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*Getting lost in a closed Swiss national park without food, water, proper clothing or a
cellphone is an expensive way to get some perspective on life.*

It's impossible to think you are someone special when you live in the Swiss Alps. Up above the cloud line, surrounded by huge jagged peaks that seem to move with the seasons, you are no one. The Alps don't care about your family or your job. They don't care if you are rich or thin or unhappy. These mountains have been around a lot longer than you have and they will still be standing here long after you and everyone else you know are long gone. That is just the way it is. Humility is one trait you acquire quickly in the Alps.

Several years ago I left Canada to move to Villars-sur-Ollon, Switzerland. I wanted a change, and the Alps were as far as I could get from downtown Montreal while still being able to watch my soaps en français. I sent a few emails to some businesses in the area, and soon enough I received a job offer to help produce promotional materials for a boarding school; I also became a European correspondent for some North American magazines. With that, I packed six duffel bags and moved to the small alpine town of Villars, a place where if you walk more than one kilometre, you have to head either very up or very down, depending on the route you choose.

Villars has only one main street and it is roughly a half city block in size. There are no stop lights or fast-food outlets. No Starbucks or movie theatres. There is a skating rink, a bowling alley, a swimming pool and good food, but mostly there is great skiing and, in my case, excellent cycling. Overhead, there are many different kinds of helicopters that cover the region. Some are checking on road conditions; others are looking for casualties. It's the red ones you don't want to see, because in a small village like this one, if you see red, it is likely there for someone you know. When I was filling out the forms for my new Swiss job, the HR woman desperately tried to sell me helicopter insurance for \$25. I explained to her that I am a non-skier, non-boarder, non-everything cold and snowy. I told her I would never be on the slopes and that I tend not to wander around in the snow because it is freezing, and as such would never require the emergency services of anything that flies. I am a cyclist. If anything, I would need the local doctor. And he would be able to run and rescue me because I cannot travel far on a bike in the winter. Unfortunately, only some of that turned out to be true.

One afternoon in late April, I rang a friend of mine in Geneva to complain about my jet lag. I had just returned from Montreal and couldn't keep my eyes open, and yet I couldn't go to sleep because then I would be up all night. My friend knew the cycling tracks in the area and suggested I head out for an easy road route. When I would returned, he said, it would be late and I would be tired - the perfect solution to jet lag. I agreed and headed out on my mountain bike as I had just about every day since I'd arrived years earlier.

It was 4:30 p.m. on April 30. The snow had mostly melted in town and was on its way out at higher elevations. It used to hang around much longer, but these days the snow melts quickly even at 1,400 metres above sea level, and some years it hardly arrives at all. I started climbing a familiar road about five kilometres from my house. It was a harder route than the one my friend had recommended, but I figured since I was out to get tired, I might as well really go for it. About halfway up, I saw a small yellow road sign that said "Col de la Croix" and pointed down a wooded path. I'd never noticed it before and wondered how it would be possible to get from here to there via that route, but it seemed interesting and as yet unexplored, so I turned in.

I skirted around a wooden gate that said "fermer" and off I went into a closed area. At this point it is important to note that because I intended to go on an easy road ride, I brought absolutely nothing with me. I had no water, no food, no cellphone, no lighter or matches, no map, no warm clothing, no flashlight, and worse, if that were possible, no one knew where I was because I had changed routes at the last minute. What I did have was a 50 Swiss franc note, because my mother taught me to never leave the house without money.

The path was wide and descended very slightly into the forest. I would cycle for about 50 metres and then dismount and carry the bike through short patches of snow. Then I would ride for another 50 metres and dismount again. This went on for about an hour. The snow was sticky, the kind you had to yank your feet out of with each step. I was in running shoes, and sometimes my foot came up without my shoe. I would laugh and stick it back on, not realizing that between walking in the sticky snow and the backsplash of my bike, I was becoming very wet and it was becoming very dark and very cold.

Entering the closed area can only be described as a colossal error in judgment, as I forgot how quickly day turns into night up here. Even though the sun goes down around 8:30 p.m. in late April, it actually gets dark much earlier because the setting sun dips behind the mountains. Ninety minutes after starting my jet-lagged ride, I was lost, in the dark, in a closed national park. The month of April is after the ski season has ended and well before the walking season begins, so no one would enter this area until June at the earliest. If I didn't find my way out, I would become "Dead Girl Found in the Woods," and that is not a headline I wanted my friends and family to read. I needed a plan and fast.

I did not have the energy to trace my footsteps back to the road. Nor did I realize how much carrying the bike through the snow had taken out of me. I was exhausted. Once it dawned on me that I couldn't turn back and didn't know the way forward, I knew I was in trouble. I threw the bike off to the side and started thinking about shelter. In the mountains, chalet owners often let the snow cover their homes in the wintertime because it serves as insulation.

There were a few of these covered homes in the area, so I approached the nearest one. The windows and doors were boarded up. I tried desperately to pull out the wooden planks, using my legs against the side of the house for balance, but I just did not have the strength. I tried to break into the next chalet and then the next one, but doing so was making me very tired and the effort was taking me farther into the woods. I abandoned that idea and started walking up a slope. I figured if I were to pass out or pass away, I would be found more easily higher up than among the trees. As I walked, I would shout "Help!" from time to time, but the nearest person to me was many kilometres away. I knew that, but shouting was more instinctual than rational. I continued to call out at regular intervals until even that became too tiring.

It was totally dark when I came across a small, partly covered shelter. Ironically, there was a topographical map hanging overhead, but it was too dark for me to read it, and besides, I had no idea where I was. The shelter had a garbage bin and a thin rail that was not big enough to sit on, but was wide enough to lean on and keep me off the frozen ground. I was sopping wet and started to shake. I took garbage out of the bin and shoved it in between my body and my clothes to keep the wet off my skin. I then grabbed pine branches and draped them over me as

protection from the wind and the snow, if it were going to fall. I really needed warmth, and those were the only places I could find it: the bin and the branches.

I spent the night propped up against the skinny wooden bar covered in pine. I knew if I fell asleep, there would be a chance I would never wake up. I moved my limbs to keep my circulation going and tried my best to cover my exposed areas to keep from freezing. I leaned on that bar for what seemed like days, thinking about that terrible Dead Girl phone call to my family. What an absolute idiot I was, heading into a closed area on my own, with absolutely nothing on my back. If I'd had a five-cent pack of matches or a lighter, this near-death experience would have been an evening by the campfire. There was plenty of wood available and I would have been warm and safe. Still stupid, mind you, but not frozen or in danger.

After a long night of staring into the darkness, I finally saw the sun coming up around 6 a.m. It was May 1. I was alive but still lost. I studied the shelter map, which showed the elevation of where I was but not how the hell to get out of there. I again opted to walk up instead of down, and it was high on the slope that I realized where I was. In the summer, you can eat at a typically Swiss restaurant in the tiny village of Taveyanne. I was there, standing outside a restaurant covered over with snow like the chalets below, and on the very top of its roof was a bright yellow metal box with the word "SOS" written across it.

Well, this was an SOS situation if ever there was one. I climbed onto the restaurant and then onto its roof. I flung open the yellow box and in it was a phone with only one digit: the number "1." I reached over and dialled 111. After a few rings, a voice said: "Allô, police de Lausanne." I honestly did not know what to say. After a few seconds, I told the policeman I was on the roof of the Taveyanne restaurant, that I had spent the night in the woods, that I was cold and thirsty and that I really wanted to get home. He told me to stay right there and that help was on its way.

I sat on the top of the restaurant and stared into the valley below. It was the most magnificent day I had ever seen. It was clear and crisp, with a bright blue hue you only see at this height. The sun was extraordinarily hot, even very early on a newly spring morning, and I sat there, legs dangling over the side of the roof, slowly defrosting. At one point, I reached over the edge and pulled some old clothes (used for insulation) out of the restaurant's vents, and put those on while I waited.

On my ride into the area the day before, I had seen snowmobiles parked along the path. They're used in the winter to rescue skiers who break their legs, and I figured the Lausanne police would wake the Villars police and up the mountain they would come on the Ski-Doos. Instead, I heard a deep thump somewhere in the distance. When I was a kid, lightning struck a metal fence right near me. This thump felt like that thump. It was a full-body experience. The problem was that I couldn't actually see anything. I looked everywhere and there was nothing. Suddenly, rising from the valley below came the dreaded red helicopter. It swooped right up, vertically, almost in my face, and landed a few metres from the restaurant. A man raced towards me, his medical kit swinging with urgency by his side. He said words to me that I only understood years later. He looked at me, sitting on the snowy roof of a long-buried restaurant, wearing insulation clothes and covered in pine needles and garbage, and said: "Was it you who called?"

Was it me who called? I started to laugh. There we were on the top of a mountain soon after sunrise on May 1, with nothing in between us and France, and he asks if it was me who called. I said "Yes," not wanting to be rude and say "Duh!" and we made our way to the red helicopter. He took my temperature and my blood pressure and up we went. Seventeen seconds later, I looked down and saw the Villars policeman making his way up the mountain in a 4x4. I told the medics to put me down. I would go with the policeman. We landed in the same spot we took off from and waited for the policeman to arrive. I then got into his car and he drove me home.

After a hot bath, I took a very long nap. My friend was right: cycling definitely put an end to my jet lag. When I walked out of my house later that morning, my bicycle was leaning against my garage door. I guess the policeman found it for me. And after repeating the tale 1,000 times to each person who asked, which was just about everyone in Villars, I received a bill from the helicopter company for my 17-second ride.

I will leave it to your imagination as to how much it cost to call out a red Swiss helicopter on a sunny May 1 morning, but I will give you one hint: I could have bought chopper insurance for several NHL teams and it still had money left over for a trip to Disney World. It was the price for stupidity, and I intend on paying it only once.

AVA CHISLING: As a content provider and a lawyer (as of 2007), I have more than 20 years experience working with local, national and international companies, including Borden Ladner Gervais, The Canadian Bar Association, Quebecor, J. Walter Thompson, CJAD Radio, CBC-TV, Montreal Mirror, enRoute Magazine, Just for Laughs Festival, Spafax Publishing, Time Out Magazine, among others. I have vast experience in television, film, radio, advertising, print, internet content, and most other forms of media. I am an award-winning editor from Montreal who also happens to practice media law: <http://www.avachisling.com>.

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