So You Want to be an Expat

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English

by

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Abstract

A tongue-in-cheek memoir of an American family’s three year life in Zurich, Switzerland from 2000-2003. This memoir—written in the present tense and from a second-person point of view—explores themes of displacement, child-rearing, and personal identity from the perspective of a mother in her early thirties.
1. And You’re Off

You fly out of Denver on July 1st, 2000, with eight suitcases and a sense of adventure. You can count to ten in German, and you’ll pick up the rest when you get to Switzerland. It’s silly to entertain stereotypes, yet you envision felt-hatted yodelers calling to one another across edelweiss-cloaked meadows, the Swiss Miss girl perched on a snow-capped alp with her cup of cocoa, the echoing cry of Ricola! as mountaineers soothe their throats on herbal cough drops. Strong cheese, dark chocolate, and buttery pastries are a few of your favorite things, and they are waiting for you in Zurich, where you’ll spend the next three years.

As the plane pushes through the clouds, you envision yourself skiing in Davos, climbing the Matterhorn, and ordering train tickets to everywhere. When you realize your children are absent from this reverie, you simply tack them in—one year-old Henry trekking up a forested slope, knobby walking stick in hand; Walter, almost five, traversing a glacier with his dad, learning about moraines and crevasses. You put out of your mind that Henry can barely toddle, and that Walter usually ends up on your husband’s shoulders twenty minutes into any hike. At present they are model citizens.
Henry lists to the right on your lap, drooling onto the Curious George book open across his brother’s legs. And Walter, not complaining about the slobber, simply clutches his rubber coral snake (his security toy) and turns the page.

Your husband sits hunched over his tiny fold-away tray table in the aisle seat, paging through a proposal on alpine tree regeneration. His dark hair, salted with more white since Henry’s birth last year, hides eyes that are absorbing the nuts and bolts of his upcoming project. He scribbles notes into the margins and reroutes text with aggressive arrows and slashes. His research post at the Swiss Institute of Forestry begins in four days. His boss, Harald, lined up an apartment he assured Pete was the best available for the rent you could afford. You also put out of your mind the fact that your family will be living in one of the most expensive cities in Europe on Pete’s post-doc salary. Somehow the hectic, penny-pinching days of life in Colorado have already receded into ancient history, and a simple three-year vacation seems possible.

2. Initiation

The taxi drops you at the apartment where you will live for the next three years, and your heart sinks. Maybe a half-beam, wood-shuttered house would have been out of the question, but you were hoping for something a little more charming, a little more Swiss, than the three-story, concrete-block apartment building before you. The beige walls are gritty, and the walkways made of cold, gray cement. The only splashes of color are the maroon walkway railings and the brown scroll-down metal shutters that cover the front windows. Bordering the front stairway stand familiar thorny, red-
berried hedges that grew next to your driveway in Colorado. Familiar dandelions clog the grass on an avenue lined with familiar maple trees.

Across the street, squeezed among more beige-colored buildings, is a tiny post office, a pharmacy, and a self-service tanning salon. This neighborhood is about twenty minutes from downtown Zurich, but there is no view of the city, or of any mountains. Forested hills rise up in the distance, but this simply strengthens the feeling you are moving into a dormitory in Wisconsin.

Except for a kitchen the size of a broom closet, the apartment is big enough, and will be comfortable enough once you buy furniture. Heavy, double-paned windows muffle the traffic noise as well as the squeal of metal on metal as trams approach the Hirschwiesen tram stop below. Visible from the tiny balcony off the back of the apartment are a park, a soccer field, and the walking path to the school that Walter will attend. Hibiscus and lilac bloom along the field’s fence. A swath of green space, wild with buttercups and wiry-stemmed flax, extends between your building and the apartment buildings opposite yours, which are also three stories, but painted pretty pastel shades of blue, yellow, and salmon. They have much larger balconies, from which hang flower boxes overflowing with fiery red geraniums and dahlias and tangles of English ivy. Maybe you live in the ugly building, but at least you have the better view.

The apartment lease is the size of War and Peace, and you don’t understand a word of it. You soon discover what is against the rules as, regrettably, the apartment
manager, Herr Huber, lives directly below you. You hang out a bird feeder and Herr
Huber knocks at your door and hollers, “No bird feeders!” Then you do laundry on a
Sunday. “No Sunday washing!” Hang a blanket out the window to air like you thought
all Europeans did. “No!” Vacuum during a lunch hour; throw away, instead of recycle,
a cardboard box; talk above a whisper after ten p.m. “No, no, no!”

Herr Huber is fluent in English from a stint of work he did in South Africa many
years ago. One morning you are on your way to the park with Walter and Henry (the
sofa you ordered from IKEA won’t arrive for six weeks, and the park bench is more
comfortable than sitting on the floor in the apartment). Herr Huber is sweeping debris
from the front steps. A cigarette dangles from his lips, and an inch of ash threatens to
tip onto his work shirt. His wrinkled pants and slowness while working (you’ve seen
him clip along at other instances) border on slovenly, yet he’s clean-shaven, and his
silvering hair is combed to the side and his shirt tucked in. If it weren’t for his constant
scowl, he might even be handsome.

“How are you, Herr Huber?” you ask as you bump Henry’s stroller down the
steps.

He stands aside to let you pass. “Every day is the same to me,” he says. He
leans forward and the cigarette ash wavers, then falls to the ground. “I don’t enjoy any
of them unless I’m on vacation.” He sweeps the ash to the side and squints at you with
his cold blue eyes. “By the way,” he says. “Are the water noises before 6:30 a.m.
coming from your apartment?”

Your husband is, of course, the culprit—showering each morning before work
(a novelty, you’ve noticed, for many people here)—but you tell Herr Huber you aren’t sure.

“Remember,” he growls, “no water noise until 7:00.”

Zurich makes up for grumpy Herr Huber. One Saturday, you leave the kids with Pete in the empty apartment and hop a tram to the city. Zurich sits on the northern end of Lake Zurich and is split in two by the Limmat River, which flows north out of the lake. You get off downtown at the train station (Bahnhof). Racks jammed full of bicycles line the front sidewalks of the station. Despite being a hub for trams, busses, and trains, car traffic is stop and go on all sides of the station. A towering statue of Alfred Escher, a 19th century railway magnate, stands upon a fountain of water-spitting dragons; he faces away from the train station toward Bahnhofstrasse (every Swiss city has a Bahnhofstrasse, a ‘train station street’ leading from the station). You start down Bahnhofstrasse and are struck by the amount of stone rising up around you—limestone bridges and office buildings, red sandstone churches and hotels. On the other side of the Limmat the buildings are painted green and pink and blue—like a color-print cloth against the blue hem of the river.

You soon become caught up in the swell of window shoppers. The city is especially crowded on Saturdays because all stores are closed Sundays. Ritzy shops selling Gucci, Armani, and Rolex line Bahnhofstrasse, along with expensive restaurants, the Credit Suisse and UBS banks. A McDonalds is squeezed between two ornate office buildings. Globus, a five-story department store best known for its imports, takes up half
a block on the west side of the street.

You veer off the corporate, paved Bahnhofstrasse onto a cobblestone side street. It winds through what becomes a labyrinth of narrow alleyways lined with coffee shops, clock shops, wine shops, flower shops and book shops. Squeezing between displays of shoes, pastas, shampoos, baby clothes, slacks, and towels reminds you of the once-a-year sidewalk sales back in Ft. Collins. You end up on the west bank of the Limmat. Hotels and galleries rise behind you, the sun glancing off intricate designs carved into their multi-colored shutters. You are buoyed by so much cobblestone and color. You tell yourself you will come here every day, that you are in Europe to enjoy old cities such as this, and that the boys are sure to appreciate it too.

You don’t get to the city every day, not even once a week. The wheels of Henry’s stroller constantly catch in the cracks of the cobblestone, and Walter whines that his legs are tired after crossing one street. They are absolutely unimpressed by the city’s aesthetics.

“Where are the castles you told us about?” Walter asks (the ones you showed him on the airplane in the Lonely Planet guide).

“Later,” you say, and steer them around the corner before they glimpse the McDonalds. You take the tram to the lake and watch the ferryboats. The kids throw stale bread to the ducks and swans tooling near shore. At a small, indoor-outdoor aviary located in the arboretum by the lake, they watch exotic birds preen and nest. You ask if they’d like to give the narrow streets another try—discover more fountained courtyards
and take more pictures of statues—but they say feeding gulls would be more fun, so you head back to the lakeshore.

You didn’t think food would be such a problem. The boys cry when you can’t find them orange-colored cheese; they say the Gruyere you buy smells so bad they will gag, and they do. The crust is too hard on the non pre-sliced bread, the cottage cheese too slimy. You spend a fortune on the limited selection of American products like Rice Krispies and Kix and beg your mother to spend $20 to ship $2.50 worth of Macaroni and Cheese. You feel you’ve discovered gold when you spy chicken nuggets in the freezer section at the store.

You find a Swiss snack the kids will eat—a ham-filled croissant—and feed it to them for lunch every day until after three weeks they are tired of it and hate it. Everyone is tiring of rice and pasta and chicken nuggets for dinner each night. You pull out a cookbook you’d packed last minute in your luggage and look up the words for eggplant, pork chops, ginger. Balsamic vinegar isn’t in your dictionary, and neither is scallion or soy sauce. You will hunt these things down, but it will be such a chore, going from shop to shop, backtracking, struggling with the stroller on the tram and carrying everything in a backpack. You hate to admit it, because in essence you love the quaint specialty shops, but you kinda sorta miss Safeway.

You are allowed to use one of two washing machines in the laundry room of your building every seventeen days. The schedule is posted on a calendar tacked to the laundry
room door in the basement. Astonishingly, dryers are nonexistent. One must lug their wet clothes to a room at the end of the basement hallway, hang them on metal wires, switch on an industrial fan at the back wall, and wait the several hours it takes them to dry. Dealing with the mountain of dirty clothes produced in seventeen days takes all day—washing in shifts, moving the less wet clothes farther from the fan to make room for the wettest, making sure jeans and bigger items aren’t blocking the airflow to shirts and socks. You’re quite sure that even third world countries have a better system than this. Switzerland, with its turbines and clockworks, is one of the most technologically advanced countries in the world; why would clothes dryers be a novelty? And for such an energy-conscious nation, running an industrial fan all day in a damp basement seems a waste of electricity compared to tumble drying a load for an hour. You ask Herr Huber’s wife (more pleasant to chat with than her husband) about this and she explains that, until recently, everyone hung their wash. Nowadays, she says, most households and apartments are in the process of upgrading, but this building won’t make the switch any time soon in order to keep costs down.

After two seventeen-day cycles you realize your family members will have to increase their wardrobes ten-fold to have enough clothes to last between laundry days by the time winter rolls around. Even now, washing the kids’ t-shirts or shorts in the sink is getting ridiculous. And there’s no way you’re going to wash out anyone else’s underwear but your own. You splurge on a portable washing machine that hooks to the bathroom sink. This side-loading machine is the size of a large toy (anything bigger wouldn’t fit in the bathroom), but sturdy. You can cram about a quarter of a typical laundry load into it.
A fold-out rack near the window in the kids’ bedroom holds the drying clothes. But even with the mini wash machine, heaps of laundry confront you on your scheduled days. You make at least seven trips to the laundry room, laden with an overflowing basket in front and Henry on your back (at age one he’s barely walking). This chore will be somewhat simplified when the kids’ big red wagon arrives in the shipment from Colorado, and you guess that it will get more use hauling laundry than children.

Between the fourth and fifth load of laundry on your second assigned day you slump onto a metal fold-out chair Herr Huber found abandoned in a previous renter’s storage room (the shipment, now delayed by four weeks, feels like it will never come). Thoughts that perhaps this move wasn’t such a great idea begin to needle the back of your mind. You wonder at your mental state last spring. Why did living abroad seem so important? After moving from Wyoming to Oregon to Colorado, Ft. Collins seemed a good place to settle with your young sons. And at age thirty-one it seemed time to settle. Pete had a decent post-doc job at CSU. You had a flexible part-time cartography job down the hall from him. Saving for a house wouldn’t have been out of the question. But neither of you seemed thrilled at the idea of homeownership in Ft. Collins. Maybe it was the starved sense of possibility from your childhood resurfacing (growing up in rural Minnesota), or that Pete’s job was losing its luster. No place is perfect, you both reasoned, yet you found the strip malls, cookie-cutter subdivisions, fast food chains, and urban sprawl suffocating.

When Pete mentioned the listing for the forestry position at the Swiss Federal
Institute, you’d mentally packed the dog off to your mother’s, found someone to sublet the house, and planned a garage sale even before he considered applying. The three-year contract seemed manageable and the idea of Europe glamorous. Though generally not prone to rash decision-making, the answer seemed obvious.

“You should definitely apply,” you’d said. You motioned toward Walter and Henry watching Dragon Tales on the couch. “How could we not take advantage of the opportunity? They can watch T.V. in Switzerland.” You stirred a pot on the stove. “I can cook pasta in Switzerland, wash dishes is Switzerland, change diapers in Switzerland. We can do everything that we do here in Switzerland, plus travel.” The grin on your face couldn’t have been chiseled away. “Kids adapt quickly to new places. They will become cultured. All we need are passports.”

“I haven’t even interviewed yet,” Pete said. “I haven’t even applied.”

But you knew he’d get the interview. And after he returned from Zurich, the offer. When the decision to actually take the plunge had to be decided, though, Pete began to falter. “It’s far,” he said. “And Switzerland is expensive.”

You hadn’t considered the drawbacks before and weren’t particularly keen on focusing on them now. “We’re already far from our families. They’ll be more likely to visit us in Europe. And your potential boss knows our situation; he wouldn’t offer you a wage that we couldn’t live on.”

“Harald did just return from two years in Boulder,” Pete said. “I guess he’d know what it’s like to make such a move. And he said all the researchers in his lab speak English.”
You could tell the lab interested him, even if the move made him nervous.

“Well?”

“Well, we need to decide soon.”

Your mind was made up. But if Pete had reservations you supposed you should hear him out. “What do you think?”

“You’d probably regret not going.”

Your obsessive drive to choose the path of least regret (all those movies with the tragic should-have-lived-life-differently 85 year-olds made their points a little too effectively) had obliged Pete to turn much of the decision-making over to you. But you weren’t about to decide something this big on your own and take the blame later if it turned out disastrous. “This is an us choice,” you said.

He’d looked at you with his typical (and frustrating) unreadable expression. “No, really, you decide.”

If Pete had been opposed to the idea, you’re certain he’d have stated his case. Although if he’d been gung-ho about it, he also would have stated his case. Staying. Going. In your opinion, the choice did circle back to the path of least regret. Either action would result in certain disappointments. But mightn’t the weight of not-knowing crush your poor eighty-five year-old shoulders later in life? You’d simply shrugged at Pete and said, “Well, then. Yes.”

Now the clock timer alerts you the fifth load is finished and needs to be hung immediately in order for the sixth load to have a chance to dry by tonight. You suppose you’ll just have to make the best of it; though as you dash downstairs to the dungeonous
drying room, hoping to hang load five before Henry wakes up from his nap, you’re sure that if your shoulders do indeed last to eighty-five, they will never appreciate the Swiss laundry system. The bright side is that you’ve learned how to properly hang a shirt—a tip from Harald after Pete came to work for a week straight with puckered clothes pin marks on his shoulders.

3. E.T.H.

Pete works for the Eidgenossische Technische Hochschule (Federal Institute of Technology, ETH for short), where he studies tree regeneration in avalanche-prone areas. He’ll mostly be working with computer models at his desk, but occasionally he’ll get to join the field crew in ground-truthing the study sites.

Office-space wars at ETH are as intense as they were back in Ft. Collins, where Pete had sat practically spine-to-spine with the other post-doc in the tiny room they shared. Pete was slated to share a small office at ETH, too, but the week before he arrived, one of the senior foresters died unexpectedly. Before the proper amount of mourning time elapsed and the squabbling over the space began, Harald had already filled out the paperwork to secure it. He didn’t take it for himself, though, as he was already settled in his own office (the Swiss rarely move once settled and consider people who do such things capricious), and offered it to Pete to share with the incoming Ph.D. student.

Pete hasn’t spoken much about his office, or the building in which it is housed, so you aren’t quite prepared for your first visit. When you step off the tram with the boys you double-check the name of the stop, thinking it must be the wrong one.
“Does Dad work in a castle?” Walter asks.

“I guess so,” you say, carrying Henry in one arm and the diaper bag in the other across the street into a looming gothic shadow. You’d expected a high-tech, sciency-looking building—boxy and metal-doored, like the science buildings in Colorado and Oregon. The magnificent ETH building rising before you looks more like a museum or a capital building. A massive dome and copper cupola rise from its center. Wide limestone wings extend from both sides. The extensive courtyard, set back from Universität Strasse, has benches and low steps where students sit reading and talking on cell phones. Geraniums and ivy spill from cast-iron window boxes. A sandstone lion spits water from a fountain on the corner.

You walk around the building to reach the terrace where Pete said to meet. You expect a patio with outside seating, probably extending from a student cafeteria, but the terrace turns out to be a huge sunny expanse, with benches, raised beds of flowers, and information boards explaining the view of the part of city they overlook. The outdoor cafeteria area is on another terrace below—a smaller area holding metal tables and chairs and surrounded by low growing trees and hedges. The view from the upper terrace takes in all of Zurich, the lake, and mountains off in the distance. Unlike an American skyline of high-rises and sky scrapers, Zurich’s is a sea of wood and terra cotta shingled roof tops, church spires and clock towers, and a rainbow of hotels and restaurants lining the Limmat River below.

Pete steps from behind one of the lion statues guarding the doors. “You made it,” he says, picking up Henry, then Walter, and standing them on the low wall next to the
You crane your neck to see the detail in the stone gargoyles lining the top edge of the building. “Not too shabby.”

“Pretty nice, huh,” Pete says. “Supposedly it hasn’t changed much since Albert Einstein studied here in 1900. Let’s go in.”

Through a fifteen-foot wooden door, hallways with tall arched ceilings lead in several directions. Pete points you forward. You walk down a granite-tiled hallway and take a wide, spiral staircase to the second floor, from which limestone columns rise to the central dome, in which is painted a fresco of plump, pale women in billowy pink gowns reaching toward a central shaft of light. The hallway to Pete’s office contains dusty, wooden display cases which hold fungi, butterflies, feathers, rodent skeletons, and wood samples. With the odor of old libraries tingeing the air, the hall resembles a forgotten wing of a natural history museum. Your husband is surrounded by such grandeur all day, while you look from a balcony that fits a chair and a flower pot. The neo-classical architects—or any architects with a sense of taste—left town before reaching your neck of the woods.

“Echo!” Walter shouts, and his voice ricochets to the other end of the corridor. Your footsteps echo, your voices echo.

“Where is everyone?” you ask. “It’s so quiet, it’s almost spooky.”

“The students arrive for the last summer session next week,” Pete says. He stops and points to a tall wood-frame door, only slightly smaller than the one through which you entered the building. “My office is through there.”
You look up. “Definitely bigger than what you had at CSU.”

“You could say that. I’ll be sharing it with Ludger, the Ph.D from Munich, starting next week.” Then he opens the door to the biggest office you’ve ever seen. On the west-facing wall, sunlight pours in through eight-foot, wood-framed windows. Floor-to-ceiling oak bookcases, still half-filled with the dead professor’s texts, line the side walls. A pair of mahogany desks and a table on Pete’s side of the room offer what seems like an acre of surface area for Pete to spread his mounds of papers and notebooks and journals. The room is so long it practically requires a phone to talk with the person at its other end.

Double glass doors behind Pete’s desk open out to a sweeping stone balcony. Office and balcony combined are larger than your apartment. Maybe you could move the family here, set up camp on the balcony and let the kids get lost in the building’s labyrinth of hallways every day while you run off to enjoy the city.

While Pete rolls from one desk to the other in a patent leather office chair, you frown. “Doesn’t it bother you that a dead guy was sitting there just a little while ago?”

“Should it?” He opens the top drawer of one of the desks. It still contains pens, erasers, a calculator. “No reason for this stuff to go to waste.”

“How Swiss of you,” you say, though you’d embrace this space, dead guy included, if it were offered to you. You point to a paperweight, a cube of dyed-blue granite. “What will you do with that?”

Pete picks it up, then rolls the char backward to a stack of papers on the other desk and plunks it on top. “It’ll come in handy when the balcony doors are open.” He glances
up. “Or did you want it for the apartment?”

“To protect against the miniscule draft coming through the back window? Right.”

You could care less about the paper weight. The space surrounding you is another issue. The two of you never had enough space in your past apartments and rental houses; you fought your own ‘space wars’ before. You can see by the way Pete’s eyes swallow in the high ceiling and every nook and cranny that he’s already losing himself to it. The likelihood that illegal drugs or another woman would tempt Pete from his family is next to nil, but an oasis like this might just steal him away for a good chunk of the next three years.

4. Settling in, Not

Traffic clogs Zurich’s streets. With gas costing the equivalent of $6.50 per gallon, most cars are fuel-efficient and no larger than a sedan or compact station wagon. The most fuel-efficient car is the Smart Car—a tiny two-seater resembling the rubber-banded pull-back toy cars you found in cereal boxes as a kid (that erratically whizzed across the kitchen floor and flipped and crashed after barely grazing a table leg). You would never drive a Smart Car, or any car for that matter, in Zurich. Contending with vehicle traffic, tram lines, and pedestrians would be too nerve-racking, even though a car would be convenient for transporting large purchases that can’t be carried onto the tram.

Although Pete likes taking the tram to work (a fifteen minute ride, door-to-door), he misses the chance to get behind the wheel and drive. Fortunately, you don’t need to buy a car to allow him this opportunity when the purchase of a television requires a drive
to the Migros department store on the outskirts of town. Pete simply trades his U.S. driver’s license for a Swiss one and joins the Swiss Car Share program. Now he is able to sign out a car on the internet for a certain number of hours and pick it up from the lot down the street (there are many lots around the city, always located near tram stops).

Trips around town are inexpensive. The week after the television purchase, Pete drives to IKEA and buys a build-it-yourself entertainment center. Now your family can watch T.V. at eye level from the plastic patio chairs Harald lent you (the sofa, still on back order from IKEA, seems to be competing with your shipment for latest arrival date).

You are now officially a *Hausfrau* on all documents. It translates to housewife, but conjures up the image ‘frumpy cleaning lady,’ not that it matters since you feel that way anyway, constantly shopping, cooking, and cleaning up after your family. Until now you’ve had some kind of title—student, lab tech, field assistant, teaching assistant, cartographer. Now you feel stripped of personality; you’re just a Frau in the Haus. You ask Pete to help vacuum one evening and he asks where the vacuum is, how to turn it on. Household chores were once shared equally when you had an outside job. Now you wouldn’t be surprised if he’s forgotten how to boil water. But he’s at ETH all day, and it’s only fair you hold up your end at home. Besides, you *wanted* to be a full-time mom—to appreciate the children at every turn! Now you watch German-speaking Teletubbies bumble around their green hill, change mountains of diapers, and speak in sing-song all day. Juggling map-making with giving baths used to be hectic, but now simply giving baths is impossible to appreciate, and you find yourself calculating on a
daily basis how much closer to an oatmeal state your brain has devolved.

Two weeks later and you are still sleeping on mattresses on the floor. Luckily Harald lent you those when you’d moved in or you’d be on the carpet. The shipment was due a week ago and now they estimate at least one more week. Harald’s wife lent you a pot, a pan, and silverware until your things arrive. She also donated her son’s old crib to Henry, so you wouldn’t have to ship yours. But Henry climbed out of the crib in less than one minute on the night of your arrival (maybe Swiss babies are better trained), and refused to go near it again. You laid the crib mattress next to Walter’s mattress, hoping that proximity to his brother would help him sleep, but no luck; he still ran to your room every night. Then when Walter woke up in the empty room, still foreign to him, he also ran to you. You and Pete were pushed to opposite edges of your mattress. If you gave up an inch of pillow it was gone for the rest of the night. And the blanket disappeared when one or other of the boys rolled away with it.

Now all the mattresses are in your room where everyone is sleeping until the shipment comes. It resembles a flophouse, but you don’t care; the bigger issue is that the eight hour time difference still isn’t solved, and you and Pete still wearily take turns getting up with Henry at four and five in the morning, knowing Herr Huber would find a clause in the lease prohibiting screaming babies before seven a.m.

Everyone is tired. You load up on espresso beans from the tiny Italian market down the street, and brew strong bitter cups of electricity that power you through the day. But the power surge sputters out by late afternoon, and you know that even if you are
ambitious enough to hunt down the ingredients for a pork stir-fry, you will lack the
energy to make it. You return to the Italian market and try rounding up the ingredients for
a pizza. You ask for pepperoni and get a green pepper, sauce and get a blank stare,
mozzarella and get a pack of what resembles four soggy golf balls which smear across the
grater. Forget pizza. Another night of pasta.

The address of your apartment is Oerlikonerstrasse 5. Fünf is hard enough to
pronounce with the umlaut, but Oerlikonerstrasse? When you drop by Pete’s office one
day and meet his new officemate, Ludger (who speaks English flawlessly), you ask if he’s
ever heard of it.

“Sorry. Which street?”

“Oerlikonerstrasse. The one that goes to Oerlikon. Where the local train stops
and the big farmer’s market is on Wednesdays and Saturdays?”

He squints. “Do you mean Oerlikon?”

“Isn’t that what I said?”

“It is not what you said, but yes, I’ve heard of it. It’s nice to live near there.
Oerlikon has many shops and you don’t have to go to downtown Zurich to buy things.”

You’d been pronouncing the Oer part of Oerlikon like the word or, and the lik
part with a short i. At least you didn’t mess up the end syllable, not that anyone knew
what you were talking about by that point anyway. Ludger explains that the Oer sound is
a cross between the er ending of a word like never and the word air (his name,
pronounced Lood-gair, would have surely thrown you off if you’d been introduced to his
written name first). And the *i* in *lik*, he says, is an *ee* sound. And trilling the *r*, though not imperative for understanding, makes the pronunciation perfect. “Errrleekon,” he says and waits for you to repeat it.

You don’t even try trilling the *r*. It never worked in 9th grade Spanish and it’s not going to start working now. But you manage the air/er syllable after a few tries, and when Harald comes in with some papers for Pete to sign and asks how you are settling in, you say, “You mean at Oerlikonerstrasse fünf?”

He looks over at you. “I guess so. That’s your address, right? Across from the Hirschwiesen tram stop?”

“Yes. The Heeershveeezin stop. Of course.”

You know you are desperate for adult conversation in English when, after a knock at the door, you usher in the two, pretty LDS missionaries from Salt Lake City. You don’t mention that your husband is Jewish or that there’s not a religious bone in your body. Instead you take their pamphlet and change the subject to canned ravioli and where one might find it. They just started their mission, they say, and haven’t discovered it yet, but you might try Globus. Your brother and his family live in Salt Lake City, so you make small talk out of the two things you remember about that area—the Wasatch Mountains and the Kennecott open-pit copper mine. The girls’ interests don’t lie in hiking or the negative impacts of mining, and conversation quickly runs short. You discover, though, that they studied German intensively for only three months before they were fluent enough to spread their message. This is an incentive for you to fire up your Step-Into-
German tape after they leave. But a moment later Henry wakes from his nap, then Walter wants a story, and so on and so on. You never get past, *Guten Tag. Wir sprechen Deutch!* before the tape gets flipped off. Maybe if you put it under your pillow it will soak in osmotically.

Apparently Herr Huber spends the majority of his life sweeping around the trash bins. You try to avoid him and his negativity whenever possible, but some days he sweeps the small space between the Dumpster and the retaining wall indefinitely, as if knowing you (or whomever he needs to have a word with) will eventually have to pass. One morning, after hearing Herr Huber’s broom scratch for over an hour beneath your window, you decide that you can’t keep the boys cooped up all day in the apartment just because he might want to scold you for breaking another rule. You load the diaper bag, sidewalk chalks, sand pails and shovels onto the stroller and head down the stairs.

Herr Huber suddenly appears at the stair rail. “Mrs. Weisberg,” he states (you’re so rarely called by your last name that you nearly look behind you to see if he’s addressing someone else).

“Hello,” you say to his lack of greeting. “Yes?”

He taps the metal Dumpster with his broom handle. “Have you purchased Züri-sacks yet?” His tone indicates you’ve broken another rule and, if it were his choice, a dozen lashes might serve the proper punishment.

You have no idea what Züri-sacks are and shake your head dumbly.

“Zurich residents pay for each bag of garbage they throw away,” he explains.
“The bags are called Züri-sacks, and you can buy a ten-pack of them at the store for twenty Swiss francs. One came with your apartment when you moved in.”

He must mean the small plastic sack that was lining the kitchen garbage can—the one you filled in half a day with Henry’s diapers. With one Swiss franc (SF) equaling about a dollar it doesn’t take long to calculate that you’ll need to take out a loan to fund the trash your family produces.

“And if I don’t use Züri-sacks?” you ask, somewhat emboldened by your empty pockets after having recently paid fees for everything from proof of identity to radio reception. “There are forty apartment units here. How would the garbage men know who’s breaking the rule?”

His frown becomes even more severe, if possible. “Everyone must pay his fair share, Mrs. Weisberg. The city hires garbage police to search non-Züri-sack bags for those who choose not to. Just make sure any paper you throw out doesn’t have your name on it.”

“Garbage police?” Several loose pieces of junk mail addressed to you just went out in Tuesday’s pickup. You picture men in black knit hats plucking a soggy credit card application from a sea of trash and inspecting it with a magnifying glass, then sending rifle-toting officers to your apartment to haul you off to a dark cell.

“They check randomly, Mrs. Weisberg, but I’d suggest that you go and buy yourself some Züri-sacks as the fines are quite steep.” With that he heads up the stairs in a cloud of cigarette smoke.

As he shuffles along the walkway, you realize that he’s just saved you a big
financial headache. If he weren’t so sour, the lag time between his dispensing this advice and you understanding it would have been less. “Thanks,” you call after him.

He simply nods and keeps walking toward his door.

In mid-August, a retired nurse moves into the apartment above yours and invites the entire east side of the building to her place for coffee and cookies in order to meet everyone (were you supposed to do this? Are you considered rude for not having done this?). Many hospital workers speak English and hers, of course, is perfect. You introduce the kids. “I hope they aren’t too noisy. Henry still wakes up at night and cries.”

“Nonsense,” Frau Hessler says and pats Henry on the head. “They are perfectly well behaved boys. But I am the one above. I’m sure you hear me all the time.”

You wouldn’t have known that anyone had moved in, except for the far-away sound of the antique phone that you now spot on a corner table. “The only thing we can hear is your phone. The ring is interesting—like an antique phone my dad kept in his office. The typical ones here are so strange with their solid tone.”

“Oh dear. You can hear that? I’m terribly sorry.” Frau Hessler wrings her hands and, before you can stop her, rushes to the table and yanks the phone cord from the wall. “That should be better.”

“It really doesn’t bother me,” you assure her. “Really. In fact, I like the sound. We can barely hear it.” But your error glares before you. People here wouldn’t mention a sound unless it annoyed them. Of course she could hear the kids, but she
didn’t say anything or it would have implied a complaint. “Will you please plug it back in?”

Her glance suggests that she might believe your sincerity, but things have gone too far. Each ring of the phone would remind her that downstairs you are clued in to her calls, that her phone life is open to you, and she doesn’t want a link like that with anyone. “I’ll get a new one tomorrow,” she says. She probably thinks you’ve been eavesdropping on all her conversations, too.

You’re sure you’ve ruined whatever friendly-neighbor relationship could be had with her and wonder if she’ll conspire with Herr Huber downstairs to make your life a miserable sandwich between the two. But moments later when she circles around the few guests that are lingering (many just popped in to introduce themselves) she seems genuinely pleased when you ask her for her ricotta cake recipe (you’ve had three pieces; it is delicious and no one seems to be eating it—maybe it’s not polite to eat at these functions either, but you’re sure that food going to waste would also be considered a crime). She produces the recipe with a flourish and translates the ingredients.

“How do you have grandkids?” you ask. It would be nice if kids came around sometimes as you’ve seen no other children living in this apartment complex.

“I was a nurse,” she says. Her tone implies this news should be revelatory in some way, but you don’t get the connection. When you don’t respond she continues, “Of course that means I never married.”

“It does?” You assumed she was widowed.

“You mean nurses in the States marry?”
You nod.

“And have children?”

You nod.

“That seems very irresponsible,” she says.

“Why?”

“Nursing schedules are erratic. Who cares for the children?” Her expression is fully earnest.

“I suppose schedules are set to coordinate with daycares or spouses or babysitters. Everyone pitches in.” Unlike in this old-fashioned system, you’d like to add.

“Well things are different here,” she scoffs. “Husbands are at work and daycare, until recently that is, is non-existent. Look at Sabina downstairs. She’s a modern woman. She has a boyfriend, but I guarantee she won’t marry, and if she does, she will never have kids.” She seems to sense your hesitation. “It’s not such a sacrifice, you know. Women know this going into the profession. Not everyone wants kids! Anyway, it’s simply best for children to be raised by their mothers.”

“Of course not everyone wants kids,” you say. “But banning marriage seems extreme.”

“It’s not banned, simply very discouraged. Who would cook the noon meal? Anyway,” she says, lowering her voice and nodding toward the old gentleman sitting on a chair on the balcony, “I have my ‘friends,’ and this one and I have planned a month-long Caribbean cruise together next spring.”
5. Routine

The shipment finally arrives! Twenty boxes, the beds, bikes, and table and chairs; it’s about a quarter of what you own but feels like a windfall. The kids rip into the toy boxes like it’s Christmas. Plastic animals, Matchbox cars, and puzzle pieces are underfoot in less than ten seconds. You tear into the kitchen box—what a luxury it will be to cook a meal with more than one lidless pot! And the computer; you hug the box, anticipating the second you’ll connect to the internet and e-mail your friends and family back home. Pete handles his bird books as if he can’t believe they are actually in hand. He pages through his *Field Guide to European Birds*. “I knew it was a great tit I kept seeing out back,” he says. Then he flips to another page, suddenly unaware more pressing issues lay at hand, like setting up the kids’ bedroom so they sleep *there* from now on.

You arrange the boys’ dressers and beds like they were in their bedroom in Colorado except now Henry will sleep in a bed, squeezed between Walter’s bed and the wall so he can’t roll out. Their dinosaur posters get tacked in their familiar positions, toy bins stacked at the foot of the beds. Everything’s arranged like before.

But Henry again wakes up in the middle of the night and comes to your bed and thrashes for hours. Maybe he got too used to sleeping next to you, or maybe he’s truly terrified, but you’re not sure how to break the cycle. You don’t force him back to his room because you don’t want his howls to wake Walter (or Herr Huber). He continues to hog your pillow, your blanket, your space.

On August 21st, a week before his fifth birthday, Walter starts kindergarten at the
local Swiss school down the block. He is terrified; you are terrified. Although Swiss children spend two years in kindergarten (which should give him plenty of time to learn the language before academics get more demanding), Walter has always been shy around other kids, to the point of preferring to play alone. Could the language barrier end up an excuse for him to never interact with anyone? As you push Henry’s stroller along the footpath, Walter sticks tight to you, his hand clamped over yours on the handle of the stroller. You try to exude cheerfulness and confidence for him to cling to and take with him into the German speaking class, though your insides are tight with worry.

“Each day try to learn the name of one of your classmates,” you encourage. He says nothing, continuing to drag the heels of his new sneakers. “All the kids will be nervous on the first day.” You take his hand fully in yours, managing to maneuver the stroller with your left hand. “I heard Frau Alder is one of the smartest and nicest teachers in Zurich.” You only know Frau Alder by the name on the slip of paper folded into Walter’s backpack with the tissues and slippers and other supplies he’ll need to begin the school year, but he doesn’t question your reassurance (like he usually would) and seems to use it to shore up his confidence.

The schoolhouse is a three-story white stone building, overgrown with ivy and shaded by giant cottonwoods. A garden of tomatoes and zucchini grows in front of the middle section of the school where it looks as if a caretaker might live. No playground equipment exists on the asphalt courtyard, just a large, empty fountain. Inside the fountain stands an oxidized copper statue of a frog dancing on one hind leg and wearing a crown. The quiet grounds resemble those of a private college instead of an elementary
You approach the building and Walter’s grip on your hand tightens. “You’ll be fine,” you tell him. “The first day is always easy. Plus you only have half-days of school here.” While you search for his classroom, a stroke of excitable windbreaker-clad luck approaches you and clasps your arm.

“Did I hear you speaking English?” she exclaims. “My son will be so happy to have an American boy in his class. He’s a second-year kindergartener. Come and meet him.”

She introduces herself as Emily and pulls you to the classroom where the boys are introduced to one another. Her son, Joseph, is blond with a big smile, and he takes Walter by the hand to a table full of Lego. Walter needs this, to be taken by the hand, and an inkling of relief pushes through your worry.

The room is large and divided into sections—a kitchen area with a play oven and painted wooden fruits and vegetables; a game area with wood-pegged boards, puzzles, and dice games; a reading nook with a sofa and bookcase; and the Lego table. It’s smaller than the preschool in Colorado, but feels cozier and less sterile, with the well-worn wooden toys scattered around and the lacy curtains shifting in the breeze over open windows. Also, the floors are spotless since the children change into slippers before entering the classroom.

Emily introduces you to Frau Alder, who is cheerful and pretty and even speaks a little English. She says there are many foreigners in the class this fall. You’ve heard that children pick up languages quickly and ask how long before Walter will be speaking
“Don’t expect him to learn it overnight,” she answers. “The foreign kids will have extra language lessons starting next week, but it takes time.”

You wave goodbye to Walter. He waves and turns back to the airplane hanger he and Joseph made with the Lego.

Pushing the stroller toward home, you recall a scene in a Radio Shack in Ft. Collins—a young Mexican girl translating without pause the heated dialogue between her mother and the store manager regarding an answering machine in her clutches. You told yourself you wouldn’t use your kid as a language crutch when you got to Switzerland. You would adjust! But with the paperwork piling up on your kitchen table, you can’t help but harbor the hope of Walter soon tackling your banking needs, making appointments, and arguing with the manager at Migros about your own answering machine woes.

Emily is an oddball of sorts and someone you may not have befriended in the States, not because of her quirks (that’s what interests you most about people) but because of her inaccessibility. She lurks in her home for weeks, sending her kids to school with her neighbor (her other son, Nicholas, is a first-year kindergartener like Walter, but in the other kindergarten class). Then she’ll surface, always in a skirt and sneakers and a windbreaker, full of nervous energy, chatting about what she’s been up to with her various groups (she’s fluent in German). Sometimes she seems to want to keep a distance from you and too much spoken English, yet her over-eagerness in approaching
the reserved Swiss mothers makes them uneasy, so they avoid her and she circles back to you. Walter and Joseph and Nicholas love to play together, though, as do her two year-old daughter, Francis, and Henry.

Emily suggests trading the toddlers once a week and you agree; it would be nice to have a few hours of freedom. But the swap doesn’t work. Henry has extreme separation anxiety and Emily’s nervousness compounds the matter. Henry’s wild screaming cannot be consoled. On the other hand, Francis loves coming to your apartment and she and Henry play nicely. Their friendship is important, so you volunteer to take her once a week. On top of a Hausfrau-ing, you are a babysitter. If you weren’t able to vent your frustrations via daily e-mail with your good friend in Colorado, you’d go nuts.

Many German words have English spellings or pronunciations but mean different things. *Will* means *want*. *Wer* (pronounced *where* with a v) means *who*. You say things like, *Ich will kuchen*, not intending to mean you *want* to cook. Or, when looking for Walter, *Wer ist Walter*, making it seem as if you don’t know your own son. *Gross* means *big*. When you need two large peppers at the market down the street, it’s strange to ask for *zwei gross pepperoni* when your instinct suggests you may wind of with two rotten sticks of salami.

Some words are helpfully similar, though. *Weiss* is *white*; *braun* is *brown*; *für* is *for*; *pflanzte* is *plant*. *Ding* means *thing*, and you perfect the point-and-*ding* request quickly. *Ein braun ding für pflantzen*, you say to the shopkeeper when you need a flower pot from the top shelf. Or simply, *Das ding*, when pointing to a melon in the basket.
behind the stall keeper at the farmer’s market.

\textit{Arzt} sounds like \textit{art} or \textit{artist}. The unassuming, three-story \textit{Kinderarzt} building across the street from your apartment building and next to the post office is not at all what you’d expect a gallery to look like (though things aren’t always what they seem here). You wonder who would want children’s art and guess that it must be for some sort of charity. Out of curiosity, you wander across the street with Henry to check it out one morning after Walter goes to school.

There’s not even a front entrance, so you follow a sidewalk to the back door, where a woman exiting with a child holds the door for you. The building smells faintly of chemicals and deodorizers. Maybe an art \textit{school} inhabits this place, you think, and rooms of easels and paints and turpentine cleaners are nearby. You take a flight of stairs to investigate. At the top is a hallway with two closed doors. To the side of each door hangs a name plate and a buzzer. One office is labeled \textit{Christof Jorg, Kinderarzt}, the other \textit{Elena Jorg, Zhanarzt}. You know that \textit{zhan} means \textit{tooth} from the \textit{Zhan paste} label on the tube in your bathroom. As a mother/child duo exits the tooth art door you sneak a peek inside and see a reception desk and a wall of file cabinets; a corridor leading to more rooms extends away from the main door. These are offices of some sort—not for an art school either, you realize, as a nurse in a white uniform approaches a waiting area and calls the next name on her roster. You pick up Henry and make a hasty retreat before you’re ushered into some sort of appointment you never made.

When crossing the street you spot Emily and Francis at the tram stop island, sitting on the bench beneath the Plexiglas shelter. Emily waves and you walk over to
“Is Henry sick?” she says, tilting her head and making a long face at him.

“No. Why? Does he look sick?”

“I don’t know. I saw you come out of the children’s clinic and just assumed. Anyway, Dr. Jorg is a really good doctor. He has a small private practice—and he speaks English. I take my kids there. Dr. Jorg shares the floor with his wife who’s a dentist.”

“That’s good to know,” you say, as if you knew artzt meant doctor all along and were simply checking out the premises.

“Just don’t make an appointment for the dentist, yet, because the school takes the kids for check-ups every spring.”

One less thing to worry about anyway. You motion toward the tram tracks.

“Are you going to town?”

“No, just up to the Co-op for nappies.” Several years ago Emily lived in England, where Joseph was born and spent his first year. For some reason she still likes to use the British words for many things—diapers are nappies, pants are trousers, a stroller a pram, and, fantastically, oatmeal is porridge, which sounds so old-fashioned that you can barely keep a straight face when she scolds one of her kids with a line like, “Because you didn’t finish your porridge this morning, you can’t have any crisps.”

Maybe this vernacular would sound natural in England (though you’re pretty sure a typical Brit might say, “no breakfast, no crisps” or whatever), but it simply makes Emily sound grandmotherly.
When Tram 14 trundles up the tracks from Oerlikon, Francis starts running back and forth on the platform. You wave goodbye and cross Oerlikonerstrasse to your apartment, making a mental note of which *arzt* is which, and where Henry will need to go for his next vaccination.

By November Walter has learned vocabulary for the colors, days of the week, seasons, and fuzzy animals, but nothing pertaining to health insurance deductibles or savings accounts. And you’re tired (and embarrassed) of speaking Teletubby German all the time (Po tired. Po sleep!), and only in the present tense (if any tense), so you sign up for a night course in German through Walter’s school.

The weekly two-hour class is offered to foreign women with children in the Swiss school system. Many of the women don’t live in Switzerland by choice. About three-quarters are political refugees from the Balkans, and the others are from Portugal or Brazil and working in Zurich as housekeepers in order to send money back to their families. There are twelve ladies in your class, but usually several are absent, or they don’t study between classes so the teacher has to teach the class slowly to keep everyone on board. You don’t mind the slow pace, though. It is nice to understand a bit of German for a change, even if you can’t yet understand a word of what people say outside the class.

The Wednesday farmer’s market in Oerlikon square is a twenty-minute walk from Walter’s school. You begin strolling Henry to the market each Wednesday morning after dropping Walter off. It’s a good way to practice a little German now that you can ask for eggplant and ginger and scallions. Henry loves the splash of colors at the market—
bouquets of flowers in buckets, cartloads of vegetables and fruits, fish stands, herb stands, bread stands. You eventually become a regular at certain stands. ‘Your’ farmer gives Henry a carrot each time you buy from him. ‘Your’ fish lady gives him a little square of chocolate. ‘Your’ Greek guy gives him a goat-cheese stuffed pepper. You still pay with large bills, since you don’t always hear the price correctly in the Swiss dialect, and end up with heaps of change. Henry is always content on the stroll home, sharing his seat with sacks of tomatoes, apples, and lettuce.

Pete signs up for a more intensive German class through ETH—two hours, two afternoons a week. Foreign students and post-docs like Pete make up the bulk of the attendance. Whereas your class is taught to memorize phrases depending on the context of a situation, Pete’s class learns verb declensions, cases, and other grammatical rules which, in the long run, will be more helpful. Because of obligations at work, Pete can’t make it to all the lessons, though, and remains at about your level. To ramp up both your language comprehension skills, you and Pete study German together at the computer after the kids are in bed. His instructor recommended a six-CD set that he checked out from the language lab. After about a week you begin the second CD—scenarios acted out by German speakers with questions for the student to answer regarding the conversation. You like this feeling of solidarity between the two of you: working toward a common goal of language comprehension. In the past you’ve typically buried yourselves in your respective books or work and then connected briefly for a quick drink before bed. Now you work together, neither of you jittery to escape to solitude; it’s not exactly romantic, but somehow deciphering what is happening in a German man’s frantic search for his lost
coat draws you closer than cycling again through the few video rentals the library offers in English.

Then the day arrives when after the kids’ water bottles have been filled and good night stories read, Pete doesn’t show up at the computer. You hear him clangling around in the kitchen, making tea or getting a beer. “Are you coming?” you ask. “There’s no rooms left at the only hotel in town, and the man who lost his coat last time has no place to spend the night.”

Pete moves to the doorway and leans on the frame. He looks past you, past the computer screen. “I can’t do it,” he sighs.

“What. Ask for a hotel room?”

“No. Learn German.”

He’s giving up? Abandoning the little time you share in which more than ten percent of your brain is activated? Quitter! you want to holler out the window toward the tram stop. *Here is someone who won’t even try!* Maybe then he’d look a little guiltier than he does now, standing there so nonchalantly. “Why?” you say, as coldly as possible.


“Good excuse.”

“And, to tell you the truth, the last thing I want to do after work is study.”

“What about communicating in this language the next few years?”

“Everyone at the lab speaks English. Our weekly meetings are in English and so are conferences and visiting lecturers.”
“Isn’t that convenient.” You feel abandoned, knowing who it will be up to from now on to translate the mail and the home notes from school and make every appointment and reservation. “How can you live in a country and not learn its language?”

“My days at ETH are only getting busier. I need time to unwind, too, and something’s got to give. You don’t seem to be in the frame of mind to understand this.”

You are in the frame of mind to conclude he is getting off too easy. “You’re right.”

“Well, that’s how it is.” He leaves you at the computer with the German I CD case about to snap between your fingers. In the living room he swipes the New Yorker off the table and heads for the couch (it finally arrived three weeks ago) to settle into something more intellectual than discovering that dinner, indeed, is included in the price of a room. Anger and disappointment bring a nasty taste to your mouth. He doesn’t have to speak German because everyone will cater to him in English. He has a choice. But you are stuck in a community in which English only gets you blank stares and shakes of the head. You’ll show him. You’ll study every night until your brain pounds, ramping up to fluency in half the time it would have taken with him in the chair next to you, his hand in yours, the two of you squinting at the computer while the German voice quizzed, Vießel costet zwei bier?

Because Pete has given up German you can’t practice with him. And because Walter speaks the very different Swiss dialect in school and you don’t understand one another’s words, you can’t practice with him. After Pete returns the CDs to the language lab, you just have your once-a-week class, slow-paced and rudimentary.
When you discover the worldwide broadcast of NPR, and that an English version of Euronews airs nightly at eight, your resolve to be bombarded by German words you still barely understand fades. Learning that TCM broadcasts movies in English after nine p.m. is the final straw. You choose *Morning Edition* (which airs at three p.m.) over German cartoons, *All Things Considered* to the German soap opera on at five. It’s nearly impossible to study at night after the kids are in bed while your husband, who used to shun television, now greedily watches every classic movie on TCM. You start joining him more and more often.

But something in the back of your head nags you to not give it up. Pete has his work—but what will you have to show for your three years here, if not a little language? Besides, Walter has no choice but to stick it out at school with an unfamiliar language. You can too.

You pay for a more intensive German course in Oerlikon. The small class is a mix of business people, spouses of Swiss citizens, and students. The instructor hands out workbooks and expects everyone to conjugate a list of ten verbs by the next meeting. He also explains the necessity of learning the article (*der, die, das*) with every vocabulary word, as gender isn’t apparent in German words—like the word for girl, *mädchen*, taking the neutral article *das* instead of the feminine *die*. Little by little you pick up more German words (though oftentimes without their articles). Sometimes in class when the teacher speaks slowly and clearly you feel fluent, by Teletubby standards anyway, until you leave the building and kids rolling by on skateboards chatter so quickly, and in Swiss dialect, that if you closed your eyes you wouldn’t even know which country you were in.
Besides seeing Emily on the days she picks up her boys at the school, you rarely interact with adults, other than in your German class where you can’t go more in depth than someone’s favorite food and where they come from. So it’s with great eagerness you join an English-speaking playgroup that Harald’s wife saw advertised on a billboard in Oerlikon. The group meets Friday mornings at a community center a block from Oerlikon Square—the same route from Walter’s school as Wednesday trips to the farmer’s market. Showing up the first time at the English-speaking group is humbling in a way. Back in the States you were prepared to avoid all English speakers, not just to learn German faster, but the stereotype of Americans abroad being noisy and rude convinced you that you’d have nothing in common with these people.

But the group consists of nice, down-to-earth women. Kathy, the group’s coordinator, has been in Switzerland the longest, about twelve years, after having married her Swiss husband. Other women are also married to Swiss men, and yet others are here, like you, because of their husband’s jobs. Typically, the group size is between twelve and twenty moms, Kathy says, and can be pretty transient. She lives only five blocks from you, on the other side of the school. Eve, a British accountant now staying home with her kids, lives in Oerlikon; Sara, who bikes everywhere with her three boys, lives about a mile from Oerlikon. Kesia, amazingly, moved from Ft. Collins a year before you and Pete; her husband was also a post-doc at CSU, but in the atmospheric science department.

You end up looking forward to the playgroup more than Henry (though he manages to enjoy some of the quieter activities like drawing and building with blocks
with the quieter kids—only Kesia’s daughter fills this bill, so she’s the one you become closest to). You didn’t realize the heaviness so much silence had placed on your shoulders, until after the second or third playgroup, and your whole body practically floated on the walk home.

6. Spring and Hell

The variety of beer available in Zurich is small considering Germany is next door, poised to import its bocks and darks and bitters. The most popular Swiss beer is a lager similar to Miller Genuine Draft and comes in boxes of ten bottles and is labeled Hell (light) Bier. Pete likes the Hell Bier and usually drinks one with dinner. “You want some Hell?” you ask each night.

“Yes, give me some Hell,” he replies.

“Here’s your Hell,” you say and hand him his glass.

“Hell!” the kids shriek, sensing they are getting away with something, but not exactly sure what. “Hell!”

Spring arrives early. Wild primrose dot the neighborhood lawns with so much color it seems as if it has rained bouquets. But with the promise of a new season, things begin to unravel at the kindergarten. On the news, Walter hears about a kidnapping in a remote section of Germany and is convinced he’ll be next. His fear escalates to the point that he doesn’t want to go to school. He cries when you drop him at class, and then he follows the teacher everywhere, even to the bathroom door, never letting her out of his sight. It’s the same with the language teacher; he clings to her side even if she crosses the
Then the same thing happens at home. He follows you everywhere around the house—to the bathroom, to the kitchen, to the laundry room downstairs, even to the Dumpster to throw away garbage. He used to race you to the apartment door—he on the stairs and you via the elevator—and now he sticks to your hip. He doesn’t dawdle anymore (when you used to have to nag him to keep up). He won’t play at Joseph’s house (although he happily plays with Joseph on his own turf). He was always so independent. Now he even screams when you go to your German class and he needs to stay at home with Pete (he’s always been fine with Pete).

“A grownup is always around,” you explain. “Nothing can happen!” But now he says there’s more. After seeing the mother die in the beginning of the movie Cinderella, he was sure you, too, would die. He felt he had to keep a constant eye on you.

“That’s all?” you say, relieved he hadn’t witnessed a murder or been molested by a crew of evil teachers. “It is just a movie,” you say.

“I know,” he answers, “but I can’t help it. My brain feels poisoned.” He shudders. “At night I imagine you lying dead on that slab of stone.” He is absolutely convinced you will die next. Soon, he can’t sleep at all. He checks on you four times in the middle of the night and ends up slipping next to you beneath the sheet.

Soon he screams like he is being tortured when you drop him at the school. “Just smile and go,” his teacher says, “he will settle down.” But he settles to a shaky state of nerves, recoiling at any noise or touch. After several days you run, panicked, to Dr. Jorg, who tells you that the worst thing you can do is panic.
“He has an anxiety disorder,” he says. “He can’t make sense out of certain information which, in some children, exaggerates their fears to incapacitating levels.” You ask if you can take him out of school for a while, that he’s actually a happy kid when he’s with you. “No,” the pediatrician says. “Send him to school unless it makes him sick, or new problems will develop.”

You pull out a four-page article from *Time* magazine your friend sent you describing medications like Xanax, Luvox, and Zoloft used to treat anxiety. “ Couldn’t one of these help?” you beg, “just to take the edge off? I’ve never seen him so miserable.”

“That’s for adults,” he says. “We medicate kids as a last resort.” He must sense you’d gobble a bottle of Xanax yourself if given the chance, and hands you a list of child therapists. “Most of these work with children,” he says, “and several speak English.”

You’ve heard of therapy for children who have been abused or witnessed graphic violence, but not for someone who just *imagines* it. You ask the women at the playgroup if they know anything about childhood anxiety disorders. You’re not shy to admit this trouble; everyone has problems, and you really could use some words of experience right now. But no one has heard of it (which counters the statistics you’ve pulled up on the internet stating one in twelve kids suffers anxiety). No one has taken their kids to a psychologist, either. You feel you are the only one in the world with a kid with this problem.

You take Walter (and of course Henry, who is always in tow), on the tram across
town on a Tuesday to see Frau Bigler. Frau Bigler has a large carpeted office with many books and toys. Like most Swiss, she has a reserved air and does not smile or use cute language or intonation. She speaks to Walter in a practical adult-like manner (which he prefers to cute-talk anyway), and he is comfortable with her. After sending him out of earshot with a set of plastic darts toward the dartboard on the opposite wall, she mows over your fears with the pragmatic reassurances of someone of her profession.

“There is more to it than news reports and Cinderella,” she says. “There’s lack of self-confidence, jealousy of the brother, anger at the move to Switzerland, probably more. Cinderella was just a catalyst.”

You try and explain that his transition to his new routine has been rather smooth, especially with his friendships with Joseph and Nicholas; and that although he is shy, he’s always been self-assured. But she cuts in with, “There’s always more to it than you see.”

You are wary, but there is no room to cast doubt with Frau Bigler. You have no choice but to put him in her care and hope for the best.

After two sessions, Frau Bigler tells Walter that you will sit in the waiting room instead of watching him the whole time in her office (he still won’t leave your side). You expect him to protest, but when she says she has important things to discuss with him that his little brother shouldn’t hear (and Henry is certainly a distraction) he complies as long as he has the option to check on you.

With each subsequent visit, the separation gets longer and more comfortable for him and he checks on you in the lobby less and less. You imagine him sitting on Frau Bigler’s sofa, discussing the dark areas of his brain and she explaining to him why death
terrifies him so much. But when he comes out (with a shy smile), he reports on how they sat reading books together or play-acted jungle scenes. You cannot imagine Frau Bigler prowling on all fours like a tiger, but he says it’s so. Interestingly, even though Walter isn’t yet fluent in German (he works his way around words he doesn’t have the vocabulary for), he speaks only German to Frau Bigler because he is worried that because of her accent she won’t understand him.

During the course of the next seven months, the day- and nightmares dissipate, and he seems to have a newfound sense of freedom. You and Pete meet twice with Frau Bigler. Each time she is vague about the details of their sessions (we read books, chat, play games), as if discussing them might infringe on Walter’s rights. You don’t insist, and are simply grateful that he is letting go of his fears. You briefly wonder if he would have outgrown his fears by now on his own. But it is a moot point; when your child is ailing and you can’t take away the pain yourself, you find someone you hope can, and Frau Bigler has.

Summer vacation speeds by quickly (school break lasts only six weeks), and Walter begins his second year of kindergarten without incident. In some ways his troubles seem a bad dream; he again lags behind on walks, runs to Joseph’s house by himself, chooses to stay in the apartment when you cross the street to mail a letter. But you’re always cautious. You shelter him from television and radio news, from aggressive cartoons, from movies you haven’t first previewed even if they are rated G. You worry about what could happen if he hears a disturbing story at school or sees the wrong movie
at a friend’s house. But he seems stronger now. He turned six and his mind seems better able to handle certain situations (e.g. he can watch a show about earthquakes and not worry that Zurich will be reduced to rubble that night). His school schedule makes the trip to Frau Bigler’s every week inconvenient. You suggest discontinuing the sessions and she hems and haws, but agrees that if he seems like he’s doing fine, the stress of running around to the appointments probably isn’t worth it. She says to give a call if we need her. You joke and say that you hope never to see her again. But with her unsmiling Swiss lack of humor, she doesn’t get it.

7. Miss Hamster

Even after a year, the kids still pine for things from their lives in Ft. Collins—friends, parks, stores. They constantly ask about the dog (now at Grandma’s house) and aren’t emotionally attaching themselves to the pill bugs and snails they’ve collected and are calling pets. Walter is still a worrier, and you think a real pet might be a way to distract him.

You spend half a day translating the section in the lease entitled Tiere (animals), and come out of it somewhat certain that it is okay to keep a quiet, cage-bound creature that won’t potty on the carpet.

“How about a hamster?” Pete asks.

“Let’s get a hamster!” Walter cheers. “I love hamsters.”

“I love hamsters, too!” Henry says, not even knowing what one is.

A hamster seems economical, size and money-wise, so you agree. “Okay. Why
Pete reserves a car from the Car Share lot down the street and you all drive to the big pet store on the outskirts of town. The boys choose the ugliest hamster in the giant glass tank of them. She is gray and beige and matches some of the dirtier patches of the apartment building. You point out the cuter black ones in the corner, the orange ones scurrying through plastic tube-tunnels, but they’ve already decided. At least she costs only eight franks, which seems a bargain in this country where the only thing you haven’t been charged for so far is breathing the air, so you shrug and tell them it’s fine with you.

While one pet store employee boxes the hamster, another circles the aisles with Pete to procure the supplies necessary for hamster upkeep. When you meet him at the checkout, you think your husband must have ended up with the wrong cart; an elephant would require less. Heaped inside are two 10-pound bags of sand, a ceramic bowl for sand (her toilet), two 5-pound bags of pellet food, a ceramic bowl for food, sawdust, bark chips, snack bars, sunflower seeds, a wood house, cotton fluff for nesting, and a water bottle. Topping off this excess sits a cage the size of a condominium, connected throughout by pine board ramps.

You would have simply bought a bird cage from the secondhand store in Oerlikon for five francs and tossed in a few toilet paper tubes. “This isn’t ours, right?” you say. “Fifty hamsters could fit in this cage.”

“She needs space.”

“We need space. Where will it go?”

“In the kids’ room. The sales guy said she needs space to roam. It’s a healthy
system.” Then he motions to Walter, who is out of earshot and says, “We want her to last as long as possible, right?”

You don’t say another word. You pull out your debit card, and pay the 225 francs, trying not to calculate the number of Züri-sacks that the money could buy.

The kids name the hamster Miss Hamster. Miss Hamster is nocturnal and spends the night racing around her cage and chewing on the cage’s metal bars so aggressively it sounds like a mini-jackhammer is at work in the kids’ room. You spend another 50 francs on burrowing logs, chew toys, and a scamper wheel (after trying the toilet paper tubes). Miss Hamster deigns to nap in the log a few times, but won’t chew it, instead continuing to attack the cage’s bars every night at 3 a.m.

The kids sleep through the racket, and so does Pete. Even though Henry and Walter no longer race to your bed in the middle of the night, your body is still programmed to wake at this hour, hamster-noise or no hamster-noise. Some nights you read the hour or so it takes to get back to sleep. Some nights you lay in the darkness, worrying if it is okay that Walter’s only friends are the American brothers, or if Henry will ever unglue himself from your hip, or if there’ll be money at the end of this month to start saving for a summer vacation. Some nights your mind stays blank and you simply listen to the rattle of the cage.

You mention Miss Hamster’s behavior to Pete (who wouldn’t wake up if a drum corps paraded past the bed).

“Maybe she needs some freedom,” he says. “She’s getting a little fat, anyway. We can try letting her out to run around in the kids’ room.”
Miss Hamster’s rear end is starting to resemble that of the Tinkie Winkie Teletubby. Maybe some exercise will trim her down and tire her out. So, Pete and the boys close the bedroom door and let her waddle around the room while you clean up the kitchen. When the work-out session ends, Walter reports that Miss Hamster likes exploring his room and that they will let her out every evening for twenty minutes.

Miss Hamster’s curiosity takes her into the potted plants on the floor, through the cut-out designs in the laundry basket, under the dressers and beds. Unlike a gerbil, which would zip at lightening speed to the darkest corner beneath the biggest piece of furniture and sit shaking for hours, Miss Hamster takes her time moseying around the room, then after the twenty minutes lets herself get scooped into big or little hands and put back in the cage.

But her work-outs only add fuel to her nightly rampages. Even after chewing through a wooden slat of Walter’s bed, she won’t rest her jaws for more than an hour. And she ignores the broken slat when it’s tossed into her cage, again attacking the metal bars with her machete teeth. You consider slipping one of the herbal sleeping pills you got from the Apotek across the street into a carrot and giving it to Miss Hamster before bedtime. The pills didn’t work for you (you had a feeling that the main ingredient, chamomile, wouldn’t cut it), but might affect a creature 140 pounds lighter. But then you worry about ratios—could half a pill stop her heart? Could a crumb have the same effect? You’d remain just as awake in the 3:00 a.m. silence—visualizing her keeling over in the shaft of streetlight shining into the cage, clutching her little hamster heart with her little hamster claws. If she died, you know the buzzing background of silence would echo
louder in your brain than any havoc she wreaked on the cage. Better to appreciate Miss Hamster as a comrade in your insomnia, another female presence in this male-dominated apartment, a symbol of headstrong determination… You clamp your mind shut before you start claiming this rodent as a soul mate.

8. Gina

After dropping Walter at school one morning, you and Henry swing past the small Italian-run market near your apartment to pick up some bread and milk. In the checkout line, a mother with a red-faced baby clutched in one arm and a small girl pulling at her leg has just managed to empty her basket next to the scanner, when her daughter (you assume the small girl is her daughter) grabs two packs of M&Ms from the rack by the register and throws them into the basket.

“We aren’t buying those,” her mom says in English.

Your ears perk up. *American* English. The woman has glasses and short, wavy, brown hair and looks to be in her mid-30s. The baby leans back and starts to wail. The woman grimaces, and then says loudly, “Put them back.”

The girl laughs, returns the candy to the shelf, pulls down two different candies and throws them in the basket.

“Put those back too!” her mom says. The baby shrieks hysterically and the cashier asks for the payment. The little girl starts bouncing in place. She smiles and shakes her head *no*. This seems to be a favorite game at which she is expert. You guess she’s around two. Her hair is wavy like her mother’s but lighter brown; she’s adorable, though
her mother looks tempted to abandon her and her new baby brother at the check stand.

“What’s your name?” you ask, thinking this might distract her into behaving.

She shrugs and says, “Svenja.” She seems nonplussed that you are speaking English to her. Then she turns to Henry, laughs, and runs down the short aisle behind you. She hides behind a pyramid of boxed milk and peeks out. Henry starts fidgeting behind your legs as his chase instinct kicks in. Though the idea of toddlers running through this store with its narrow aisles shelved with jars and bottles is against your better judgment, the temporary reprieve it would offer the mother—now depositing the second round of candy back to the shelf—seems like the right thing to do.

“Okay. Go find her—carefully,” you tell Henry, who starts down the aisle in his off-kilter run. You soon hear bursts of laughter in the next aisle over. You listen for the crash of cans or glass, or the holler of the man working the deli counter, but so far little clomping footsteps are the only noises echoing through the shop.

“Thank god,” the woman says, juggling the baby while bagging her milk and yogurt.

Henry and Svenja round the corner from the produce end of the store and begin another lap. “She’s cute,” you say. You pay for your things and put the carry baskets onto the stack of them by the door. “How old is she?”

The woman plops the baby into the stroller outside the shop’s propped-open door, fastens a half dozen straps around his body, then loops her grocery bag over the stroller’s handles. “She just turned two.” She glances at the fidgeting baby and sighs. “They’re exhausting.”
“Henry’s two, too,” you say. You like the woman’s candid admission that her children are tiring (unlike Emily, who never allows herself to complain and gives you looks of grave concern whenever you threaten to kill one of your family members). She’s someone you’d like the chance to get to know. And Henry and Svenja seem like they’d make good playmates. Her living here would be too good to be true; probably she’s visiting relatives or something. But maybe you could get together before she leaves.

You’ve never met anyone while shopping. Trying to cultivate the small talk to a point beyond the store seems weird. Now she’s calling, “Svenja! It’s time to go. It’s almost time for dinner. Svenja, come on.”

Svenja dashes out the door and makes a B-line to the recycling bins, which buys you some time.

“Do you live around here?” you ask, cringing at the way this sounds like a pick-up line.

She moves the stroller back and forth. The baby has calmed a bit and his face returns to a normal pink color. “Down the block. I just got off work.” She smiles tiredly. “This is our quality time.”

A bubble of joy rises like a hot air balloon into your chest. You ask her a few more questions while Henry and Svenja race around the bins. Her name is Gina. She married a Swiss grad student she met three years ago in California and has lived in Zurich ever since. She also works at ETH, in the biology department, two blocks down the hill from Pete’s building.

“When Sam was born three months ago, I started working three-quarter time,” she
says. “I’m telling you, the days at home are harder than at the office.”

“I believe it,” you say. Just that morning you were wondering whether a person could truly die of boredom while stacking blocks and parking toy cars.

“Listen,” Gina says. “I have Wednesdays off. Do you want to come over next week?”

You and Gina get together every Wednesday morning after Walter goes to school. Sometimes you go to the zoo, to the farmer’s market, to one of the kid-friendly indoor pools, or just to one another’s apartments to drink coffee while Henry and Svenja tear apart the living room. Gina’s work involves genetic coding and genome structures in small mammals. She sometimes feels guilty putting her children in daycare four days a week.

“Better than having your brain stagnate,” you say, “look at me.” You have the opposite problem, too much time with kids. Now that Henry rarely naps, there’s not enough distance from him to appreciate all the time you spend with him.

You both get to air your frustrations on a weekly basis. Her husband is underfoot. Yours is never home. She has no time to exercise. You have no time to write. Her in-laws criticize her every move. Yours…well yours are actually pretty easygoing…anyway, it’s not one of those friendships where you feel compelled to out-do one another’s hardships or complain all the time; it’s just fun and really nice to be able to say what’s on your mind.
9. Could You Say That Again? And Again? And Again?

By now you can ask for many things at the market, even unrehearsed. You can make appointments if you warn whomever you are talking to that you don’t understand German well and that they must speak s-l-o-w-l-y. Even then you usually have to ask them to repeat themselves a half dozen times to confirm the day and time.

The most frustrating thing about your lack of fluency is not the inability to have intellectual conversations in German (that idea was laid to rest immediately), but missing out on day-to-day social pleasantries. When the old woman from three doors down meets you on the walkway smiles and says something kind about Henry or the warm weather, you nod and smile in agreement if you are lucky enough to have understood her, and smile and nod in agreement if you haven’t understood her. When a stranger approaches and asks a question beyond what time it is, you can only state your lack of German—to which the person might try to simplify his/her comment until you understand, or simply shrug and walk away. You were never much for small talk back in the States, but now with the impossibility of it, you crave it more than ever.

At least the lack of understanding goes both ways and the kids’ gaffes fall on uncomprehending ears.

“Why is that lady so fat?” Walter asks one day when you and the boys are standing in the back of a full tram, returning from the farmer’s market. “She’s the fattest lady I’ve ever seen.” At least he doesn’t point, a universal gesture that would have been easily understood.

“Shush,” you say, moving in front of him to block his gaping view. There are few
overweight Swiss people, so the woman’s heaviness is obvious, although she isn’t that big.


“Nobody. Quiet.” You pull a carrot from the canvas bag of vegetables and waggle it in front of his face to distract him.

He shoves the carrot aside. “Who?” he asks louder. “Who is fat?”

“Keep quiet!” you say.

People glance at the commotion heating up in the back of the tram—the children the foreign mother can’t keep quiet, though for some odd reason she seems more relieved than angry.

10. Prices

Penny pinchers do not thrive well in Switzerland. Every six months or so a new round of fees is charged to you for everything from listening to the radio and watching non-cable T.V., to the electricity not included in the rent that your apartment has exceeded. You even have to pay 100 SF for a required background check (requested, oddly enough, after your family has been a resident here over one year). Up to now you haven’t managed to save more than a few francs.

Signs proclaiming Switzer Qualitat! scroll diagonally across the window of every butcher shop, bakery, shoe store, and pharmacy, reminding consumers that it is indeed worth paying an extra twenty francs for Swiss toothpaste and socks and pickles. Unfortunately, the things you stocked up on from home—soap and toilet paper and
hand lotion—are about the only non-overpriced items in the country. A typical loaf of bread is nearly three dollars (your vision of tossing a couple coins onto a counter and walking off with a fresh baguette under your arm was quashed early on). That the kids might grow didn’t seem to have crossed your mind either—bringing shoes and jackets a few sizes up for Walter could have saved a fortune. And for the price of Walter’s required backpack (a boxy, briefcase-style contraption with shoulder straps and a latch, sturdy enough to carry artillery over mountain passes) you could have bought fourteen backpacks at Target.

“No one saves money in this country,” Gina says one day, after having listened to your complaints. “With the cost of daycare, Marc and I barely save anything with both of us working. At least you have something to show for the backpack. And it will last forever.”

“Well, it’s not like he’s going to show up at the office twenty years from now with blue dolphins slung over his shoulder.”

But Gina only offers the same annoying advice as Pete. “You probably shouldn’t obsess about money so much.”

Were you always such a miser? Probably. But even during tight times in college you managed to save up for road trips and occasional flights. So now—when Pete’s paycheck arrives only to disappear so completely a moment later that it seems an apparition; or a serendipitous ten-frank bill shows up in a pair of jeans in the laundry only to be needed for milk, tram tickets, or stamps a minute later—a feeling of both helplessness and greed steals through your gut. Sometimes you’ll squirrel away the
equivalent of thirty-five cents and recall Trina in William Dean Howell’s *McTeague*—bony arms sweeping over the pile of coins she’s been hoarding for years. So what if her house is falling apart around her and the bed is sagged and broken; she has stashed so much money she can cast aside her threadbare sheet and warm herself with silver—although in Switzerland that would only mean she could buy a *bretzli* to go with her coffee next time.

11. The Face of 9/11

Your brother e-mails his travel plans three months before his family’s planned arrival date in late September. *Can you meet us at the airport?* he writes, as if you might already be booked, as if you wouldn’t cancel an appointment with the president himself, if that were the only day he could meet you. *I guess I can squeeze you in,* you reply.

You thought the birth of your niece six months ago would curtail their desire to travel. Then pictures of Ruby started trickling in—Ruby strapped to Matt’s back at the crest of the Wasatch Mountains, Ruby plopped between a tent and a silver spray of rabbit brush, Ruby sunk into a sling on Amy’s chest in Moab, and you sensed a child wouldn’t hamper them. *Do they sell normal diapers in Switzerland?* Matt asks, *or should we bring some?* *The Swiss have square butts,* you answer, *so you’d better bring your own. Real funny,* he writes, then adds, *See you soon, come hell or high water.*

On 9/11 your father-in-law calls on a cell-phone from his car in New York City.
He is fighting gridlock to get out of Manhattan and back to his apartment in Queens.

“Turn on CNN,” he shouts. “All hell is breaking loose here.”

You switch on the TV and slump onto a footstool as an airplane slams into the second tower of the World Trade Center. Fortunately, the kids are playing in their room, because your eyes are glued to the string of events unraveling on the screen, and you wouldn’t be able to prevent them from watching.

“I’ll call you tonight,” your father-in-law says, and hangs up.

At last you muster the strength to turn off the TV. Your rising dread isn’t yet of the thousands that are dying in the attacks (that will come later) but the ferocious urge to protect Walter from this news. Surely, surely, you will be on the phone to Frau Bigler with a major relapse in his anxieties.

When Pete returns from work, the two of you have urgent, whispered conversations away from the kids. The phone lines are jammed and he can’t get through to his parents and grandmother. Finally, he calls his other grandmother in Florida, and she assures him that his parents are fine and nobody they knew was in the towers that morning. The kids’ bedtime takes an eternity to arrive. Finally, when they are in bed and asleep, you snap on the news, seeing many of the images that were playing earlier that day over and over—smoke and dust billowing from the base of a collapsing tower, a man leaping from one of the top floors, firefighters pushing into the gritty mayhem. The recorded phone calls from people stuck above the point of impact, knowing the building will soon collapse, make you numb.

The next day you contemplate keeping Walter from school, sheltered from the
morbid chatter of the terrorist strikes; he’d handle this tragedy easier after its edges had been blunted with time. But this news will not blow over quickly, and you cannot keep him out of school indefinitely. In slow motion you lift Henry into his stroller and secure the plastic rain shield around the frame of the seat. Then you slip on Walter’s puddle boots, zip him into his raincoat, and the three of you head down the stairs.

Heavy clouds hang in the sky. The purple crepe-papery hibiscus flowers, which dazzle the foot path all summer, are barely visible behind a curtain of mist. Your mind grasps for ways to downplay the catastrophe to Walter, but you can’t think of any; the vision of exhausted, soot-coated firemen maneuvering through mountains of rubble is too fresh in your mind.

When you reach the schoolhouse, no one approaches you. The parents stand apart, seeming to need their own space. Brief eye contact flits among them, but no one smiles and no one speaks. The children, though, run about and play happily. It is quite amazing really, but not one child says, “Did you hear about...?” Everyone has sheltered their children from the news. Relief pushes the worry of nightmares and panic attacks from your mind at least for this day.

The bell finally rings and Walter runs to line up with the rest of the 2nd year kindergarteners. You wave and turn the stroller back toward the path. In a moment, several parents approach and acknowledge the catastrophe in the USA. You are the only American among them this morning and they offer up genuine sympathy—a touch to the elbow, a sad nod.

The mother of one of Walter’s closer school acquaintances is Muslim. She
catches up to you and walks in your homeward direction, trying to explain in her broken German that you should not blame her religion. “Muhammad does not condone violence,” she says, “I do not believe a Muslim was behind this.”

But bin Laden’s face is already plastered everywhere. You reassure her that you do not hold anything against her (she’s only ever been nice to you and the boys—a step above typical Swiss hospitality). After parting at the corner, you dash home, set Henry up with a computer game, and turn on the TV to soak in more news of the dead.

The Taliban declare their hatred for the West, and Americans in particular. The United States suddenly seems vulnerable and unsafe. In a way, you feel fortunate living in a place isolated from the attacks; yet being unable to join the comradery that is at last burgeoning in your country is frustrating. Having no opportunity to wait hours in line to donate blood to your countrymen is like having an instinctual drive blocked. You read a quote by Woody Allen regarding his feelings after the attacks: It is impossible to be happy. The best you can hope for is to be distracted. But you are not distracted. You are filled with a keen sense of hate. Hate for Osama bin Ladin’s steely, thin face spread across the front page of every newspaper. His terror killed no one you knew. But it killed the hopes of seeing your brother and it feels the same. Every flight is cancelled for weeks, re-booking impossible. Who would be crazy enough to fly anyway? Now the deepening stresses of life in a foreign country sink two-fold back on your shoulders. The hate fizzles into hopelessness.

Your brother and his wife are crazy enough to take to the air! They are a
determined pair who won’t let terrorists, babies, or disagreeable travel agents get in their way, and they manage to re-book a flight for early November.

They land around the time Walter’s school ends, so Pete goes to meet them at the airport while you and Henry pick up Walter. “Where is Uncle Matt?” the boys ask every five seconds on the walk home from the school. “Coming,” you assure them. “Where is Uncle Matt?”

As soon as Matt bends through the door (he is 6’5”), the boys jump on him and beg him to carry them upside down in his famous Uncle-Matt-Upside-Down-Trap. You leap in for a hug before the kids grab all his attention, and it is like hugging home; you almost can’t let go. Matt is thinner than when you last saw him, and fit from working out. The lenses of his glasses are the size of dimes. In his fleece pullover and nylon hiking pants, he looks ready for an excursion to the library or to an alpine peak.

Amy tries to shake off her jacket while holding the baby. “Can I hold her?” you ask, tentatively. You are meeting your niece for the first time, and it’s been a while since you’ve held such a tiny baby. “Please,” Amy says, and holds forth Ruby, who is pudgy and smiling and has fan-shaped delta of drool on her little pink jacket. You whisk her overhead and try to make her laugh by wrinkling your nose at her. She doesn’t scream when held by a stranger (unlike a certain wildcat named Henry used to), and flashes a wide, gum-swollen smile. Amy takes off her boots and stretches her arms. “Just give her to Matt if she gets fussy,” she says. “I need to do something about these contacts.”

Although they’ve heard rumors of a new cousin, Walter and Henry haven’t yet noticed her. They are completely focused on Matt, who roars like a monster at them, and
lifts one, and then the other, into the air and takes turns walking them on the ceiling. Pete finishes preparing the half-made lunch tray of cold-cuts, cheese, olives, and pickles, and sets it on the table along with bottles of water and beer. Everyone sits down. Walter dives into the olives, Henry the feta cheese. Matt piles sliced ham, Gruyere, and pepperoncinis onto a slab of crusty bread and washes it down with beer. Then his eyes droop, and so do Amy’s, and they head to the spare room with Ruby for a nap.

They wake up four hours later and your sons notice Ruby for the first time. “Who is that?” they ask.

“Your cousin,” you remind them. “Remember Aunt Amy and Uncle Matt have a baby now?”

“How boring,” they say, “all she can do is sit.”

You encourage them to bring her a toy, kiss her cheek. Walter won’t kiss her because she’s a girl, and Henry won’t kiss her because Walter won’t. But they bring her their entire collection of hard-plastic dinosaurs, piling them on her lap and around her. She laughs at each addition to the stack, and gazes at Walter adoringly when he offers her a T-rex.

You bring extra pillows to Matt and Amy’s bed. The room already looks as if a cyclone has blown through. Sweaters and gloves and socks spill out of two huge yawning suitcases. Burp cloths are strewn everywhere and a line of rumpled sweat pants on the bed mark the boundary which, you assume, prevents Matt from rolling onto the baby. On the desk, a diaper bag is tipped on its side next to the computer (the guest room doubles as an office) and Ruby’s little diapers are poking out of it. You pluck one out. They are
so tiny! You think of your ‘baby,’ now 2 ½. He is not all the way potty trained yet, and suddenly his diapers seem huge and unnatural. And after holding Ruby’s little hand earlier today, Henry’s seemed the size of a ham. For a moment, you are wistful of time gone by. Then Ruby’s lung-bursting screams pierce the air. Amy is outside getting some fresh air, and Ruby has tired of chewing on T-rex. No one but Amy will be able to console the frantic cries for milk.

The next day Amy bundles Ruby to a state resembling a purply fleece sausage, pops her into a sling on her chest, and she and Matt take a day trip to Lucerne. They return, breathless, and want to go farther afield. You haven’t yet been to the Matterhorn, and suggest a trip there. It is five hours by train to Zermatt, the village nearest the Matterhorn; but with an entertaining uncle for the boys, plenty of bouncy knees for the baby, and the off-season lack of crowds, it’s the perfect time to make this trip.

According to the forecast, variable weather is the best you can hope for during the four days you’ve allotted for the trip. The afternoon you arrive in Zermatt the Matterhorn is hidden in a bank of fog. “Where is it?” Matt says, looking up from a picture in the guidebook of the mountain surrounded by blue sky. From the train station platform you all strain your eyes into the mist ahead, hoping to make out an outline of the massive peak, but no luck.

From Zurich you’d booked rooms at the cheapest inn in Zermatt recommended by the guidebook, a place called the Gabelhorn (Fork horn). Now each adult pulls a rolling suitcase down the car-free, snow-packed main street, past quaint tourist shops and restaurants. The lack of engine noise lends an ambiance of earlier times, when farmers
hauled their hay by horse and cart to the barns (built on stilts to keep out rodents), still visible behind the town.

The streets aren’t labeled, but the village is small, and the turnoff into the first alleyway into the old town is obvious from the guidebook map. The buildings here are hewn of rough dark-oiled wood, and shingled by sheets of slate. All are three-storied, with steeply-slanted roofs, and closely resemble one another. Pete and Walter walk ahead and find the Gabelhorn down a narrow offshoot of the alleyway. You approach the steps and notice a pot of frozen macaroni sitting on the front steps (to feed cats?). Also, a slate shingle is propped up against the south wall, suggesting the potential for decapitation if one happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

At first, the Gabelhorn’s creaky dark hallways and ill-lit rooms add to its European charm. “This is great!” your brother remarks, “We’d pay ten times more to stay at a bed and breakfast like this in the States.” It turns out to have a little too much character, however. The radiators never register past lukewarm while cold air seeps through the window panes. At night you dress the boys in fleece pajamas, fleece hats, and wool socks. Still, you slip from your bed and check them every twenty minutes to make sure they are warm enough. Finally, Pete pushes the beds together and you sleep at opposite ends of them to make a sandwich of warmth.

The darkness of the hallway off your room hides the filthy threadbare carpets, but cannot hide the slant of the hallway itself, and you feel, at midnight on your shuffle to the bathroom, that by not sticking tight to the far right wall, the balance of the entire inn might be upset, sending it toppling to the ground. At least the bedding is clean. And the
tiny balcony overlooking the alley (that you wouldn’t dare step out onto) lets a generous swath of light into the room the next morning.

When the sun has been up for a while and the kids are impatient for breakfast, you go down to the middle floor and knock on Matt’s door. He answers with a scowl and no reply to your, “Good morning.” Amy and Ruby are still huddled under the comforter. “Come on in,” Amy says, “we’re still working up the nerve to pull back the covers.”

The room is small and dark. Even with the ratty curtain clipped back, light from the two lamps and overhead fixture are necessary for visibility. “This room sucks,” your brother says. “We can hear every footstep upstairs, and the boot-clomping of every bozo that comes in downstairs. We didn’t get more than an hour of sleep. And try sitting on the fucking bed,” he adds. You sit on the edge of their bed and tip sideways. Their floor angles even more sharply than the upstairs hallway, and the bed’s headboard faces downhill into the wall. They had adjusted the time-worn wedges of pillows to raise their upper bodies, but still ended up sliding into the headboard. No wonder their necks ache.

“And check this out,” Amy says, holding up the top hem of a sheet. “It tore off when I tried pulling up the sheet last night.” Then she lifts a fleece jacket off her pillow. “But the worst was when my head went through the pillow case. You don’t want to know how disgusting the stuffing is.”

“What about Ruby?” you ask. The state of the grown-ups is of much less concern when a niece is involved.

“At least she slept well,” Amy says, sliding a mitten back onto a tiny hand poking from the cocoon-like mass in comforter. “Her only complaint in the night was when she
needed a diaper change and her skin was exposed to ice-cold baby wipes.”

“Well, I suppose this shack is one-star for a reason,” you say, knowing they are beyond consolation.

“One star,” your brother spits, “this place should be condemned! I had to sleep standing on my goddamn head!” He grabs his towel and heads for the shower. Because of his height he has already knocked his head twice on the doorway, and raked his knuckles across the room’s low ceiling when taking off his pullover. You suggest switching rooms. Amy says they’ll put up with it one more night. It’s already mid-morning, and packing the explosion of clothes and baby gear back into the suitcases would take time; setting out soon would allow the entire day for sightseeing. Then you all could leave Zermatt two days earlier than planned, and have time to explore another part of the country… And that is what you do.

But the Matterhorn! The mountain is still banked in clouds after breakfast that morning, but the clouds are various shades of gray, the kind that fool around in the sky instead of building opaque walls, and they offer a hint that they may cooperate with your plans. After a thirty minute cable car ride (shared with a few diehard skiers) through swirling mist, you step into Klein Matterhorn Station, the highest cable station in Europe, which sits on the shoulders of the Matterhorn. In the station foyer, Ruby’s boot falls off and her nose needs wiping. In the slush-tracked hallway, Walter drops a mitten and won’t pick it up because it’s dirty. Then, at the end of the hallway, Henry refuses to go through the turnstile and Pete has to duck back under the metal bar and carry him through. By the time the seven of you step into the glassed-in self-service cafeteria, no
one is quite prepared for the sight of the mountain, appearing a stone’s throw from the
glass wall. It looms up into the sky, an enormous white and silver pyramid. As the wind
whips gray clouds and snow up the sides of the horn, it is like watching time-lapsed
photography the way blue sky and white mountain flash in and out of the dark clouds.
You buy sandwiches and coffee and sit at the table with the best view of the mountain.
You all sit in silence, staring out at it as if watching a movie.

You glance at Amy; a forgotten half of egg-salad sandwich sits on cellophane wrap
before her. Matt puts his arm around her and she leans into him, without changing her
focus. Suddenly, you feel victorious. You are sitting at the top of the world with those
you love, despite Osama and his cells of terror. Even if the mountain hadn’t shown its
face, the moment would be perfect with your family together like this, but because it has
you will never forget it.

The kids are only mildly interested in your explanation of how glaciers carved the
Matterhorn nearly symmetrical on three sides. They entertain themselves by running to
and from the cafeteria, delivering unnecessary salt and sugar packets to the table. You
decide to step out onto the gusty snow-swept balcony to snap pictures. At the slope’s
edge, a skier adjusts his goggles and plants his poles. He bends twice at the knee, then
disappears down into the whipping swirls of snow. A group of young, hung-over
Americans pushes past you, their ski tips pointed toward the south-facing slope which
winds down to Carvinia, Italy. One of them suddenly discovers he doesn’t have his
passport (necessary to reenter Switzerland), and the rest grudgingly decide to stick to the
western slopes. As they turn, then dive into the blustery gale, one of the guys exclaims,
“Dude, now we can’t say we did Italy!”

On your own descent toward Zermatt (via cable car), a steel curtain of clouds closes over the mountain, and just like that the show is over. The views were so impressive that you all decide that if the weather clears up by the next morning, you’ll take the cog-rail train to Gornergrat to see the Matterhorn from a different perspective.

But the next morning the mountain is stuck behind a dark impenetrable wall. Out of sight, its magic cannot tempt your families to stay another night at the decrepit Gabelhorn. Now the trouble is that you can’t find the innkeeper (she is as aged as the pillowcases and inhabits a dark, cellar-like area of the inn) to pay. “We want to pay!” you call. “We want to leave!” For an eerie moment it’s as if you are in the song *Hotel California*, and your departure might be forever prevented.

Eventually the innkeeper surfaces from an unlit stairwell and you settle your account. The train is at the station, engines idling so the heaters can blast warm air. Free seats are plentiful and you all sit together, giving the boys the window. As the train chugs away from Zermatt and from the flanks of one of the most spectacular mountains in the world, a soothing tape-recorded voice comes over the speakers, turning your attentions toward the sights of glaciers and sharp silver-colored rock formations outside the windows. When a jolt rocks the train, the recording explains that a cog-wheel and cable have been engaged to prevent the train from flying down the track. The mellifluous voice of the recording is at odds with the treacherous downhill journey and the angry gray clouds which threaten another storm that you are, thankfully, leaving behind.
12. Bones

When you have more than a minute to yourself, you refuse to do housework. In fact, you derive so little satisfaction from making dusty surfaces gleam, grimy floors shine, or finger-printed windows see-through, that many of these chores get put off until you feel your family’s health might be at risk. But this afternoon you find yourself tugging the vacuum cleaner—which resembles a giant blue suppository—from the back of the closet. Pete’s taken the boys on an outing today for the first time by himself. Just an hour ago you’d felt he was more than capable of such an endeavor and that this moment was long overdue. Now unease keeps nagging, nagging, nagging at you. If the kids were nearby, and you could dash to them at a moment’s notice, the hours without them wouldn’t be so nerve-racking. But they’re at the zoo—over an hour away by tram and bus. Since you can’t attend to them personally, you’ll compensate by attending to their bedroom floor, which hasn’t felt the assault of the vacuum’s beater brushes in nearly two weeks.

This morning you had awoken in a particularly bad mood. You’d felt like the woman whose mug shot you once saw on a joke birthday card—she was about 120 years old, with bull-dog wrinkles and a permanent, toothless grimace; the only live features on her face were her steel blue eyes. Beneath her picture a caption read: *If Momma ain’t happy, nobody is.* You thought that if the rest of her family would just give her an afternoon alone, she’d probably shed 100 years and transform into a person bearable to be around. This sentiment seemed to be the one your husband hoped for as he skirted the radius of your snapping and volunteered to take the boys to the zoo after lunch. While
Pete wondered aloud how he’d wrestle the stroller, diaper bag, and backpack onto the tram, and then transfer it all onto the bus, you didn’t think much of it. After all, you do it every day. Instead you cataloged a plan for your afternoon of freedom: a bit of reading, German language review, some writing, a walk.

You zipped Henry and Walter into jackets and slid baseball caps onto their heads. Then you handed Pete the backpack filled with snacks, water bottles, and books for the ride, slung the diaper bag over the handles of the collapsible stroller, and herded everyone out the door. Goodbye! Hooray!

You waved to them from the walkway as they waited at the tram stop. Henry, still attached to your hip like a barnacle, decided suddenly that this adventure wouldn’t suit him. He began to frantically holler, “I want to go home! Home!” and held his arms up toward you. Pete’s attempts to distract him with a cracker didn’t work and he started to cry. You ducked back into the apartment before your instinct to rush down and rescue him kicked in. If you caved in now, who knew when the opportunity for free time might again arise? You peeked through the bedroom window to make sure they survived the rest of the wait. Walter, fidgeting with his hands in his pockets away from his squeaky-wheel brother, was the first to spot Tram 10. He hopped on before the other two to claim the back area while an already frazzled-looking Pete lifted Henry in, then stepped on backward and hauled the stroller in behind him with a frame-bending heave. You could see Pete sighing with relief as they settled onto the back bench. Only when the tram pulled away did you notice the dark clouds stacking up over the foothills in the direction of the zoo. In the swell of backpack items you forgot to add umbrellas
and extra sweatshirts. What if it rained? The urge to throw these things into a bag and catch your family on the next tram was almost overwhelming.

But you imagined Pete’s reaction—dismay that you thought him incapable of handling the situation. He’s already hinted that you show signs of turning into one of those hovering, overprotective parents you swore you’d never become. Your reluctance to loosen your grip on the kids now made you realize he was right. As the coveted free hours turned into a vast empty space to ride out, you revised your agenda. No walk in case they called. And forget about reading or writing—you were never good at tossing aside feelings of trepidation simply by shifting focus. Mindless housework seemed a perfect undertaking through which to concentrate on your worries.

You maneuver the vacuum around a pelvis and a foot lying in the middle of the boys’ room, then a tibia and a rib cage. Of all the toys, the skeleton has to be the one scattered across the bedroom floor, and even onto the hamster’s cage, where a femur lies a maddening speck beyond the reach of Miss Hamster’s outstretched little claw. It’s a sure portent of the day’s activities. The skeleton is made of cheap, hollow plastic and streaked with dirty yellow patches of glow-in-the-dark paint. The boys bought it for seven francs the previous Halloween and still get mileage out of it, even though most of the bones’ connector pegs have bent or broken off. When fitted together, the skeleton stands a few inches taller than Henry—about the size of the Australopithecus at the anthropology museum the boys like to visit each week. When Joseph and Nicholas come to play, they and Walter turn the bathroom into a graveyard. They lay the skeleton in the tub, shut the door, and turn off the light so it glows. Then they make
spooky noises until Henry screams and runs out of the bathroom. They do it over and over. Henry figured out early on that they would include him only if they could terrify him; and because he adores any kind of attention, he shrieks convincingly every time.

You turn off the vacuum and toss the bones into the toy bin with the remainder of the disjointed skeleton. Before stepping back from the bin, you notice the skeleton’s other femur poking past the bin’s lip. You pull it out and find yourself facing the skull which has been jammed onto the femur’s other end (now functioning as a bludgeon instead of graveyard material). The black eye sockets stare over your shoulder, and the teeth curve into a decayed gray grin. The glow-in-the-dark paint flakes like desiccated skin from its cheeks and chin. It looks as if it has died ten times over. You understand the kids’ fascination with it; they enjoy horror in a controlled way. You, however, do not. And although you are the most practical member of your family, you are convinced that today this grinning skull is an omen of death.

You follow the skull’s stare out the window toward the dark sky over the foothills. The wind has picked up, and you sense from afar the forces stirring at the zoo. Something horrible is about to happen. A fire will tear through the reptile house. Or the baboon leader will finally break through the Plexiglas he’s always slamming against (and pressing his four-inch canines against) and snatch Henry from the stroller and throw him around like a rag doll. Or the golden lion tamarin monkeys that are always running loose through the zoo will leap onto your children and sink their needle-sharp, rabies-infected teeth into the kids’ tender necks. By the time the zoo keepers respond to these catastrophes, it will be too late. And if the boys do somehow make it
out of the zoo in one piece, one of them will surely get left behind on the tram since Pete is so overloaded with supplies. Who will you call when this happens? Lost and found? But your German is too rudimentary to explain the situation even if you find the right number. And the kids aren’t carrying ID tags; if they run off, madly searching for home and end up in the wrong part of town, they might be sold across the border. You wonder if your marriage can survive after Pete comes through the door explaining that he only looked away for a second…

You shove the bones back into the bin and cover them with trucks, train tracks, and a red rubber ball (similar to the one the screeching chimpanzees constantly slap from the crooks of each other’s arms). You buzz the vacuum around the rest of the apartment and even clean the cobwebs from behind the couch with the special hose attachments. The appliance stays on so long that by the time you turn it off, its whine echoes through your head during the half hour you spend e-mailing your friend in Colorado, babbling paranoiacally about the danger your children are facing, but probably not, but maybe so, and maybe not, and how you might be getting a divorce, and so on…

At four o’clock the door opens. You’ve determined that your marriage cannot, indeed, survive a catastrophe involving the children, and that you will be going back to the States after the hospital stays or funerals or both. Then the kids roar in, red-cheeked and chattering. You really can’t believe that they’re standing there, both in one piece. You hug them and inhale the cold air off their cheeks until they squirm. Then you wow the stuffed animals they bought at the zoo store. Their radars pick up on your relief and
they take advantage of it.

“We’re hungry!” they cry. “Can we have some cookies?”

It’s getting close to dinner, but you open a new box of hazelnut wafers and set it between them. “Tell me all about the zoo,” you say. But their mouths are already full of cookies. And after swallowing, they are only interested in refills.

You imagine the skull and femur, upside down in the bin like a doused torch, and offer a cookie to Pete. He bites into it while looking at the vacuum cleaner in the hallway. “You didn’t spend your free time cleaning, did you?”

You shrug and hand him another cookie, guilty at how freely you dismissed him from your life just moments ago. Would you even have noticed if he’d walked in with a lion tamarin attached to his neck? You drape your arm across his shoulders. “My instincts kind of short-circuited this afternoon,” you say. “But I really appreciate that you took the kids today.”

“They were fine. Henry calmed down the minute we got on the tram. We had a really good time.” His gaze shifts from the tidied living room to the tidied kids’ room. “Maybe I’ll take them more often.”

And he does, and the apartment remains spotless for several more weeks. Then it’s gone—the urge to worry and the urge to clean—and you spend your free time on the computer or behind a book like any sensible, chore-skirting human being.

13. Doctor, Doctor!

One day Henry wakes up with weepy, crusted-over eyes. Pink-eye is not a serious
enough matter to warrant a call to Dr. Jorg, so after Walter heads off to school with Joseph and Nicholas (they walk on their own now, and you and Emily take turns picking them up), you zip Henry into a jacket and head to the Apotek across the street. State run pharmacies (Apoteks), are located on almost every block in Zurich. They are managed by pharmacists, who dole out aspirin, cough syrup, and allergy medication as they see fit. Though this system can be inconvenient (especially to a one-stop shopper used to buying such items at a grocery store), the fact that pharmacists are allowed to sell many medicines over-the-counter which would require a doctor’s prescription, hence a trip to the doctor, can save a lot of money. The pitfall of this system is that the person in need of medicine must describe, loud and clear, the exact details of his/her problem with the pharmacist. With five to ten people typically milling around the small shop, this can amount to a public announcement regarding one’s difficulty with hemorrhoids or warts or ear wax. At least pink eye is one of the lesser embarrassing ailments.

You’ve been to this Apotek before. The pharmacist speaks fluent English and she is friendly, though her propensity to dispense herbal remedies borders on manic. For all the freedoms pharmacists have in selling over-the-counter medications, they seem reluctant to distribute anything synthetic. Not that narcotics should be given without due cause, but truly, how many illnesses can chamomile cure? The chamomile teething pills she gave Henry last year offered only a few moments reprieve, and only because the soft nubs resembled candy, distracting him long enough to pluck the five to seven pill dose one by one out of the palm of your hand to chew them. If the teething pills were anything like the sleeping pills, the relief was non-existent. Today, after you explain Henry’s trouble, the
pharmacist gets the same gleam in her eye as she did the last time you came, and you know what’s coming.

She insists the cure for conjunctivitis is so simple that you won’t even need to make a purchase today. The tonic: steep two bags of black tea, cool them, then lay them across the affected eyes ten minutes. Repeat several times throughout the day. You nod skeptically, sure that if this type of homeopathy worked, your Swedish grandmother, who had remedies for everything, would have known about it and passed it down the generations.

You return to the apartment and brew some orange-pekoe. But Henry won’t allow the soggy tea bags near his eyes. Feeding him an M&M every ten seconds is the only way to convince him to press the bags in place. After ten minutes, his eye sockets are bruise-brown. Two applications later, sockets stained nearly black, he looks like a phantom or an owl-child. You dab the stains with a cloth, but they have permeated every layer skin and you don’t want to irritate his already sore eyes by rubbing at them. If this was a widely practiced treatment, why weren’t ghoul-children wandering everywhere this time of year? Maybe they are simply kept in; you’re definitely not taking Henry out looking like this. Fortunately, it’s Emily’s turn to pick up the older boys from school.

When Pete returns from ETH, he’s only slightly surprised by Henry’s appearance. The homeopathic option interests him, and he proposes a scientific explanation. The tea’s astringency, he states, is likely strong enough to attack a viral infection. You suspect he’d rationalize the use of hazelnuts or Muesli had they been suggested (and, frankly, you’re surprised Muesli wasn’t an option, since it is consumed with such
abandon for its health benefits here). The goop continues to collect in the corner of
Henry’s eyes and lashes, and you’re sure you’ll need a prescription for eye drops from Dr.
Jorg the next day, but lo, the next morning Henry wakes up, eyes crust free, and with only
a shadow of a stain in the sockets.

You tell Gina of Henry’s miraculous cure. “Have you heard of it?” you ask.

“Of course,” she says. “My in-laws are Swiss, remember? They always give me
advice like that. They think using real medicine is a crime. Once Sam woke up
screaming with an earache and they told me to fry onions and wrap them in a towel and
put them on his ear. I told Marc to forget about that witch-doctor bullshit and give him
Advil. He did and Sam woke up screaming again the next morning. Marc did the onion
thing, and Sam seemed better. I thought for sure it was a coincidence. But then I got the
same ear ache. Marc fried up the onions and I put them on my ear, and it was so weird,
but the pain stopped."

You imagine the vapor of the onions, snaking its way into the ear cavity, backing
pain against the canal wall and smothering it. You relate the news of the odd cure to Pete
later that night, and he simply says in his knows-everything tone, “It makes sense, really.
The sulfur compounds in onions take down the swelling.”

When you get sick (after jinxing yourself by bragging how long you’ve gone
without an illness), you wonder what herbal therapies are in store for you. The
pharmacist recommends tea—Echinacea, chamomile (!), anise—and lozenges with
menthol and honey. After taking them you don’t feel much better, but with Tylenol to
lower the fever and dull the aches to a low-intensity throb, you manage to pull yourself together, though making your way through the day feels like slogging through knee-deep mud. Because your decline is gradual, you continue trudging through each day, maintaining a regimen of Tylenol, tea, and lozenges that seem to keep you off your death bed. You reach a point when you wonder how you ever had the energy to sweep the kitchen floor or clean the windows; how you ever walked to the museum without resting, brought the kids to the pool without getting a headache from the chlorinated air. You can’t imagine ever biking up to the zoo; it must have been the high point of your physical fitness, and you’ll never attempt something that crazy again when getting dressed is taxing enough. You convince yourself that this state of low-energy is a result of letting up on exercising, and that you’ll get back into shape in the spring. Your roll as a parent, too, begins to slip. You used to encourage the kids’ artwork, and now watching them draw makes you yawn; sitting at the table five minutes to paint with them feels like torture. Why do you even have kids, you wonder, guiltily, if you don’t want to interact with them? Pete remarks on your volcanic cough and how tired you seem. He wonders how you can’t stomach coffee when for ten years it was your lifeline to survival. One morning you tell him how impressed you are at his energy to shower, at his ability to dress without tiring. “You’re really quick at layering,” you tell him sincerely, while slowly climbing out of bed and reaching for the Tylenol bottle.

“Two weeks ago I carried a forty pound bag of rice in one arm and Henry in the other and walked a half mile home when the tram didn’t show up—and you barely shrugged. Now my pulling on a sweatshirt impresses you? You need to call a doctor,
because there is definitely something wrong.”

Even though you don’t feel *that* bad when the Tylenol kicks in, you make an appointment with Emily’s doctor in Oerlikon for a time that afternoon when Emily can watch Henry.

“I’m tired all the time,” you tell the doctor after he listens to your lungs through an icy stethoscope. The nurse comes in with two chest x-rays and hands them to him. “I’m sure it all boils down to not having an appetite,” you explain.

“Boils down? What do you mean?” He clips the x-ray paper to a lit screen.

“I’m just not really hungry, you know, probably because of all the coughing—I just hope you can prescribe something besides chamomile. I can tell you right now that chamomile won’t work.”

“What are you talking about? Your lungs are full of fluid. You need at least two weeks of antibiotics to get rid of these bacteria. Why didn’t you come in sooner?”

“I didn’t feel that sick,” you say feebly. “I thought I was getting out of shape.”

Now your warped version of reality glares before you.

The doctor gives you a rather scorching look and says, “You are lucky your lungs are not damaged.” Then he scrawls a couple lines on a prescription pad and says, as if to a two year-old, “Take these medicines until they are *gone*. You people are notorious for not completing the antibiotic regimen when you start feeling better. That is how antibiotics lose their efficacy.”

You wonder about the notorious band of antibiotic evaders you’ve been lumped with. Are they the chronic coughers at the tram stops on damp days? The pale-faced
ones that get winded from crossing the street?

You choke out a rattley half-cough and assure him you’ll be a good patient.

“Come back in two weeks to make sure the lungs have cleared, okay?”

The pharmacist describes your strain of pneumonia (*lungenentzündung*, she repeats the four times it takes to cement in your memory when you go to the Apotek to pick up your prescription), as ‘walking pneumonia.’ Because people with it can get around, even if in a zombie state, they often don’t realize how sick they are. When you remark that the teas and cough drops seemed to work a bit for your sore throat, the pharmacist says, “Of course you need to see a doctor for a fever more than four days.”

*Silly girl!* you hear in her tone. She sells you the antibiotics and a morphine-laced cough syrup.

Two days later you feel reborn. Pete has blessedly washed the dishes all week. But the counter hasn’t been wiped down or the floor swept. Having the energy to tackle counter and stovetop grime feels like a miracle, as does wielding a broom and picking up the boys after school. Caring about the kids’ jumble of crayon drawings again is a relief.

You swear to maintain your new perspective of letting trivial things remain trivial. The overdue books at the library can wait another day, as can the refrigerator shelf devoid of yogurt and cheese sticks. But then you consider that a fine of 2 SF per book per day probably warrants a trip to the library. And the kids’ bones might weaken without the calcium from their usual yogurt and cheese stick snacks. The store is only half a block from the library, so the trip won’t be complicated, leaving time to swing past the recycle bins and unload the glass, and, as long as the post office is actually open at the moment, it
wouldn’t be out of place to grab a book of stamps.

You take the two-week course of antibiotics. The doctor proclaims your lungs fully recovered at the follow-up exam, stating that good things happen when ‘you people’ actually listen to him. The little old lady on your floor of the building explains that drafts are the cause of all disease, including *lungenentzündung*, and recommends that you wear a scarf anytime you set foot outdoors. And Herr Huber judges your illness to be due to the fact you haven’t been airing your apartment the full twenty minutes morning and evening, as per your lease agreement, and that the germs will cycle through your family indefinitely until you do so.

14. Miss Sixty

Women in Zurich dress well. Heavy make-up is standard, as is permed, boldly colored hair (platinum, copper, and burgundy the colors of choice). Even the thirty-somethings pushing strollers wear high heels and resemble movie stars. The stylish *hausfrau* is in—one able to maintain an edge during the years she takes off to raise her kids before returning to her career in finance or medicine. Her appearance exudes confidence and ambition; her job is CEO of the household until she returns to the workforce.

Your ‘look’ consists of cotton pullovers and jeans, straight hair and no make-up. Not that you’d mind looking a little spiffier, but you’ve become lazy. Who would you dress for anyway—your family, who doesn’t even notice when you get a haircut? Gina, who changes into sweats the minute she gets off work the days you have lunch at her
place? Of course it would be for your own self esteem; you don’t want to resemble the 40% of the mothers you’ve seen picking up children at the kindergarten near your house in Ft. Collins who’ve let themselves go. But the poly/rayon blouses everyone wears in Zurich (that match the burgundy end of the spectrum of hair colors) would irritate your skin. And you’re used to a hairstyle that involves no more than a comb in the morning. Besides you don’t really want to blend in with the CEO hausfraus. You’d hoped that in the eyes of the Swiss your appearance might set you apart as a foreigner and people wouldn’t approach you so often and launch into conversations in Swiss dialect. How many hundreds of times have you said your German is terrible followed by “Sprechen sie English?” How many more times will you say it in your remaining year here? Why do you look like someone who needs to be talked to? Perhaps you simply resemble one of the .05% unemployed Swiss down on their luck.

After nearly two years in Zurich the jeans you came with threaten to wear through the seat, knees, and hems. You’ve put off buying clothes for yourself here—not only are size labels defeating (instead of a nine, you are now a 140—better than Pete whose new underwear are size 164!)—but simple, straight-leg jeans for women are non-existent. The most popular label in pants is Miss Sixty—tight, black, poly/blend slacks that flare from the calf down. Miss Sixty sits on every tram, walks every street, stands at every bakery counter, and pushes every stroller. It’s a style you’d never consider wearing in the States, but as your jeans verge more and more on the grunge look of yesteryear, and because Levi’s cost over one hundred franks a pair, you’re willing to give the local taste in clothing a try.
Before you even find the dressing room, you predict *Miss Sixty* will fit you like clown pants and they do. Empty space bubbles at each hip and the hem flares at your ankle instead of dragging on the floor; no tailor in the world could bend this style to your build. With Zurich’s abundant clothing stores and their labyrinths of racks jammed with blouses, sweaters, slacks spilling out onto every sidewalk, you’d think finding something other than *Miss Sixty* to wear wouldn’t be a problem. But no pants are available in tall sizes. At nearly 5’9”, you are a giantess in a country where women average 5’4”. You can get by with capris about seven months of the year, but they won’t do for cold weather. You reevaluate your old jeans to see if they can hold out another twelve months. Not a chance. The front pocket is already starting to show through on your good pair.

You manage to find a pair of nylon hiking pants in a sporting goods store in Oerlikon. Though you’ve always associated elastic waistbands with Pete’s ninety-one year-old grandmother, they fit okay and are comfortable (though the fabric remains forever wrinkled). Unfortunately, it is the last pair in your size and they will no longer be stocked as they are “last year’s news” according to the salesman. So much for getting by on local goods.

Ordering clothing from U.S. companies adds a hefty import tax that nearly doubles the original price (a mistake you made once—paying a 30 SF tax on $35 jeans for Pete). To skirt this fee, you order two pairs of tall jeans from L.L. Bean and have them shipped to your mother so she can rewrap them and declare them as gifts on the post office form and send them to you tax free. Returns will be next to impossible this way, so if they don’t properly fit, you’ll be stuck with saggy, baggy attire for the remainder of
your stay. If so, maybe on the days you wear them, what appears to be a conscious anti-fashion choice in clothing will better discourage any well-meaning Swiss from approaching you on the street and peppering you with Zurich’s still-incomprehensible dialect.

15. Ottmar and the Zugerberg Bog

One sunny Sunday afternoon you are accosted by an elderly woman at the glass recycling bin at the park. “Don’t you know recycling is against the rules on a Sunday?” she scolds in German. “People take naps and don’t like the noise.” Even if everyone in the neighborhood were napping, with their bedroom windows open to the park (a fact you’re certain is not true), the noise from the insulated bins would not travel even half way to their pillows. The woman yammers on, poking her finger at a list of rules regarding the bins (you had foolishly assumed the words had encouraged recycling; but, indeed, rule #8 states the hours and on which days one can recycle). Before walking away she grumps, “Don’t forget!” She seems the type who wields her old-lady control just because she can; you’ve seen people like her on the tram, clutching at their shawls on sweltering days, complaining about the draft until the windows get shut even if other passengers are on the verge of heat stroke. You feel like wheeling the wagon ahead of her and tossing the material in the park’s non-recyclable garbage to horrify her a little. But you know what would happen. She’d root through her coat pockets until she found a plastic sack, then shaking her head, she’d reach into the bin and pull out every last bottle you put in. She’d then sniff indignantly in your direction and toddle off in hers,
superiorly satisfied. Well, you refuse to give her that satisfaction. You turn on your heel and rattle your load back to the apartment.

The scolding at the recycling bin doesn’t wash off easily. Nor does the talking-to by Herr Huber the next day when you vacuum up a spill over the lunch hour (quiet time 12:00-2:00, p.4 of the lease). You realize it’s time to get that figurative breath of fresh air before you do something drastic, like strangle the next cranky old person that steps in your path.

Fortunately, a colleague of Pete’s at ETH invites your family on a hike to the mountains near Zug. The goal for Saturday’s trip is to find a remote bog at the top of the mountain that Ottmar had visited over a decade ago. The bog reportedly supports insectivorous sundew plants, now rare as their habitat has shrunk to a tiny fraction of what it used to be. From Zurich, the destination will be about an hour by train and half an hour further by bus. Walter and Henry, now six and three, aren’t speedy walkers, but Ottmar says this won’t pose a problem; he and his wife, Lioba, always walk slowly in order to search for interesting specimens along the way that Ottmar can photograph or collect to bring back to his lab.

The bus drops you at a parking lot where a funicular station sits, ready to transport the twelve other passengers to the top of the mountain in an eight minute trip. The easy way appeals to Walter and Henry, and they follow the group across the lot. You herd them back to where Pete and Ottmar and Lioba are pulling binoculars and cameras from their packs, and arranging bird and plant guides in pockets for easy access. “That is a
much less interesting way up,” Ottmar says to the boys. “You can’t learn about nature unless you get out in it.” He straps on his pack and leads the way to the far end of the lot.

You step onto a gravel service road that rises steeply into the tall-treed darkness of the Zugerberg. The road quickly erodes into a maze of gullies and ruts, slushy beneath your hiking boots, and threatening to wash you back down to where you began. At the next curve, the road disappears completely, crumpled down slope like a broken ribbon. Clinging to the embankment, you baby-step in single file until you’re back on ‘solid’ ground.

“Last year, record rains flooded this part of the forest,” Ottmar says in perfect English. “The chaos is magnificent. Let the Swiss try to manage the landscape now!” Ottmar, originally from Munich, often complains about Swiss land management practices. He claims the forests, farms, parks, and lawns down to the last blade of grass, are far too regulated. His gleeful tone regarding the washed-out road borders on maniacal, but if the rigid regulations here match those on the home front, you can understand his frustrations.

Lioba walks with you and Henry. She’s a horticulturist, like Ottmar, and helps him edit and publish a bi-monthly journal on root pathogens. Quick to smile (and, fortunately, quick to speak perfect English), Lioba makes good company. Pete and Walter keep up with Ottmar and get a lesson on the ecology of the forest. You’d like to catch up and listen in, but it’s too slow going with Henry. He quickly tires of slogging up the loamy incline (one step forward, two steps back is an understatement), and soon you
end up piggybacking him. “Are we almost to the sundew patch?” he asks. He can’t wait to see the sundews, a change in attitude from earlier in the week, when the trip was proposed. It wasn’t just the idea of a day of hiking that had dampened the boys’ enthusiasm for the trip, but also that the sweet-sounding word *sundew* evoked the image of dolls and tea parties. Luckily, the day before the hike Ottmar had stopped by with some maps and a train schedule. He toughened up the sundews’ image by describing the plants to them in detail.

“Sundews are magnificent creatures!” he said with the enthusiasm he brought to anything related to the natural world. “They are carnivores, like Venus flytraps. They create acidic environments that can destroy buildings, benches, or anything man builds on the bog without first clearing them away.” Then he lowered his voice to the mysterious. “This bog in particular is special because it is one of the only ones left in Switzerland. And hardly a soul knows about it.”

“Are they really carnivores?” Walter asked. His interest was immediate. He was certainly imagining a prehistoric grove that had been overlooked since dinosaur times, where tropical, man-sized Venus flytraps flagellated wildly, preparing to devour anything that neared their nefarious trap-like mouths.

Henry, already starting to worry, asked, “What do they eat?”

“Their diet consists primarily of ants and mosquitoes and flies,” Ottmar explained. “They consume many kilograms of insects in order to get the nutrients they need. The soil on which they grow is very poor.”

“Do they move?” Henry asked.
“You mean like walking around? No, they don’t need to. Their leaves are fringed with many sticky tentacles. When something lands on the tentacles, it gets stuck. As it struggles to escape, it gets covered with digestive enzymes that break it down so the sundew can absorb the nutrients.”

“Do the tentacles move?” You weren’t sure how Henry’s was envisioning the sundews, but it was likely a scene better handled by a superhero than a family of hikers.

“Not as actively as I think you are imagining,” Ottmar said. “After an insect gets stuck, the tentacles slowly fold over the insect’s body and dissolve it with acid.”

“What about bigger animals? Like mice or deer…or people?” Walter asked.

Because Ottmar has no children, and seldom spends time around younger people, he simply answered Walter as matter-of-factly as he would an adult. “Well, the ‘dew’ isn’t sticky enough to hold down something as big as, say, you. But if you fell asleep in a patch of them they might try to dissolve you a little at a time.”

As the boys’ eyes were about to pop, you pulled Henry onto your lap and said, “If these guys can’t fall asleep tonight, I know who to call.” Ottmar had turned away, mumbling something about departure times and when to meet at the train station.

Soon Ottmar leads the group onto a narrow, muddy footpath that winds through a mature stand of beech, white fir, and yew. You’re used to seeing yew as a low shrub, planted as a border or property divide in the American suburban landscape. The yews in the Zugerberg are out to impress. They elbow right in with the large-diameter trees and rise high into the canopy, sealing tight the ‘lid’ of darkness above. Several spindly holly
bushes seem to regret having taken root in previous splashes of sun. The forest floor is awash with rotting, matted leaves that probably haven’t dried out since the previous fall. The scent reminds you of healthy compost, and you inhale deeply, missing the garden you had back home. Walter and Henry are not as taken by the smell. They tuck their noses into their sweatshirts and make gagging noises for the next quarter mile.

At least the dearth of vegetation prompts Ottmar to keep marching forward. He slows only briefly to point out fan-shaped turkey-tail fungi growing on fallen logs and bright white shelf fungus step-laddering up the sides of dead trees. Hiking with Ottmar sometimes means not reaching one’s destination. Although his research lies in plant pathology, he is interested in the entire spectrum of the natural world—botany, ornithology, entomology, geology, soil science, etc. He has a habit of stopping at every plant, fungus, moss, lichen, or snail to examine, photograph, ID, and, if possible, sample it. He likes to know every detail of the physical landscapes he visits. Though prone to losing patience with people who show no interest in their surroundings, he is quick to educate those who approach him with questions (which happens often when he is snapping photos; his lectures on microclimates and plant biology could continue indefinitely, depending on the interest level of passersby). With Henry on your back you prefer the learn-as-you-go method and prefer to keep moving with the established momentum.

After winding up another half-mile or so of switchbacks, the trail opens out into a greener, even steeper section of forest. Here the landscape looks war-torn. Chunks of slope above the trail have washed out in debris flows. Downslope, rivers of boulders and
trees end in haphazard, slumpy pileups against beech trees sturdy enough to have stopped their force. Gaping holes split the ground where mature trees once stood, and the upended root balls hold gnarled fistfuls of earth above the craters. Even the smaller of the uprooted trees have ripped out radii of ground three times the size of a person. Boardwalks that had connected parts of trail have also washed out. Many of the splintered boards are tangled in shrubs or dangle from the lower limbs of trees. Ottmar rubs his hands together. “My colleagues who study geomorphology would find this extremely interesting,” he says. “Stand by that root ball. I’ll get a picture for scale.”

Immense outcrops of conglomerate rock begin to appear on the side slopes. Stones plink down from above, an ominous sign that the mass of cemented material might come unglued at any moment. Although Ottmar repeatedly says that slope instabilities usually occur during inclement weather, you aren’t exactly reassured. You look down slope where chunks of rock have already broken free from the cliff and ripped away some of the undergrowth—not the caliber of a debris flow, but you definitely wouldn’t want to be in its path.

Nearing the ridge top you pass into the youngest part of the forest, and the sky opens up. Sedges, ferns, and giant clover-like oxalis blanket the ground. Thick-trunked holly thrives here, as well as several dog-hair clumps of hemlock. Patches of fluorescent green lichen hang like macramé from tree limbs. A garlicky/chivey odor rises from an area overgrown with European leek, a plant which many Swiss gather for cooking.

Now that flowering plants begin to appear, Ottmar stops frequently. “It’s been so long since my last trip here,” he says, aiming his hand lens at an orange spot of rust on a
leaf. “It’s quite fascinating how this forest has changed.” He kneels to photograph another clump of hairbells that seems identical to the three he’s already photographed.

Although energetic, Ottmar looks a generation older than his age of forty-seven. His complexion is sallow from spending so much time in his lab at ETH. His hair has gone to silver and the whiskers on his chin are a mix of white and gray. His youthful features—sharp blue eyes that overlook nothing—are obscured by yellowing, thick-lensed glasses. He has a wiry build, not because he exercises regularly, but because he so often forgets to eat, reading journals or papers at the dinner table and getting distracted by the need to edit or take notes. His shirttails are always on the verge of escaping his pants, and, according to Lioba, if she didn’t button him straight each morning, he might be taken for a vagrant (and indeed he once was when he crawled under a shrub at a city park to inspect a fungal colony).

Now Ottmar stops every twenty or so paces to inspect another plant. Henry is patient for a little while, then starts whining that he’s hungry, “for something better than apples.” Walter also grows tired of poking around so much and asks to go ahead.

“We’ll be along soon,” Ottmar says and motions up the slope. “You can get ice cream at the café at the summit. We’ll meet you there.” You have the feeling that Lioba would rather hang back with Ottmar and Pete and talk science, but she sticks with you and the boys, handing Henry little flowers to distract him until the summit is reached.

Every Swiss mountain seems to have a café at the top. Generally you agree with Ottmar and Pete’s complaints against such development, but now, with Henry clinging to your back and Walter stepping on your heels, the idea of having coffee and kuchen at an
outdoor table is inviting. The Zugerberg café is an unimposing two-story, half-beam building. A long wooden deck with picnic tables extends over an area of grass cropped short by cows or goats. Just as you sit down, Walter starts shouting and clutching his left arm. His eyes water as welts slash red across his forearm. “My arm is burning!” he yells. He must have swiped it against the stinging nettles at the edge of the forest.

Henry starts to cry, worried that the beastly sundews have already started attacking.

“We haven’t even reached the bog yet,” you tell him. You leave him at the table with Lioba while you bring Walter to the bathroom to cool his arm under running water.

You return to the table with Walter frowning and patting a clump of wet napkins stacked on his left forearm. Ottmar and Pete have arrived and are ordering beer.

“What happened to you?” Pete asks. He peeks under the wet heap at the landscape of red prickly welts.

“Stinging metals,” he says. “It hurts.”

“Nettles,” you all correct at once.

Ottmar raises his finger. “Next time it happens find some dock weed and rub it onto the sting. The oils in the seeds take away the burning.” He shifts his weight, as if considering whether or not he’s coming across as a know-it-all. But he continues, “The interesting thing is that dock always grows anywhere nettles grow.”

“Really?” Walter is a fan of such natural relationships.

Ottmar waves his arm to the open field behind the café. “I bet you can find some before your ice cream gets here.”
Indeed, Walter comes across many stalks of dock weed. The welts have already subsided, though, and he’s not inclined to test the remedy on a fresh patch of skin.

After everyone is rested Ottmar counts out enough change to leave at the table and stands to strap on his pack. The hay-scented air seems to fuel him and he is anxious to get going. The next leg of the trip begins on the one-lane gravel road behind the café. It is open only to pedestrians, cyclists, and the few farmers whose cows graze at this elevation. Soon you leave behind the weekend walkers and join the company of a sputtering tractor baling hay in the meadow next to the road. The tractor pulls a rickety wooden wagon stacked high with hay—a sight you’d expect to see on a Russian steppe instead of high-tech Switzerland.

“Not exactly pristine with the tractor noise,” Ottmar comments. “Farming is absolutely unnecessary in this region. The land should be allowed to return to its natural state. But ideas like that confound the Swiss!”

“The country is so small,” you say. “Don’t farmers need to take advantage of every arable inch?”

“Imports are cheaper.” Ottmar kicks at a stone in the road. “Do you think Swiss farmers make a profit on milk and cheese? Every year the subsidies increase. Every year the cows are paraded up the mountainsides and set to pasture on any slope where they can keep their footing. The Swiss and their traditions. They’d never give up farming in a million years. Just when this country’s beauty takes your breath away, you step in a cow pie.”

Very few cow pies are, in fact, underfoot. How can Ottmar not be stunned by this
field of buttercups, so glaringly golden you need to squint to look past them toward the jagged, snow-topped Alps? On the Zugerberg, man’s (and cow’s) imprint on the land isn’t exactly an eyesore, and you find yourself teetering toward the defense of this scenery.

“Many countries have wrecked their environments in worse ways,” you comment. “Open pit mining, clear cutting, corporate farming. Maybe the farmers here are subsidized, but the government can afford it. Anyhow, the subsidies are probably offset by tourists who love the sound of cowbells in the mountain meadows. It’s better than the feed lots we have in the United States. When our small farms go out of business, the land doesn’t revert back to its former natural state, believe me.”

“Perhaps I am too much of a radical,” Ottmar says, glumly. “I think more than a small corner of this country could remain untouched. Switzerland is rich. Let them subsidize a bit of nature.”

Then, as if in bovine solidarity, the clang of brass bells rises from a pasture up ahead. The path hits a gate and a turnstile, and you are routed through a herd of chocolate-colored cows. Even with four-inch horns jutting from their skulls, their slow, thick-lashed blinks and nonchalant chewing makes them look more flirtatious than dangerous. Despite Ottmar’s murmurings of “stupid cows” you find yourself flirting back—winking and making smooching noises as you pass on the trail in front of their noses. You want to take one back to the apartment and set it to graze in the complex’s deserted common area. Maybe a Sunday wash is out of the question, but you don’t think the lease specifically prohibits cows.
Walter walks backwards, enthralled by the musical ding that sounds at each animal’s pull on the grass.

“See?” Ottmar says. “The cows, the little barns near the field, the wildflowers—a neat and tidy panorama to fill the Alpine stereotype.”

Although it’s one of the most spectacular views you’ve seen in Switzerland, you say nothing.

“Where is Heidi!” Ottmar shouts. “Come out Heidi!”

“Don’t spoil it, Ottmar,” Lioba says. “It suits most people.”

“Of course it does. But if I had my way, I’d let it revert to forest and bog.” He turns to you. “Do you know most bogs in Switzerland have been drained? Or killed by toxins in the environment?”

Lioba takes his arms and steers him forward. “Calm down, Ottmar. That’s happened everywhere.”

You pass through the turn-stile at the far end of the pasture. Henry is tiring and pushes between you and Pete; he takes a hand on each side and swing-walks along. Then Ottmar says he missed the landmark for the turnoff, and the group backtracks to a barely discernable trail bordering another hay field.

Ottmar leads the group in single file. After skirting the meadow/field boundary for about a quarter mile you approach a small copse of pine forest. To your right teeters a ramshackle shed in which firewood, presumably cut from the scanty forest, is stacked. The purpose of the wood is a mystery, as no home or picnic area stands nearby. The trail dips through the pines and then passes through a stand of aspen. You exit the shaded
half-light of the aspen grove into full sun where the trail ends at the edge of a football field-sized expanse of open space. On the opposite side of the expanse, a mixed hardwood/pine forest resumes.

“Here we are!” Ottmar exclaims.

“But where are the sundews?” Walter’s voice falters.

“There aren’t any.” Henry’s shoulders slump.

To an untrained eyes the landscape looks barren. Squat hummocks of stunted vaccinium dot the bog-scape, but aside from these, no plants stand taller than toe height. The green and rust-colored sphagnum blanketing the ground resembles the shag carpet in a low-budget trailer you once rented. No half-digested city lies among seething stalks of poison. No fleshy tentacles writhe toward exposed ankles to suction them into a world beneath the scrappy moss. The boys’ initial relief at not being attacked by fearsome critters turns to disappointment.

“I thought you said they destroy buildings,” Walter says. He tries not to sound rude, but his dashed expectations beg for an explanation.

“Why do you think there are no buildings here?” Ottmar says. “See that low platform over there? It is new. The former one was dissolved.”

“By what?” Walter asks. “There’s nothing here.”

Ottmar leads the group over a make-shift path of branches and small logs to the pine-plank platform at the bog’s eastern edge. The platform quivers when you step onto it and whenever anyone moves. Ottmar jumps up and down, making it bounce and tilt under his weight. “By what?” he says. “By what populates this giant sponge, Walter.”
He digs a hand lens from his knapsack and crouches down. “Here. Come and see.”

What you had mistaken for rusty colors of sphagnum are indeed the sundews. They are so tiny that anyone walking through the bog without having dropped a contact lens would overlook them. As you take turns with the hand lens, the boys’ disappointment disappears. What the plants lack in size they make up in quantity and beauty. Beneath the lens, hundreds of iridescent orange follicles shoot like fireworks from green leafy pads. Tentacles indeed, and each topped by a perfect drop of sticky dew.

“That’s the acid,” Ottmar explains. “It smells good to flies and mites.” He pulls his camera from its case and lies on his belly over the side of the platform, adjusting his new, high-powered zoom lens. “These are the most splendid sundews I’ve ever seen!” His excitement is infectious. Henry asks if he can stick ants onto the tentacles.

“Of course,” Ottmar says as he shifts position and then snaps another round of pictures.

“Are you not lying on the ground so they don’t dissolve you?” Walter asks.

“I’m not lying on the ground because I want to stay dry. By the way you can walk on the bog. You won’t fall through. But first,” he says, “take off your boots so you don’t damage the plants. Don’t worry, the acid won’t hurt you. In fact, I think I’ll join you. We’ll see if the population dynamics are the same on the other side of the bog.”

Walter and Ottmar peel off their socks and shoes and roll their jeans to their knees. Walter is cautious at first, but soon he’s spring-stepping after Ottmar, asking questions about the landscape and the plants. He helps Ottmar place paperclips for scale for the pictures he takes. Henry isn’t brave enough to step onto the bog, so he continues
to search for small bugs to feed to the sundews.

You imagine the sundews covering the entire ridge top of the Zugerberg—blazing orange like a sunset in smoke—and Ottmar’s point about keeping wild things wild hits its mark. As the sun swings further west and shadows begin to fringe the edge of the bog, you take Ottmar’s hand lens and observe a piece of this mini-kingdom one last time. The sparkly sundews shimmer in the late-afternoon light, marking time without regulations and conventions as they wait for the next unsuspecting gnat. They are, of course, oblivious to the people in the world around them, which is probably a good thing. Who knows what a sentient sundew might resort to, if it knew who was responsible for its declining habitat? But you’ll leave that idea to your sons and to B-movie makers. Now, before your return to the rule-clogged world at the bottom of the mountain, you catalog a snapshot of these plants in a corner of your mind to access during times when you’ll need a leg-up to rise to life’s next obstacle.

16. Too Far From Home

Two years in Zurich and your family again cannot financially swing a trip back to the States. So, although she visited last summer, your mother decides she will make another trip in July to see everyone. Both her parents passed away the previous spring and she says she feels like an orphan (she is 60!). “Your grandfather is still sitting on my closet shelf,” she says, wistfully (his ashes are to be spread in the Rocky Mountains the next summer). “I have to move him aside every time I need a pair of shoes or a belt.” A Swiss vacation just might cure the blues.
*  

You and Walter and Henry take the train to the airport to meet her. The boys step up to the glass wall facing customs and begin the contest of who will spot Grandma first. She finally appears at the top of the escalator with the last of the stragglers from her flight. You recognize her pink jacket and turquoise duffel carry-on before you recognize her. Her hair is now shoulder-length and gone entirely to gray, and the plastic torso-encompassing brace she wears when traveling (her back is weak after a failed operation seven years earlier) seems to be all that’s holding her up. Unlike the battle-axe who hustled off the plane last summer raring to go, she now tugs her suitcase toward the customs booth as if a sticky floor is catching the wheels. She sees the boys through the glass and waves to them. Her tired smile is a result of more than having crossed nine time zones. Apparently the deaths of her parents took more of a toll than she had let on.

She finally passes through the last security checkpoint and through the double glass-sliding doors. “What a long flight!” she remarks, catching her breath. She turns to the boys, “How are my favorite grandsons?” she asks (they are her only grandsons). She gives them each a packet of peanuts from the airplane and they squeeze the crinkly blue wrap. They hug her and ask if they can knock on Fred (the name of her brace). “Go ahead,” she says, “I can’t wait to get him off!” She turns to you, takes you in and seems satisfied. “You look good, Jen,” she says.

You embrace her armored torso and then clasp her upper arms to touch a real piece of her.
“Your dad sends his love,” she says. “Only two semesters to go before retirement—he’s counting down the days.”

“Don’t we have to hurry?” Walter pipes in, “to catch the next train back to Zurich?”

You glance at your watch. You need the Oerlikon connection which leaves in six minutes. “It would be a dash,” you say, trying to gauge whether or not your mother is up for it. Last year, even wearing Fred, she could be quick. “Mom?”

“Let’s do it,” she says. “We don’t want to wait another half hour.”

You grab Henry’s hand and hurry to the ticket machine to buy a transportation pass for your mother. Then you point to the Haltestelle 2 sign over the escalator leading down to the platform, and the four of you hop on the moving stairs. Before you reach the platform, the train arrives, thundering forward to the far end of the station. Henry sees it and panics (the rush to catch a train or tram happens often—you come out of a store with groceries under one arm and a tram pulls up to the stop, so you snatch him up in your free arm and run). Henry raises his arms and you pick him up. Walter runs ahead to press the button that holds the train doors open. Your mother hustles alongside you, forcing her small suitcase to keep up. But when you hop into the train and turn, she is still on the platform, huffing and heaving; she can’t climb the two stairs until she catches her breath. Walter gets in and holds the button on the inside of the train. Your mother struggles to heft the suitcase to the stair. The bell rings and the automatic doors begin to close. You realize she’s about to be stranded and drop Henry and reach toward her. But the jaws of the door slam toward your arm, forcing you to pull it back. Panic fills her eyes. But the
doors reopen after shutting on the obstacle of the suitcase she somehow hefted onto the first step. You catch the pink fabric of her jacket and pull her in. She is gasping for breath, hand on her chest, and you suddenly worry she is having a heart attack.

You reach for her elbow. “Are you okay?”

She nods yes. The train lurches forward and the boys head toward the seating area. After inhaling deeply several times, her breathing slows. You lift the handle of her tipped-over suitcase and roll it to where the boys have found an open set of seats.

“The trouble is that my strength is gone,” she says, following behind you. “I haven’t been to the fitness center since my last bout with pneumonia. And the collapsed lung doesn’t help matters.”


“I did, but that cough last month turned into pneumonia anyway and gummed up part of my left lung. I guess I forgot to tell you.”

Expecting the suitcase to be on the heavy side, you heave back and practically throw it into the overhead rack. “You should have said something.”

She sinks into the brown cloth seat and the kids start tapping on Fred again. “I didn’t want to worry you,” she said. “When my mother had cancer she didn’t tell us until after the operation, which was successful, and in which case she said there was no need to worry anybody else about it.”

“I don’t want you to be that way,” you say.

“I gripe enough to my friends,” she says. “It helps. In fact, my friend Lori used to
be a nurse. She knows pain. She sometimes comes with me to the doctor’s to explain to them what medications I really need.”

You’ve never met Lori; she is recent friend of your mother’s from her investment club. You etch Lori’s name into your memory, as she seems to be edging you out regarding your mother’s confidence. “Why did she stop nursing?” you ask in a tone that implies that you don’t quite trust this Lori character.

“She quit when she moved to Morris to get married. Her husband was a jerk and she divorced him after a year, but she stayed in Morris. Our clinic is so small, they rarely hire, so she’s working as a home health aide until something opens up. She knows her stuff. She’s also had a failed back operation, so we commiserate in our misery.”

“I didn’t realize you were so miserable.”

“Until you suffer from chronic back pain, you can’t know how horrible it is.”

Walter takes her hand and traces a blue vein up to the delicate knob of her wrist. “Why do your veins stick up so much?” he asks. He presses on one and it slips sideways. He is startled and laughs; then he leans in and does it again. They are impressive veins, like a network of rivers, and she glances down at the back of her hand.

“Because I’m an old lady,” she answers.

“But you’re only sixty,” Walter says. A flicker of fear passes behind his eyes.

“Sometimes I feel like I’m a hundred.”

Just as your mother has chosen to downplay her ailments, you weren’t exactly straight with her on the severity of Walter’s anxiety problems. You mentioned the therapy and that it ended a year and a half ago, but not how you were still walking on
eggshells concerning his worries, especially about death. To ease his anxieties regarding death, you told him everyone lives to be a hundred (you tacked an extra twenty years onto the ages of your deceased grandparents). Now she’s said the magic word, *Hundred*.

*Feels like I’m a hundred.* Walter drops her hand and shrinks back into his seat. He’s probably imagining her laid out in a shroud on the living room sofa, or unmoving on the spare bed, or dying right here on the train.

“Grandma’s a tough old bird,” you try, lightly. “She has a good forty years left.”

“God, I hope not,” she says. Then she notices your glare boring into her face and Fred, and sees Walter’s stricken wide eyes. “But don’t worry, honey,” she adds, and pats his knee. “I’ve got plenty of years left.”

Pete returns home late that night, after the kids are in bed. When he comes in and drops his keys onto the table, you and your mother are sitting at opposite ends of the couch, watching the English broadcast of EuroNews. She stands, stretches her arms overhead, and goes to hug him. “How is my favorite son-in-law?” she asks (he is her only son-in-law).

“Good. Busy,” he says. “And how are you, Lenny?”

“Hanging in there.”

“And the flight?”

“Not too crowded. But the airlines are stingy with meals. And they used to give you free wine. Now they don’t even do that anymore.”

Although you feel like going to bed, your mother is wide awake. Pete also seems
wound up, his brain still wired to the computer, calibrating another run of his model.

You ask if anyone is interested in a glass of wine.

“That would be good,” your mother says. “My body still thinks it’s two in the afternoon. Maybe a drink would help me relax.”

You pull an Australian Shiraz from the wine rack and three wine glasses from the cupboard. Pete changes into a t-shirt and sweat pants. He opens the balcony door to let the cool night air in, and then switches on the standing lamp to its first notch of brightness. When he sits, the three of you make an equidistant triangle—your mother on the loveseat, you on the couch, Pete on the floor in front of the turned-off TV. There is a bit of small talk—the raspberries are dropping off the vine back in Minnesota, a bumper crop of tomatoes is on the way.

You top off the wine glasses and check on the kids. You have the feeling your mom wants to tell you something, but that she’s waiting for a prompt. Although she told you last spring not to make the trip to Michigan for her mother’s funeral (she knows the state of your finances), you have the feeling she’s disappointed that you didn’t go. You had called your grandmother in the hospital the week before and happened to catch her last lucid conversation; perhaps you stole the last lucid conversation from those around her bedside. But she had been your favorite grandmother; she was independent and strong, musically talented and business-savvy, and she always rooted for you no matter what bad decisions you made when you were younger. You’d sensed this might be your last conversation with her and held onto it until she told you she was tired and that she hoped you weren’t crying because she’d be seeing you next summer when you brought
the boys for a visit. You would have paid any price to be magically transported to her bedside at that moment. But her decline had been so rapid, in reality you wouldn’t have made it in time to see her alive. And the funeral would have been a logistical nightmare—a last minute flight costing over $1500 dollars for one ticket, more than you family’s travel budget for the year; also it would have been next to impossible for Pete to take the week off to stay home with the kids when he was so far behind on his projects and scheduled to present his work at a conference the following week. At the time you felt justified in not going to the funeral, but now that months have passed your excuses seem week and your life in Switzerland selfish.

Since you ate dinner four hours ago, the wine has gone to your head. You step into the living room and blurt, “I’m sorry I called that night at the hospital when I did. Matt said to call before it was too late. Grandma seemed, I don’t know, so chatty. I had no idea she was dying right then or I would have hung up and let you have the last word.”

Your mother looks at you, and then says, without a hint of confrontation, “She had who she wanted by her side, and by keeping you on the line, you were there too.”

Your eyes threaten to tear up. How could you ever have thought jealously or disappointment lay hidden beneath her surface? It had never been there in your lifetime, so why would it start now?

“She felt so bad that she never had the chance to meet Henry,” she continues. “She wanted to hold out long enough to meet him someday. I guess it wasn’t meant to be.”

Your husband refills the glasses, and then sits next to you on the couch which
makes a kind of audience for your mother. “She was in bad shape for a while, wasn’t she?” he asks.

“Oh god, yes,” your mother says, a little slurred. She sips again from her glass. “She got to the point that she was afraid to step five feet without her oxygen tank. Emphysema is a cruel killer. It suffocates you slowly, but can strike you dead at any time.” She swirls the remaining wine in her glass then tips it back. Then she drums her fingers on the side of the loveseat. “Just one more splash of wine and I’ll be able to sleep,” she says, holding her glass toward Pete.

Then she says, not to you, but to a space in the darkness behind you, “If kids could just see how emphysema takes a life, they would never smoke that second cigarette, the one that gets them hooked.”

Your grandmother had smoked her entire life, even after she had been diagnosed with the early stages of emphysema. She tried everything to quit—the Patch, Nicorette gum, hypnotism, cold turkey, locks and bolts. Finally, it was the oxygen tank that put an end to the urge.

Your mother was also a smoker from a young age, and she smoked thirty years before asthma forced her to stop. Although she’s been smoke-free for fifteen years, you can tell when she craves a cigarette by the way she fidgets. Like now as she continues to drum her fingers on the side of the loveseat.

“It’s a real fucking shame,” she says. The word fuck startles you. You’ve never heard it out of your mother’s mouth. In fact you only remember hearing her say damn a few times—when the Democrats lost an election, or when hail threatened to wreck her
tomato starts. She now seems coarse and drunk, instead of the well-read, well-educated person you’ve known. You hate the feeling of wanting to go to bed before she disappoints you more.

Although now wide awake, you stand and say, “I’m fading. The boys’ll be up early. I’ll try and keep them quiet so they don’t wake you up.” You kiss her cheek. “Sleep well.”

The next morning you shove your selfishness to a back corner of your mind and are determined to be supportive—to take your mother under your wing if she needs. You rise early, intent on starting breakfast before she and the boys wake up. But you are stopped short on your way to the kitchen. Fred is propped on the couch, facing the TV as if waiting for someone to turn it on. Without a body to grip, he appears a lonely empty husk.

Then your mother’s leg rises from behind the love seat. A giant stretchy blue band is looped around her ankle and tied off at the base of the sofa. You step to the side of the sofa and sit on its arm. “You’re up early,” you say.

Lying on her back with her hands clasped behind her neck, she exhales slowly and lowers her leg.

“Thought I’d get my exercises out of the way,” she says, and then exhales again for another leg lift. The band pulls taut. The color in your mother’s cheeks is high, and her jaw is set with determination.

“Fred is waiting so patiently for you,” you say. “I think he’s in love with you.”

Breath shakes from her mouth as the leg comes down. “Don’t make me laugh,”
she says, “or I’ll lose the strength to finish. Fred might have to entertain himself today. If we don’t go too far afield I can leave him here until this afternoon.”

“We’ll stay local.” You stand and move toward the kitchen. “Do you still eat oatmeal?”

She nods yes, her eyes locked onto her ascending leg.

Over the next few days she plays tirelessly with the boys. She paints with them, goes on ant hunts with them, plays cards with them, watches videos with them while you and Pete enjoy a few dinners out. And every morning they exercise together—working their legs with the giant rubber band, and then lifting cans of corn overhead and into curls to work triceps and biceps. Your mom is tuned into them in a way you can’t recall her being with you. You remember running loose with your neighborhood friends as a child. Your mother was always around—weeding the garden or peeling potatoes or busy fixing something, but you can’t conjure up anything interactive, unless adding quarters to the machine at the Laundromat counts.

Now the three of them raise the cans of corn from their sides until they tap overhead. “Look how strong I am, Mommy!” Walter says.

“Look how strong I am!” Henry shouts.

“Me too!” your mother calls. “I’m strong too!”

You plan a four day vacation to Ticino, the Italian-speaking Canton of Switzerland. Because Pete has taken on too many projects with imminent deadlines, he
decides to stay in Zurich and work. You don’t mind, though. He’s always antsy to fit in as many sights as possible, and this way your mother won’t feel obligated to be constantly on the go.

You take the train to Locarno, from which a forty minute bus ride transports you to Porto Ronco, a tiny town near the Italian border on Lake Maggiore, where the hotel is located. Stepping from the bus, you nearly buckle in the Mediterranean heat—the moist air hugs you like a too-tight embrace, and the sun glares off rock, water, and pavement to bake you. Your mother seems in her element, though. Because she’s so thin, she is usually cold and layers up even during the summer. Now she smiles as she rolls up the sleeves of her white linen shirt, and retrieves a pair of sunglasses from her fanny pack. “This heat is perfect,” she says.

Waxy-leaved shrubs and huge spikes of yucca grow from cracks in the limestone walls above the sidewalk. You look through the haze for a landmark pictured in the brochure of Porto Ronco. In particular you scan the area for the swimming beach that your hotel advertised. But Porto Ronco’s shoreline is narrow and rocky. A stone ledge extends partway into the water after which the drop off is so deep you can’t see the lake bed. Even in the absence of a breeze, sizable waves break against the stones. There is no way the kids will be able to swim here. You glance down the street. Several restaurants are located on the lakeside, but not the Hotel Eden. You ask a passerby where the Hotel Eden is, and he points across the road and straight up the cliff side, where many homes and hotels cling to the rock. You look at the brochure, wondering how on earth you got the impression the hotel was on the beach. Your mother looks up the cliff and is
consumed by a fit of coughing. “I don’t think I can make it up there, Jen,” she says. “My asthma is really kicking in.”

The helpful man smiles. “Ma’am,” he says in a lilting Italian accent, “if you can make it to that bend in the road, there is an elevator to serve you to the hotel.”

She looks relieved. “I think I can manage that,” she says.

True to the man’s word, around the corner an elevator is tucked into the rock. It has a science-fictiony feel—like it might travel up through cliffs and reach outer space. But it has only one stop, and the doors open onto a terraced part of the cliff. You step out at the foot of the rose-colored Hotel Eden. You sign the ledger and the hotel clerk hands over the keys to a cottage. You roll the suitcases along an uneven stone-slab walkway and are quickly swallowed up by the dense vegetation surrounding the path.

A split-rail fence half-heartedly protects guests from plunging off the edge. Henry’s constant tripping on the stones threatens to send him hurtling through one of the fence’s wider gaps, and you force him to the inside edge, where he could just as easily disappear behind thick ropey vines and giant fan-shaped leaves. At last you pass through a gate where limestone blocks, shored up with cement, lead to the door of the cottage. The hotel and other dwellings remain out of sight.

The cottage opens from the rear. Smooth hardwood floors cool everyone instantly. The kids run to the double bed in the corner of the large living room and flop onto it. A couch, a bookcase filled with random German and Italian books, and two coffee tables occupy the rest of the living room. Your mother crosses the room and opens the double-doors that lead out to the balcony. She steps out and remarks that the balcony
extends the length of the cottage. You leave the suitcases by the door and follow the short hallway to a bright white kitchen, where another glass door opens out to the balcony. You step out onto it. The view downward is vertigo-inducing. Only one side of the cottage is snug against solid ground. This side, the balcony side, is supported by tall stilts bolted into the bedrock about twenty-five feet below. Craggy rocks into which squat trees have somehow rooted jut down to the road which parallels the coastline of Lake Maggiore.

The front of the balcony offers an expansive view of the lake. With the mountains rising up, green and gully-cut on the opposite shore, it appears almost fjord-like. Your mother has her face to the sun and her thin tan hands rest on the balcony rail. Behind her are simply water and distant trees, blurred somewhat by the haze of the heat. From this perspective she looks to be standing at the rail of a ship; the balcony seems to be directly overlooking the water. The cottage is probably just yards from the shoreline as the crow flies. The lake is so vast that balcony and water fit together perfectly. The photo in the brochure was indeed misleading, but you can see why they did it.

“It’s beautiful,” your mother says. Her hand trails along the wrought-iron railing as she walks toward you. “We’ll have to watch the kids on this balcony, though, and everywhere else. I’ve never been surrounded by so much steepness.” She turns again toward the lake and points at the two smallish islands on the western side. The motion of the water makes them appear to be moving; their oblong shapes add to the impression that they are dark green ships headed toward Locarno. “Which one has the gardens?” she asks.
“The bigger one.” You smile, knowing she can’t wait to see the botanical park on Isolo di Brissago—reportedly a gardener’s paradise. “We’ll take the ferry there tomorrow.” Thousands of flowers and shrubs should be in bloom now, although from the vantage on the balcony, the colors are obscured by thick tall trees and the only visible color is green.

The next day, when the ferry pulls away from the dock and heads toward the island, you get a front-end view of your hotel and other homes dotting the steep terrain above Porto Ronco. From the water, the bedrock is invisible, and the structures appear to have been pressed into a green Styrofoam jungle, like in a diorama. You can see that the cliff on which your hotel is located rises to a geologic bench about a half mile overhead. Upon this bench sits another small village, sentineled on one side by a buff-colored church steeple. Somehow the road through Porto Ronco must wind up to it; and it must end there, because above the village nothing but forest stretches to the top of the mountain. You keep the road in mind as a walk for later exploration.

The four of you spend half the day with mouths agape in awe at the botanical garden. Trumpet vines and philodendron, which thrive only in greenhouses back home, grow in wild tangles in every direction. Bamboo the size of telephone poles gives the impression it will grow into the stratosphere someday. But it’s hot. Shade provides some relief, but like a convection oven, the heated air circulates into every space and cooks everyone and everything, even in the shade. After two ice-cream bars, the kids are still too hot and sweaty to follow another interpretive flower path without serious
complaining. You volunteer to take them to the boat dock to let them wade at the shore so that your mother can poke around some more and inspect the plants that interest her, but she also feels like going. Even with her inhaler, her lungs are heavy here, and she coughs a lot.

The ferry returns to Porto Ronco in less than twenty minutes. Soon you reach the cliffside elevator, and then the cottage, which remains cool without air-conditioning due to the chill inherent in the bedrock.

The next afternoon while your mother and the boys rest, you decide to hike up the road and see if you can reach the village you saw from the boat. You take the elevator down to the road, which has at best two inches of shoulder. Keeping your ears open for trucks and buses, you round the first bend, where a group of cyclists nearly takes you out. Not fifty yards ahead is a sign for Sopra Ascona, the village on the geologic bench on the cliff. The sign points to a pathway of steps that are cut into the limestone cliff wall. Back at the cottage you noticed a few people passing on some stairs, but assumed they were trekking a few feet up to their rental units. Now it appears that the stairway leads from the lake shore all the way up to the village. And within moments of starting up the stairs, you indeed pass within an arm’s reach of your cottage.

The stone stairway is doubly shaded—first by tall trees and shrubs, second because it traverses the north-facing slope of the mountain and the sun’s angle is already behind the ridge. You feel as if you’ve stepped into a different climatic zone. The air is cool and moist enough for maidenhair fern to grow between the limestone bricks. You’ve seen this species of fern in the wet forests of the Pacific Northwest, but never imagined it
could grow in the heat here.

Intermittently, gates leading to different properties appear in the rocky walls of the stairway. Also, small shrines appear in the bigger nooks and crevasses, or in spaces where people have removed bricks from the wall. Crosses, candles, beads, and pictures of Mary and Jesus crowd these little well-tended spaces, and the stone of the pathway is worn smooth below them.

After twenty-five minutes the stairs emerge into the open, before the Catholic Church you saw from the boat. On this quarter-mile wide bench, the dense forest vegetation has been cleared, and sycamore and London plane trees planted for shade. Beyond the church stands a smattering of inns and restaurants and the post office of Sopra Ascona. The mountain slopes up behind the village and crests several miles further. Looking northward along the mountainside, you see the road doesn’t, in fact, end at the village. It continues along the bench and then curves out of sight along the next valley before appearing on the other side again. There the road is visible only in segments as it passes through mountain tunnels and bends up other valleys. Eventually it straightens before dipping down into what must be Locarno in the distance.

You glance at your watch. Two o’clock. Your mother would love the enchanted stone pathway, and this quaint little village tucked almost haphazardly into the mountain. But it must be at least a thousand stairs from the hotel; just the idea would knock the wind out of her. But the kids would also enjoy the walk, and they are slow, too, and might be willing to climb this far with the promise of pizza and ice cream at the end. Even a four-hour journey would leave enough time to make it to Sopra Ascona for dinner.
“I'll give it a try,” your mother says, after you explain the route and persuade her try a few stairs to see how it goes. She turns to the living room bed that she and Walter share. Her brace is tipped on the bed on its side. “Sorry, Fred,” she says, “but you’re on your own again.” She snaps on her fanny-pack and pulls on her visor. “Let’s go for it!”

“Too bad, so sad, Fred,” Walter shouts, and tosses his rubber snake to the brace to keep it company.

“Bye, bye, Fred!” Henry calls. Then he asks, “Will Fred really be sad?”

On the stairs your mother gets winded quickly, but she recovers quickly, too, with enough stops. Walter and Henry like to stop a lot anyway. They point out ferns and mosses and spider webs that inhabit cracks and corners. Behind a curtain of ivy, they discover a spot where someone, somehow, managed to plant a flower garden on the steep slope; and your mother pinches off a tiny piece of the interesting-looking succulent poking through the gate to propagate when she gets back to Minnesota. The kids are attracted to the shrines, although you try and shepherd them past the ones of crucified Jesus bleeding under his crown of thorns so they won’t have nightmares for the rest of the trip.

In just under three hours, the four of you step from the lush stairway onto the paved Sopra Ascona road. The boys drag their grandmother past the church to a pedestrian bench near a fountain, and you take pictures of them against a backdrop that looks as if they’ve just climbed the equivalent of Mt. Everest.

After a bit of rest, Walter and Henry decide they are starving. You all stroll into the small village and find a pizzeria with outside seating. It’s 5:30 and the restaurant is
empty. The waitress and chef sit smoking at one of the round outdoor tables and look a little surprised to see the four of you wanting to eat at such an early hour.

“Geoffnet?” you try in German, having no idea what open is in Italian.

The waitress says, “No speak English.” But she smiles and motions you with her cigarette to sit, then brings you menus.

“How does she know we speak English?” Walter asks.

“Who else in Europe eats before seven?” your mother says.

“And look at Grandma’s hat,” you say, and poke a finger at the Twins logo.

“And look at your t-shirt.” She points at the Museum of Natural History logo on Walter’s T-Rex clad chest.

“And look at mommy’s arms!” Henry cheers, thinking he’s in on something.

Your mother laughs and says to him, “Anyway, the whole world can hear what language Henry speaks!”

The only Italian you know is Ciao, Pizza, and Vino, but it is enough. You stuff yourselves on gorgonzola and artichoke heart pizzas, then trek back down the stone path to the cottage. As the evening air takes on the musky moth-attracting scent of nighttime blossoms, you feel like a cliff swallow sweeping its family back to the safety of its dwelling before darkness falls.

The kids are asleep by nine. You take a shower, and then find your mother on the balcony. She is sitting on one of two wicker chairs you pulled out earlier from the living room. Her eyes face south into Italy, over the crescent bend of the water. Night has
already fallen behind you, but ahead you can still make out the dark silhouette of the
mountains against the pewter sky.

“It reminds me of an art project you brought home from school once,” she says.
“Mountains cut from black construction paper and glued onto gray construction paper.
Simple, and so pretty.” Her gaze remains steady. “I used to want to live abroad,” she
says. “Considering your dad’s roots, you’d think at least European vacations would have
been an option. But he never wanted to make the trip to Estonia, or anywhere else; all my
travels have been with tour groups.” She leans back and the chair makes its wicker-
crunch noise. “I want to etch this scene in my mind before we leave tomorrow.”

You slide the other chair to face the same direction. “You did well on the walk
this afternoon, Mom,” you say. “Making it up all those stairs—I wasn’t sure how it
would go. Your stamina seemed better today than even two days ago.”

“It comes and goes.” She sighs. “It’s hard, you know. I was never a weak person
until the back operation. Not only did it make things worse, but everything else piled on
when I couldn’t recover. I used to be a positive person.”

“Your parents just died,” you say. “Things will start looking up soon.” Your
encouragement falls flat against the darkening sky. You know she’s turning it over in her
mind, deciding if she should leave it at that.

“Although they divorced when I was two, I always imagined they might get back
together some day—rediscover one another in old age or something silly like that.”

“But Grandma swore off men,” you remind her, “after her fourth divorce.”

“Oh, I suppose. I thought she might at least ask about my dad in the end, though.”
She laughs and says, “Their deaths happening so close together seemed significant somehow. But I imagine that if there is such a thing as heaven, she’s probably not taking much notice of him there, either.” Then she clears her throat and says, “Jen, I’m addicted to the pain pills.”

“What?” A numbing tingle crawls up your arms. “What do you mean?”

“I started taking Percocet on a regular basis two years ago.”

You stare at the side of her face where her cheekbone rises as sharply as the mountain behind her. *Two years?*

“Is Lori in on this?” In your mind you call the ambiguous Lori, threaten action, or maybe just beg her to wean you mother off the medication. You’re not sure.

“No,” she says. She sees your surprise. “Lori doesn’t hold much sway with the doctors in Morris. I complain enough about the pain and they give me the pills. I only take them at night; it was like heaven to finally sleep again. Over time I wasn’t able to sleep without them. Well, it doesn’t matter anyway.”

“Why? What do you mean?” Your brain nags you for a drink or three, or for one of her pills.

“I wasn’t going to say anything, since sometimes these things drag on, but sometimes they don’t, and you said before you wanted to be kept up to date about my health.”

Your mouth is too dry to speak. *These things?* What more things could there be? Suddenly you’re sure it’s cancer. Every year she is screened for the two types of cancer her mother had. But in that case it would have been caught early. There’d be time for
treatment.

So when she says, “I have emphysema, too, Jen,” you are relieved. No chemo, and she’ll have plenty of years if she holds out to the age your grandmother did.

But she says, “On top of the asthma, the collapsed lung, and recurring pneumonia, things don’t look good. That’s where the cough is coming from—the asthma causes the wheezing—just so you know. And as you also know, it can’t be cured.”

“But Grandma lived with it...”

“God, the idea of going around with those oxygen tanks. If I had any guts I’d simply jump off the balcony in this beautiful setting.” She looks at you trying to come to terms with what she is saying. She continues, “I suspected it for a while; the diagnosis explained a lot of things. When the pulmonary specialist confirmed it, though, all I could visualize was my mother’s last suffocating hour of hell and I wanted to kill myself right then and there. Ironically, that day my back felt fine and I wasn’t coughing. And when it comes down to it, I’m too squeamish to attempt suicide. My mother had emphysema for twelve years, and she was somewhat strong going into it. I can barely keep up with your three year-old son.”

“But you climbed all those stairs today.” Suddenly, the distance from Switzerland to Minnesota unravels to a point of infinity. How can you not be there?

“I suppose. But that trip should have taken thirty minutes, not three hours. I don’t mean to scare you. I plan on holding out a few more years, but I say it just in case because I don’t want you caught off guard.”

Her frailty glares before you now, the curtain dropped from what you were
blinding yourself to the minute she stepped from customs—her bony collarbones jutting against her shirt, her stooped shoulders, constant labored breathing. She indeed has the stature of a ninety year-old, only with a younger face.

You want to reach out to her, touch her sleeve, but you have never reached out to one another and it would be awkward for both of you now. “Can I do anything?” you ask. “To help?”

“Just keep a good eye on those boys of yours. They’ve got to be in tip-top shape to help their granny in the garden when they visit next summer.” She stands and crosses her arms to ward off the night chill. “Don’t worry,” she says. “I know you’re there for me.” Then she laughs, “And I won’t ask you to smother me on my deathbed, either, if I’m lingering there, although the thought did cross my mind.”

“God, Mom!”

“By the way, I’m down to half a pill a day. So, it’s only a little addiction, if that makes any difference.” Then she steps back into the cottage, smiling, and closes the glass door behind her.

You’re not sure what to think. The signs of the illness were there, and its severity must have been lurking somewhere in the back of your mind, even as you denied it, or the bleakness of it all would be even more unbearable. But the tears come, not because of the realization that she will die in the not-too-distant future, but because somehow you have an emotional distance even greater than the physical one spanning the ocean. She has never let you, or your brothers, get close to her, and now that she needs support, you’re not sure how to administer it.
Her friendship with Lori is suddenly a relief. That she has someone smart and compassionate she will open up to is probably better therapy than many of the specialists she sees. Although you wouldn’t want to burden your kids, either, if you became ill, you can’t imagine replacing your family’s sympathetic ears to those of friends. All you can do is hope that open lines of communication and affection can provide your family with the building-blocks for closer emotional relationships than the one you share with your mother.

You thought a pall might settle over the remainder of your mother’s stay in Zurich, but her spirits pick up, and yours follow suit. She doesn’t joke about her ‘creaky old bones’ in front of the kids anymore. She helps set off fireworks at the park on the Swiss National Holiday and returns from the Lindt Chocolate Factory with five pounds of chocolate, and her vigor at finding bargains at the downtown flea market parallels that of the previous year. She climbs the castle tower in Schaffhausen, visits the military airplane museum in Dübendorf, and makes it up the hill to the anthropology museum near the apartment. The only time you catch a glimpse of introspection is when she sits in the wing of Fraumunster Church, encircled on three sides by the Chagall stained glass. Sharing a pew with a handful of other tourists, she deciphers the stories told in the colorful panes. She’s not religious, but buys several postcards of the window pictures and keeps them in her purse.

The morning of her departure, she double-checks her plane tickets and packs her
five rolls of film to develop back home into the turquoise carry-on duffel. While nesting
the film canisters into a pocket in the duffel, she discovers two tubes of purple sugar she
had been saving for the boys.

“Where are my good grandsons?” she calls.

When they appear, she hands them each a tube and points at the label on which a
pink snake with fangs bigger than its head poses ready to strike. “This is called Viper
Vile. I found it at the dime store in Morris and thought it would be perfect for our ant
hunts. I forgot all about it until now. So you might as well use it. Just save a little bit for
when I see you next time and we’ll attract a whole herd.”

“I don’t think ants come in herds,” Walter says.

“Well, whatever they come in, we’ll be ready for them. Just don’t drop any in the
apartment.”

Henry is mesmerized by the violet crystals. His attachment to the Viper Vile is
immediate, and he refuses to let go of it for the train ride to the airport. “Grandma, is it
okay if I don’t feed it to the ants?” he asks. “I like it too much.”

“Sure, sweetie,” she says. “Now come and give Grammie and Fred a big hug
before we head out. You too, Walter.”

As she hugs your sons, you feel the strength of her love extending toward you
through them. At this moment they are the middlemen, and later when they are
clambering over you on the couch you will remember this and embrace them and draw
the strength of this love. You will recall the giant blue rubber band stretching between
ankle and floor, the canned-corn weights, and the isometric exercises, and know that she
hasn’t given up. Maybe she can’t recover, but she can hang in there. And you can hang in there with her.

17. Bergün, 2003

Another February rolls around, and with it another Sportferien (sport holiday). During this two-week period schools close and families head to the mountains. Zurich empties down to the smattering of people who can’t get the holiday off work and who can’t afford to travel. You’ve never vacationed over this holiday, saving money for warmer-weather trips, but this is your last winter in Switzerland, and a final excursion to the snow-covered mountains seems a good way to end the season. You decide on a kid-friendly ski resort in Bergün, a village in western Switzerland, separated from ritzier St. Moritz by a craggy arm of Alps. Your family doesn’t downhill ski, but Bergün is also popular for its long, well-groomed sledding courses, which seems more your family’s speed.

If an inexpensive Gasthaus exists in Bergün, it eludes your meticulous search. You comb Bergün’s on-line Chamber of Commerce and find nothing cheaper than the one-star Gasthaus Klimpt which charges 90 francs pro bett, pro nacht. How much Switzer Qualitait can go into a basic bed in a basic inn whose window aims at the parking lot? Herr Klimpt will no doubt walk away with a huge profit—friendly smile not included. A unit with a hallway bathroom is 40 francs cheaper. At five francs a flush you believe it’s worth using the hall toilet, but your husband says flatly, “Some things are priceless.” You suggest lowering your standards a star.
“You mean down to zero stars?” Pete says. “Like that place in Zermatt? We’re at least going to have a room with heat this time.” He tosses his credit card next to the computer. “We can afford two nights.” He’s not in the mood to be reminded how close to maxed-out this piece of plastic is, so you don’t argue. You reserve the room and then Google the Bergün live-cam web link. The view consists of a splat of melting flakes smearing the lens. At least it is snowing; you’d rather head to a place sight unseen anyway. What matters is that the snow report is good and all runs are open.

After a steady two-hour climb from Chur, the train emits its last hydraulic gasp at Bergün’s small, one-room train station. As you unload backpacks, suitcases, and sleds onto the platform, return-trip passengers press in the other direction to get the best seats for the ride back down. You speculate how the train will turn around without a loop of extra track. It doesn’t. An engine locked onto the last passenger car raises its metal bar to the electric lines overhead and becomes the lead. After a moment, the train you rode in on eases back down the same track it climbed.

You pile the suitcases and kids onto the sleds and pull everything down Bergün’s silent, snow-covered streets. In less than ten minutes you arrive at Gasthaus Klimpt. A typical gasthaus in Switzerland includes a restaurant, and Gasthaus Klimpt is no exception. The rich aroma of bratwurst and schnitzel wafts into the lobby as Pete signs the register. The kids have eaten only apples and raisins the past four hours, so you herd them forward before they start whining they’ll die if they can’t have a bratwurst. Pete catches up with the key and opens the door to a surprisingly decent-
sized room. There’s even a loft, which the kids squabble over until they flip a coin to see who gets it the first night. Walter wins. Henry cries about the unfairness of everything.

You hand everyone the turkey sandwiches you packed that morning in Zurich for lunch. At eighteen francs per plate for a simple sit-down meal downstairs, you regret not hefting a fourth suitcase full of bread and jam. “How about a stroll through the village?” you suggest when everyone’s finish eating. “Maybe we’ll find some hot chocolate and pastries?”

“But we’re here to sled,” Walter says.

“And walking’s boring.” Henry grabs the rope of one of the sleds leaning against the wall and tugs it over.

Pete shrugs, implying that the path of least resistance—what the kids want—would be easiest. So everyone bundles into sweaters, long johns, snow pants, jackets, boots, hats, mittens, and scarves. The suitcases are nearly empty after all layers are donned. By the time the last boot is laced, sweat is trickling down your sides. You grab the boys’ hands and Pete grabs the sleds, and you bumble down the creaky stairs like Teletubbies on parade.

Three times a day a red cog-train makes the half-hour grind up Albula Pass to Preda, the topmost station on the mountain. The train circles in and out of tunnels in such tight curlicues that you can see the bottom cars when you look down the mountain from your window. Walter sits tight in his seat at the window—not just because he is well-behaved and tilted back at a 40˚ degree angle, but because the view to the base of
the gorge a mile below is absolutely vertigo-inducing. Spruce and hemlock grow from sheer, gray granite cliff walls on the other side of the valley. They hold boughfulls of crystal-packed snow toward the clear sky like an offering. In the instant the train curves into direct sunlight a strange reflection appears in the window—Walter’s face overlaying the scenery of forested cliffs. It’s like a double exposure on film, giving the impression of a ghost boy moving across the bearded landscape.

At Preda Station, you hop off the train and take the sleds from the flatbed carry-car. This train, too, reverses direction and backs down the mountainside. Now you are committed. The only possibility of returning the four kilometers back to Bergün is by sled. You procrastinate—adjusting boot straps and cinching snowsuit belts—to allow the faster sledders to go ahead. After the thrill-seeking, speed-demon types without children take running starts and disappear behind tails of glitter, you and Pete agree to get going.

Pete and Walter settle onto the Snow Star, a pastel-green Swiss-made sled whose bench seat sits about a foot above the runners. Walter leans back against Pete and holds the rope. They position their feet on the runners and you push-start them. Last year when you and Walter sledded on Mt. Rigi, you managed to crash the Snow Star into some orange plastic fencing that barely stopped your trajectory over a cliff. So this year you splurged on a two-seater toboggan-style sled called a Snow Car (replete with plastic steering wheel and hand brake) for you and Henry. This Cadillac of sleds will, you hope, glide smoothly and safely to the base of the mountain. Henry plops down in the forward seat. You compress his puffy snow suit and jam in behind him.
Then you scooch the sled forward until gravity takes over.

At once the plastic blades that the steering wheel is supposed to control clog with snow, making steering by hand impossible. You know how to steer with your feet—left heel down to turn left, right heel to turn right—but your low proximity to the ground puts an instant strain on your thigh muscles. The claw brake slows you on the slick patches of snow in the shade, but a complete stop isn’t possible, and you have the sinking feeling you are steadily losing control. You approach an arched, stone bridge and don’t have more than two blinks to appreciate its postcard setting as the momentum increases. The Mt. Rigi fiasco flashes through your mind.

The grade steepens. You yank the claw-brake as far back as it will go. Its raspy grind becomes deafening as the sled speeds up. The cold air slaps your cheeks, makes your eyes water. A Danger-Steep-Slope sign approaches, but you can’t decelerate. Up ahead, scores of sled tracks shoot past the bank of the curve and into the forest where the trunks of spruce trees are now looming taller and wider. You try to stay calm for Henry’s sake, but then the back end of the sled skids sideways and you shriek. Henry yells to slow down. When you tell him you can’t, he belts out shrill, pulsating screams that just might alert Herr Klimpt back at the gasthaus he’ll be short two guests tonight.

Between the ear-splitting shrieks, scrape of the claw-brake, and near-rocket speed, nothing bodes well for split-second decision making. At the turn you dig hard with the wrong foot, and the sled spins 360° degrees. The momentum swoops your sled sideways over the lip of the embankment. As you are about to launch into an upside down glide/flip/crash, you close your eyes and wrench the claw to near-breaking. It
shudders against the hard-packed rim, then digs in. Only when you are certain the sled is truly stopped do you open your eyes. And breathe. The sled is perched in the direction of the trail, as if you’d planned the about-face in order to watch the plume of snow sparkling in your wake. You give Henry a shaky high-five. But there’s no time to linger. Barreling down the slope are two out-of-control teenage sledders. As a flurry of curses, waving arms, and kicking boots hurtle toward you and Henry, you let up on the brake and veer back onto the trail.

You quickly resume warp speed. In a moment you spot the Snow Star pulling away from a bank of snow. It begins to fishtail, and soon the Snow Car is bearing down on Pete and Walter. Your claw-brake grinds furious, helpless grooves into the icy slope. You dig your right heel hard, thighs burning now, and barely avoid a collision. You feed them a spray of snow, and Henry yells, “See ya when I see ya, wouldn’t wanna be ya!” The race is on.

The Snow Star catches up and tries to pass. But on the next icy curve, without a claw to gouge the trail for at least a semblance of a slow-down, it slams into the snow bank. You and Henry pump ha-ha fists and sail out of sight. The course winds rapidly, but less dangerously, down the rest of the mountain, shooting alongside cliffs and beneath two more stone bridges bulging with fat columns of ice. You finally exit the trees. The slope levels out, and the sled glides to a stop. You stand, wobbling on legs strained numb, listing forward as if still in motion. The descent took forty-five minutes. The brake handle is stretched to a permanent ‘on’ position, and the claw is worn down to scraggly nubs.
The Snow Star eventually shows up and skids to a stop next to you. Everyone is starving. The boys stay on the sleds and, while Walter describes several crash-and-burn scenarios, you and Pete pull them back to Gasthaus Klimpt. You lay the wet snowsuits and frozen mittens across the radiator and head downstairs to the restaurant.

A Heineken costs about a frank a sip. But you enjoy your bottle of beer as much as your husband enjoys the proximity of the toilet, maybe more, and it relaxes your defenses enough to let the kids order desserts with their meals instead of insisting on the broken chocolate bars upstairs in the outside pouch of your suitcase.

After dinner you look forward to relaxing. But Walter reminds you the Preda-Bergün run stays open until ten for moonlight sledding. It’s too late for Henry. Pete thinks sledding at night sounds fun, but he’s already deep into a New Yorker article and halfway in bed. “Tomorrow night, okay?” he says.

Walter’s mournful brown-eyed gaze lands on you. “Aren’t we here to sled?” he asks.

Your thighs feel like concrete pylons. A magazine also awaits you on your side of the bed. But do you cave in to the comfort of the moment, the possibility of catching up on the Goings On in a town you won’t visit for another year? You gear up with Walter, and Snow Star in hand (you both won’t fit on the comfort car), head to the station.

In the dark, the mood on Albula Pass has completely changed. A spell seems cast over the moon-washed landscape. Small lamps facing the cliff walls send a diffused light over the run, and the snow reflects the eerie glow as if illuminated from below. The
moon throws dark spiky shadows from rock outcrops and trees onto the run’s east-facing edge. In the murky light it seems that the stone bridges must lead to haunted castles. You imagine *Wizard of Oz* monkeys diving from shadowed nooks and snatching unsuspecting sledders off the slope. When an empty sled *does* slide past, goose bumps prickle your arms.

The snow, crusted over since the afternoon, crunches beneath the sled’s runners as you and Walter push off. Sounds sharpen in the dark. Though you can’t see the different consistencies of snow the sled passes over, you hear them, as if the runners are passing over different grades of sand paper. Slushy spots are now frozen into long slabs of ice. You quickly speed up and don’t see dips and ruts until the sled is bouncing in or off one. Icy rills grab the sled’s runners, and then fling them to the side. In one particularly sharp toss, the sled flips over. If Walter had let go of the rope, your empty sled would have flitted like a pinball down the slope (adding to the creepy ambience for the next train load of sledders).

The two of you climb back onto the sled and buck Bronco-style down the steepest section of the run. Your backside turns numb, and needling sparks fizz along the base of your spine. It’s impossible to dig a heel into solid ice, but instinct makes you try and your feet simply skid helplessly next to the runners no matter how hard you press. As your speed increases, your thighs suddenly decide to go on strike; even if you happen to hit powder, you won’t have the strength to brake. The sled careens down the mountain. The darkness hides the Danger-Steep-Slope sign, but all these slopes warrant such a sign under icy conditions. You crash at the bottom of one, get back on, then crash at the
bottom of the next. Maybe because Walter is older than Henry, or maybe because you can’t see clearly what you are careening toward, you’re not as panicked as you were during the earlier run. But without a moment to relax or recover before the next crash, you’re exhausted by the time you approach the final stone bridge and surprised the two of you are still in one piece.

The steep grade levels out and the magic returns. Flecks of snow shimmer in the fan-shaped lamplight against the limestone bricks of the bridge. Giant pewter-colored icicles hang from the lower edge of the arch. Beyond the arch, a sprinkle of lights indicates Bergün in the distance. As the sled glides smooth and easy down the remainder of the mountain, you picture yourself in a miniature snow-shaker toy cupped in a child’s hands—the bridge, the frosted trees and cliffs, the moonlit snow, and two little figures on a green sled taking part in a storybook adventure.

Maneuvering the stairs to breakfast the next morning sends such pain scissoring through your thighs that your eyes water. Although your legs were more or less useless during last night’s run, the pain had been absent, somehow diffused into the surrounding darkness. Now, when you close your eyes to trick your muscles into releasing some of the vice-grips, the pangs simply travel through your torso and start banging between your temples.

But another sled run awaits your clan—a must-do run ascended by chairlift. By the time you reach the base of the mountain, a dose of Extra Strength Tylenol has reduced the pain in your limbs to a dull ache, though the muffled throbbing seems to warn that if
your legs receive further abuse they might just fall off.

The chairlift swoops through a check point where a lift assistant, in a fraction of a second, hooks sleds onto swinging chairs and secures lap bars across passengers’ legs. Your reservations of sledding with ineffective leg muscles take a sudden back seat to a new fear. The chairlift. Henry has never ridden one. And he handles panic in unfathomable ways—dashing toward busy intersections, climbing from moving carts or, you imagine, throwing himself over lap bars of chairlifts.

Your husband motions from near the chairlift for you to hurry up. Against your better judgment, you step up to the counter. “Is he too small?” you ask the ticket lady hopefully.

“Who?” she asks. Henry stands so short beneath the counter, she can’t even see him. She peers down through the Plexiglas. “Is he four?” she asks.

“No, three.” Your tone implies that it’s more than fine not to let this small kid on.

But then Henry looks up at her. The white pompoms on his little sage-green hat bobble expectantly. He is zippered to his eyeballs in his puffy blue snowsuit and can barely keep hold of the sled rope with his fat black mitten. “Is he closer to four or three?” the attendant asks.

Henry shifts his gaze to you; a vague mistrust in your possible answer knits his brows. You sense lying would set undesirable precedents until the day he leaves home. You sigh, “He’ll be four in three months.” Which, you want to remind her, equals a whole quarter of a year.

“Well, why not then,” she says. She smiles and slides two tickets through the
Plexiglas slot. No other Henry-sized kids are riding the chairlift. Your heart feels separated from your body. You look for Pete to tell him you’ve changed your mind. But he’s already sliding onto the lift with Walter and glances at you with that look that indicates you’d better be at the top soon.

The lift assistant positions you and Henry in the pathway of the next chair hurtling around the loop. Before you can blink, the sleds are hooked up, and the attendant is lowering the lap bar. He looks at Henry and says in English, “Sit. Stay.” With a tickle-belly swoosh the chair rises quickly above the trees. Henry grips your hand and doesn’t move. You make a note to test the explicit dog-training tactics of the attendant at home; he might be on to a very effective form of parenting.

You look down past the tips of your boots and feel like you’re sliding off the chair even though you haven’t moved an inch. When the cable shudders over the rollers of the support tower, the free-fall feeling heightens. You recall last year’s disaster when an air force jet flew through a lift cable in Italy; everyone fell to their deaths. Now you’re sure you hear engine noises. You ask Henry to describe the view below as you watch the sky for planes. The only thing circling is a turkey vulture; maybe he’s expecting an air force training run, too. Henry talks of dinosaur tracks in the snow, lost ski poles, and a sled crashing. You sneak a peek downward and see the sled upended against the base of a support tower. Finally, the lift station appears.

An attendant whisks you from your chair. To the left another lift carries skiers even higher up a north-facing flank of the mountain. To the right a self-service café with a wide deck and tables perches in the sun. Extending past the deck is a panorama of
silver and white peaks, so sharp against the blue sky it looks almost fake. You snap a dozen pictures that will, in fact, look as if they were taken against a backdrop at a Sears photo studio.

“How about a snack before we start down?” you ask. You open your wallet and thrust forward what’s left of the confetti-colored bills. You haven’t thought of money in two days even though it’s managed to flow freely enough. “We can take in the scenery.”

“Mama, we’re here to sled,” Henry states, happy to make the announcement before Walter.

Walter points to the Schlitten sign behind the lift station. “You can watch the scenery on the way down. Right?”

Do the grandiose peaks really make the same impression on him as an even-aged stand of spruce? You suppose the trip is about the sledding, but still…

“Okay. Let’s do it,” you say. Better to go now anyway before the Tylenol wears off. “But I’m stopping for coffee on our next pass through.”

You pull the sleds to the trail head and pair up again. Pete and Walter push off, you and Henry follow. At once this becomes your favorite route. The gradual slope allows for easy steering and the brake works well in the grainy morning snow. Although the charm of the train and the stone bridges is absent, the pleasure of not having to worry about crashing every second is a relief. Anyway, you’re tired of worrying—about money, about language, about grumpy apartment managers and impossible rules. During this three kilometer cruise-control ride, those worries fly off in the crested wake of the Snow Car to settle in the trail’s powdery banks. For the next thirty minutes you sit back while
Henry takes control of the wheel. You photograph snow-capped trees, Pete’s back on Snow Star, boots dangling from the chairlift overhead, and the pom-poms that have been batting your face the past two days, in order to capture the essence of your last winter vacation in Switzerland. For some reason this simple fun brings tears to your eyes, and you’re thankful to have the cold alpine wind to blame.

18. Safety Dance

On a gray Thursday in March you drop Walter, Joseph, and Nicholas at afternoon school and head to the Käferberg—an extensive city forest about a quarter mile past the school—for a jog. Henry, against his will, is playing with Francis at Emily’s house. Now that he is nearly four and better copes with small separations, you are trying the kid-swap thing again. Because this only happens once a week for one hour and forty-five minutes, you’re not about to be deterred by clouds or cold.

At the base of the forested slope of the Käferberg lies a busy hub for busses and trams. You pass over this concrete world via an octopus-style pedestrian bridge that spans to various intersections, as well as spirals to the platform below, and take the walkway that connects to the gravel road leading into the Käferberg. After about twenty feet, the trees swallow you in, though you can still hear the nearby traffic. Like the Zurichberg forest near your apartment, the Käferberg is crisscrossed by trails and non-motorized roads. This forest extends for miles in an easterly direction until it hits the countryside. Most walkers and cyclists stick to the Zurich side, but one could, if inspired, follow wanderweg signs to nearby towns, or even other parts of the country, without
having to travel the busy highways.

The Käferberg is managed for wood and recreation. Piles of timber are stacked every half mile or so near walk-in picnic areas containing benches and fire pits. Though far from wild, this forest has an untamed feel. Towering trees, overgrown with ivy and lichen, arch over the road. Deep, shaded ravines inhabited by knotty-limbed trees and ropey vines cut into the side slopes of the ridge. Nothing more threatening than foxes and owls lives here, yet there’s a mysterious, almost enchanted, feel to the place.

Today’s dreary skies mean you’ll have the forest largely to yourself. As you begin jogging along the lower road, the muffled street noises disappear. The trees haven’t leafed out yet, so the gray branches match the gray sky and the gray gravel road. The pond at the next fork in the road reflects the gray light. The first fire pit you pass is built up with gray rocks. From your apartment window, this monochrome world would weigh gloomily inside you; but being out and active in it is somehow invigorating. The few colors in the area contrast brightly against the gray, as if in 3-D—clumps of scraggily, but deep green, lodgepole pine; last fall’s leaves rotting to coffee brown on the forest floor; neon yellow and sage green lichen draped in the open canopy of alder—the little things that will be obscured in a month or so by the leafing out of trees.

As your body warms, your teeth stop rattling after about a half mile. The upper ridge loop is a straightforward route you’ve taken before, so you know you won’t get turned around (like the time when a curved road sent you to some unknown side of the forest. Panicked, you’d stopped an elderly passerby and earnestly explained you were verlogen (untruthful, lying) instead of verloren (lost). The old woman stepped back with
a frightened look on her face until she figured out what you meant and pointed you in the right direction). Soon, the gravel road begins to switchback up toward the ridge. The long, slow plod always convinces you that jogging is stupid and you aren’t cut out for it (the sentiment reverses on the downhill).

Near the ridge top, a flash of blue and black spandex on a mountain bike shoots out from a side trail and blazes past you down the hill. You hear the tires behind you, skidding across the gravel as he brakes, and then fading as the bicycle rounds the bend. Mountain biking is popular in these forests, so this particular cyclist slips your mind until, five minutes later, on the part of the ridge now visible to you, he appears again, this time stopped in the middle of the road and facing in your direction. Straddling his Cannondale, he pulls off his helmet and runs a gloved hand through his wavy black hair. His considerable muscles flex beneath the royal blue lycra that practically throbs against the gray lighting behind him.

Unless you turn around, you will have to pass him. With his expensive bike and flashy gear, he doesn’t seem like a hardened criminal, though you suppose no one ever knows for sure. Even if you did turn around, though, he could catch you in less than five seconds if that is his intent. And if it isn’t, however faulty this reasoning is, you just got here and don’t want to cut your precious outdoor free time short, so you continue forward.

As you draw near the cyclist, his thick-lashed blue eyes meet yours. He crosses his arms over his wide chest. This guy would pass for Superman if had a red cape. As it is, his resemblance to Christopher Reeve is enough to take more of your breath away than
the hill just did. Look away, you tell yourself, in case he really is a lunatic. But that idea makes you watch him closer in case he reaches for a gun or a Bowie knife. It’s difficult to muster up much fear toward this person’s easy smile, though; it is slightly bemused and non-leering. In fact, you begin to feel a little self-conscious in your baggy sweatpants and Pete’s old windbreaker, not that you’re out to impress anyone, but still. Even this guy’s helmet hair is stunning.

“Gruetzi voll!” Christopher Reeve says, and then launches into an incomprehensible flurry of Swiss-German. When he finishes speaking, he flashes an expectant smile. He doesn’t seem to be asking directions, but he’s obviously awaiting some kind of response.

Before he says more, you find your voice. “Es tut mir leid. Ich spreche keine Deutch.”

The news that you don’t speak German doesn’t deter him. He simply launches into perfect English. “Of course! I can tell by your accent you speak English. You have to excuse me, but I saw you run past and, well, I have a question for you.”

His hesitation strikes you as that of a salesman. The relief that he’s not a crazy maniac turns to disappointment. Door-to-door salespeople have been soliciting you a lot lately, trying to sell you everything from cat jewelry to rare coins to life insurance policies. You aren’t about to waste your time with one that lurks about the woods. Even so, eyeing the broad-shouldered, shiny-eyed cyclist, you’re glad you left your wallet at home. “Yes?” you say a little impatiently.

“Miss,” he says. “I am a student at the university, and I wondered if perhaps I
could interest you in a table dance. In your own home, of course.”

You’re not sure you’ve heard him correctly, though he articulates his words more clearly than many native English speakers. Maybe he meant something else, but what other meaning could be behind table and dance? He raises his eyebrows and smiles boyishly. His striking looks are undeniable, but his presence suddenly makes you tired. How do you politely tell him the testosterone level in your apartment is already maxed out? That its inhabitants are so hard on things—toys, computers, clothes, furniture—that the idea of another male in it makes your mind implode? You take off a mitten and show him your wedding ring.

“For your next all-girl party, then? I have three partners and we are only 100 francs for one hour.”

Gina’s cleaning lady charges 80 francs an hour. You consider asking him if he and his pals might steam clean the carpet for that price. “I don’t think so,” you say. “Sorry.” You look at your watch. Your free time is ticking away. Moving on at once seems all-important.

“Well, it was a pleasure to meet you,” he says, snapping on his helmet. “Have a nice day then!” He pedals away and his brilliant colors fade around the next bend.

In less than ten steps anxious question begin to needle your mind: should you feel flattered or horrified? The important matter here is, business transaction aside, did Christopher Reeve circle back to the top of the hill because he thought he’d be engaging in equal-aged fun? Or because you seem like a frazzled, middle-aged housewife desperate enough to pay to see him unclothed? You know the age you feel half the time
(and your baggy, mismatched running gear only fuels it), but that doesn’t mean that with no style, no make-up, no energy to run an extra hill you don’t want to exude the impression of being like the young mother you saw on the news recently who won a medal in a world track and field competition. This conflict plays around in your mind the entire loop, the route back to the school to pick up the boys, and several hours later chopping vegetables in the kitchen.

Later that evening during dinner, Walter knocks half a glass of grape juice onto his plate, the table, and the floor (which, for some unfathomable reason, is carpeted). Henry declares he isn’t hungry and leaves a half-chewed piece of pork chop nesting in his untouched mashed potatoes. Pete finishes eating and lingers a bit to keep you company, but you can tell he’s anxious to fire up the new computer game he and Walter just bought, so you tell him to go ahead with it. At least he clears his plate, which is more than can be said for Walter, who, in the middle of his, left juice-stained napkins mounded in a soggy pile.

You lean back and imagine Christopher Reeve appearing at your side in his blue Speedo. His muscles are oiled and he flashes his wide, white smile. You move over a little so he can step onto your chair and up onto the table. Though he’d be more attractive in a flannel shirt and hiking boots, you can appreciate the way he artfully maneuvers around the scattered mess on the table, eyes locked onto yours, allowing you to forget the dirty dishes a few minutes longer.

19. Spring, Sprung
When spring arrives for good in mid-April, people spill into the warmth like glossy black insects that have just hatched. Even with the change in season, dark colors still dominate. Black Miss Sixty slacks are still the trend; black leather jackets have been exchanged for black sleeveless sweaters, vests, and halter tops. From your vantage above the Hirschwiesen tram stop you watch black shoes and sandals grind out cigarettes before stepping onto trams. Maroon and burnt-orange blouses are the brightest colors you’ve seen all month on the platform.

It is your third, and supposedly your last, Zurich spring. But in the apartment, your mood matches the dark Zurich fashions. The position Pete thought he had secured at a small college in British Columbia just fell through, and now he’s scrambling to line something up for August. The job market is slim; there aren’t many listings for ecologists. He applies to several universities, including a research post at an institute north of the Arctic Circle (which you immediately delete from his database; yes, things could be worse than Switzerland). Each day passes without a response to his applications.

May rolls around and still no job. Harald drops by the apartment after work one day and suggests Pete stay on another year at ETH. You and Pete look at each other. Reflected in your eyes is the claustrophobic brown-tiled bathroom, the sun-starved living room, the busy front street, the cigarette smoke that wafts in from Herr Huber below, the fact that management hasn’t fixed the swing in the play area behind the apartment, or put sand in the sandbox, or put a clothes dryer in the laundry room (even though they’ve repaired the fan twice). Further issues such as Pete’s sluggish project,
continual language frustrations, and the fact that Henry would have to begin first-year kindergarten in August press even heavier onto your shoulders.

Pete declines the job extension. You wonder if you’ll have to take up paper routes and deliver pizza to survive back in the States. It doesn’t matter. After three years, the urge to step foot onto any parcel of your homeland is so overwhelming it makes your head ache.

Finally, finally Pete is called for interviews. One at Oklahoma State in Stillwater and one at the University of Nevada in Reno, both of which will, thankfully, pay for his flights. He schedules back-to-back interviews for mid-May. The fact that he’ll get to spend six kid-less days in the western U.S. doesn’t rouse the least bit of envy in you. He’ll hardly have time for sightseeing between interviews, and his jet-lagged evening hours will be spent on his laptop, writing reports for his current project. Besides the staggering cost for you and the kids to join him, the idea that the rest of your life hinges on these interviews is making you too nervous a wreck to enjoy such a trip anyway. If returning to the States within a few months is indeed within reach, you don’t mind holding down the fort in Zurich.

Pete returns from Stillwater and Reno convinced he isn’t qualified for either position. But you know it is in his nature to undermine his abilities, so you are confident he will at least make the short list at one of the places.

The following week an offer arrives from OSU. Some on-line research reveals an interesting tall-grass prairie and appealing small-town atmosphere. Real estate is cheap and crime minimal. But Stillwater is far from the mountains and far from any of
your relatives, as well as politically and religiously conservative. It is worth returning
to the States for, but you have a nagging feeling it is a place from which you’d again
find yourselves pulling up stakes.

Then Nevada’s offer arrives. You worry about the desert heat, suburban sprawl,
and casino culture. But after a little digging you discover there is more to Reno. The
Sierra Nevada mountains are nearby, and the downtown is revitalizing to include life
besides gambling—theater, art, cafés, festivals. And the big plus is that Matt and his
family would be your Utah neighbors. After only minor deliberation Pete accepts the
position in Reno.

As the job-related worries lift, glorious color appears before you as if a blindfold
has been removed. You notice the clumps of purple, white, and crimson primrose
coating the back lawn like they’ve blown in on a storm; the yellow petals of the
forsythia in front of the apartment glowing from arched stems as if powered by
electricity; the cherry blossoms hanging like fat pink snowballs from the trees along the
street. These beautiful bloomers seem out of place surrounding your concrete building,
like they deserve a more favorable spot, but then again doesn’t the drab apartment
deserve something nice, too?

You walk around with a constant stupid smile on your face. “What’s the matter
with you?” Gina asks when you see her a few days after the UNR job is finalized. “Are
you pregnant or something?”

“No way,” you reply. “Pete took the job in Reno. The kids and I fly out in three
months, two days, nine hours. Pete’ll meet us later after he wraps things up here.”
“You can’t leave,” Gina says, “you just got here.” But she knows you’ve been anxious to return to the States. She sighs. “The trouble with living in Zurich is that my friends are always leaving.”

You try to show a hint of sadness, because you will truly miss her and want her to sense this, but you can barely muster up a false grimace. “I hope you can visit us in Reno,” is, lamely, all you come up with.

20. Furka Pass

A month before the move, Matt decides to visit Zurich for ten days on his own—Amy is due to have a baby in several weeks, so he looks at the trip as his ‘last hurrah’ before midnight feedings and constant diaper changes again become routine. He arrives in early June—a perfect month in Switzerland because the heat isn’t yet oppressive and school is still in session so the trains aren’t clogged with vacationers.

You meet Matt at the airport. He exchanges money, buys a train pass, and then you both catch the U-Bahn to Oerlikon. At the small Oerlikon station Matt pulls his camera from his bag and starts snapping pictures of the trains, the platform, the rail lines below, and the electric lines above. He takes more pictures at the tram stop outside the apartment. He shoots at least a dozen pictures of the tram, the t-bar connecting to the electric lines, and the steel bars that keep the intersecting lines from touching. He is a civil engineer with a near-obsessive interest in mass transit. He hopes to soon become involved in Salt Lake City’s light rail system which was recently approved by the mayor.

“I love the trams,” he says radiantly, like someone, well, in love. “You wouldn’t
believe the planning it takes to set so many electric lines without having them touch.” He talks about the way the lines attach to the corner buildings and how they are grounded and other details that you wish could bring you half the joy as they bring your brother. You are reminded that this is a person whose favorite bedtime reading is a book about how container shipping revolutionized America’s highways. You just hope his frantic picture-taking of the train and tram lines doesn’t come across as suspicious—if anyone sabotages this line, he’ll be a prime suspect.

The next morning, you drop Henry at Emily’s for the morning so you and Matt can spend some time downtown after dropping the older boys at school. On the way to the tram stop nearest the school, you run into a mother of one of Walter’s classmates. She is Italian and speaks no English, so you’ve always chatted briefly in rudimentary German when the occasion arose. Now, as she approaches, you stop and introduce Matt.

“Das ist mein bruder,” you say. Then you continue with a few simple statements regarding her son’s new glasses and how cute they are. She agrees and you talk briefly about the upcoming bike trip you and Matt have planned and how you’re going to Zurich now to enjoy the city without the kids. She smiles and says goodbye. You walk forward, knowing Matt understood none of this conversation and doesn’t realize how extremely simple it really was.

When he says, awed, “You seem pretty bilingual now,” you simply shrug and say it’s about time having lived here three years (while a loud Ha! resounds in the back of your head). Maybe it’s an older sister thing, but when you find the opportunity to flaunt a false brilliance you milk it.
In town, the two of you stroll halfway up Bahnhofstrasse and then duck down cobble-stoned Augustiner Gässe, a pedestrian-only side street that winds past St. Peter Church and down toward the Limmat. The magic from your first exploration along these side streets has never disappeared, and now you try and take in every nook and cranny one last time. You stop in a clock maker’s shop, a cigar shop, several book stores, and an artisan pasta-making shop. Then you end up at a café on Waag Gässe, a street of baroque architecture where two tables have been set out on the sunny sidewalk. There’s so much character, so much quality here, that you wonder if you’re crazy for wanting to return to the U.S. Why is the need to understand the discourse around you so important when you’ll likely ignore most of it when you can understand it back home? For some reason, even though you’re not particularly a people-person, you want to live amongst those you share language with. Even though you have friends to connect with here, there’s some larger, humanity-sized population that’s always out of reach. You want to talk to the café owner about his perfect espresso, or to the meter reader about the rate hikes in the utility bill—little things, unimportant and random, but ones without which make the silence surrounding you feel like a glass wall.

You and Matt discuss your upcoming bike trip. You’ll soon be spending three days cycling in southeastern Switzerland. It will be another last glimpse of a part of Switzerland you love. You’re glad you can share it with your brother who so thoroughly appreciates things foreign (the sort of wonder you boarded the plane with three years ago). Pete has graciously agreed to watch the kids during that time, as the ride you’ve been hoping would become a possibility for six months now, has.
June 8, 2003.

The train stops in Airolo, a small village in the green, steep-walled Bedretto Valley in the Italian-speaking corner of Switzerland. Matt hops onto the platform. With his cropped hair and wrap-around shades, he looks more like a twenty-something trend-setter than a thirty-two year-old dad (it’s still sometimes hard to remember he’s a dad!) When you hand your bike and panniers down to him, a roadmap of veins rises from his flexed forearm; there isn’t an ounce of fat to hide them. Matt is sportif, as they say; at a lean 6’5” with calves like steel cables, he looks strong enough pedal to the summit of Gotthard Pass—looming behind him now like a massive snow-topped barrier to the next valley over—without breaking a sweat.

You are not as sportif as your brother, but you’ve prepared reasonably well for the next few days of cycling. Several months of pedaling to the zoo and around Zurich’s steep forested roads with Henry in the bike seat have, you hope, increased your endurance. After all, this is the Switzerland you’ve been greedy for—the high Alps—and you don’t want to burn out after one day, or, worse yet, have to push your bike up the passes. Also, it’s been years since you’ve had one-on-one time with your brother; you’re looking forward to having him to yourself for a little while—that is if you can keep up with him.

But two handicaps will keep Matt from his usual breakneck speed. First, he has to rent a bike from the Airolo train station. You have your own mountain bike, correctly sized and equipped with a 20-cog granny gear for climbing. But the best this modest
station office can offer Matt is a 19” hybrid bike. The tires are not at all burley and there is no granny gear. When he extends the saddle to its outermost limit, it is so far from the frame it looks as if it is in orbit; he’ll have to tip 45° degrees to reach his handlebars—not a big deal on the uphill, but a half-somersault crouch is asking for trouble going down.

Perhaps your brother’s second handicap, pack weight, can be blamed on birth order. Although he’s only two years younger than you and has his own family, hints of a generation gap exist between you. Practical versus carefree. Into your panniers you’ve rolled two pairs of socks, a fleece pullover, an extra pair of padded shorts, and a toothbrush. In your small backpack are six granola bars, some dried apricots, and a windbreaker. Your stock of water consists of the two bottles attached to your bike frame.

Matt’s panniers, on the other hand, are the size of Harley Davidson saddlebags. They are crammed so full that a corner seam is starting to split. Tied on top of the panniers are his hiking boots, Tevas, two extra water bottles, and a kryptonite lock. Strapped to his handlebars are his camera case, two bike lights, and a sweatshirt. His backpack bulges with enough gear to journey to the Arctic Circle. And topping his pack is his three-liter, camel-back water pouch.

“What do you have in your bags?” you ask.

He shrugs. “Stuff.”

The uphill climb to the summit of Gotthard Pass will take three hours. You will be pedaling up the original pass road, built out of cobblestone for horse drawn coaches in the 1820’s. Nowadays, only bicycles and motorcycles are permitted on it. And presently, due to patchy snow near the summit, motorcycles are prohibited. So you’ll have it
entirely to yourselves. From the wind-whipped pass, where cobblestone meets pavement, you’ll zoom down the north facing flank of the mountain, passing cars and other cyclists, breaking until your forearms feel paralyzed, until, an hour later, you reach the village of Andermatt in German-speaking Canton Uri. There you’ll rent a sunny, balconied room at an inexpensive inn.

While you lean against the balcony rail, trying to rub life back into your forearms, your brother will lift two 22-oz. bottles of ice-cold Francis Kahner Hefeweizen from his over-stuffed panniers.

“Kidding!” he’ll say when he sees the look on your face. “I bought them at the Kiosk around the corner while you were checking in.”

Chapped, chafed, and dog-tired, you’d even welcome a Miller Light at this point, so the Hefeweizen will taste like heaven. You’ll run your fingers though your sweat-crusted helmet hair and take a long swig. “You are a genius,” you’ll tell him and then tip the bottle back again. “You always were the smart one.”

He’ll happily drink to that.

The next day your route will take you up Göshener Valley. This is where cliff walls are so steep that the section of single lane road which isn’t tunneled through rock seems as if it could peel off like a loose ribbon of tape. Where, without Matt’s two bike lights, visibility in the tunnels would be zero. Where roadside waterfalls gush with so much melt water they spill over the pavement, supplying your knobby tires with gritty slurry to spray into your faces and up your backs.

At the top of the valley will be a café (there is always a café), with outdoor
seating. Nearby will be a lake surrounded by snow-capped, avalanche-streaked jags of granite. You will treat your brother to lunch, and he will feed the cheese sandwiches he hauled up the mountainside to the yellow lab sitting outside the cafe. While eating a funky salad made of corn and pepperoni, Matt will spy an old road skirting the edge of the lake. The road, which grades quickly to rock-studded single-track, plunges down an embankment and through a herd of little bell-clad goats that somehow keep their footing while they graze.

“We can’t not ride through a goat herd,” he will say. And because he is the second born, it would be wasting breath to remind him of the precarious angle his body must take on the downslope, or of the sharp rocks that will be jabbing his inadequate tires. And because he is the second born he will fly past you as you walk your bike down a particularly craggy section of trail, his butt sloped back over his seat, tires straining, panniers flying; and he’ll be standing at the bottom, unscathed, where the trail meets back with the road. He’ll say, “What took you so long?” when you finally ride up to meet him.

On the third and final day will be your five hour ride over Furka Pass. From Andermatt the elevation gain will be 3500 feet. You’ll be forced into first gear early on, and though your legs will spin like those of an Olympic athlete, the roadside flowers and rock will pass as if in slow motion. As the air thins at high altitude, your lungs will burn and your peripheral vision turn fuzzy; the endless back and forth hairpin weaving will disorient you. After three hours you’ll no longer stop with Matt to snack and take pictures; you’ll fear that your momentum will falter, your muscles fill with lactic acid and quit on you. Up and up and up you will pedal in a semi-trance-like state. The fuzzy
vision will darken. You’ll think you are hallucinating when a skier passes you from behind, his sequoia-sized thighs forcing each roller ski side to side in what will appear an effortless glide. Being passed, by a skier no less, will be enervating and you’ll barely have the energy to nod at his greeting.

An hour before you reach the pass you’ll finish your last drop of water. Soon you won’t have enough moisture on your tongue to wet your cracking lips. The glimmering snow at Furka’s summit, visible across the saddle connecting that peak to the one you’re on, will seem a mirage for the next half hour. As the meltback of snow exposes phlox and alpine rose in the high meadows, you’ll suppose it should be one of Vivaldi’s concertos that inspires you to go on, but the idea of a sudden oboe solo will make you want to get off and walk. So you’ll drum up the Pixies in your head. *Surfer Rosa. Debaser. Gouge Away.* Frank Black’s driving energy will tap a store of adrenaline that you used to drawn on for jumping around dance floors in your college days.

At last you’ll reach the top of the pass, dehydrated and sunburned. The vendor at the side of the road (there is always a vendor) will be selling stuffed toy St. Bernards, felt hats embroidered with edelweiss, and shot glasses with Swiss flags on the sides, but no water. You’ll collapse onto a dry outcrop of granite at the edge of the road and wait the twenty minutes for your brother. When he arrives you’ll accept his extra bottle of water, tube of sun screen, and apple from the bag of them he pulls from his left pannier, and never again question his packing job.

After Matt props you next to the Furka Pass elevation sign (8000 ft) and takes a picture,
you’ll ride together, down and down and down into French-speaking Canton Valais. Past Rhone glacier, where dark, evenly-spaced, striations cross its surface like slash marks of a giant tiger. Past a forested gorge so deep, that vertigo might strike anyone trying to focus more than a second on the silver thread of river below. You’ll continue shooting down the mountain, eyes watering behind sunglasses, windbreakers snapping like machine gun fire, and you’ll think that this is what it must be like to sky-dive. Down and down, into a new ecotone of thick green trees and dry heat—a Mediterranean climate where summer is already well under way. And at last to the train station where the agent will speak only French, a language that your brain has never grasped and never will, but when you simply say, “Zurich,” he’ll know what you mean.

This is the Switzerland you’ve watched through train windows while reading stories to your sons, while rounding up snacks and drawing pictures with crayons. This is the Switzerland you’ve craved to explore since the day you landed in this country. And for three days it is the Switzerland that will be yours. And it will be enough.

Now you look up at the miles of stony switchbacks before you, piled toward Gotthard Pass like an unraveling skein of yarn, and decide you’d better be on your way. You clip on your helmet and chug some water. Matt gives a thumbs-up, and you’re off…

21. Going Home

The cheapest shipping option is a ¼ container which will allow you sixteen boxes and the bed, two rolled carpets, and the bikes. You sell the dressers, computer desk, washing machine, microwave, book cases, television, radio/CD player, bike seat and
other odds and ends to people in the play group. You decide to have a rummage sale to get rid of the items that don’t sell, and tape a **SALE** sign to the outside hall railing. Harald, knowing the popularity of rummage sales in the U.S., tells you the concept is completely foreign in Switzerland and not to expect anyone to show up. You’re sure that such deep discounts will entice at least a few passersby to drop in, but he’s right. From the sidewalk several people try angling their line of vision into the apartment, but are unwilling to come up—perhaps uncomfortable with the sense of obligation they might feel to buy something. Who knows. But by the end of the day nothing has been sold. The big furniture items still fill the living room—the Ikea sofa (still in very decent shape, although the purple color might fit only certain tastes), the kitchen table and chairs, a bookcase.

A Bulgarian family recently moved in downstairs, and you go down and knock on the door to see if they might want any of the remaining furniture for free (it would be a huge hassle to lug it to a secondhand shop that might not even want it). The husband and wife come upstairs, their young son in tow, and you and Pete motion to the things that need to go. Though their handle on German is worse than yours, everyone knows what *Frei* means, and they seem grateful to take every last item you don’t want. The man’s German is better than his wife’s and he explains that he was a chemical engineer in Bulgaria, but the economy there was so awful he took a job at a factory in Zurich to have a better life and a future for his son. They are a handsome couple—thin, dark-haired, dark-eyed—and after Pete helps them carry the bulky things down to their apartment they come up and present you with a CD of Bulgarian folk songs. It’s such a sweet gesture,
and later that night when you play it (the CD player, like the TV, is due for last-minute pick-up), the sad notes of the clarinet and trumpet curl around your heart and squeeze. You feel both grateful and guilty at how fortunate your life is, knowing that so many people don’t have the choices you’ve had, and how unfair life is for them.

Emily gets the floor lamp and guitar and some camping supplies her sons might use. In slow batches you bring Gina things you can’t sell and won’t be shipping back—plants, spices, the sleds, bags of books, Henry’s rocking chair, and finally what remains of your liquor stash.

“Well, congratulations,” she says, lifting a nearly full Campari bottle from a cardboard box. “Have a nice life and all that.” Then she smiles. “Try to keep in touch.”

You finalize shipping dates, fill out necessary documents for leaving the country, and make final payments to utility and insurance companies. Throughout the box-packing process you’re able to more or less stick to your routine. Walter still goes to school (school ends in mid-July, so he’ll miss the final two weeks of first grade), you’re able to make a couple last trips to the market with Henry—pushing him in the stroller loaded down with vegetables, fruits, fish, and flowers while he chatters and munches a carrot. You try and impress into your mind the hazel and hibiscus flowers lining the path to the school, the balconies filled with potted trees and flowers, the bakeries, cheese shops, and butchers which sell non-mass-produced foods...

Dissecting this routine, though, you realize that after three years, so much is still
foreign to you. You can gripe about the stuffy tram on an unseasonably warm day (so hot!), and ask a young mother where she bought her baby’s outfit, but it is impossible to connect with the person reading your favorite Chekhov anthology at the tram stop, or speak in-depth with Walter’s first grade teacher. You can’t even help Walter with his first-grade homework, or tell the school dentist to use Novocain when they fill his tooth. You do not feel capable here. Instead of enjoying everyday life over time, you’ve been looking more and more forward to weekend outings away from the apartment and away from people.

You also sense a potential within yourself beginning to pass; you want to invest your time learning something besides how to order meals. You admire the little old lady who wobbles past the apartment on her bicycle each day with a stack of groceries in the front basket. You want to be like her when you are old, but not here.

On a Tuesday in late June, two college students come for the futon (it was the guest bed in the office/spare room). Joseph and Nicolas are over for lunch, eating sandwiches and watching a video about Nile crocodiles with Walter and Henry. Joseph, now eight, eyes the students suspiciously as they heft the futon from the office and set it down in the hall to catch their breath. Suddenly, he cries out, “They can’t take the futon!” You think he is joking; you didn’t even think he had noticed it before since it was always heaped with laundry baskets and backpacks, and why would he care anyway? “That was my favorite futon,” he sobs. Tears start pouring down his cheeks. Nicholas and Walter begin to cry, too. “Leave the futon here!”
Nicholas looks at the students and says in German, “My mom will buy it.”

“Yeah, our mom will buy it,” Joseph repeats. “Don’t take that futon!”

“We love that futon!” the three of them wail. “It’s our favorite futon!” When Henry figures out what a futon is, and that it is so important to the bigger boys, he starts bawling, too. Even Miss Hamster’s death last year didn’t result in more tears. The students shake their heads and heft the futon out the door.

The kids are somewhat calmed by a few pieces of chocolate. They blow their noses and head back to school for afternoon class only after you promise to look into getting the futon back. You realize that everything you get rid of from now on will have to be done when no one is looking. Coming home to something missing, to the hope it will eventually turn up, is easier to handle than seeing it go.

When you see Emily for the last time, she hugs you with a strength you didn’t think her skinny frame possessed. She is calm, nearly subdued, although her eyes dart around, ready to lock onto trouble if her children’s arguing increases another decibel. She shed her windbreaker during the mid-June heat wave and now is wearing a plain white t-shirt and knee-length Chino shorts. Her arms are crossed before her as if to ward off a chill. During the past three years, your friendship managed to develop into more than just a symbiosis regarding the kids, even though you never could quite relate to her scattered sense of time or place or self. “Goodbye, Jenny!” she says, then waves dramatically, as if a giant ocean liner is now about to carry you off, and not your impatient husband who is pacing by the curb, wanting to finish up last minute packing. “See you,” you say, “and
don’t forget to e-mail.” She nods and waves again.

_Tchuss_ means _goodbye_ in Swiss dialect. Phonetically, it sounds like a cross between _shoes, juice_, and _choose_. “Tchuss,” Walter says to his classmates on his last day at school. You watch from the hallway as he shakes his teacher’s hand.

“Vielen glück im _USA_,” she says. _Much luck in the USA._

He mumbles something and turns away, suddenly erecting a stone barrier to emotion. He seems to think that showing sadness now might imply he doesn’t want to move back to the U.S. The other children confuse his detachment for disinterest and crowd around Henry instead. They take turns patting his head (many have patted his head every morning for the past three years at the schoolhouse door). “Tchuss,” they say to him. He smiles and says the only German word he knows, “Tchuss!”

The night before you are due to fly out, Pete pulls two plastic cups and the last bottle seven franc Chianti off the counter. You sit together on the floor of the nearly empty apartment and toast your time spent in Switzerland. “Cheers to Montreaux,” he says. “Cheers to Lucerne.”

You raise your glass. “Cheers to Mount Pilatus and the Matterhorn.”

“Cheers to Tuscany.”

“Cheers to Paris.”

“Cheers to Zurich.” Somehow the cheers echoing off the bare walls don’t seem to hold conviction, though. The excitement of returning to the States makes it impossible
for nostalgia to hit with any real force and conversation circles back to the relief of leaving the apartment, Herr Huber, rules, misunderstandings, not understanding, constant expenses...

Before you convince yourselves that a vacation might have been a better idea than living here, you shut up and drink more wine. “It’s not like it was awful,” Pete says. Which, of course, is true. And besides, life would have been complicated anywhere with small children.

Interestingly, it was the quieter, more subtle things that turned out to be more meaningful than the glamorous images you arrived with—the miles and miles of wanderwegen, the sunflower fields, the walk-in picnic sites in the forests where families roast bratwurst together on weekends, the small museums dotting the city. Even with all the travails, you know living abroad was worth it. The experience was necessary in your path of self-discovery. Your desire to reinvent yourself as a globe-trotting citizen of the world has been laid to rest. You now know your limits—a six-month stay, without kids, would work for you, anywhere in the world. Of course, you’ll remain open to experience, but you’ll be a little more guarded from now on.

“At least we won’t have a lifelong should have hanging over our heads,” you add, warming with the wine. “But do you ever worry that we won’t be content anywhere? We seem to always be drifting from place to place.”

“If that’s what makes us happy, what does it matter?” Pete says.

You nod toward the kids’ bedroom door. “Well, we do need to start considering them at some point.”
“Of course, and we do. I’m only saying that we don’t have to start worrying about the future in advance.” He readjusts his position on the floor. “Whatever will be will be, right?—like my grandmother says every time she phones. As long as we stick together, things will work out.”

So, maybe Reno will be a long-term stop, maybe not. You’ll just have to hop onto this wave of possibility and see how it goes. Cheers to Switzerland. And cheers to moving on.

On July 3rd, you board Swiss Air with six suitcases and three one-way tickets to New York. There’s no baby on this journey, but a boy on either side of you, arguing over your lap about whose turn it is to play with the doodle-pad. The immediacy of their needs prevents your mind from wandering into future scenarios with or without them. You take away the doodle-pad and pull a container of grapes from the tote bag. As they snack, you pull three books from Walter’s backpack and three from Henry’s. Books about cowboys and pioneers of the west top the stack as those are their main topics of interest these days. They look forward to ending up in a land touched by Jim Beckworth, Kit Carson, Indian wars, and the race for silver and gold.

You can stretch the books by playing I Spy on pages with lots of pictures, and by involving the kids in the stories. The important thing is to distract them from the sadness of leaving behind their routines (and from the R-rated gangster movie playing on the big screen at the front of the plane). They adjust their tippy suede cowboy hats and chew on grapes, anticipating The American West sitting across your knees.
It will be a month before you reach your final destination, weaving toward Nevada with stops in New York, Minnesota, Colorado, and Utah. It’s hard to visualize particulars about any of those places right now (aside from the people you know); yet the thought of each dot on the map blends together into a comfortable general idea of the U.S.A. Of home.