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My car just got towed

Established in 1999, A-Protect Warranty Corporation has emerged as one of Canada's leading auto warranty companies. After almost two decades of excellence, A-Protect Warranty Corporation continues to be sold by retail dealerships throughout Canada. What separates us from the rest? Quality service. With our wide range of auto warranties, we provide invaluable and affordable mechanical breakdown protection on all automobile makes and models, regardless of how many kilometers you've put on your vehicle. Read More Over the course of about four hours, all I'd managed to do in my water pump replacement project (for my 1979 Alfa Romeo "Alfetta" Sport Sedan) was to drain the coolant and remove a belt between the alternator and water pump. I was now faced with the step that Benny (my old Alfa Romeo mechanic) had told me was the very reason why I should not attempt to do the project on my own: I had to remove the crankshaft pulley, a job that required a monster socket (36mm). It was also a job that perplexed and panicked other Alfa owners, judging by the many posts on Alfa message boards, such as AlfaBB. It was after 4 pm when I got back from O'Reilly's with the 36mm socket. There was no way I'd finish by dinner time. But, I had some naive hope that at least I'd make some more progress. I put the new socket on the wrench and pushed it into the hub of the pulley. I felt it grip the nut. Yesssss.... I pushed the wrench, hoping to feel the nut give up its grip. But it didn't. Of course, it didn't. Almost immediately, I was overcome. But not by worry or anxiety. Now it was just pure frustration. I grabbed the metal curtain rod I'd used earlier to help me with the alternator mounting bolt, and I slipped it over my wrench, hoping the additional leverage would do the trick. But it didn't, because even though the car was in gear, it was still moving the crankshaft. As I pushed on the curtain rod, the pulley would rotate. Not a lot, just enough that it essentially mitigated all the force I was using. I revisited the AlfaBB forum to see how others were dealing with this problem, and many people described a method that sounded, frankly, terrifying. Here's how they described it: set the socket wrench and brace it with a piece of wood and then start the car. The idea, I think, is that between the sudden power from the starter and the braced socket, it acts as an impact wrench. I imagined myself doing such a thing, and having my socket wrench become a sort of weapon, a projectile, crashing and smashing into the engine and other parts under the hood. I posted my frustration to Twitter. Dan Roth, who was previously an automotive journalist and now works for Ford Motor Company, suggested: "**Remove #1 spark plug, find TDC. Then roll to BDC. Fill cylinder with ¼" polypropylene rope. Acquire proper socket and long breaker bar. Ratchet attachment helps, too. Rope locks engine from spinning.**" Dan is pretty no-nonsense when it comes to this kind of stuff. He's given me car repair advice before, and I'm always intimidated. Between my exhaustion, frustration, and the fact that I had no desire to remove a spark plug and stuff a cylinder with rope, and also that I had no idea what TDC or BDC was, I tweeted back: "**You are trying to get me to give up?" "Easier to do than describe,"** he replied. Then he quickly followed up: "**But wait, this is just to replace the water pump and install a belt? Try to figure out how it comes apart. Removing the whole crank pulley seems drastic."** It did seem drastic. Very drastic. And yet, I knew it to be true. It was written in the manual, and it was what Benny warned me about. But I didn't want it to be true. So, what I did was this: I soaked the hub of the pulley in PB Blaster, and, stubbornly, decided to start removing nuts from the water pump anyway, even though it meant I was skipping ahead in some futile, pointless attempt in making headway. But I only got a few off before I hit yet another obstacle: there was no possible way I could access some of the nuts with my ratchet set. Their locations were just too tight. I needed some regular old wrenches, but aside from a few random ones I'd collected over the years, I didn't have anything near the correct size. Feeling utterly dejected, I tweeted that the nut "**won't budge and I need to go pick up dinner and tomorrow is Mother's Day so looks like the project is going to be put on hold till Monday.**" Brian DuBois tweeted me back a link to "**19 Italian Swear Words**" and Jeff Batterton wrote, "**On the bright side, Dave, you're basically now a fucking Alfa Romeo mechanic, which is totally badass.**" And I have to admit, that even though I felt like I'd gotten myself in way too deep, that I had no idea how the hell I was ever going to finish this project, that tweet about me being an Alfa Romeo mechanic—even though all the evidence was to the contrary—really made me feel better. Like even though the project was going terribly, I was actually doing something. Jeff then posted some photos of the Lotus Europa that he's rebuilding. "**You are so much better at this than me,"** I said. "**No, believe me, I am not,**" he wrote and then, sensing just how sincere I was being in my observation, he tweeted, "**It's easy to get down and literally many days are pure frustration, but you just keep trying. That's all there is to it."** And then: "**What you are doing isn't easy, you'll get there. I swear everything I do takes four times as long as I expect and twice the money. You're doing great!!!"**" *** Weeks after the project was complete, and I decided to write about the experience, I sent a few follow-up questions to some of the users who had helped me with the project. One of them was Jeff Batterton. I asked him if at any point during the time I was doing and tweeting about my project, he felt emotionally involved like he was a part of it. He answered, in part: "**At some point during your ordeal, I posted a picture of some super minor thing I'd done on the Lotus, way less complicated and involved than your water pump, and you'd replied with something along the lines of 'I'm no good at this. I felt that. I think everyone who's done this stuff has been there but these [kinds of] stories rarely make it online. Anyway, at that point you seemed really discouraged but I knew you could do it and I wanted to see you succeed.'**" I asked Brian DuBois if at any point he thought I was in over my head. He replied, "**I didn't feel you were in over your head. I was worried you would get discouraged and angry when having to pull the crank pulley. I was very happy that you walked away at a few points: once you get angry or in a hurry, nothing good comes of it."** As Dan Roth would observe days later, "**Car Twitter is your surrogate dad, looking over your shoulder...**" *** Speaking of dads. On Mother's Day, I didn't work on the car, but it was still an important day for the project. We'd gone to my in-laws' house, and my father-in-law, unlike me, knows what he's doing when it comes to cars. A couple of years ago, he bought a 1978 FJ-40 that was rusting away in a weedy lot. He single-handedly restored that and then sold it to a literal passerby who loved the thing so much, he made an offer my father-in-law couldn't pass up. He's now in the process of completely rebuilding a 1953 Chevy pickup with a different engine and transmission. So aside from the fact that he's galactically smarter and more experienced than me when it comes to car stuff, it's great to talk cars with him. So, I showed him photos of where I was at with my project, and told him how I was flummoxed by how to remove the crank pulley. "Mmmmmm" he intoned wisely as he looked at the photos. And then he took me into his shop and loaned me a socket/torque wrench that was a little beefier than my socket wrench. He also gave me a length of scaffolding, which would give me far more strength as a cheater bar than the flimsy old curtain rod I had been using. He also gave me a tool I'd literally never even knew existed: a puller. "**Hopefully you won't need this. It's a pain in the ass,"** he said, as he handed me the bizarre looking contraption. I then asked if I might borrow some wrenches, and he practically laughed me off his property. "**Hell no, you can't. I use those every day,**" he told me. Clearly, at age 42, I needed to grow up and get my own wrenches. *** The next day was Monday, and even though I had plenty of work to do, I was eager to get back in the garage. I dropped the kids off at school, and then I popped into the O'Reilly's (mere blocks from my house, remember) and bought a set of metric wrenches. After doing some work inside, I returned to my car. The length scaffolding was pretty serious business. So I slipped it over the torque wrench and pushed. But the added leverage did nothing to solve the problem, which was that the crankshaft was giving way as I pushed—every time I tried to turn the nut, the shaft turned with it. It wasn't mysterious. It wasn't complex. It was simple: push the wrench, the crankshaft goes with it. I knew this was the case. Yet, I had absolutely zero other ideas. And so, with absolutely no hope of success, I spent nearly two hours trying the exact same thing over and over and over again. All at once, I put the tools down and I walked down the alley a little ways, taking deep breaths to keep myself from screaming or crying in frustration. I was at a true impasse: I couldn't get the old pump off without getting the pulley off. It was that simple. I considered calling AAA to come tow my car. But where? The one mechanic I knew who worked on Alfas had already told me he was unavailable. And how would it feel to watch it hauled away, to explain how I'd worked all that time, and all I'd really managed to do was remove a belt, and a lousy job of draining the coolant. Surrender was not an option. Not yet at least. *** I did something I really didn't want to do: I called Benny, my old mechanic in LA. First, I felt guilty because he had his own work to do. Second, I felt bad because he'd already warned me not to do the job. Third, I was now stuck at quite literally the exact part of the project that he told me was the reason why I shouldn't do it in the first place. "**John's Alfa,**" he answered in a voice that suggested he had better things to be doing than taking phone calls. "**Benny!**" I said in my most friendly voice. "**This is David. The guy with the Sport Sedan."** "Uh huh." He didn't sound disappointed to hear from me. But he didn't sound overly happy, either. I then proceeded to—sheepishly—explain the reason for my call. To my relief, he didn't hang up or scold me. "**Okay,**" he said, "**you need an impact wrench.**" I told him I didn't have one. I also made the observation that it seemed unlikely I could fit an impact wrench between the radiator and the pulley. "**You have to take the radiator out,**" he told me. I told him I'd taken the fan out, but that I really didn't want to go through the trouble of taking the radiator out, too. "**Why?!**" he asked me a little perplexed. "**It's held in by one screw!**" I had only assumed it was held in place by much more, but he was right. There were the electrical connections, and then a single screw right there, easily accessible, at the top. I told him I could manage that much. And then, I figured, between the tool-borrowing program at O'Reilly or tool rental services at the Home Depot, I could track down a small impact wrench. *** I removed the radiator (spilling yet more coolant), and set it aside. The car was now even more disassembled than it had been before. As I set the radiator off to the side and looked at the slack belt, the electrical fan, the radiator, the mess of tools, the take-out containers of various nuts and washers, I had a feeling. The feeling was like when I used to go to the shore as a kid. I hated pools but I loved swimming in the ocean. Sometimes I'd swim out and keep swimming, and then I'd stop and I'd look back at the sand, expecting to see my family right there on those striped beach towels. But instead, the beach was too distant to make anyone's faces out. The towels and blankets and umbrellas all blurred together so I couldn't tell who was who, what was what, or where was where. I'd swam too far out, maybe drifted down the shore a bit, and suddenly, I could feel the depth of the water beneath my feet. The part of my brain dedicated to fear would light up. Riptides were a thing they warned you about. I could be swept away, pulled under. And God knows what kinds of carnivorous creatures lurked in the deep water, patrolling their marine territories for prey. Gripped by fear, I'd swim in as fast as I could, closing the distance and getting back to a place where it felt safe. That's what it felt like. My 42-year old Italian car was broken, and it was in pieces, and instead of being in a shop where it belonged, it was in my tiny garage next to a five-foot tall wooden Santa, a portable air conditioning unit waiting to come inside for the summer, and a disassembled kids' bunk bed that we no longer have to use for. What had I done? I couldn't just swim back ashore. Not only did I not have a mechanic, but I had no idea just how much a repair like this would cost, what with the belts and radiator and fan and nuts and bolts and hoses all removed. I was out to sea, indeed. But as fearful as I was, what I needed to do was keep swimming. *** Called the O'Reilly's by my house and asked if they had an impact wrench. No luck. Then I saw a neighbor of mine who rebuilt a Corvair and a Mercury Capri. Asked him if he had an impact wrench, but he didn't have one, either. I grabbed the keys to our Prius and headed over to the Home Depot. They had tons of tools for rent, but not a single one of them was an impact wrench. I called my mechanic back, explained that I was having a hard time finding an impact wrench and didn't want to spend over a hundred bucks on one. "**Where's the nearest shop?"** he asked me. "**That can work on a car like this? I have no idea,"** I told him. "**No. Just any place. Any place they work on cars,**" he told me. "**There's a Grease Monkey about three or four blocks away,**" I told him. "**Okay,**" he said. "**They'll have an impact wrench. You take the car down to them, and they can get that nut loosened.**" I almost burst out laughing. "**Take the car down there? I have the belt off the alternator, there's no fan, no radiator. There isn't even coolant in the car. All the hoses are disconnected!"** "It'll still run," he told me. "**You can run it for five blocks. Drive it down there and as soon as you pull in, kill the engine. They loosen the nut, and then you drive back and kill the engine."** The only thing that sounded crazier than taking my car apart at this point, was trying to drive it in its current state. I simply hadn't the guts to try it. "**Isn't there some other way? I read somewhere about using the starter?"** "No!" he said. "**You'll crack the bell-housing. Don't do it like that.**" I told him that I really, really did not want to risk driving that car. "**There is one tool,"** he said. "**It's like Vise Grips, but there's a chain on the end. You gotta keep that crankshaft from rotating. So you put the chain around it."** I tried to picture it. I knew what Vise-Grips looked like, but what the hell would a Vise-Grips with chains look like? And how would I use it to keep the crankshaft from rotating? He told me that the Home Depot should have it. And they did have it listed in their inventory, but it was out of stock. So he told me an auto-parts store would have it. I asked him to try explaining this to try explaining this to me again, and he did his best. "**You wrap the chain around the pulley. You have to jump the belt to get it on there. You do that with a large flathead. Put the car in neutral, and rotate the crankshaft with the flathead and wrap the belt. Then you put it in gear and wrap the chain around the pulley. Jam the grip under the old water pump.**" He took a deep breath. "**Ask someone in the auto-parts store how to use it, they'll tell you."** I called the O'Reilly's by my house. They had one in stock. I asked them to put it on hold. I've been selling auto parts for nine years, and I think this will be the second one I've ever sold." she sighed. "**But, okay,**" I bought the tool (which, according to my research, is named a different thing depending on who makes it, but the one I bought was a Locking Wrench with an 18" Chain by Power/Torque). I was too eager to get back to work, so I didn't bother asking how to use it. Then I did just as my mechanic said: put the car in neutral and jumped the belt so it was off the pulley. (Great, another part removed, I thought.) After a good 20 minutes of fumbling with the locking chain pliers, I finally figured out how to get the chain of it tightly around the pulley. I clamped and locked the grip and jammed it against the old pump. Then I put the car into gear, and I put the torque-wrench with scaffolding back on the nut. I gave it a steady push. The chain had a death grip on the pulley itself. The grips were jammed right up under that old pump. Everything was locked up—the crankshaft would not move. It worked. I applied more pressure and then I felt it: the sweet, merciful release of the nut from the threads. *** I held the massive nut in my gloved hands and took some photos of myself as if I was displaying a massive fish. I sent a photo to my old mechanic. "**Now you're a mechanic!**" he texted me back along with a thumbs-up emoji. I tweeted out the photo, too. Brain DuBois tweeted back a video of Queen's "We Are The Champions." Oliver Pickard tweeted back a gif of Nick Offerman's Parks and Rec character, Ron Swanson, saying "**I'm really proud of you.**" Jeff Batterton retweeted the photo along with this caption: "**We convinced @DavidOfromnj to replace a water pump himself. What could go wrong? (The crank dampener had to be pulled.)"** And then he tweeted to me: "**YOU FUCKING DID IT!**" and "**Feels like it's all downhill from here now!**" And it did feel like it was. But, of course, when I pulled and pulled on the crankshaft pulley, it did feel like it was. But, of course, when I pulled and pulled on the crankshaft pulley, it did feel like it was. Not even a little. And then I remembered that contraption my father-in-law gave me. With the confidence of someone who'd used one before (but with the skills of someone who had never as seen one before), I finally figured out how to get it to work, and the pulley slid off the crankshaft. I set it down in a clean cardboard box. My car was even more disassembled. But, somehow, I no longer felt so far out to sea. *** I used my new wrench set to remove the remaining nuts from the stud. And then with all of them gone, I gave the water pump a nice hard pull, but it was stuck fast. Countless Car Twitter users had warned me against using so much as a razor blade on the block of the engine when removing the water pump or cleaning up the old gasket. So I knew not to do something dumb like go prying it off with a screwdriver. I had come a long way, and something told me that as long as I didn't do something hasty or impulsive out of impatience, that I was over the most difficult parts. "**Naturally the pump is stuck to the block,**" I tweeted. But, by now, it was time to wrap it up so I could make dinner for the family. I tweeted "**Hey all, I stopped for the day. Send me ideas on how to get this water pump off the block. All nuts (and a single bolt) now removed."** Car Twitter did not disappoint: Jeff suggested a flexible putty knife between the gasket and the pump, and then he joked, "**This is where I break out the hammer and break something.**" Steve Edwards wrote, "**Exactly—TIME FOR THE BFH [big fucking hammer]."** He also wrote, "**Many gentle and indirect taps with one of those poly-faced hammers you can get at [Harbor Freight] could help. Soak the hell out of it with some kind of solvent overnight to soften up the gasket.**" Brian DuBois replied, "**Well hammer, yes, but not to destroy. Screw in a couple of bolts and give the old pumps a few taps to try to loosen it up. (Just don't hit the bolts.)"** "**Tappa tappa tappa! (Gaskets stck when on for years. Tap it with a hammer.)"** suggested Lewin Day. John W Lindsey wrote, "**If you can lay hands on some good penetrating oil you can spray that around where it mounts to the block, let it sit overnight, and give the pump some thoughtful and well-placed whacks with a hammer."** Dan Roth said, "**Get a chunk of 2x4 or 1x3 or whatever. Set it on the snout of the pump. Whack that with a 2.5lb hammer, but not crazy hard.**" And that's just a sampling of the suggestions from Car Twitter. Do you know how many the Haynes manual had? None. None at all. *** It may surprise you to learn that I did not have to go to an auto parts or hardware store to buy a hammer. I even had a 2x4. The next day, after lunch, I used the method Dan Roth described, and the pump came off in a matter of seconds. I pulled the old pump off and snapped a photo. Car Twitter was right there with me. Brian DuBois: "**Yes!!! Now for the gasket scraping.**" Dan Roth: "**Congratulations!**" Steve Edwards: a gif from a character from Napoleon Dynamite saying "yes" while pumping his fist. Jeff Batterton: "**Woah crazy setup, does not look like what I expected beneath at all!**" Others agreed, and he tweeted, "**Really wondering why they could not have angled the whole thing a bit to just clear that crank pulley or whatever.**" (Looking at it, I wondered the same.) Brian DuBois observed: "**Walking away at several points and persistence without going overboard and snapping off a stud really paid off here.**" Dan Roth chimed in, "**And you're gonna do the front seals like that, right?"** Bigly Unwitty replied, "**I can feel the life draining out of David as he reads your tweet."** I was not going to change the seals. Instead, I spent at least two hours meticulously scraping old gasket and Permatex off the block with the edge of a disused credit card (an idea Car Twitter had given me). And then I affixed the new gasket to the block with some Permatex blue. While that was setting, I removed the old timing point from the water pump, put it on the new one, and mounted it to the block. And then with more Permatex, I mounted the pump to the gasket and replaced the nuts and washers. It was too late in the day for me to put everything back together, refill the fluids, and take it out for a drive. My goal was to simply get the water pump installed, and replace the crank pulley, belts, and put the alternator back in place. It had taken me 2.5 days to take all of those things off. But that day, I put it all back together in a single hour. I might have even been whistling as I did the work. It felt that natural. *** The next day, I replaced the hoses, mounted the fan to the radiator, and put that back in. I got some valuable advice on Car Twitter for how to properly refill the car with fluids while bleeding the air. Appropriately, I had to go back to O'Reilly one more time to get another jug of coolant, as the single gallon I'd bought almost a week earlier was not nearly enough. With the job done, I took it for a short drive. The temp wouldn't go above 175. There were no leaks. I reported as much to Car Twitter. Bigly Unwitty tweeted back a gif of Rocky Balboa arms raised in victory. Jeff Batterton wrote "**You did it!**" and also included a gif of Breaking Bad's Walter White looking bruised, but saying into a phone, "**I won.**" Brian DuBois sent me a gif of Beavis and Butthead headbanging. Pats Curtins sent me a gif from Inglorious Basterds showing one of the characters dressed in a tuxedo and making a very Italian-style hand gesture. "**When you become one with the Italian mechanics,**" he wrote. "**WooHooooo!!!! Bravo!**" Damian Solorzano wrote. Many others on Car Twitter tweeted their congratulations and relief, including the guy who probably went back and forth with me more than anyone else, Jeff Batterton. He wrote: "**Was a journey. Nice job, man."** *** It really was a journey. And one that I thought I would be glad to be done with. And I was glad. But as I reflected on this sense of gladness, I discovered that what I was glad about wasn't just that my car worked again. I was glad (as opposed to regretful) that I had done it myself. Was glad to have saved the money. Was glad to have had the experience. Was glad to understand how a major system in my car functioned. What I was not glad about was that I was done working on my car. And so, the next week, I found myself replacing an intake hose and chasing down an electrical fault that had been puzzling me for months. And as soon as I'd done both of those successfully, I once again found myself in the auto parts store and Centerline, buying sparkplugs, as well a brand new valve head cover gasket, and set of seals. Because now that I've got everything back together, why wouldn't I want to take it all apart again? It's my car. And as it turns out, I don't just love driving it; I also enjoy keeping it running, especially when it means saving myself hundreds of dollars and learning a whole lot in the process. And, for the first time, I feel like a true part of the car community. Maybe one day I'll be like Jeff Batterton or Brian DuBois or Dan Roth, and when some poor, panicked person with a weird car c-Tweets about a part that broke, I'll be the one sending back encouraging, helpful messages, guiding them along the way from afar.

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