Laughing Children On Slicky Slides

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Abstract

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Zoology 6

I am beginning to believe that what happened to me was only a dream. A journey into my unconsciousness and nothing more. Ah, but if it wasn’t a dream, if only it wasn’t... Laughing children sliding down slicky slides. Husbands and wives looking into each other’s eyes. If only it wasn’t a dream. Wouldn’t it be grand if it wasn’t a dream? If only my friends are wrong. They are probably right, however; the mountain has cursed me with a sickness. But I’m not mad. Dream or fact, it is what I remember, and I know I’m not mad. The natives here don’t consider me mad. Will you read what happened? About the laughing children sliding down slicky slides. And about the husbands and wives looking into each other’s eyes. I will write and say it was all a dream. Then you may stop to read. And afterwards I don’t even care if you believe what happened. At least you will read, and perhaps, just perhaps, you may think about my ‘dream’.

The following strange events occurred only a short time ago. It was during the first part of August, the exact day I’m not sure, but the year is 1970. It has proved to be an ill-fated year for man. Thus I was overjoyed when my request was granted for a leave-of-absence from the university in New York to come to Bavaria. New York, with its clattering underground dragon storming from the ominous shafts of steel and glass surrounding the Port of Authority’s terminal, past the terrifying nighttime of Central Park, under the narrow passages of China Town, to the quiet waterfront by the ferryboats, is the only place I would ever live. But I welcome Bavaria. The air is clean, and the people notice me when I walk down the street.

As I hunch over my Remington Rand, I dread the clack, clack, clacking it will make, destroying the unreality of my thoughts before it stamps them on the
paper. I should have a tape recorder or one of those dictation machines with a secretary for an accessory. Then I could settle back into a fat chair, put my stockinged feet up on the windowsill, and look out over the city of Landshut while I talk. It could be so easy. But instead, my back aches and my glass of Bavarian beer is always too warm. They say the beer is made here in Landshut, the capital of Lower Bavaria, but it tastes like black nectar from a deep underground river. Perhaps such a river runs under the mountains. Gigantic hoary shapes that crowd to the edge of Landshut and extend along the entire southern boarder with Austria. The Bavarian Alps. Southward from my window, above the gray squat buildings, the Alps rise, ridge behind ridge into the morning, a blue and white glimmer blending with the hugging clouds and the cold sky. It was to these mountains that I came to learn and write about the retreat of Adolf Hitler. There was a true madman. A maniac dreaming of power, merciless brute power. Power to threaten even Zugspitze, the highest peak in the Bavarian Alps. A summit which is bare to the sun and stars, lonely, naked of warmth and safety, and naked of life. Cold like the maniac’s charred bones lying in a bombed out hole. But Zugspitze’s power remains, reigning in solitary supremacy. And I stare at it, knowing that I was there, on its crown, whether in a dream or not.

How did it all begin? That is what leads me to believe it was only a dream, for I can not remember much about the beginning. I had put on my muffler, for it was cold, and I was walking down the street toward the spa to take a bath. I profess no belief in the healing powers of mineral waters, but I enjoy meeting interesting people there. On the way, I was halted by a sound coming from an alleyway.

“Psst. Psst. Mr. Stanger. In here.” I looked into the alleyway and I could see no one. Puzzled, I turned to go when there came another, “psst,” below my very nose. I looked down. There was a most curious little fellow. In the darkened alleyway all I could tell was that he was small, smaller even than a normal-sized dwarf. “Kind, sir,” he
said, in a most honest voice. "Won’t you please come with me?"

I still do not understand my actions, for the next thing I remember I was following this - - - this thing out of the city toward the mountains. He walked ahead of me on short, thick legs; walking easily as I stumbled behind, panting to keep up. The two of us drove forward, into an unknown land for me. At the foot of the peak Zugspitze we didn’t stop, instead we began to climb. The pass grew steeper, and the air colder and sharper, stirred by a strange wind. Onward we pressed. Up and up. The little man was tireless, climbing with sureness in himself. My breath came quickly, the cold air punishing my lungs. I slipped and fell to my hands and knees, scraping my shins over the stones as I slid back. "Wait!" I cried, tears formed, streaking my face with ice drops. "I have to rest." My chest heaved, aching with each breath. The little man stopped. And I collapsed with relief.

When I looked up again my companion was kneeling beside me, looking intently at my miserable body. He had blue eyes, a wrinkled face, startling white hair, a thick beard, an aquiline nose, and his head was topped by a gray-green slouched hat. "Can I help you in any way?" he asked.

Wearily I raised myself up. "Yes. Yes you can," I gasped. "Just what is going on anyway?"

"I am taking you to the mountain top."

"But why?"

"You will have to wait to find out," he said. "Please come now."

"No. Wait!" I was sure I couldn’t stand yet. I wasn’t even positive I would ever be able to stand again. "What’s your name?" I asked, stalling for time.

"My name is Dalin." He turned to continue up the mountain.

"Don’t go yet!" I cried. "My name’s Mark, Mark Stanger."

"I know," Dalin said matter-of-factly.

"You know? How - - -? Oh yes." I remembered him
calling me by my name from the alleyway. "What sort of a person are you?"

"I am an eismanndl, an ice dwarf." He began climbing again.

"Just a minute!" I scrambled after him, afraid of being left alone. "Where are we going?"

"No more questions," he answered. "We will rest again on that ledge." He pointed straight up an impossibly rugged wall. There was even snow at the top.

"Oh, my God!" I groaned.

Dalin and I did not speak as we climbed. One step was followed by another. I knew I could never go two steps; but one, I could always go one more. The air was becoming thinner and I puffed with each step. Then I stopped! Before me was a sheer cliff, rising up over a hundred immense feet. I stood staring upward, awestruck by the majesty of that slab of rock.

"You wait here," I heard Dalin say. When I turned toward him he was starting up the cliff. Like a wiry spider monkey, Dalin scampered up, leaping from one invisible handhold to another, his compact muscles bulging, then relaxing. Before I could shield my eyes from the sun, Dalin was at the top.

"Incredible!" I whispered, to no one in particular.

"Grab hold and I'll pull you up," Dalin called down as he lowered a silken rope. It seemed frightfully thin to me.

"Are you sure it will hold me?" I yelled up to him.

"It will hold ten of you. Tie it around your waist. Hurry!"

"But you can't pull me up! I'm too big for you."

"Yes I can, Mr. Stanger. Please tie it around your waist. It is getting late." Dalin seemed overly impatient, so I secured the rope about my waist. Immediately I was rising swiftly, scooting up the cliff as though I were looking out of a train's window. Even my ears popped. When Dalin set me on the ground beside him I was breathless.

"Do you have a hoist up here?" I asked, looking around after I regained my composure.
"As you can see," he motioned with his arm, "I don't. We must hurry now."

"But why?" I implored. "The sun is only just now beginning to cross its high point."

"Never mind. We must hurry!"

With a relentless incentive Dalin pushed on, striving, reaching; he was magnificent! And I felt like a babbling weakling as he hoisted me over countless barriers. The summit ridge drew nearer and the slope steepened. There was snow interspersed with the rocks, making the going difficult, and my heart raced. Dalin found a couloir, a pass through the rocks, and I trudged on behind him, mindless of everything except my numb body. We detoured to the right, a few more steps, a few rocks to avoid, and I dragged myself to the top of the mountain. A savage and fierce wind tore at us. God, I cried like a baby, so happy I was to stop the endless climb. Down the mountain, clouds floated in billows like a robe. And above us there was nothing!

Ah, the solitude was beautiful. I felt that I was no longer a part of the world but in a place all my own. My thoughts soared. And I felt as though I could soar also, gliding like a sea gull. Only I would be a mountain gull. Perhaps I should survey my new home, I felt. Strange happiness, this solitude - - - so peaceful.

"Mr. Stanger!" The startled cry from Dalin stopped me, inches from oblivion. I stared down and down and down into an emptiness with a bottom marked by the clouds. I leaped back from the precipice's edge, terrified with the thought of falling endlessly, screaming, with my ears exploding, then dashing to pieces against some jagged rocks below the clouds. The agonizing thought of stopping. Then nothing. "Mr. Stanger! Come inside. Please!" I turned toward Dalin. He was standing in front of an opening that appeared to lead into a bright tunnel. "Hurry. Please, Mr. Stanger. It is getting late." Dalin was noticeably nervous.

"What - - - what is this?" I managed to ask.

"Just step inside, Mr. Stanger. No harm will come to
you. There's not much time!" Dalin stepped through the stone doorway. "I'll explain inside. Come along now!" There was a grating noise, as if heavy rock was moving against rock, and the door began to close.

"Wait! Wait for me," I screeched. And I dashed through the opening just as it rumbled shut, closing with finality. When I looked back at the door, I could see no crack, only my muffler which had been caught, appearing to be a growth from the rock itself. Quite beside myself with fright I fell against the door, pummeling it with my fist and sobbing. "Mother of God, help me! Don't leave me here to die!"

"Mr. Stanger." It was Dalin's irritated voice. "You're not going to die or be harmed. Please control yourself."

I turned to see Dalin, fully expecting him to have turned a scarlet red and sprouted horns and a tail. But he was unchanged. "I - - - I don't understand," was all I could utter.

"Come along," Dalin said. "I'll explain on the way."

"On the way?" I cried. "On the way where? I'm not moving until I know what is going on," I stubbornly remarked with new found courage. "Just who are you anyway? And what do you want with me?"

"I told you. I'm an eismanndl, an ice dwarf."

"That's not enough," I said. "I want to know more. Are you something good or something evil?"

Dalin laughed. "Very well, Mr. Stanger. I'll tell you something about my people. But you'll have to wait till we get to our journey's end to understand why I brought you here." He sat down on a small rock next to me. "We have time to talk now. Before, we had to be to the top of the mountain at the precise time the sun shone full on the door we passed through." I looked at my watch. It was almost a quarter to four. "If we had been late, we would have had to spend the night on the mountain top." I shuddered at the thought. "But you are interested in other things so I will continue to do something else. Are you familiar with the Bible, Mr. Stanger?"

"Yes, of course."
"We have no such book here, but in your Bible do you recall the book of Genesis?"
"Yes, the first one."
"It says there, in the first chapter, that 'God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.' Is this correct?"
"It sounds right to me."
"But when God created the world, according to the second chapter, God made a woman out of Adam's rib. Is this not true?" I nodded my head, yes, impatient to be on with the story. "Then Adam said, 'this is now,' - - - do you know why he said that?"
"No," I said, puzzled by the question.
Dalin said, "That first woman was created by God, equal to Adam in every way. She was not under him in anything. But Adam felt that it wasn't good for woman to be his equal, so God sent her and her offspring away and put them into the hills to live. There they remained, without sin, inside the hills, showing themselves only when they wanted to be seen."
"And that is your people?" I interrupted.
"Yes. The first woman's name is Lilith. Our ancestor. The second woman, Eve, was your ancestor."
"And you live without sin?" I asked.
"Yes. I am one of the younger ones. And I am over ten thousand years old."
"My God," I whistled.
"Let's go now, Mr. Stanger. We have a good distance to go yet."
"But - - - ? What do you want with me?"
"You will understand soon. We must be going now."
I continued to protest, but it was to no avail. Soon I was reluctantly following Dalin down a twisting corridor. The walls were intricately laid with alternating blue and white stones. They were opaque. And a soothing glow emitted from their surface, lighting our way. On the floor of the tunnel we stepped upon a spongy, moss-like substance, which must have also contributed the cut-grass fragrance. There was no sound, not even of our footsteps,
except that when we passed what appeared to be air holes
I could hear a nocturnal cry, echoing into infinity. I began
to imagine the cries to be the playing of a beautiful,
haunting horn. Then they became more like the moaning
of the damned. I fearfully asked Dalin, my lips trembling.
“Wha - - - What is that sound?”
“It’s made by hyraxes,” he told me. “They’re tiny
animals that live on the ledges. When they cry at night,
the sound is magnified as it echoes from one cliff to
another.”
“Do they ever stop?”
“They only cry in the early evening. Think of the
sound as coming from small animals who like to sing, and
it becomes wonderful music.”
“I’ll try that.” But the wailing cries were still
disturbing. It is unusual what a conformist one can
become about certain things, like music, when there is
such a wide variety available.

We, Dalin and I, went on. Ever downward we seemed
to go. The air became warmer and the covering under our
feet thickened, though not enough to make our passage
difficult. Rather, it seemed to carry us effortlessly along.
I glanced at my watch, which showed the time to be seven
o’clock. When I looked up again, there was a small blue
door at the end of our corridor. In its middle was a
polished brass doorknob, and the door was hung on
equally bright polished brass hinges. Dalin knocked
rapidly three times, waited, then knocked twice more.
The door slowly swung open. Dalin removed his slouched
hat, passed through, and turning, he beckoned to me.

I had to crawl through the doorway on my hands and
knees. Gently, the cool moss-like substance soothed the
places I had hurt in my fall on the mountain side. But
when I could stand again, I was not prepared for what I
saw. There was a huge cavern. Indeed, it was the same
dimensions and size as the hollowed out insides of
Zugspitze itself would be! The dome-shaped ceiling, which
seemed an endless expanse, was made up of the glowing
blue and white opaque slabs of stone like those I had seen
in the corridor. Blending together, the stones led to an appearance exactly like the sky I knew. The ground was the same material as had been in the corridor, too, except that there were trees, and bushes, and farmlands, and the landscape seemed to stretch for miles, dotted with tiny dwelling places.

Dalin touched the sleeve of my shirt, startling me. "It is becoming dark, Mr. Stanger. We will stay at my home tonight and continue to our journey's end tomorrow."

"Can you tell me now what I am doing here?" I asked. "Tomorrow you will see." Dalin started along a path. We passed several farms, and a few children came to the roadside to watch us pass. But no one seemed overly concerned with the fact that I was a stranger and three times the size of any of the people. I noticed dairy cattle, oxen, sheep, chickens, and dogs on most farms. I began to think it strange that there were no beef cattle or hogs on any of the farms. But then, Dalin stepped off the regular trail and walked toward a green-trimmed house surrounded by other farm buildings. I dropped my thoughts and hurried after him. "This is my home," Dalin proudly explained.

And proud any man would be of the home. It was a sturdy, small cottage, hand-built, I was later to discover, by the owner over four thousand years before. He had used nothing but the best wood in its construction. This, of course, helped to account for the fact that there was still an abundance of forest in the countryside.

Stooping, I entered the tiny doorway into Dalin's home and found myself in an immaculate, quaint living room. "Your wife must be an extraordinary woman to keep her home so beautiful," I said to Dalin.

"I have no wife yet," Dalin said. "But soon I plan to be united. To be united is something like marriage in your world. Only we think of it differently, for the men and women are of equal status here."

"What do you mean?" I asked. "We treat our women as equals."

"What I mean is very simple. The men and women
who are united here share everything of their lives.’’ Dalin spoke calmly, as he always did. ‘‘In your world, equality is only a word, which is not true for women or for other men.’’

After we had eaten a meal which consisted only of bread and non-meat products, Dalin talked with me far into the night. He told me things about his people, which I promised never to reveal. And he informed me of some unknown facts about Mr. Hitler. I went to sleep in a magnificent feather bed, with my head swimming in unbelievable fantasies. But I still did not know why I had been brought there.

I awoke with a start the next morning when Dalin touched my shoulder. ‘‘We must be on our way, Mr. Stanger. Time is wasting.’’ He walked back out of the room.

‘‘Good God,’’ I thought as I sat up on the edge of the bed, ‘‘that man is constantly in a hurry to go someplace.’’ I stood up to dress and almost fell. The pain and soreness in my legs struck me like a hammer against an anvil.

For breakfast, we gulped down a cup of sweet juice and some cakes. Then we were on our way, once again on foot. The splendor of the countryside was dazzling, bringing truth to the tale of the land of ‘‘milk and honey.’’ The time passed quickly, and as we neared the top of a rise Dalin spoke. ‘‘Beyond this hill, you will be able to see our destination. The end of your journey.’’ I hurried to clear the edge first, but Dalin easily passed me and was waiting when I arrived. In the vast valley below us was another arrangement of exquisite farms, only the buildings of a few of these were not dwarf-size, but normal-sized buildings. I didn’t understand.

‘‘Come along,’’ Dalin urged. ‘‘It is here that someone is waiting to speak with you.’’

As we walked down the hillside, planting our heels first to keep our footing, I noticed that Dalin was angling toward one of the farms with regular-sized buildings. The buildings looked like they were freshly built, making for the only contrast between them and the other farms I had
seen. Besides the fact that they were larger, of course. The grass, or moss-like substanse rather, was kept closely trimmed, and there was finely prepared dirt around the house and in other areas in the main yard. Passing the entrance into the farm lane, I noticed a sign which read, Tim and Nancy C———, Little Awoi.

A man, the same height as myself, walked toward us as we approached the house. When we came closer, Dalin and the other fellow began yelling greetings to each other, with both of them enjoying it immensely. Their happiness reached such an extent, as a matter-of-fact, that I was almost compelled to begin offering greetings myself. Soon they ran toward each other, and the other man picked Dalin up and swung him around, both of them laughed insanely. When I reached them, I felt somewhat like an intruder, but at the same time I knew I would be treated well here.

"Tim," Dalin said, catching his breath for a moment, "this is Mr. Stanger, Mr. Mark Stanger. He has had a hard journey."

Both men laughed at this, as if there was a private joke involved. "And Mr. Stanger, this is Tim C———. A very dear friend of mine."

We shook hands, and Tim said, "Very glad to meet you, Mr. Stanger. May I call you Mark?" Of course, I told him. "It's just that I've been expecting you for so long that I feel I know you already," he added. "Well, shall we go up to the house?"

"Yes. By all means. Let's do," Dalin said cheerfully.

On the way to the house, things still puzzled me. But one thing I knew for sure. Tim was from America. Once a person has traveled in Europe, he can spot an American every time.

After we were seated in Tim's living room, he and Dalin continued to talk. When I noticed a break in their conservation, I interrupted. "I don't mean to be rude," I said, "but I understand that the reason I have been brought her concerns you, Tim. Perhaps we could discuss this and set my mind at ease. You understand, I'm sure."

"Of course!" Tim turned toward me. "And believe
me. I'm as anxious to discuss our matter as you are. Please forgive me."

"I'm really at a loss to explain any of this," I said. "Actually, I don't even know what possessed me to start on the whole thing in the first place."

"Let me explain," Dalin said, as he got up and walked over to me. "You see, Tim is an ex-U.S. soldier. Quite frankly, he is a deserter. He left his ship while it was in port when he discovered that his unit was being recalled to Viet Nam. Previous to this, Tim had repeatedly tried to explain to his superiors that he did not wish to enter into a situation where killing would be involved again. However, his request was ignored. Therefore, he left when there was nothing else for him to do."

I didn't say anything; instead I waited for someone to continue.

"Mr. Stanger," Tim's voice was serious now, the playfulness was gone. "We are not here to discuss whether I am right or wrong. That was my decision to make. No one else's."

"What are we here for then?" I asked.

"I would like you to do me a favor when you return to the states, Mr. Stanger," Tim said. "I've been able to get word to my wife that I am all right, but it would be too risky and a danger to these people," he looked at Dalin, "to tell her in a letter how to get here. I'm asking you to tell her for me."

His steady stare was unnerving, and I had to look away. "Well, Mr. Stanger. Will you?"

I thought about the countless pictures I had seen in news magazines about the war. The mother holding her dead baby. The bodies in the river. The wounded. And the rotten hospital care they had for them at home, if they made it that far. The destroyed cities. The destroyed villages. The destroyed farms. The destroyed land. The destroyed lives. The destroyed. And I thought about Dalin and Tim running toward each other, to clasp one another in friendship. "Yes. Yes, of course, I will," I told him.

Tim almost leaped upon me, shaking my hand, mumbling over and over, "Thank you, Mr. Stanger!"
Mark. Thank you!” Tears were not only in his eyes, they were on his cheeks, his chin, his clothes, and in my hair. I admit, the ones on my cheek were my own. Tim went on babbling, “You can’t miss her, Mark. She’s the prettiest one in town. In the whole country! She’s small and soft, and - - - and just right. Her smile! You’ll know her by her smile. Especially when you tell her. And she’s so gentle. So good. I get goose-bumps thinking about having her here in my arms again! Oh, I hope time hurries up ’til she gets here. I even have freshly made spots where she can plant her flowers and a garden!” He started to calm down then. “But, I have to tell you where to find her! And what to tell her!” Tim went to get a piece of paper and a pencil. Excitedly he wrote and told me everything I would need to know, and then some.

Dalin and I stayed at Tim’s that night, although only Dalin slept any. The next morning we started on the journey back. As we were leaving the valley where Tim lived, Dalin and I passed another farm belonging to a youth like Tim, only his wife and children were with him. As we neared their farm, I saw laughing children sliding down a slicky slide. And I saw a husband and wife looking into each other’s eyes.

Back in my hotel room, often carefully recalling the happenings, I checked into my pockets. It makes no difference if the world believes me! It is only important if one does. And I’m sure she will, after seeing her husband’s hand writing. It was no dream! I know it happened! And now I must go.