

Death Pass – Part 2

David

July 6th

There were a couple of times I had to retreat and grab hold of Angela to pull her forward past a rock that jutted out inconveniently into the path. She grew progressively more hysterical. Snot would come halfway down her nose before she'd snort it back, tears streaming down her face. A couple of times she had to stop and consciously slow her breathing to keep from hyperventilating. *(Note from Angela: Snot, yes. Terrified, oh, yeah. You try controlling your emotions when you know that either you, your careless fiancé, or his father are surely going to die. Oh, and Death Pass was my name for it. I'm a genius.)*

When we neared the top of the pass, I went ahead, as I often do in the approach to a landmark, to get a sneak preview and to scope it out. Expecting to be greeted with breathtaking views and a few smiling, satisfied hikers (and cyclists?), I was instead blasted with 30 mph winds and a ridge that was roughly the width of two people. During the climb I had noticed the clouds climbing up over the pass, and I had been looking forward to watching them head toward and over me, but instead I was too afraid to look up for fear of getting blown off the ridge and plummeting backwards to my doom over the cliff I'd just climbed.

It took a few more minutes for Dad and Angela to reach me, and then they too were blasted by the wind. Angela grabbed hold of the signpost that marked the top of the pass and refused to let go. In the meantime, Dad and I looked around for a way down, but we couldn't find one! The trail sign to which Angela so steadfastly clung pointed in three directions: back in the direction from which we had come; along the ridge (a path that looked about as safe as walking along the

Ups & Downs

top of Sears Tower without a safety harness); and directly in front of us, where there was a cable fastened into the shale (with who knows what degree of security) and, after about 15 feet, a dropoff into some unknown abyss.



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We stood there like idiots for several minutes. We weren't really supposed to grab onto that cable and abseil down the cliff, were we? Our state of shock was such that we weren't debating our choices so much as wondering whether a helicopter rescue was a legitimate option.

Eventually we saw people climbing up the cliff using the cable, so we figured that must actually be the way to go. In the distance we could see Wei Wei, now apparently with a guide of some kind, halfway down the slope. Being the fearless leader that I am, I agreed to go ahead, scope out the territory, drop my pack down below, and then return to assist Angela with the descent. Dad, meanwhile, would stay back and make sure that Angela didn't lose her grip on the trail sign. (Somehow, I didn't think we had to worry about that. We could've removed her arms at the elbow and she still would've held tight with the stumps she had left.)

After descending a few yards, though, I discovered that it wasn't all that bad – the cable went down for about a quarter of a mile, and for most of it there were steps, which about two dozen people were in the process of climbing up. I returned immediately to share the news with the rest of my party, and we began to assemble our “reverse high-mountain danger formation,” with Dad leading the way, and me waiting for Angela to go next, so I could bring up the rear. (The reverse high-mountain danger formation has the same advantage for descents as the high-mountain danger formation has for ascents; Angela would take Dad with her over the cliff if she lost her footing.) Dad grabbed the cable and stepped over the edge. The cinders went sliding out from under his feet and he started sliding down the slope on his back. Fortunately he'd had the foresight to put on gloves, and he squeezed the cable until he managed to skid to a halt in a pile of rubble after about 15 feet. Angela immediately returned to clutching the trail marker pole, and again refused to let go.

By the time I'd managed to pry her away a second time, Dad, naturally had disappeared from view, and it would be another hour or so before we'd catch up to him. In the meantime, I'd stand in place for 5 or 6 minutes while Angela, emitting constant whimpers of

Ups & Downs

panic, would descend 20 yards, after which I'd wrap my wrist around the cable and slingshot myself down as fast as I could, bringing a small avalanche down on top of both of us which invariably comforted Angela immensely.

Eventually the slope leveled out, we made it to more even ground, and Angela was able to calm down enough to consider the magnitude of her accomplishment.

When we finally caught up to Dad, he'd met up again with Wei Wei. Her escort had been a young Finnish man who had been with one of the hiking groups maneuvering their way down the cliff on the other side of the pass. They had come upon a lone and very scared Wei Wei clinging to a rock. He had shed his pack and escorted her back to the top and a significant distance down the other side. When Dad showed up and agreed to accompany her down the rest of the way, the Finnish hiker turned around and headed up over the Death Pass for the third time that afternoon.



Angela & Wei Wei

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Wei Wei had a reservation at a hotel in Griesalp, and since we were heading in that direction (and she was obviously completely panic-stricken from what she'd just experienced), we walked together for the next 2 hours as the piles of rocks which showed the way down the otherwise unmarked precipitous slope turned into an actual footpath which eventually turned into a gravel road.

Wei Wei was very insistent on following the road-signs for Griesalp. Often on these climbs and descents, a trail will cut down a hill or through the woods as the road takes a long switchback around. In those situations we take the trails, both to save walking time and to spare our feet from walking on the hard roads. Having done this for 2 weeks, we recognized the shortcuts immediately, but Wei Wei was not convinced. We spent several minutes assuring her that either way we'd end up in the same place. We even pointed it out to her on her map – “This is where we are. This is the trail right here. You're following this red line, which goes aaaaaaaalll the way around here before ending up in the exact same spot.” But she insisted on following her red line. Meanwhile we, sick of walking and looking for an isolated place to camp, parted ways with her.

It was maybe 10 or 15 minutes before our shortcut met back with the road, and then we were 5 minutes down the next shortcut when we saw Wei Wei on the road high above us. We waved. I almost climbed back up, just to say, “See, I told you so,” but that wouldn't have been very gentlemanly, and besides it would've meant an extra 10 minutes of walking.

We found a fabulous place to camp at a Feuerstelle right next to the river. It was fairly well exposed, which always results in the paranoia that we might get arrested in the middle of the night. But we'd been walking for 10 hours and it was a flat spot to pitch our tents. For that we were always willing to risk spending the night in jail.

For dinner we had the following options:

- Instant noodles
- Instant soup with crackers
- Crackers and tuna fish
- Instant mashed potatoes and tuna fish

Ups & Downs

- Instant mashed potatoes with dried sausage
- Instant soup with peanut butter and jelly
- Instant soup with dried sausage and tuna fish

Naturally, these were the same options we'd had every single other time we'd camped out away from a town, and although these foods all happen to be highly rich in the nutrients one needs when hiking for 7 hours a day, you can only have so many meals of mashed potatoes and tuna fish in a 2-week period before you start to get sick of it. I'm sure we did eat that night, but my brain has repressed the memory.

The following morning Angela and I were awake before Dad. Shock! Horror! Several times a family or a large group of school kids would walk noisily past Dad's tent, and still he didn't move. We began to get scared, and when he was still asleep at 8:30 I checked to make sure he was still breathing. In the meantime, as the sun hadn't yet risen over the mountains, it was ridiculously cold. Angela and I made hot apple cider, but it only warmed up our stomachs and not our outer layers of skin, which was the part that was cold to begin with.

The mountain to our east cast its shadow over the mountain to the west, and we spent half an hour watching the shadow line move down toward us as the sun rose up. It reminded me of the scene in *The Mummy Returns* when they're running to make it into the golden pyramid before the sun comes up.¹⁰

Somewhere along the way we'd heard that this day's hike – to Kandersteg – was supposed to be even tougher than the one we'd gone over the day before. I can hear the announcer now:

“Angela vs. Death Pass II. The last time these two met, they fought for twelve rounds, and in the end, Angela won it on a split decision. What do you think of that decision, Max?”

“Well, it's obvious that Angela fought that bout scared, and

¹⁰ Did I actually just confess to having seen and **remembered** *The Mummy Returns*? Never mind, forget I said anything.

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Death Pass certainly put her to the test, but in the end he just didn't have what it took to put the bout away. But this time, Death Pass is back with a vengeance. He's been training hard, he's put on 550 feet, he's got more ice in his step, he's got a steeper uppercut. I don't think she can take him. My prediction: the ref calls it for Death Pass in the 11th round."

There happened to be a map of the area right next to the Feuerstelle, and while Dad packed up, Angela and I studied it and identified an alternative route – north down the valley to Kiental, and then veer east into Interlaken, from where we knew we'd be able to get to Zurich easily. Just at that moment, who should walk by? Wei Wei, on her way to the Second Death Pass of Doom. We had suggested to her the day before that often it's possible to find a valley route around, and here we had found one for certain. Well before Kiental, she'd be able to break off west again and go over a much easier pass before dropping back into the Kandersteg valley. We estimated the whole thing would take about the same length of time, but her chances of falling off a cliff somewhere would be far more remote.

But as before, she was very insistent on sticking to her map. While we were arguing with her, the group of Swiss hikers that we'd encountered several times the day before came up. They, too, had spent the night in Griesalp. We explained to them the situation and they agreed to shepherd Wei Wei up and over Death Pass II to Kandersteg.

After bidding them goodbye, Dad, Angela and I broke camp and started down the valley. About 3 minutes into our walk we came upon a sign that posted the regulations for the local municipality. There were illustrations of a dog on a leash, a person picking up after a dog defecating on the ground, and a picture of a tent with a big red line through it. We didn't have a dog, but it was pretty clear that the last illustration meant that we had camped illegally the previous night. We figured if we ever got caught we could just plead ignorance – "We're sorry, we don't understand German illustrations." Fortunately we didn't get caught, though now that I've confessed my crime in writing, we will never again be able to

Ups & Downs

return to Switzerland for fear of being immediately arrested at immigration control.

But no matter. It was a beautiful, sunny day, the first we'd had in 2 weeks that was completely rain-free. Onward we hastened, and after only 2 hours we came to Kiental, a beautiful, isolated valley town. According to the various people and maps we consulted, the local private campsite would be the last for another 12-15 miles, so we made the conservative call and decided to spend the night there.

It was only lunchtime, but you'd be amazed how easily you can kill an entire day when life has slowed down to a mountaineer's pace. We spent 90 minutes perched on the front steps of the grocery store, waiting for it to open so we could eat something other than peanut butter and jelly crackers for lunch. We walked down the hill to the campsite, set up our tents, and washed our clothes. Angela and I walked back up the hill to the grocery store and spent 45 minutes agonizing over what to buy for dinner. We then spent half an hour preparing our salad, ate it slowly, chatted for a little while, and then spent 45 minutes preparing dinner. We ate, washed the dishes, and then spent 3 hours watching the clouds. As we sat there on a bench, a string of tiny cumulus clouds raced across an otherwise clear sky squeezing between the Blumlisalp, (the tallest mountain in the area) and a shorter peak just in front of it, and coming out the other side as a much denser mass. As a result, it was 2½ hours before we caught a view of the Blumlisalp that was completely unobscured, and when we did we were almost disappointed that the constant eclipse had finally been broken.

Eventually the sun went down and the temperature dropped, forcing us into the shelter of our tents for the night.

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The Cast in Kiental