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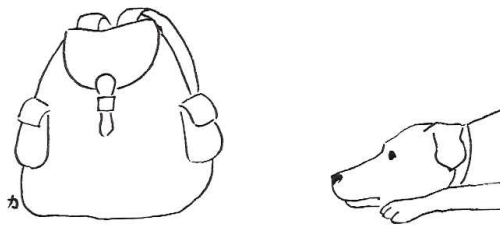
## In The Beginning

**Why do you go to music festivals, is it more than for just the music?**

*Imagine a festival as an orange. The orange peel is the music, as what you see is what you get. But inside, there is so much more, the juice and the flavour represent everything amazing and wonderful about music festivals - Josh*

**What one thing would you like to see at a festival which would improve it for you?**

*A park with swings - Heather Isabella*



It seemed hardly imaginable, but I was considering the suggestion all the same; should we turn around and go back home? It was an idea I had been mulling over for the past half hour, as the rain continued to fall in torrents around us, without any sign of abating.

We had just left the A3, driving in the direction of Arnheim, and were on the final stretch of our journey. We had been on the road for over ten hours. The last time we'd driven the same route, the journey had taken a little more than half that to complete; the traffic hadn't been kind to us.

Daylight was fading and the traffic in question was finally beginning to thin. Driving conditions were, however, not improving. If anything, they were getting worse as, for the last hour, we'd been subjected to what can only be described as the longest car wash I'd ever been through. I had adopted a *little old lady* driving position, through a combination of both fear and realisation that two windscreen wiper speed settings are just not adequate for this part of Germany, at this time of year. Not to be outdone, my wife, Karen, had created her own quite unique seating position, a mixture of *foetus* and *aircraft crash landing*, as she laboured over a map intended to guide us through the last few kilometres of winding road to our eventual goal.

"This map is total shit. Do they want us to turn up to their bloody festival or not?" she mumbled.

I was not the only one becoming travel weary.

Jovial discussion as to the potential highlights of the weekend was but a distant memory. The air of festival enthusiasm had been slowly waning since we'd accepted, shortly north of Düsseldorf, that we

wouldn't be arriving in time to see *The Zutons* and to catch any of *We Are Scientists* would require an act of god.

The eerie spectre of dread, which had slipped in to our vehicle unnoticed at Königsforst Services, was now contentedly rocking back and forth behind us, childlike, with hands tucked between legs and seat. It was busy glancing from driver to passenger, awaiting more words of misery.

Although we travelled in silence, our eyes betrayed the thoughts spinning around in our minds. Our collective gaze would rapidly fall upon any crack in the hedge, gate or opening, which would provide us with a fleeting glimpse of the landscape beyond. How sodden are the fields? In half an hour we'd be expected to pitch our tent on something similar.

From the back seat I heard a rasping snigger and, as our unwelcome hitchhiker shifted forwards, towards me, I braced myself for his inevitable whisper.

'Welcome to Haldern Pop 2006.'

We weren't pitching a tent thirty minutes later. We'd noticed the turning that would have led us to the festival campsite, but we'd chosen not to take it. Instead, we had continued driving, in the direction of Haldern itself, only slowing down briefly to unceremoniously bundle our unwelcome guest out of the car.

We were sitting, still in car, staring at the Hotel Doppeladler, on the opposite side of the road to where we had parked. The same hotel which we knew was fully booked this weekend, having enquired about a room four months earlier. The pair of us glumly watching the rain running down the windscreen, it suddenly occurred to me what a comic sight we must have made; comic or slightly eerie. I imagined us to have adopted the archetypal expression of those happy seaside day trippers I had observed so often as a child. The ones content to push the nose of their vehicle as close as possible to the fence separating car park and beach. The male's face would be buried in a newspaper, whilst the female would be looking wistfully out to sea, the heavy silence only fleetingly broken by the intermittent sweep of the windscreen wipers.

'Breathe deep, that sea air is good for you,' he would utter.

He'd be oblivious to the fact that every window was wound firmly shut.

In desperation, we'd already stopped at every other hotel in this small village to ask whether, by some lucky coincidence, rooms were still available for the weekend. Even to the most novice of German speakers, it was clear that the repeated answer of *nein* wasn't indication to empty the boot of the car. Nor was it a cue to offer retort in the form of 'no, no my dear Fräulein, just the one room will do!'

A plan of action was required. I was booked on a 07:05 flight from Munich to London Heathrow on Monday morning. Karen, a freelance translator, had a job due for delivery on the same day and, most importantly, Dougal, our dog, would be in the kennels, with his overnight bag packed, awaiting collection. We weren't in a position to run the risk of getting bog-bound on any festival campsite. At the same time, it was dispiritingly obvious, that the chances of sinking our Autobahn-bludgeoned bodies onto a marshmallow-like bed were extremely slim.

Granted, it was evident from our enquiries that the hotels were full with festival acts and muso types, which meant that Karen could have played the groupie card. The condition of 'my husband gets to sleep on the floor' may have made her proposition less appealing though and pushed the challenge just beyond the realms of reality. We were thus left with the simple choice of having no choice at all; we were going to have to sleep in the car.

'That's really not a bad idea, you know,' I said.

It was, in fact, a good idea and one that I was thus happy enough to claim as being my own. The solution seemed quite simple and really not so daunting. Looking no doubt rather smug in our festival resourcefulness, we thus decided to celebrate by foregoing the planned teatime treat of veggie burger with something a little more lavish. The Hotel Doppeladler may not have been able to provide us with a room, but an evening meal surely couldn't be refused.

The look on the waiter's face as we bundled ourselves through the restaurant door told me that we weren't the first that evening to have made such an ungraceful entrance. We were instantly identified as non-guests and seated accordingly. I took a moment to observe my surroundings. Pastel coloured wallpaper, Nik Kershaw enthusiastically informing me that dancing girls would be brought on later, I am slightly embarrassed to say that the eighties-in-style, eighties-in-sound atmosphere brightened me up no end.

Our waiter seemed to be gifted. He appeared, as if by magic, the instant I had finished removing every wet outer-garment, with a glass of beer. I met his presence with a look of 'is that for me?' He answered with a silent 'yes, sir, I know you haven't yet had the chance to look at the menu, but, you know, I think you would have ordered a beer. In fact, I think you've earned this beer.'

'What a magical place. I wonder if they'd notice me slipping under the table to take up residence for the night,' I thought.

As I took the first few sips of my drink, busy trying to ignore the sound of fire engines screaming through the centre of Haldern, on their way to pump fifteen centimetres of rainwater off the festival site, I began to have doubts.

'There is one thing,' I said.

'What?' Karen answered.

'Well, privacy.'

'What do you mean privacy?'

My mind had turned to nakedness.

It's all very well bedding down in a car on a campsite, or at a festival, but finding somewhere to do something similar in a town centre where you're not likely to attract the attention of the local *boys in green* could be a tad more difficult. There were basics that the chosen spot must provide and top of my list was privacy. I wasn't sure whether Frau Schmidt would take kindly to seeing a pair of buttocks pressed against the inside of a car window, however pert they may be, whilst the owner is busy trying to coax them into clean underwear. Maybe she would, although I'm fairly certain she would object to me paying a

morning visit against the outside wall of her living room. 'Morgen!' I would cry, as she draws back the curtains, looking forward to seeing what the new day has brought.

'This is all about your bladder, isn't it?' Karen asked.

'Might be.'

'Then perhaps it would be a good idea if you didn't drink tonight.'

'I'm not getting naked in a car sober!'

It was a Catch-22 situation. I'm British and the estate car we'd hired didn't have curtains. I thus wasn't too keen on undressing in it. But, being British, I was quite happy to shed my clothes, and most probably run through the streets of Haldern naked, after having consumed a little alcohol. Of course, that also meant that I'd have to take a short pit stop during my gallivanting, to let off, or, more accurately, produce, a little steam.

Suddenly the idea didn't seem like such a good one after all. An experience was at risk of turning into an ordeal. I thus allowed the waiter to continue reading my mind until closing time, at which point I handed the car keys to Karen, suggesting she might be in a better position than I to drive our hotel to a suitable resting spot.

I had noticed a potential position earlier. I hadn't considered it appropriate then, but now it seemed altogether perfect.

'Straight on, bit further, not so fast, there, take a right at that gap in the hedge!' I instructed.

Thus we found ourselves bumping slowly through a vast, slightly scruffy, municipal parking area. It suited our needs. It was deserted and a six feet high en-suite hedge acted as barrier between Frau Schmidt's twitching curtains and my white bits.

'What's that over there?' Karen asked.

It's a gift she doesn't possess; ignoring potential problems. Me, I'm talented enough to do this for the both of us.

'It looks like some sort of fairground ride hut,' she considered, out loud.

Is this car park area empty for a reason? Are we likely to awake the following morning as an exhibit in a visiting fair? 'Roll up, roll up. Ladies and gentlemen, you've seen the bearded lady, now witness our latest attraction, the Feral Festival Goers. Observe as their heads momentarily appear above the car window line, wild eyes darting this way and that, in search of a clean toilet!'

'I'm sure it's not,' I answered, although I didn't share my scenario with her.

Nor was I going to mention the *Trinkhalle* I'd noticed just around the corner. Literally translated as *Drink Hall*, it might not head the list of blind date meeting venues. It had been a little difficult to gain a view into the world of the drinking hall, although what I had been able to see didn't detract from the image I had built of the typical frequenter. Chip board seemed to be the chosen style of furnishing; chip board bar, chip board seats, chip board floors. From a health and safety point of view, I'm surprised that more than one person at a time is allowed in the place. The only burst of colour was provided by a pool table, placed in the middle of the hall. It had seen better days, although the customers didn't seem bothered. I daresay the quality of baize and tilt of table added an extra challenge to the game. Perhaps I

was being unfair. Maybe the clientele are, in reality, very pleasant. I simply wanted to know what route they took home at chip boarding up time. Would they be staggering through the village centre or our car park and, if the latter, is car tipping a popular pastime in this part of Germany?

Karen manoeuvred us into one corner of the potential fairground, nose facing away from the hedge, with enough space to use our en-suite facilities from the boot, as opposed to the rear doors. We transferred our now surplus-to-requirements tent and other assorted camping regalia to the front seats, lowered the rear seats and went about making a nest. It really is rather surprising how well an estate car can double up as impromptu sleeping quarters. I now view those handy storage cut-outs situated in various doors, footwells and the rear area of the vehicle in a totally different light. I have no doubt that, if we ever do buy a car, I will utterly confuse the salesman by asking whether the vehicle in question has a torch holder in the side door, shoe holder to the right hand side of the rear door and dirty underwear container on the left hand side of it.

The night passed without event and although our Opel Astra Combi wasn't likely to win any comfort prizes, there was no denying that this car park had provided us with the most peaceful night ever experienced at a festival. Not wanting to detail my personal grooming habits in too much detail, I was immensely proud in what we had managed to achieve with our hedge. I was, however, reprimanded for not leaving enough distance between our bathroom washing area and toilet facilities, being accused of, in essence, relieving myself in our virtual sink. I thought I'd kicked that habit shortly after my first year at university.

Hair and face washed, teeth cleaned, it was time to check-out and return to the Hotel Doppeladler for breakfast; Karen had noticed the previous evening that the hotel was serving from eight thirty in the morning.

Having secured the same parking spot as the one we'd been in less than twelve hours ago, we slipped into the hotel unnoticed and found ourselves a table in the corner of the dining room. I couldn't help but smile. Here I was busy scattering crumbs across the tablecloth as I sliced open the second of three freshly baked breakfast rolls, when things could have been very different. I might have been back in Munich. I wouldn't have been the best of company there. Or, instead of slurping at this thick, treacle-like coffee, I might have been looking in disgust at a styrofoam container of tepid, anaemic tea, on the festival campsite, whilst wondering whether the other pair of rain sodden pants wouldn't have been less uncomfortable to wear than those I was currently in. Karen must have sensed my euphoria.

'Why don't you write a book about music festivals?' she suddenly exclaimed.

'What!' I answered, noticing that the crumbs around my plate weren't man enough to soak up the coffee that had now joined them on the tablecloth.

'Why don't you write a book about music festivals?'

'I heard you the first time, but what, I mean why, how?' I stuttered.

I had become flustered. It was a good idea. It was a great idea and, as I will no doubt be reminded of at regular intervals throughout this adventure, it was Karen's idea.

'You're always moaning about work and how you'd like to do something more related to what you're truly interested in. If music, gigs and festivals don't fit into that category, I don't know what does,' she explained.

'Write what about festivals though?'

'I don't know, that's up to you.'

'But I've never written a book before!'

'So how do you know you can't write a book?'

Regardless of Karen's valid point, I continued to bombard her with a merciless, unabated volley of 'buts' throughout breakfast, the festival and our return journey to Munich.

All of my butts having been nimbly counter-butted though, it was clear that the acorn had been sown. Having categorically stated less than twenty four hours ago that I would never, ever, for as long as I live, go to another music festival, thanks to Karen, I would shortly be embarking upon a year long worldwide festival journey, in search of true enlightenment.