

Lizard Love

Don

July 2nd

A huge storm blew all that night. We were over 7,000 feet high and it was absolutely frigid, but at least we stayed dry under the cavernous shelter of the ski lift station. David, who tends to be paranoid about these sorts of things, was afraid that there were video surveillance cameras secreted around the structure. This was supported by the fact that the control room of the ski lift was next to where he and Angela had rolled out their sleeping bags; behind a large glass window, we could see red lights flickering ominously throughout the night.

As if David's natural tendencies aren't bad enough, he has been mightily influenced by my tales of Switzerland being a police state. The Swiss have rules for everything, and they are damned serious about them. When the Fried Family first moved to Zurich in 1987, we stayed for 2 months in a small apartment building. On the day we moved in we were given a pamphlet of the building rules, which included not taking showers or flushing toilets after 10 pm. There was also a schedule for using the building washer and dryer; each apartment was allocated exclusive use of the facilities for two entire **consecutive** days in each 2-week period. A few months later, when we moved into our house, Rhonda was harangued by a neighbor because she was mowing the lawn – with an electric lawn mower – between the noon and 2 pm “quiet” hours. And a work colleague of mine was given a ticket for washing his car on a Sunday. A neighbor had called the police to “inform” on him.

While we were living in Zurich there had been a big scandal when it was revealed that the Swiss national intelligence organization was actively spying and had secret files on a large

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percentage (40%?) of the population of the country. When we'd arrived 2 weeks earlier I had asked Elena and Tomas about what the outcome of the scandal had been. They said they expected that now, 20 years later, the figure was more in the 60% range.

When I was in Zurich on business in 1991, I heard a story on the radio of an American reporter who periodically came to Geneva to cover activities at the United Nations office there. On one trip, in the middle of his first night in the country he was awakened by the local police banging on his hotel room door. They seized him and took him to jail – **in his underwear!** Clearly whatever he had done was far too dangerous to allow him to get dressed. The next morning, he was informed that several years earlier he had rented a car and gotten a parking ticket, which there was no record of him having paid. When you check into a Swiss hotel you have to fill out a police registration form, and when this unfortunate soul's form had been keyed into the system the night before, alarm bells had started ringing all over the country. Fortunately for him he had, in fact, paid the ticket and, knowing the Swiss national mentality, he'd had the foresight to save the receipt. Unfortunately for him, the receipt was in New York, and it was most of a day before he could get a copy of it sent to the Geneva police and gain his release.

Coincidentally, on the same trip on which I'd heard that story I had rented a car and gotten a parking ticket. I kept the receipt and carried it with me every time I went to Switzerland until we left Europe in 2004. I didn't have it with me during our trek, which worried me more than a little.

Having been brought up on these and dozens of similar stories, David was terrified that some time during the night units of some elite Swiss military or civil law enforcement agency (The Swiss Coast Guard? The Ski-lift Police?) were going to rappel down from hovering helicopters, storm the lift station, and cart us off to a secret prison deep under the streets of Bern from which we would never emerge. Or at least they'd expel us from our dry, sheltered ski lift to wander endlessly through the sleet and freezing fog at the top of the Jochpass. But I guess whoever's job it was to come kick us out

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wasn't any more interested in braving the storm than we were, because we made it through the night unevicted.



*"... and He made them wander in
the desert forty years ..."*

I was first out of my sleeping bag the next morning, and discretely kept my eyes averted (I seem to have to do that a lot) from the other side of the ski lift from where David and Angela's sleeping bags were making suspicious rustling noises. Why anybody would want to risk exposing bare skin in conditions like that was beyond me. But I guess that's the difference between being 25 and being 55.

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(Note from David: In all fairness, any time Angela and I wanted to make suspicious rustling noises, we watched Dad for several minutes to make sure he was sleeping, or possibly frozen to death. More often than not, we rustled about pumping ourselves up to leave the coziness of our sleeping bags.)

We had only enough water left for cooking and drinking, and although there were snow-patches on the mountain slope a few hundred yards away, I wasn't in any mood to bundle up and go out into the storm before it was absolutely necessary. So after breakfast I washed the dishes under the drip of rainwater at the edge of the roof where the ski-cable stopped its downward trajectory and leveled off. It took a while, but it wasn't as though I had anything else important to do.

As we left the shelter of the lift station and headed down from the pass in full rain gear, the weather alternated between cold/windy/drizzling and cold/windy/pouring rain. A few minutes after starting, we came upon what looked to be a shiny black plastic toy sitting in the middle of the trail. I bent down to take a closer look, and it moved, albeit at glacial speed. It looked like a lizard, about 5 inches long, and fantastically ugly, like something from the dinosaur age. Over the next hour, we came upon thousands more. The lone ones were mostly basking in the damp on the exposed trail. If we approached one or prodded it with a stick, it would recoil a bit and then sprint off at the lightning pace of a step every 3 or 4 seconds. I guess the lone ones were the least attractive, because most of them were paired up and engaging in what looked remarkably like human missionary-position copulation. What is it with this mountain air? First Angela and David, and now a mountain-wide lizard orgy.

David said that lizards only live in hot, dry climates and that we should call them salamanders. Further research would prove that they were actually Alpine Newts, of the species *Mesotriton alpestris*. But Salamander Love, Newt Love, and *Mesotriton alpestris* Love don't trip off the tongue quite like Lizard Love.

As we continued down the mountain, David and I speculated on how a species that slow and apparently unprotected could survive.

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Perhaps it's simply their numbers. That much lizard-love is bound to produce a lot of little lizards. Perhaps they are poisonous. They certainly didn't look appetizing to me, but then I'm not a bearded alpine vulture, and none of us was willing to lick one to find out. Maybe the lizards are not indigenous at all, but the advance team from an alien planet sent to soften us up for the impending invasion of earth, and their bigger cousins would be along shortly. (I know the paranoia of that last one sounds like David, but I was the one who came up with it.)



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We walked downhill for over 7 hours, at times through gentle valleys, and at times along narrow paths set into the sides of precipitous cliffs. The rain had made the path, especially the rocks and roots, particularly treacherous, and I slipped and nearly fell several times. I'm not afraid of heights, but I was certainly glad when we left the cliff-side and were back walking through farms. Once again, David and Angela castigated me for walking ahead of them. I suppose after all the times I'd told them about my vast experience walking in the mountains, if I was going to go plummeting to my death they wanted to be there to enjoy it. (*Note from David: Yes, Dad was not shy about taking every opportunity to remind us how many more miles he has in the footbank than we do. The result was that Angela's reaction whenever Dad slipped on a rock was, "Take that, footbank!"*) Our only respite from the rain was when we stopped at a farm to buy cheese for lunch and sat for a half hour on a bench in front of their barn while we ate.

Finally, we slogged into the splendid town of Meiringen, at the west end of the Briensersee (at the other end of which is Interlaken). Meiringen is flanked to the east, south and southwest by the Sustenenpass, the Grimselpass, and Grosse Scheidegg, which are some of the highest road passes in Switzerland and are drivable only from late spring to early autumn. When Rhonda and I first came to Switzerland in 1974, we tried to drive over the Grimselpass during the first week of September. We couldn't make it over the top and had to back down the mountain in the dark and in deep snow until we got to a place where we could turn our car around.

Meiringen was made famous by Arthur Conan Doyle, who used it as the setting for Sherlock Holmes' "first" death in *The Final Case*. Although the first Sherlock Holmes stories had appeared only 2 years earlier in 1891, they immediately became wildly successful and by 1893 Doyle had published 24 of them. By that time, however, Doyle had tired of the pressure to churn out what he considered to be pulp fiction and wanted to free himself to produce more lofty historical novels and non-fiction works. He decided to kill off Holmes and his arch-nemesis Professor Moriarty by sending them plunging to their deaths over the Reichenbach Falls (just above

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Meiringen) during a titanic hand-to-hand struggle. However, Doyle hadn't counted on the public's attachment to Holmes. Londoners dressed in mourning and letters flooded in, some accusing Doyle of brutality. So during 1901 and 1902 he wrote the *Hound of the Baskervilles* recounting a number of adventures which had taken place before Holmes' death. Still, the public outcry at Holmes' death continued, and by 1903 Doyle capitulated and resurrected the master detective in *The Adventure of the Empty House*. It seems that Holmes had faked his own death to avoid continued pursuit by Moriarty's henchman.

Meiringen enthusiastically capitalizes on its association with Sherlock Holmes, but manages to do so in a non-tacky way. Sure, there's a Sherlock Holmes Museum, a Sherlock Holmes Hotel, and numerous statues and information signs, but they are all well presented and many of the houses in the town are surrounded by magnificent flower gardens which gives much of the place an up-market, Victorian feel.

By the way, Meiringen also claims to be the source of the word "meringue," although there doesn't seem to be any linguistic evidence to support that claim. By all accounts its origin is in the French language, though that's as far as any dictionary is willing to venture an etymological history.

It was still raining when we arrived, and even if it hadn't been, after seven sodden hours of walking we were ready for a roof and a shower. We stopped at the tourist information office, which made reservations for us at a nearby hostel. When we arrived at the hostel 10 minutes later, we were shocked to see what seemed like 50 screaming 13 year olds, French- and German-speaking Swiss on school trips. It was 4 o'clock and we weren't allowed to check-in until 5, so we made use of the two crude showers in the basement entrance "shoe" hall, washed our clothes in cold water in the utility sink, and hung them up in the games room, which had 10 clotheslines strung across the ceiling. All during the process, kids would open the door to the games room, see us and the clothes hanging everywhere, freak out, and leave.

We were concerned that we would have to sleep in a dormitory

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room with the kids, but it turned out that we had a four-bunk room for the three of us. We went out for dinner and came back at 8 pm to the continual screaming and thumping of the kids as they raced up and down the halls and stairs. At 10 pm, though, their chaperones announced that it was quiet time, and within a few minutes the hostel had fallen completely silent. The Swiss and their rules. I love it.