

## MY FIRST GRAND PRIX

### *Memories of the Nordschleife—1966*

Harold Robbins was a pap writer of my youth. I read his bloated epic *The Adventurers* under a streetlight at the German Grand Prix.

There were no sleeping accommodations at the Nurburgring so fans camped out on the exciting sections of the iconic circuit. I was new to Formula One, so I got blind pig drunk and scarfed down white sausages with sweet brown mustard.

When it comes to partying, the Germans don't mess around. They make the best beer on earth. Think what heroic party mammals you'd have to be to come up with Oktoberfest. Forget the Porsches and the rocket engineering. Let's have another round, and some more cleavage, Heidi.

Anyway, I was having a rare old time until I got sucker punched. That cheap shot made me forsake the taproom for more congenial surroundings. I found refuge under a streetlight as a steady drizzle fell on the hallowed track where Juan Fangio hauled in both factory Ferraris.

By dawn, I was sore, soaked, hung over, and exhausted, but still psyched for the race. In a few hours, Jim Clark, Jackie Stewart, Graham Hill, Jochen Rindt, Dan Gurney, Jo Siffert, and the race winner, Jack Brabham, would be part of the starting grid.

My waterlogged condition wasn't a problem. I had a change of clothes in my bag—the selfsame one I'd been sitting on in the wee hours. All I had to do was nip into the GENTS, and don me there my dry apparel.

“HOLD MY PLACE,” I shouted to a fellow fan at the first shriek of a race engine. “I’LL BE BACK IN A JIFF.”

I threaded my way with difficulty through the mob. What had been a good crowd had swollen by leaps and bounds. My route to dry duds led through a forest of omnibus-sized krauts, and I was breasting the hordes against traffic.

Finally, I made it to the *Klo*, and unzipped my bag, expecting to find dry clothes. Instead, I found a thoroughly wretched mess of squashed fruit that ruined everything down to the last sock. I’d forgotten the bon voyage grapes and bananas that Edie had given me. Fuck.

So much for the comfort of dry clothes. Now I had to hightail it out of the *Herrentoilette* and fend my way back to the fence. This proved impossible. Germans are diehard car freaks, and every mother’s son had crawled out of the woodwork to make my viewing pleasure a nightmare.

I sought my spot on the fence, only to find it ten deep with mammoth Übergoobers. The race was starting, and I couldn’t see anything but umbrellas. Plus, I was sardined all the way in the back against the restaurant window.

What a bring-down. On my own, without Dad there to get great seats, I was relegated to groundling room only.

My first Grand Prix looked earmarked for disaster. Then one of the princes of Serendip stepped forward. I heard a German voice say, “Why don’t you get on the window ledge so you can see the race?”

I thought I was being mocked.

“The ledge is too narrow,” I grumbled.

I beheld cloudy eyes that twinkled with friendliness.

“What if I hold your legs?”

I studied the smartly dressed German who had to be seventy.

He seemed sincere.

“Don’t worry,” he smiled. I’ll hold your legs.”

“But then you won’t be able to see,” I fretted.

“*Ja*. I will for sure. It’s not a problem.”

I bit my lip as the rain came down. “Are you sure?”

“*Jawohl*. On the Nordschleife, it takes the cars forever to complete one lap.”

This was true. Waiting for the cars at the old track was like waiting for a bus in Outer Mongolia. Also, I trusted the tweedy stranger because his Teutonic manner reminded me of my wonderful German godfather, Walter Brauns. Uncle Walter and his wife gave me beautiful chemistry sets for Christmas when I was a budding mad scientist.

So the plan worked. Every time we heard a pack of cars approach, I’d hop up on the window ledge while the kindly old guy held my legs. And that’s how I got to see Jim Clark drive in the German Grand Prix!

What a gracious gent that chap was. Strangers really are friends we haven’t met yet. I had a guardian angel appear in Nibelungenland—a country always dear to my heart. *Alle Menschen werden Bruder!* (All men are brothers!)