

Sick of the Lies

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**WHY ENDURE
SWISS HURRICANES,
WRONG TURNS,
HISTORIC WOUNDS**

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**AN APPALLING LACK
OF HOTEL CHOCOLATES?
FOR ONE MOMENT OF TRUTH
IN HEIDI'S ARMS,
OF COURSE.**

by Steve Friedman +++ illustrated by Chris Buzelli



BUZELLI

THE RUSSIAN WAS ANGRY.

The Russian was hungry. “Ach,” the Russian had said at dinner the previous night, “More green salad—why do we not get more meat?” It was one of the four sentences I had heard Pavel utter in the approximately 60 hours I had known him. He had uttered the words in the manner the especially devout murmur prayers, with conviction, before meals, with the apparent belief that they might actually make a difference. He had uttered them as we sat down to three lunches and two dinners. Another thing he had uttered—the first phrase I had heard from him—was, “Ach, surrounded by the despotic ones.” He said this when we met, when he learned he would be spending a few days cycling with three Americans. In our little group were also a German, an Austrian and an Italian, and it vexed me that Pavel’s historical hatred didn’t seem to extend to the Axis powers that had killed millions of his countrymen not all that many years ago. It vexed me deeply.

I am pondering Pavel’s selective xenophobia and his longing for meat because at the moment I would rather ponder anything other than my own situation, which is, I’m pedaling a bulky hybrid bicycle with a tinkly bell on its handlebar through a freezing downpour, being buffeted by gale-force winds, sucking the filthy, diesel-scented gusts from large trucks speeding by me on a superhighway. Also, I’m in Switzerland, which I didn’t think had freezing downpours and gale-force winds and superhighways. The guidebooks hadn’t mentioned them. Neither had our Swiss tour guide, Robert, who, I had learned in the course of the past few days, could fib convincingly in five languages.

I wasn’t the only one who had learned some hard, sad truths. “I’m sick of the lies,” one of my fellow Americans, Richard, had hissed to me at midday, after we had been forced to climb a mountain and to visit our fourth castle before Robert would allow us to eat lunch. Richard was based in Los Angeles and was on the trip primarily to investigate gay nightlife for a magazine back home. He put up with the cycling, but was by no means an enthusiast. Richard sounded like he was going to cry as he said, “Robert promised today would be flat!”

Robert had promised lots of things, such as bike-friendly roads and easy-to-follow routes and good weather. I grimly tote up his lies as another supertanker hurtles by me then melts into the swirling mists of



the Swiss typhoon. If the world were a just and merciful place, Robert would be the one dodging trucks and breathing exhaust and sooty rainwater on this Swiss superhighway, while I, after knocking back bar after bar of free hotel chocolate, would be stretching between edelweiss-scented sheets, readying myself for a nice long afternoon nap in the capacious hotel room on the shores of Lake Geneva, where the air was clean and sparkly and the receptionists were blonde and blue-eyed and

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friendly and preternaturally fond of Americans and where the chocolate bars were replaced many times a day.

I had dealt with lying tour guides before, on other press trips. Any seasoned citizen of the world worth his collection of stolen hotel body lotion quickly learns that "Join us as we explore the wonders of Hawaii" really means "On Tuesday we're going to take an hour-long jeep ride to visit a mango farm because the Maui chamber of commerce is footing the bill that allows me, your lying tour guide, to pay the airfare and food bills for you freeloading slugs and the chamber wants some publicity for mango farms, so shut up and take notes." A seasoned citizen of the world learns to hoard his energy for the free five-course dinners and the beachside naps. But Robert had been making us wake up at 7 a.m. the past couple of days, forcing us to cycle way past the civilized napping hour, and meals often involved little besides green salads, fondue and french fries.

Another gale-force wind rips through me. I am sure that my nutrient-starved body is going to plunge into hypothermic shock at any second. Another truck. I ponder the impressive grouchiness of meat-seeking Pavel some more and feel a kind of sympathy for him. Aren't we all, centuries-old differences and blood-soaked wars notwithstanding, brothers under the skin? The rain is so cold, the wind so relentless. Is my brain shutting down? I imagine Richard, already walking the streets of Lake Geneva, plunging into the exciting and expansive world of gay Swiss nightlife. My world, on the other hand, is wet, and frigid, and very, very small. I wonder how many people will come to my funeral, if the former girlfriend whose last e-mail had said, "I don't know you anymore, please lose my address," will weep copious tears of regret and longing as she collapses, keening, over my casket, and if Robert or the Swiss bureau of tourism might be found criminally negligent in the matter of my death.

The invitation to take a guided bicycle trip through Switzerland mentioned jagged, snow-dusted peaks and shimmering mountain lakes. It talked about cycling through river valleys, along charming little bicycle-dedicated paths, through what I was sure would be café-packed, cobblestoned villages where chubby, white-haired, lederhosen-wearing burghers sat outside and stuffed their bulging guts with chocolate and cheese fondue while their daughters, apple-cheeked blondes named Heidi, lined the curved and narrow village paths, gazing in misty-eyed admiration at the handsome American as he knifed through the mountain air, his legs pumping like pistons, his skin radiating a kind of pantherish vitality the women had spent their dewy adolescences dreaming about but had never actually seen up close. And now it was in front of them! "Sacre bleu!" the Heidis would exclaim into their pink, perfectly formed palms, which had already milked a few cows and kneaded a bunch of loaves of nutritious Swiss bread that morning and were consequently redolent with the fumes of honest work and artisanal nourishment and clean, pure animal longing. (Or "Mein Gott," if they lived in the German-speaking parts of the country.) Then the Heidis would wave those soft, perfect hands and call out in their native tongues, and the

American, while not knowing the exact meaning of each syllable (Switzerland has four official languages, and the American speaks none of them), nevertheless would understand exactly the language of love, and the American would be so far ahead of his fellow adventurers that yes, why not stop for a cup of midmorning Swiss coffee and a little nibble of chocolate and then he would mention—in sign language, if he had to—that perhaps Heidi would enjoy a ride in the support van, where she and the American could relax and stretch out and discuss international relations and....

A wall of water assaults me. If I weren't so cold, and already soaked to the bone and cursing the Heidis who had never once beckoned to me on this accursed and ill-fated quest, I might find this interesting. Who knew that hurricanes occurred in this neutral country whose greedy, Nazi-gold-hoarding heart pumps steadily and dependably for any dictator willing to pay the blood-soaked price? Just as I'm reflecting on the mysteries of global weather patterns and historical evil, another enormous truck passes, sending another sheet of water my way.

ROBERT ACCUSED US OF BEING WHINERS, MALINGERERS AND LAZY PIGS (GENERALLY TRUE), WHILE COMING UP WITH EXCUSES FOR THE LIES.

It had sounded good. Every morning, according to the Swiss tourism press materials I had received, we would wake in some beautiful Swiss village, mount our Swiss rental bicycles for a leisurely 20- to 30-mile ride to our next stop, where our luggage would be waiting in what I was sure would be edelweiss-scented rooms. Three days of cycling through winding valleys, along an "almost entirely flat" route, "rated easy, ideal for everybody including families with children." Impossible-to-miss signage, promised the press materials (and Robert). Great exercise, I was sure. Excellent muesli for breakfast. Ill-fated but transiently satisfying romances with trusting burghers' daughters named Heidi.

It had sounded great. It had sounded like seven days (two days in the Alps to get acclimated before the cycling, a day afterward to wind down) of all-expense-paid traveling through a foreign country that, its history of duplicity, casual anti-Semitism and Nazi-sympathizing notwithstanding, had clean bathrooms. These were important to me, because even though I am a seasoned citizen of the world, I sometimes suffer from digestive issues related to what a psychologist once labeled "generalized anxiety disorder," which I think she wrote just so she could make some money from my insurance company. My point is, I think my problems are due more to a sensitive disposition and a

finely calibrated awareness of the black, bottomless existential abyss that yawns beneath us all than they are to any kind of chemical imbalances or readily diagnosable "disorders" common to hordes of others who happen to possess tightfisted insurance-plan administrators and inventive psychologists. Why are people always so eager to label what they cannot understand?

No matter how great a trip sounds, a seasoned adventurer, a citizen of the world, is always prepared. I knew there might be some problems, so I packed accordingly. Antidiarrheal tablets. Sensible shoes. Rain gear. Sunscreen. A 700-page novel about 19th-century British explorers being stalked and eaten by a gigantic mutant polar bear in the Arctic wastes, in case I got bored, or tired, or sick of the other freeloading seasoned adventurers sucking at the swollen, historically guilty teat of Swiss tourism. I also packed some Hawaiian shirts, because Hawaiian shirts are in style everywhere in the world, despite what my former girlfriend said. I brought my special, prostate-protecting Velo Plush seat, for obvious medical reasons, which I would have the crack Swiss bike mechanics attach to the lightweight and high-end Swiss bicycle I planned to pedal with pantherish vitality. I packed a Durango Fire and Rescue cap (given to me by a guy who actually worked for the unit) to impress any potential Heidis.

On the first day of the trip I learned that there were no crack Swiss bike mechanics; that the Swiss Army knives we received as presents didn't include the hex wrenches I would need to attach my prostate-protecting seat; that the only place I could get my seat attached was a combination motorcycle/bicycle shop next to a superhighway, where I'm pretty sure I heard one of the mechanics mutter something anti-American when he saw me and my Hawaiian shirt and my Durango Fire and Rescue cap. I also learned, when, after a few miles, I informed Robert that I was ready for a break and needed to stretch out in the support van and hoped there were chocolate bars inside, that there was no support van. That gave me a very bad stomachache.

"I'm sick of the lies," Richard had said for the first time as we pedaled together that day. Other than his predilection for repeating this refrain, he was very pleasant to be around. The other American on the trip was another story.

"This isn't flat!" Marcia, a newspaper travel writer from Florida, had said the first day, and the second, and the third. "I don't think I can do this," she said the first day, and the second, and the third. "I might need to go home early," she had moaned on the first day, and the second, and the third. Marcia also enjoyed discussing what genocidal maniacs the Chinese were (inspired, I guessed, by our visit to the Olympic Museum, in Lausanne), a sentiment that I guessed didn't go over so well with one of the American tour guides who joined us on our second day, whose name was Shin-Jung.

The Europeans on the trip with us—being European—were more outwardly sanguine. Andreas the German spent most of the time muttering in German to Fred the Austrian, whose most noteworthy English-language sentiment was, after being told we would have to visit what seemed like our 100th castle, up our 50th mountain, "I am a journalist, not an athlete." Tall, bald Albano the Italian said nothing, but glowered with contempt at the Swiss sausages and cheese plates we got at one castle and appeared to throw up in his mouth when he heard Marcia order

"I'M VERY GLAD YOU HAVE FOUND ME," HEIDI SAYS. SHE HOLDS ON TO MY HAND LONGER THAN IS REALLY NECESSARY.

a cappuccino late one afternoon. (Later, I would learn that Albano was a former competitive cyclist, a city planner and a gifted artist, silent at rest but funny and generous when engaged, as well as the author of six Italian guidebooks. Also, that he loved cats. Also, that his disgust at cappuccino drinking past 10 a.m. was very real.) Except for the salad-hating and American-bashing, I didn't hear Pavel say anything until we arrived for lunch at the Olympic Museum, where we were served perch. That's when the Russian uttered sentences number three and four.

"Leetle feesh," he grunted. "Very leetle feesh."

In charge of us all was Robert, who reminded us at different times that, "There are no dangerous animals in this country," and "No one litters, look, do you see any litter? No." Whenever anyone

complained—about the pace, the forced castle tours, the mountains on the flat route, for example—Robert accused us of being whiners, malingerers and lazy pigs (generally true), while coming up with excuses for the lies we'd been fed.

"The signage is perfect," he said at one point, when I complained about getting lost so often.

"What kind of cyclist would want signs that he didn't have to pay attention to?" he said at another point.

"Just keep the lake to your left," he had said once, and "Just keep the mountains ahead of you," another time.

"You all have detailed booklets," he had assured us, neglecting to mention that the booklets were written in German. And, "if all else fails, you have my cell-phone number." I didn't, and even if I did, my cell phone didn't work in Switzerland.

Robert's lies, evasions, forced climbs, mandatory castle visits and ugly (but accurate) accusations of negativity notwithstanding, he was not a bad guy. One night, while I imagined Pavel was dreaming of steak and the German speakers were conducting nefarious transactions with the local bank, and Marcia was crying herself to sleep, and Richard was investigating nightlife, I met Robert in the hotel sauna. I had come to the conclusion that my complaints were getting me nowhere. So I told him it must be difficult to be in charge of so many reporters.

Yes, he admitted, it can be challenging.

"Marcia really whines a lot," I suggested. (I'm not proud of my behavior, but I can't pretend it didn't happen.)

Yes, he admitted, she can be challenging.

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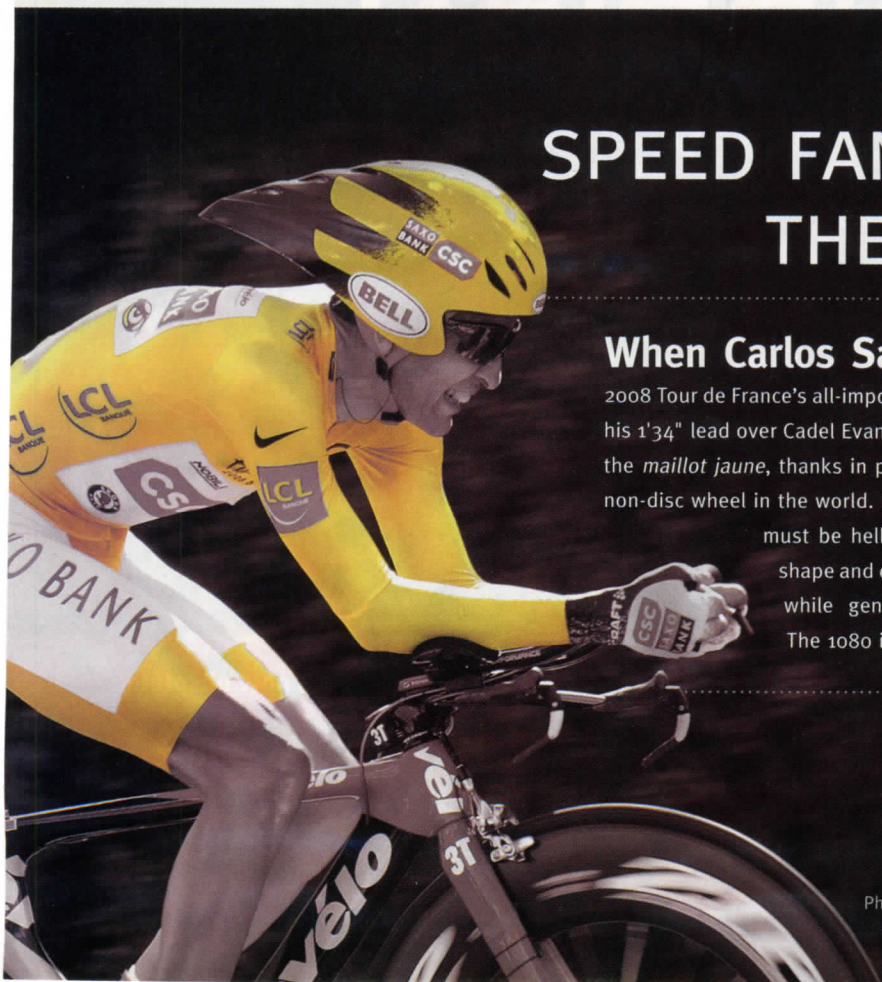
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"What about we skip the museum tour scheduled tomorrow and kick back somewhere and have ice cream?" I proffered. "I think it might be good for group morale."

He promised he'd think about it.

Then we talked about travel and adventure and life and love. Might I have said something about being lonely? Might I have said something about New York City being a dark, cruel, remorseless, soul-crushing, spirit-gobbling cesspool where the only things prized are wealth and beauty, and how in such a shallow, merciless metropolis, is it any wonder that a sensitive man with an exquisitely calibrated emotional gauge might end up with an ex-girlfriend who doesn't understand him, who hates his Hawaiian shirts? I might have. (When I miss a couple of nap days in a row, I become emotionally labile. My psychologist says it's not my fault.)

"Steve," Robert said. "You need to find Heidi."

Dawn breaks gray and cool, and by the time we have mounted our bicycles for a 20-mile ride to Nyon, our final stop, the day has become black and cold, and wet. I crest a hill and face full on, once again, the ravenous maw of the Swiss typhoon, teeth chattering, near death, planning my funeral, wondering about my ex, cursing the Swiss. I try to picture the British explorers being stalked by the mutant polar bear in the Arctic wastes, so that I might feel better about my final hours. When that doesn't work, I accost a chubby resident of the town and ask her how far it is from this town

to Nyon. I do this by screaming, "Nyon! Nyon!" and hugging myself and crying and holding my hands apart and raising my eyebrows. I think she tells me it is a long way, and I think maybe I cry some more and then she says a word I understand, "*Gare*," which means train station.

I am the last one to arrive, the most chilled and soaked and miserable. After I change into sweatpants and a spare Hawaiian shirt I wisely carry in my backpack, I beg Robert to please let me skip lunch and the staggeringly ill-conceived walking tour of Nyon that will follow, and just get on the goddamn train and back to the heated hotel in Lausanne, where I might gorge on chocolate and read about the mutant polar bear some more. The way I phrase it is, "Robert, I think the group might be happier—and more likely to write good stories—if they could get dry and get some rest."

But no. That will not happen. There is a schedule, and this is Switzerland. We will eat lunch, and we will have a walking tour.

I sullenly tuck into some pasta with pork (Pavel does the same, and smiles for the first and only time on the trip), while outside the rainstorm rages. With the food warming my belly, and the Hawaiian shirt warming my body, and the thought that I'm through with Switzerland's perfect signage and flat roads warming my soul, I cheer up a little. I cheer up so much that when Robert informs the group that we will now each volunteer our opinions of the trip, I don't groan.

Pavel is first up. He says he loves the fellowship of the group. He

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actually uses the words "love" and "fellowship." I am astounded at his vocabulary. Also, maybe I have misjudged Pavel. Maybe I need to look at my life. Fred and Andreas say something not obviously nationalistic or racist, for which I'm grateful. Marcia doesn't bash the Chinese, and Shin-Jung doesn't say anything terrible about Marcia. Maybe this trip has been life-changing for more than one person. When it comes to my turn, I mention that while I have learned how nuanced the definition of flat is in this country, I had a great time. People laugh. I really need to open up more, stop keeping the world at arm's length. I tell the group that I will return to the United States sorry of only one thing—and here I lock my eyes onto the eyes of Robert for a meaningful, emotionally connecting beat—and that is that I have not found Heidi.

Robert looks at me for a meaningful, emotionally connecting beat of his own. And he smiles. I smile. He keeps smiling. I hear giggling in the group. This is getting weird. Another symptom of hypothermia? The brain is an awesome and complicated organ, I think.

"Steve," Robert says with the weirdest smile I have ever seen, "turn around." Now there is laughter from everyone, even Marcia.

When I turn, there she is, standing just two feet from me. Blonde. Blue-eyed. Very white teeth. Also, and it doesn't make me proud to say this—but while a seasoned citizen of the world might be duplicitous and conniving and selfish and self-pitying and greedy and self-serving and lazy, he is sometimes very honest—possessed of a body that we Americans might call "smokin'!" She is wearing heels and a tight cotton blouse and very tight gray pants. For a terrible, shameful second I wonder if Robert—worried about some of my complaints and how they would play out in the American press—might have hired a really beautiful hooker to cheer me up.

More laughter. A tender gaze from the possible prostitute. Tender, but ripe with promise, too. Am I hallucinating? Have the diesel-scented fumes screwed up my neurological functioning? If so, would Swiss hospitals accept my insurance plan? I look around the room wildly. I have been lost before in my life. I have been lost many, many times on the terribly marked highways and byways of this terrible and allegedly neutral country. But I have never felt as lost as I do now. I see Richard smiling, looking at me. "She is hot," I think I see him mouth.

I stand up. Around the beautiful blonde's neck is a name tag. The name tag says "Heidi."

I take her hand. Actually, I grab it. It is perfect, soft, pink, all that. Did Robert pluck her from a farm? Was she milking cows and kneading dough this very morning? How can she be so pure, and yet radiate such proud, raw carnality? I have a terrible stomachache.

"I am Heidi," says Heidi.

"Heidi, I have been looking for you for a very long time," I say. It is the most sophisticated thing I have ever said in my life. I'm pretty sure it's the most sophisticated thing I'll ever say in my life.

"Then I am very glad you have found me," Heidi says. She holds on to my hand longer than is really necessary. I'm sure of it. Questions flood my tired, survived-the-Swiss hurricane, inhaled-the-diesel-scented-fumes-of-Swiss-supertankers, generally confused mind. "Is Robert really so desperate for ink that he'd hire a prostitute for me?" I think. Also, "What's the proper etiquette with a Swiss prostitute?" And, "Just because Heidi's a prostitute, isn't she capable of love?" And, "Am I not capable—finally—of providing love?"

I have decided that I will not judge Heidi's past, that we are destined for each other. That's when Heidi says, "I am your tour guide." As she says this, she continues to hold my hand. I'm sure of it.

The next few minutes are blurry. But the next instant is very, very clear. We are standing outside. Somehow, miraculously, we have gone from inside the restaurant, from my plate of pasta and pork, to outside. I don't remember walking, but somehow, it happened. And somehow, miraculously, the storm has abated, and the air has warmed. Heidi and I face each other, and we listen as a delicate, magical pitter-patter surrounds us: falling on the white Swiss Tourism umbrellas we each hold, a gentle, cleansing drizzle. Heidi is looking deeply into my eyes, and I am looking deeply into hers.

"You are looking for Heidi?" Heidi asks.

"Yes," I croak.

"You want to know about Heidi?" Heidi asks. She has moved even closer. She is inches from me. I can see the rain glistening on her skin. I can see how her blouse clings to her. Interesting that she refers to herself in the third person, I think.

"I want to know everything about Heidi," I say. I am so unbelievably Continental. I will try

to remember this moment. I will tell our children, Moshe and Mary, about this moment.

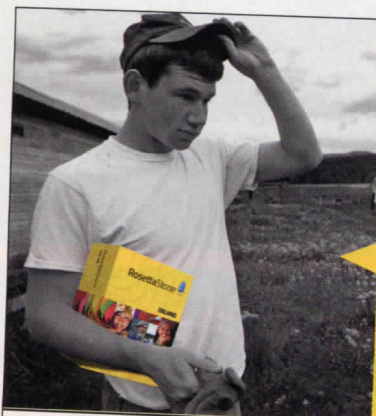
Heidi tells me a story about Heidi. I think there's a cranky grandfather in it, and a little girl in a wheelchair, and some sheep, and maybe even a wackjob named Peter, but I'm not sure. I'm busy imagining my life with this Heidi. Tour guide? Prostitute? Why are we always so quick to label what we do not understand? Is it because we fear the unknown? Is it because we are afraid of our essential, true selves? I will not be afraid anymore. I will not fear mountains called flat, nor twisty mazes called perfectly signed routes, nor grouchy, hungry Russians. I will fear no one. I will not even fear the bottomless black abyss that I can see now yawns not at all, but is merely a figment of my love-starved imagination, which, because of Heidi, is starved no longer. Henceforth, I will gorge on love, and Pavel will have plenty of meat and all countries will live in peace and even Turkey will apologize for its genocide. It is a perfect moment and I will live in the moment. I will live in the moment, filled with love.

I am home now, in New York City. I've had time to wonder whether my episode in the rainstorm really qualified as a brush with a hurricane or was just a short spin in a spring squall. I have had time to ask myself some hard questions: Why did I complain to Robert so much? Why was I such a baby? The truth is, except for the 10 or 12 times I got separated from the group, I did spend much of my time on the bicycle-dedicated paths the brochures promised. I did see a few fat

Swiss cows, some nice yellow fields of rapeseed. I enjoyed an excellent ice cream sundae with Robert on the shores of Lake Geneva while Marcia and the other suckers were frog-marched through the Olympic Museum. And the weather was good most of the time. And there really was some nice scenery, and Albano patted my arm when I made it up one of the mountains and said "Good, good," which almost brought me to tears. So what if my hotel-room sheets didn't smell like edelweiss? I don't know what edelweiss smells like, anyway. Why did the superhighways and the tankers get me so worked up? Why was I so uninged? Maybe it was because I missed a couple of nap days in a row.

I e-mailed Heidi, of course. I told her I would love to get together sometime and treat her to some chocolate. I told her what a great tour guide she was. Might I have mentioned something about a deep, powerful connection that transcended religion and national boundaries and other meaningless concepts that only separated tender, yearning, not-chronologically-young-but-nevertheless-children-in-their-hearts souls who were meant to be together? I might have. She e-mailed back, and while not addressing the powerful connection part of my message directly, said sure, she would be glad to take me up on my offer, if I were ever in Nyon again. Which I plan to be. It all feels very real. **D**

Steve Friedman, BICYCLING's writer at large, has been anthologized six times in Best American Sports Writing, and his book The Agony of Victory includes a profile of Graeme Obree written for BICYCLING magazine.



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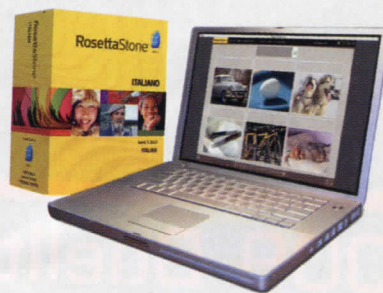
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