



We're here to ask him about something he doesn't like to talk about: a job he did 30 years ago, when he owned a trucking company. He got a contract with a local industrial plant called Asian Rare Earth, co-owned by Mitsubishi Chemical, that supplied special minerals to the personal electronics industry.

Esso Man couldn't believe his luck. He wasn't a rich man back then, and Asian Rare Earth offered three times as much as his usual gigs, just for trucking waste away from the plant. They didn't say where or how to dump the waste, and he and his three drivers were paid by the load—the quicker the trip, the more money they earned.

"Sometimes they would tell us it was fertilizer, so we would take it to local farms," Esso Man says. "My uncle was a vegetable farmer, so I gave some to him." Other times, the refinery officials said the stuff was quicklime, so one driver painted his house with it. "He thought it was great, because it made all the mosquitoes and mice stay away."

In fact, Esso Man and his drivers were hauling toxic and radioactive waste, as they'd discover a year later, when Asian Rare Earth tried to build a dump in a neighboring town. Residents there began to protest, and a few activists took a Geiger counter to the plant, where they found levels of radiation that were off the charts—up to 88 times higher than those allowed under international guidelines. In 1985, after residents sued, the government ordered the plant to be closed until Asian Rare Earth cleaned up its mess.

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