

Auf Wiedersehn

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We are heading off later today for a trip that will start in Vienna, take us through the Czech Republic, and conclude in Budapest. As a movie fan, that itinerary brings a lot of movies to mind: THE THIRD MAN, which I saw as a kid, and recently re-watched...it holds up well, and the zither music is as haunting as ever; KOLYA...wonderful Czech film; and GLOOMY SUNDAY, a recent movie, terrific, set in WWII Budapest.

Alfie has gone back to the breeder, where when last seen he was romping happily with a Tibetan Terrier named, ah, Elvis. The breeder assures me that he will not forget me in 17 days but I am gloomily doubtful.

I am taking my laptop on the assumption that I'll be able to find internet access at various points in Eastern Europe. There was a time when European cafes were populated by people in trench coats sipping cognac paid for in pfennigs and floirins and murmuring code phrases to fellow spies. Doomed and haunted expatriates right out of novels by John LeCarre. Now, though, it will all be tourists with laptops. Me included.

I travel a lot. Sometimes with Martin, sometimes alone, occasionally with women friends. I was thinking today about some of my worst/best experiences in other parts of the world.

One of the worst was a whale-watching excursion, three hours long, off the northern tip of Iceland, close to the Arctic Circle. The thing that made it bad was our own fault, Martin's and mine, because we had misjudged the weather in northern Iceland in late May. We had thought Spring when we should have known Winter. Thus we found ourselves in rough seas, with snow coming down, in an unheated boat, with an unworking head, no whales in sight, and us in clothes meant for spring. Luckily it was only 3 hours but we both remember it as among the worst 3 hours of our lives, one of those times when the phrase "Take me now, Lord" comes to mind.

Best? Well, once I spent a very quiet hour in the hills on the island of Bali. I was there with my friend Kitty, but she had climbed down a steep slope to see a ruined temple, and I was hot and tired, and decided to wait for her partway down, where I saw an old-fashioned soft-drink cooler, the kind where you lift a lid and reach in to get a cold drink. It was on the porch of a small shack on the side of the path, and the woman there, to my gestured question, indicated that yes, I could get a drink and sit down. So I waited there for Kitty.

I gave the woman some money, sipped my drink, and watched children playing on the steep path. Somehow, through sign language, I asked the woman...my hostess, for it was her house where I sat on the porch...if the children were hers. Three, she replied, holding up three fingers and then pointing to the ones she meant. Then, somehow, again with sign language, she asked if I had children, and I too held up 3 fingers and we smiled at each other.

But I didn't feel quite right about my answer. I had had four children, actually, and one had died just a few months before this encounter. Saying "I have three" didn't yet feel comfortable to me (perhaps it never would, never has) and so I tried to explain...tiptoeing through the language barrier, using my hands...that once I had had four. To my amazement, she understood, and then replied, using her hands, that she too had once had four children. I cannot remember exactly how we conducted the resulting conversation. But we did, and we understood each other. She asked what had happened, and I pointed to the sky, where as it happened a plane was crossing high above; I gestured, describing with my hands the downward plunge, the explosion as it crashed, and that I had lost my son that way. She expressed sorrow, and told me her own tragedy: a child climbing, and falling from a high place in these hills; a head injury; the very difficult journey to the only hospital in Denpasar many miles away, the fact that the child could not be saved.

We sat there in silence for a while. She reached over, then, and touched my hand. We smiled at each other.

We had not exchanged a single word that either of us could understand. But we had exchanged two lives with each other, two griefs, and had crossed an enormous barrier.

Along the way, in my many travels, I have seen a lot of museums and cathedrals as well.

You can buy postcards of those.

Tags: Untagged