

PERIL AT ALTITUDE

BY ZACHARY DOVE (aged 12)

Mountains are curious lumps of looming tectonic debris. They can be protective, sturdy and steady. However, they can oppress, intimidate and isolate. Saas Gartveit, a Swiss mountain village situated along the Saas river in a valley between two sets of mountains, is a perfect example of this. A mountain's length from Italy, it is separated from the three near villages by dense alpine evergreen forest and surrounded by mountains. Secluded and isolated, the villagers have a strong sense of unity and identity, yet limited experience of difference. 1.5km above sea level, all the locals know each other. After several ski seasons there, even a tourist can become a member of the small community and intimately know the locals.

It was my fifth ski season and I had just hiked down the steep slope from the chalet I was staying in, the furthest building up the mountain inside the main village and naturally, one of the furthest from the lift station, to be greeted by the longest, most orderly crowd crush of a queue ever seen. Using tricks learnt from the lunch rush at school with a pinch of improvisation, I bypassed the majority of the queue and prepared for my cable car. I knew that the 30-minute ride was immensely scenic and peaceful, marmots scurrying beneath you and glaciers snaking down the mountain side.

Skis propped against the safety rail, I was able to relax. With interest, I surveyed the people that were on the platform with me. There was a ski instructor, scarlet uniform gleaming; one of many local bakers, cheerful and plump yet moving to a new village soon; a successful retired snow sports shop owner with top-of-the-range equipment; a professional snowboarder, training for a competition; two unknown tourists; the resort manager, Swiss

army knife showing out of his pocket, and finally an avalanche risk assessor. I considered how a bad safety report could put the resort and all the shops out of business. This trip up the mountain could be awkward.

While the cable car passed by the platform on which we were standing, we all attempted to clamber on at once. In the confusion, all the tourists climbed in, swiftly followed by the instructor, shop owner, snowboarder, myself and finally the baker. As the doors began to glide shut and we started the journey upwards, the risk inspector stumbled in, breathing heavily. The manager managed to throw his bag in but was shut out despite his effort.

As we settled down, the inspector collapsed onto the metal floor. A gleam of harsh, ruthless metal with a cruel red handle was embedded in his back. I was sure that I'd seen that knife before. He looked up and coughed. Viscous red liquid oozed from his open mouth before he dropped back down forever.

Stunned silence deafened the cable car and everyone tore their eyes from the dreadful sight. The tension and shock were palpable. Seconds blended together into minutes.

Someone had leaned over and was checking the corpse's pulse. Nothing. No phone reception either. We were completely cut-off. The mountains were no longer protective, but suppressing. With that thought came realization. Among us was the killer. No other people had had contact with the risk inspector recently. Everyone was a potential enemy.

Despite those thoughts, once logic had entered my mind, I could consider suspects and their motives for the dreadful deed. I eliminated the tourists completely from my suspects list – they had no plausible motive and no opportunity (they hadn't been near the victim). Due to the weapon, close proximity would be required with the victim for a fatal strike. The only person who had been close to the inspector was the baker. While the baker's business could

be at risk, he was moving to France soon so wouldn't be affected by possible closing of the resort, so wouldn't have a rational motive. The shop owner and snowboarder hadn't been near the victim, like the tourists. That left myself. The manager's rucksack was beeping like someone was calling his phone.

'That was careless of the manager' I thought.

Still no-one had talked, yet by the looks on their faces, they were coming to a similar conclusion to me. It had to be one of us, yet no-one had an incentive or an opportunity. What did this mean? It was clearly not accidental – the blow had been struck with force and intent. It couldn't have been suicide – the inspector's arm didn't stretch that far down his back. Who was it? If it wasn't any of us, only one other person could have done it...

Which was precisely when the rucksack, carelessly thrown in by the manager, decided to explode. Our cable car became an intense ball of excruciating heat and blinding light. The glass windows exploded, and I saw the manager eerily grinning in the cable car behind. Suddenly, everything clicked into place. The cold-blooded manager couldn't let the inspector shut down the resort, so resorted to desperate means. As the inspector was getting in the cable car, the manager stabbed him with the penknife and tossed his rucksack in. That wasn't his phone ringing in his rucksack, but a bomb timer. Now the horrific secret was dying with us.

While these thoughts flashed momentarily through my scorched head, the cable car left the wire, plummeted onto the jagged mountain face and plunged into a crevasse.

So much for coming back next year.

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