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Voiture en Panne

by Martin Bourne

Nothing travels faster than the speed of light with the possible exception of bad news, which obeys its own special laws. The bad news was a gradual clonking noise coming from the back of my dad's ageing Austin Cambridge as we trundled down the French motorway heading south. Speed seemed to be dependent on gradient.

I was sharing the back seat with my cousin Robert and his girlfriend at the time, Jane. Jane didn't talk much and did even less according to my mum. Behind us was our accommodation for two weeks in the form of an Alpine Sprite caravan. White and cumbersome and given to sudden attacks of weaving from side to side like a drunk trying to keep a straight line.

The clonking noise was getting louder with each passing mile and I gave out helpful updates reading the frequency of the clonking and the varying opinions on what I as a 10 year old thought it might be. It was strange that no one asked for my reports but I provided them nonetheless.

We skirted Paris, and my mum happily reported, "well, that's the quickest we've ever been round Paris."

However, after a few miles the car slowed and my dad said, "hang on, the sun should be in front of us, not behind us, we're heading bloody north."

We turned at the next intersection. This temporary slowing down, ascending the exit slope, going round a large roundabout and then descending the slope to rejoin the motorway had given the clonking noise a period on which to reflect. After consideration, it decided to restart, only this time, after each clonk there was a sort hee-hee noise. This development was exciting as it came and went. Rather like a nosy neighbour I would press my ear to the back of the wheel arch and gave updates as to whether the hee-haw noise had followed the clonk or not.

"Maybe if you go a bit slower Jim," suggested my mum.

“I can’t go much slower than I am now,” he replied.

The clonking noise was really going for it now and the hee-hee’s had developed into a screech-screech. It didn’t seem to matter now whether the car went slow or fast, the clonking and the screeching just sounded angrier and angrier. We limped on a few more miles, and then without warning the clonking and screeching combined into a rapid high pitched clanking before the back of the car went all bouncy before collapsing exhausted.

“Bugger,” exclaimed my dad.

In the meantime French cars were screaming past and the drivers were making unfriendly gestures. We coasted to the hard shoulder. A sign read five miles to the services.

Very carefully my dad drove at 2 mph until we reached the turn-off and we limped onto the garage forecourt where we lived in the caravan for the next 10 days until parts arrived and my dad was able to fix the car.