being in prison.

The police asked for my identification and Rodger's as well. A few moments later, a series of interesting announcements came over a radio loud enough for everyone gathered around in this spectacle to hear.

"Drug possession with intent to distribute ... Jackson State Prison 3/14/85-5/5/87. Arrested for robbing a convenience store with a deadly weapon ... Jackson State Prison 7/1/87-9/1/89..."

The best part about these announcements was seeing the faces of the white bread people gathered around enjoying their ice creams. I loved hearing their hushed whispers. I never said anything to Rodger about any of this or asked him about the time he had spent in prison. As a matter of fact, I pretended I didn't hear a thing. What I understood at that point after having spent so much time with Rodger is that you can't judge people all the time based on their past. Also, Rodger had experienced a different life than I had, and if I were to have shared his experiences I too might be living a life similar to his. You can never judge a person until you have been in their shoes.

The tank had lashed out at these stores and did over \$30,000 in damage. Despite an incessant disorganization, I had been organized enough that summer to have insurance and the entire thing was covered. I am very fortunate that no one was injured in this ridiculous incident.

I'd been storing the tank at night at a steel processing facility run by a German man. The tank was currently in a police impound lot. A couple of days after the tank accident, the German man called me wondering where the tank was. I think he was nervous that I might have run off without paying rent. He then explained to me that he could fix the tank and trailer because he had skilled welders on his staff. I had the tank towed there and a couple of days later it was as good as new.

Over the next several years, I used this tank every summer and it was something that enabled me to support myself through school. I loved this tank and it brought me such good luck and fortune it's hard to describe. For everything I invested in the tank, I ended up getting more out of it.

After I graduated from [law school](#), I moved my tank up to Bay City, Michigan, where I was working for a federal [district judge](#). I was excited about all of the work I could do with my magic tank on the weekends. The tank had been incredibly good to me for years and years and had brought luck and magic to my life.

I decided that I was going to give the asphalt tank a complete overhaul up in Bay City. I found a shop that built trailers and I ordered a massive overhaul. I made numerous changes to improve the quality of the tank. I built special ramps to load my equipment on and more. I was planning on turning the tank into a profound piece of machinery that could support me for the rest of my life. I sketched out changes to the tank and spent weeks thinking about how to design the tank of my dreams.

As luck would have it, I ended up quitting my job in Bay City and flew out to California to interview with [law firms](#) while my tank was still being worked on. There were some fishy things going on with the welder before I left. I stopped by there often and heard them fighting about money issues and other things. It was a family business. I knew things were not going well there. They had also agreed to do the work for a very cheap price which was suspicious.

I was sitting in the Hilton Hotel in Pasadena one evening when the phone rang. It was the owner of the welding shop. He told me that there had been a traumatic fire and that his entire building had burned down. He hinted to me that he had started it for insurance money. I was 100% confident he did. He told me that my trailer had been in the garage and had survived the fire but would need a complete rebuild. He told me that the insurance company would be responsible.

To my astonishment, the insurance company took my trailer and did a massive rebuild on it and made it into the most incredible piece of machinery I have ever seen. Moreover, they brought it up to Department of Transportation standards. It must have cost them over \$20,000. They also did the work very quickly and gave it back to me within days because they were worried I would file a claim for "lost wages." When I got the trailer back, I literally could not believe my eyes. That summer I took the trailer out and it looked so impressive people would pay basically anything I asked for my services. I looked like a hardcore operation. I was making so much money that I bought a Porsche. Life was good and it was all because of the magic trailer.

I was planning on moving to Los Angeles to start work in a law firm and was about a week from leaving. I had no idea what I was going to do with the magic trailer. One day, I was behind the True Value hardware store in downtown Grosse Pointe purchasing some supplies to finish a job. A man came up to me and said he was at a fair down the street with his family but couldn't help but notice my beautiful trailer.

He explained that he owned a small nut factory that processed peanuts by adding delicious toppings to them and was interested in the asphalt sealing business. He asked me if I would be interested in selling the trailer. I told him I was.

A few days later, I stopped by his nut factory with the trailer and he gave me a bag filled with \$15,000 in hundred dollar bills. I

had never seen so much money in my life. The tank is still giving to this day:

1. When I moved to Los Angeles, I purchased a small house for \$180,000 and used the \$15,000 for a down payment. A year later, I sold the same house for \$250,000.
2. I purchased a \$350,000 house with the proceeds from that sale. Two years later, I sold that house for \$550,000.
3. I purchased a \$950,000 house from the proceeds from that sale. Two years later, I sold that house for \$2,000,000.
4. I used the proceeds from that sale to purchase a \$5,000,000 house. One year later, I sold the house for \$5,800,000.

Today the tank is still giving to me and I live on a [beach in Malibu](#), California, because of the power of this asphalt tank and what it has given me. I consider myself blessed by the power of the asphalt sealer tank.

What does this asphalt sealer tank represent and how is it relevant to you? It is relevant because it represents having faith in your work and your own abilities. It's about investing in what you are good at and taking chances. It's about looking for opportunity no matter where you are. It's about picking yourself up when bad things happen and fixing them. It's about investing your gains and never stopping when things get bad. It's about using your skills to provide opportunities for others. It's about the power of what you're capable of. Because of that tank, I am a different person today. I get up and look at the waves and walk on the beach when I want to. The lingering power of the tank allows me to breathe fresh air each day. The tank is something that changed my life.

The tank may have been magical but it is also a symbol. You never want to give up. You want to constantly make the most of the tools you have at your disposal. You want to continue improving and moving forward and you always, and I mean always, want to remember where you came from.

THE LESSON

Don't ever give up and make the most of the tools at your disposal. Take chances and invest in your best skills. Persist in the face of unfortunate events. Have faith in your considerable work and capabilities, and use them to create value for others.

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