



Old Al—The Tractor From Hell

When Doobie and I developed twitches from living in the city, we decided we could live without all the convenience and began to search for the perfect house in the country. My perfect house was quiet, inexpensive to heat and cool, and had adequate exposure to the south for satellite Internet access. I also thought some personality and a sunroom where I could raise seedlings for a garden would be nice. Doobie, who is really into Toys, thought perfect meant a house with enough land to justify a tractor.

Our real estate agent was still more or less coherent when we managed to find *the* house: a passive solar, in-ground toad lurking beneath a sod-covered roof and surrounded by 8 acres of grass and Ponderosas. Out back a 1952 Allis-Chalmers WD45 farm tractor was gently disintegrating to oblivion. I bought the house for its crypt-worthy quiet and its 65-foot-long sunroom and Doobie bought it for Old Al. The Tractor from Hell.

Old Al used to be A-C Orange, but time and the sun had faded him out to pale rust. The paint inside the back fenders curled away from the metal in thin sheets that crumbled at a glance but somehow managed to maintain their integrity under the most rib-bruising jounce Old Al could inflict.

The pivot pin on the bucket release lever had worked loose and escaped at some point and the former victim...uh owner...had repaired it by plunging a screwdriver through the holes and securing it with approximately 50 feet of baling wire. No trace of the original muffler remained. In its place wobbled a dented car muffler with a mangled, rusty can placed over the tailpipe opening to keep out rain, snow, and any adventurous rodents.

When the 6-volt battery had died and a replacement was impossible to find, someone had wrenched it out and installed a 12-volt battery. The 6-volt battery had had a relay switch that opened the generator circuit and prevented the charge in the battery from leaking away. The 12-volt battery had no such switch and the cables had to be disconnected whenever the tractor was stopped or the battery would have a total-death experience. The battery box resembled moth-ravaged lace barely connected by holes and was held in place with the rubber pads stolen from muffler hangers.

Al had jettisoned the seat controls some time in the last century so the seat was welded in place at the perfect distance for someone who was 6 foot 7 inches. While the seat could no longer move back and forth, it still had a giddy swoop from side to side and was placed far to the right (the better to watch the furrows). In order to change gears I had to aim for the clutch, slide forward and to the left off the seat, and hope my foot would connect with the pedal. Swooping and bouncing, I often missed and would then either have to pull myself back into the seat to reacquire the target or grope around with my toe while I gazed at the sky, missing the place I had wanted to turn. After watching my ineffective attempts, Doobie decided it was better if he drove Old Al, even if he did have to use the “Toe-Point Method” of engaging the clutch, because at least he could see where he was going.

The brakes were a memory, the gears shrieked and growled and were reluctant to engage, there was no oil pressure, the engine leaked oil (slowly because of the lack of pressure) because the head gasket was gone, and there was no roll bar. In spite of these *idiosyncrasies*, we needed Old Al to grade our quarter mile of driveway that transmogrified from dirt to rutted mud with any suggestion of moisture. He had a bucket, a blade, and started the first time, every time.

“I’m going to restore him,” said Doobie, patting a wobbly fender with paternal affection. Now, if it’s mechanical, Doobie can fix it. He was, at one time, a Master ASE mechanic. Although he had never worked on a tractor before, I knew he could get that baby running and looking like new—given enough money. I suggested we price new ones.

Do you know how much new tractors cost? Not those golf-carts-on-steroids that fit in a garage and can only slaughter grass and pull around cute little garden carts (and, yeah, I’ve got one—I love that cart). I’m talking real tractors. Ones that say, “*Va-rooom*,” and do some major deconstruction. Yep, they are Expensive.

I thought Doobie couldn’t possibly drop \$20K on Old Al, so we decided to fix him while we were saving for a new tractor. We estimated we could afford one just about the time the rust on Old Al stopped holding the tractor together and he would collapse into scrap.

In late November, Doobie replaced the brake pads and adjusted the brakes and bought a new battery, spark plugs, and muffler. “*Va-rooom*,” said Old Al and the muffler’s little bouncing weather guard said, “Tap-a-tap.” Doobie made a few passes on the drive but there were very few real ruts to smooth out. He’d have to wait for moisture.

We had a snow storm during the first week of December. Nothing spectacular, but enough to muddy up the drive. After two days of sun the drive was dry enough to plow. Doobie shot out the door ready for grading. Three of the four tires were flat.

Ever the optimist, Doobie said, “Hey, at least the left rear tire is good!”

Ever the realist, I felt my skeptical eyebrow creep slightly upward.

The leak in the right rear was not in the tire but in the rusty rim, a difficult and expensive object to replace. The leak was slow, so Doobie figured until he could fix it, he’d use the compressor to fill the tire before each use.

The two small front “tricycle” tires were both so bald that the cord was showing and they had started to leak air with a gentle hiss. They sat at a slight angle and nearly brushed together at the bottom. There was no room between them to insert a jack and no part of the tractor low enough where

one could be placed instead. Keeping them filled with air would have required me to act as a pit crew, compressor hose at the ready, to fill up the tires every time Doobie drove by the barn. Doobie built a pyramid of two 1x12s on the ground and carefully drove one front tire onto it while the other tire dangled in the air. He removed the dangler, drove 17 miles to a local store that carried that make of tire, waited for a new one to be mounted, returned, replaced the tire, backed up, moved the boards and repeated the whole operation. By the time he had finished replacing the second tire, it was dark.

It started to snow during the night and snowed sporadically during the first two weeks of January, keeping the drive too wet to plow. During the third week, a storm dumped three feet of snow, which was a daunting amount to move with our snowblower. Doobie gasped in delight and said he would use Old Al! He filled up the right rear tire but never managed to get the tractor down onto the drive from its perch behind the house because it was a two-wheel-drive *farm* tractor used during the *summer* for plowing. It slithered sideways ten feet and managed to get stuck four times while traveling only five feet forward. Seven hours later, exhausted and shivering, Doobie and I put the snowblower back in the garage.

In the first week of March, after Doobie had barely recovered from the flu, the road was finally dry. Doobie strode outdoors, took a deep breath of iced air and hacked roughly for about an hour. He filled up the right rear tire, dragged himself into the seat, and turned the key. The engine whirled energetically but refused to start. My skeptical eyebrow climbed a little higher. Disassembly revealed a large spring in the starter motor had snapped. Doobie ordered the spring from the local store and used the down time to investigate why Old Al had no oil pressure.

After checking to make sure there were no blocks, leaks, kinks, or whatevers, Doobie started reading and found a solution so simple that anyone familiar with Old Al tractors (not us) would have known it immediately. The oil filter had a small metal riser tube that dropped down into the center and magically induced oil pressure. Someone in decades gone had thrown out the tube with the filter. No one in the interim knew enough to realize the tube was missing. Doobie ordered it from a store in Greeley that still carried the part.

The spring arrived by post the same day the Greeley store called to tell us the riser tube had arrived. Doobie, certain he had all the engine problems solved and could get the tractor running, decided he couldn't wait for the tube to be shipped. We bounced out of our deeply-rutted drive and drove to Greeley to pick it up.

With the spring and the riser tube installed, the engine va-roomed to life with excellent oil pressure. Doobie filled up the right rear tire, toed in the clutch and engaged the gears. He took off down the drive, the glint of success in his eyes. And yet...as soon as the blade struck the dirt, Old Al began to sputter and wheeze. Doobie's chin jutted forward and he persevered until the tractor was stumbling and gasping. Halfway back up the drive Doobie had to pull off onto the grass where Old Al coughed weakly and died.

Doobie trudged up the hill. "It died," he said.

"I could hear that," I replied, turning away before Doobie could see that my skeptical eyebrow had reached its apex and my mouth was twitching into what looked suspiciously like a smirk.

The next day it started to snow. When it stopped a week later, I called a local man to rent his grading tractor. Doobie had the drive graded smooth in less than three hours. I immediately ordered gravel and it was down within two days. During the hiatus, Doobie had time to give Old Al a long over-due tune up.

After installing a new distributor cap, hotter plugs, and new plug wires, he bought another hose for the compressor so he could reach the distant, now flaccid, right rear tire. The tire filled, Doobie twirled the butterfly nut for the gas, pulled all the little levers and knobs, swung into the seat, toed in the clutch, and turned the key. “Va-ah-ah-ka-ka-ka-off,” said Old Al.

Doobie shut his eyes and sat still, but the whiteness of his clenched knuckles revealed his mounting need to scream. I was gone long before he let go. After it had been quiet outside for so long that I thought Old Al might have won, I went outside to find Doobie wiping out a black, greasy sludge from the bottom of the air filter canister.

“Gunk,” he growled.

“Bad gunk,” I said, barely suppressing a giggle.

I watched while he installed a new air filter, replaced the canister, twirled, pulled and adjusted everything, swung into the seat, and toed in the clutch. He shut his eyes and turned the key. “Va-roooooooooom,” said Old Al.

Doobie grinned. “And I haven’t even set the dwell point or altered the timing. I’ll order a new head gasket and a battery box in the morning, grease the gears and rebuild the carburetor when I have time, and then it will really be ready to work.” He tested the tractor by using the blade to scrape yuccas from the yard. Parking Old Al out back for the night, Doobie recounted everything he would now be able to do. Why, he would start the next day.

The next day the left rear tire was flat.