

Chapter - 4

THE FIRST DENT ON MY CAR

I won't be wrong if I say that the memories related to the first dent in one's beloved car is like that of one's first love which is unforgettable. I remember vividly the instance when my brand new car got its first dent. I was passing through the congested road of a hardware market on that unlucky evening of May 21,1991. I was going on a call [to see a patient] and this was not the usual route that I followed. I was listening to music in my car, when I saw a tonga coming from the front. Little did I know that it was going to leave me with such painful memories! The peculiar thing about this tonga was that it was moving with a sideways swing just like a full-term pregnant creature. Probably, either the wheel was loosely fitted or the weight of the passengers was more than its capacity. Anyways, by anticipating the wide swing, I tried to keep my car well away from its swinging range. The moment our vehicles crossed each other, I heard a loud sound [kirrrrrr-----] and I could also feel the impact of the body of the tonga on my car. My heart sank and without getting out of the car I could easily imagine the havoc played by the grating sound on my darling car. In fact, I was sure this sound must have been produced by the contact of the metallic claw fitted in the axle of the wheel. In fact the dent was made in my heart. Believe me, I am not exaggerating. I could not wait any longer. With the first opportunity to park I got out of the car like a commando. Throughout this I was trying to figure out how deep, broad or lengthy this dent would be. At the same time I was wishing it to be only a small scratch. But against all my optimism it was a broad, metal deep dent with a distinct depression involving both the doors. For a few minutes I could not remove my eyes from the dent. I cursed the tongawalla in my mind and regretted why I had chosen this road instead of the longer and safer one. I called myself a fool, a miser and a thousand other things that day! With a heavy heart, I got into the car and could not make myself drive at more than 20 or 30 km/hour.

When I was a child and suffered many cuts and bruises on my body, I had never cared, but I don't know why this first dent in my car had given me so much tension! I wanted to get rid of that dent as soon

as possible as I didn't have the heart to see it repeatedly. I was upset and returned home after hurriedly finishing the work. I was in no mood to share this mishap with my family. In fact, I had planned to get rid of the dent on the very same day without letting them know about it. But it couldn't be done in such a short time. The agony of the dent was writ large on my face and everyone at home wanted to know as to what was wrong. I had no choice but to tell them the unappetising details. The entire family rushed out to 'see' the dent and was upset too. Everyone examined it carefully. Perhaps they thought I had told them half the truth. Like James Bond, each one was trying to solve a murder mystery! Then followed a volley of comments: 'I knew this was going to happen', 'Couldn't you be careful?' my wife screamed. 'Oh papa! don't you know how to drive?' was my daughter's comment. In vain, I tried to convince my family that it was not my fault but that of the tongawalla. I tried to narrate the whole incident, but I was stopped in the middle by my wife who said, "Don't make silly excuses, I know how carelessly you drive these days!" My position was like that of a defence personnel who has been court-martialled, the only difference was that my wife was sitting in the chair of the enquiry officer. Meanwhile my daughter came back and added to the list of the charges against me by saying, "Mumma! there is one more dent in the back side and one side-indicator-light has also been broken."! All of them literally ragged me and made me feel like a naughty school boy being reprimanded for his pranks. I had never imagined that at this stage of life when I have become the father of a child, I would land in such a situation. I myself felt very bad about it but my family was taking my trial without considering this fact.

On a number of previous occasions when I had got my pocket picked or lost my briefcase, I had never faced such situation as on this occasion. This reminded me of an incident during my childhood when I had broken a glass tumbler from one of my mother's best lemon sets. I was the youngest child. The moment the sound of the broken glass was heard, my eldest sister sharply commented, 'This must be Babbu [my pet name] in the kitchen'. I already had a guilty feeling because this was the second incident of its kind. My mother shouted, "Is there something wrong with your hands?" You have spoiled two of my lemon sets!" Since we belonged to a middle-class family, this was a typical and spontaneous middle-class reaction! Nowadays we are a little well off and if such incidents occur, we immediately ask the child whether he has a cut or injured himself and tell the servant to clean up. This is perhaps the difference in the attitude of a middle-class and high-class family. It is not that the middle-class people do not have feelings for

their children. Instead, their constant financial constraints always dominate their feelings. Anyways, I come to the dent story again.

Next morning I was not in a mood to do my favourite job i.e. to clean and wash my beloved car. I often faced ridicule from my wife and kids for this special attention I bestowed upon my car. That day I did not want to see the ugly reminder of my painful memories of the previous day. An idea was constantly tickling my mind right from the accident. What if I could get some matching car paint from the market and apply it with the help of my daughter's paint brush? At least this would lessen some of its ugly look. However, after I thought about the jeering I would get from everyone who saw it, I abandoned the idea. Those who have gone through such a thing would probably understand that once your car has been dented your eyes don't see the car but only the dent. So I took the car to a known garage to get rid of this dent. The garage mechanic examined the dent and said 'Doc Saab, why do you want to remove this small dent right now'. He advised me that it would be more cost effective to have the car dented and painted after a few more dents. It might have been very commonplace for him to see dents on cars but for me it was a 'big' distraction. Anyway, heeding his logic, I postponed the dent repair for a later date.

The same day I narrated the story to a close friend of mine. I told him that in spite of me being so deeply hurt by the dent, I had to face so much scolding especially by junior members of my family. He laughed at my inability to tackle such a trifle situation. After seeing the puzzled look on my face, he advised me not to narrate the truth word by word. Judging by the blank look on my face, he started telling me about one such incident that had happened to him. He began, "On one occasion when I banged my car into a tree and broke the headlights and dented the sides, I presented the story in an entirely different way to my family. I entered the house with a limp, and a long face. The immediate reaction from the family members was, "what happened to you?" 'God is great', I replied. I had a new life today. It was enough to create a panicky wave among members of my family. By now they all became very eager to know and came very close to me. 'Beta, tell us what had happened', asked seriously my mother who was almost hysterical. Then I described the time-tested story. I told 'today I had a narrow escape in an accident with the truck'. There was an overloaded truck whose driver was very careless. I had to turn my car suddenly and in spite turning the steering fully, I could not avoid the accident or rather these dents'. 'Don't worry about these dents or the damaged light, you are saved, that's enough', said every one in my family. My mother

kissed my forehead exclaiming that she would offer Prasad (offering) to Lord Ganesha. The very next moment my wife declared a Devi Jaagran on the next auspicious day. She probably felt she should not lag behind her mother-in-law in expressing thanks to God, rather she should get 'political mileage' by the incident. My father was cursing the 'imaginary' truck driver, saying that he must have been drunk, etc. Seeing the limp, my wife wanted to consult a doctor and get me some medicine. I replied, 'there is some pain in my leg and chest, but any way, I will manage it'. I assured her that I would be fine with just a hot water bottle and pain-killer pills along with a strong cup of tea. That day I got off scot free and got VIP treatment instead.

I just admired my friend's presence of mind for spinning such a story to save his skin.

Why do we react like this during such incidents? If we go by logic, then a dent is simply a minor financial loss. If you are the owner of a car you can certainly afford that much! Moreover, most of the vehicles have comprehensive insurance so there is no question of even a financial loss. So certainly money is not the reason. Many times we suffer losses of valuables and money and take it in our stride even if those things have not been insured. Actually, the attachment with a new vehicle is like that of a 'kid with his favourite toy'. When his or her toy is damaged it is very difficult to console the child even by saying that you will get him a new one. If at all you are able to convince him, he would say that he wants exactly the same toy and that too right now. Perhaps, most of us also get deeply attached to our vehicles. When your brand new or well-maintained vehicle has been dented, you may feel the same way.

Once the vehicle gets older, your reaction too is more controlled. Although the second dent hurts too, it does not provoke the same kind of reaction. In fact, after 3-4 dents, perhaps you don't even bother to come out of the car to examine the extent of damage. Unlike kids, we are mature adults, so we should try to control our reaction in such situations. But, if you have caused damage to someone else's car, do not hesitate to apologize. On the other hand, if someone else has damaged your car, don't expect anything more than a polite 'sorry'. Instead you should first make sure that there are no injuries to either party.

I would like to mention a small accident that we witnessed in Marseilles, a city along the French Riviera. We were there to attend a conference on pediatric surgery in 2002. The conference venue and the hotel were very close. One evening when we were walking from the

conference venue we heard a thud of a crash. On tracing this sound we found there was a head-on collision between two cars. Both the drivers were young boys and fortunately both did not suffer any injury. However, on the contrary both the cars were quite damaged and we noticed that coolant from one of the radiators was leaking. Seeing all this we were expecting a good freestyle vocal and physical fight there. Surprisingly, both the drivers after getting out of their cars, instead of moving towards each other, remained near their respective cars. Both of them took out their mobile phones and started talking to someone. We noticed that they did not even have an eye contact. We waited there for some time to see something interesting to happen. In India, talking of drivers on the mobile phone immediately after such accidents usually means to 'call their respective armies' for making a gadar (fight). However, here in this case they were probably informing either insurance people or the police. That day we witnessed a good example about how to remain cool in such unpleasant situations.

Now whenever I get a new car, I always wish that the first dent is made by some other member of the family, especially by my wife! A kind of soft and sweet revenge!