

## **Introduction – The Accident**

It was 8:06 am on Saturday, September 27, 2003 when the accident happened. Driving his beloved Eagle, Osamu Tomoda was heading toward the Kawagoe Country Club in Saitama Prefecture.

That day, he was going to play with three old buddies from his college days – an enjoyable golf game with no formalities. Although the sky was slightly overcast, there seemed to be no threat of rain. It was 7:55 am when he exited the Kan-Etsu Expressway at Higashimatsuyama Interchange. From there on, it would take less than 20 minutes to arrive at the club. The tee-off was booked at 9:15 am. He was going to be early.

After exiting the interchange, Tomoda headed north at 60 kilometers-per-hour (kph) on the bypass leading to Kumagaya. A poster vehicle for the Goryo Auto Company, the Eagle was equipped with a 6-cylinder 3000 cc gasoline engine – one of the largest domestic four-wheelers on the market. Tomoda had bought his Eagle exactly a year ago, and was captivated by its solid stability and potent power.

After driving straight for seven minutes, he turned right at a set of traffic lights into a two-lane access road to Musashi-Kyuryo Prefectural Park, a spot locally promoted for tourism. The road was pretty, dogwood trees lining its path. Once beyond the park entrance, Tomoda drove up a small climb, then a long downhill section, which curved to the left just before the road leveled out. Getting close to the curve, Tomoda stepped gently on the brake and tried to turn the steering wheel slightly left.

— What? So heavy!

He put some force into it, but the wheel didn't move as if suddenly shackled by a lock, totally resisting his hands.

— Come on! Has the engine stopped or something?

When the car was well into the curve, a mini-van suddenly appeared from the left.

Tomoda stamped hard on the brakes and frantically wrestled the steering wheel left, instinctively twisting his body at the effort. As the van cut across in front of the Eagle, Tomoda caught sight of the fear on the other driver's face.

A fleeting hope crossed his mind that a collision had been avoided, but it was blown away in the next moment by the shock of an impact, as the van's driver also stamped on the brakes reflectively. The Eagle's solid bumper had crashed against the mini-van.

For Tomoda in the Eagle, the impact was unexpectedly light. The mini-van, by contrast, at less than half the weight of the Eagle, bounced off the Eagle's bumper, snapped hard against the guardrail, then flipped over onto its side, the driver's side down.

The Eagle came to a halt after flattening the guardrail. Tomoda jumped out and rushed over to the mini-van.

While the rear right side looked like a hammer-bashed tin can, there seemed to be no major damage up front. He moved around to the front and peered in at the driver's seat. Inside, he saw a man with a graying shaven head, overturned and struggling to undo his seatbelt.

Although grimacing, the man didn't appear to be seriously hurt, as there was no sign of any blood. Feeling relieved, Tomoda leaned in close to the windshield and yelled:

"Are you all right?"

It was a stupid question, given the circumstances but what the hell else could he have said?

The man glared at Tomoda and yelled back, while continuing his fight with the seatbelt:

"Of course I'm not all right, you idiot! I can't get this off. Don't just stand there. Do something!"

It looked like the seatbelt's clip was trapped under the driver's seat.

Tomoda climbed onto the overturned vehicle and tried to open the passenger's door. The handle moved, but the door did not budge.

"The door's probably locked," said a voice from behind. Turning around, he was surprised to see two cars – apparently from the interchange – pulled up on the side of the road. The drivers had got out to join him, but he had been working like mad and hadn't noticed.

"No, the lock's up, it looks like.... I think the door's twisted stuck."

Tomoda crouched and pulled the handle with all his strength, but the door was stuck fast. So he knocked on the window and yelled:

"The door's bent and won't open. I'll get a bar."

He jumped down.

"What can I do to help?" One of the other drivers asked.

Taking a bar out of the Eagle's toolbox, Tomoda responded:

"If you've got a phone, call an ambulance! It's probably nothing serious, but... And, call the police too!"

He did not really want the police involved, but he knew it was unavoidable.

Armed with the bar, Tomoda jumped back onto the mini-van. He slid the bar into the gap between door and frame, and tried to lever the door open. The door looked thin and flimsy but

was unexpectedly resilient. The bar only managed to curl up the door's edge. The lock didn't budge.

Another driver jumped onto the van to join Tomoda. He too was armed with a bar in his hands. Seeing Tomoda's bar inserted slightly below the lock, he pushed his into the gap above it. They both tugged with all their might, but the door was stuck fast.

"The window won't come down any further," said the man, inserting his hand into the centimeter gap above the passenger's door's window, trying to pull it down. It slid another centimeter, but that was all.

The first driver had just finished calling the police and was back to help. "Do you guys smell gas?" he asked anxiously.

Another man, who had joined the scene, said: "Yeah! I think the van's leaking underneath."

The first man walked around to the back of the vehicle and stooped down to look. "No sign of a leak down here..."

A muffled inaudible voice came from inside the vehicle. With his body twisted, the trapped driver was pointing to the cargo space in the back.

"What's that?" Tomoda pressed his ear to the window's gap.

The blast of heat from the flames hit him like a punch in the face. Tomoda tumbled off the mini-van and landed momentarily dazed and confused. .

The first driver was already jumping out of his car with a fire extinguisher. Another driver, who managed to withstand the blast, was also dashing toward his car.

Shaking off his confusion, Tomoda jumped up and was about to run for his own extinguisher when the first driver yelled at him: "Forget that, smash the glass!"

Tomoda picked up his bar on the ground, looked at the windshield, and felt desperate and beaten, as the vehicle's back half was a blazing inferno, with roaring flames sucked toward the window's gap they had just managed to pry open. He saw the trapped driver frantically trying to beat off the flames while screaming like crazy, with his face cramped up by fear.

Breaking the glass could injure the driver, but there was no other way. Tomoda landed the bar's first blow to the center of the windshield, splintering it into a spider's web around a hole the size of a centimeter. The flames abruptly changed direction, surging toward the new opening, crawling up the driver's body.

"No!" Tomoda screamed.

He hit the windshield's passenger side with everything he had, making a new frosted spider's web extended over the glass. Tomoda kicked it with all his strength, making the windshield cave in. But the supply of fresh air gave the flames new life.

The two helpers joined him and unleashed a spray fire retardant into the van. Four seconds, five seconds..., the flames waned little by little, and in 20 seconds the fire was completely out. But the trapped driver showed absolutely no sign of response to Tomoda's frantic call.

The sound of approaching ambulance sirens cut through the morning air.