

SHELL SHOCKED

Car Sickness in Sanibel

By Art Stevens

I drove my car into a Sanibel gas station one day and asked the attendant to fill the tank up. If that's all that had happened, there would be no story to tell, no fingers pointed at anyone and no near heartbreak to follow.

But as luck would have it, the attendant asked me if I wanted to have my oil checked. What the heck, I thought to myself, why not? I wasn't in any hurry.

So he opened the hood and started to look around. He probed into the nether regions of the world under a car's hood for what seemed like an eternity. He gave out a long low whistle and ambled back to the driver's side of the car.

"Oil and radiator are okay. But it looks like your Finnegan pin is corroded. If you've got five minutes, I can replace it in a jiffy," he said.

Being among the literati and not the autoati, I said, "What's a Finnegan pin?"

"It's that dojig that connects the manifold to the universal. If it snaps on you, goodbye car. Better safe than sorry."

He sounded convincing and I agreed to the minor operation. He asked me to wait in the tiny office while he put the car up on the rack. He continued to assure me that the whole procedure would take no more than five minutes.

I waited patiently in the office and passed the time counting bicycle riders on the shared path outside. Five minutes passed quickly. Then another ten. Then another twenty. Finally, he appeared in the office looking greasy, sweaty and worried.

"Complications, I'm afraid," he said. "Everything was going fine when the car went into shock. The oil pressure started dropping rapidly and the front wheel drive is hyperventilating. We'll need some oil donors right away. You'll have to call some friends and get their cars here in a hurry. Make sure their oil type is the same as your car. Hurry."

Stunned, I sprung into action. I called friends, neighbors, and the entire editorial staff of the Islander, all five members of the Sanibel City Council, and all the waitresses at Doc Ford's -- everyone I could think of.

Twenty cars showed up within fifteen minutes and the delicate oil transfusion process began.

Friends sat in vigil with me as I prayed for a speedy recovery for my poor, dear innocent car which a half hour earlier had been humming along Periwinkle in seemingly perfect health.

A long half hour passed and the attendant finally emerged from the car emergency room. He looked even grimmer than before.

“Your car is in intensive care right now. The oil transfusion is complete, but the car’s in a coma. The vital signs are weak. The radiator temperature is high and the radio antenna is not responding. We’re flying a team of specialists over immediately. Pray like you’ve never prayed before.”

Tears welled up in my eyes. “Can I see it now? Maybe if I hold its steering wheel in my hands for a few minutes it’ll know it’s me and respond.”

“No visitors now,” he said. It’s too touch and go. We’ve diagnosed it as car sickness.” He said that the car was hooked up to oil pressure gauges, gas support systems and carburetor monitoring devices. I felt helpless.

A few minutes later a helicopter landed on Periwinkle and out stepped Lee Iacocca and a team of automotive specialists. Iacocca emerged holding a black valise. Once again time stood still while he and his team were inside performing lifesaving car surgery.

Another hour passed. Finally, Iacocca and his team emerged. Although bathed in sweat he had a smile on his face. “Your car made it. It’s going to be just fine now. You should go home now and get some rest.”

Hallelujah. To a person we all screamed for joy. When the gushing tears abated I asked the gas station attendant what had happened. He looked at me squarely and said, “The Finnegan pin I used turned out to be a transplant from a faulty donor. Count your lucky stars that your car is still with us.”

I hugged my car’s steering wheel all the way home.