

The Cable Car

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Nobody would have thought that the wind could have got up so fast on that August day. But it did. The cable link between Cervinia and Zermatt at the top of the mountain was prone to such winds. The operator had no choice but to shut down the power. This time the wind just kept blowing. There were six people on the lift when it stopped. Each of them appeared single and unconnected with each of the others. Fate had cut them off together in a space the size of a small room. They swung alarmingly with the gusts of alpine wind. No-one spoke. Suddenly the intercom crackled and a voice came from the speaker by the door. There was no need to be alarmed, it said, but the lift would start again as soon as the wind died down a little. Then silence. There were no seats in the car, which was designed to carry walkers and skiers across the steep valley. The journey was normally short and the accommodation designed for standing room only. The cabin settled into a long pendulum swinging motion from side to side, sitting as it did on its cable almost in the centre of the space above the valley. The return car was just in front, and swinging in harmony with it. There were no passengers on the other car.

One by one the passengers slid down onto the floor and sat down on the lino, backs to the sides of the cabin. Somehow the motion was less disturbing if one sat down. You couldn't see the landscape lurching violently back and forth. You had a firmer base and could rest. Sitting like that the eyes of the passengers levelled across the car naturally into the gazes of those opposite. Catching each other looking, they averted their gazes. At first there seemed no need to intrude, to engage with one another. After all, this was a momentary delay. They would be on their separate ways in a moment or two.

Time passed. They looked at their mobile phones. One had a book. Another checked her diary. One young woman seemed increasingly agitated, clearly not good with heights.

"My name is Sister Bernadette" she said suddenly. There was a pause. She blushed and went on: "I want you all to know that God loves us and will care for us. I think we should all say a prayer for deliverance together." There was a shocked silence. At last they looked at each other. The young nun coloured again and looked down at her hands, which held a rosary of amber beads. She started to incant the Lords' prayer in latin in a low monotone, looking down at her hands still.

The others looked around at each other, rather at a loss with this development.

A large rough man stood up and stretched. He held onto a briefcase. Sneering, he looked at the Irish nun. "You and your church can take your prayers and stick them where the sun does not shine," he said unpleasantly. He spoke in a middle European accent. He turned and looked out of the window at the Zermatt lift station ahead of them. "Maybe if we lost some weight from this shit hole, it could get to Zermatt. Does anybody feel like leaving?"

"I don't think that will be necessary." A rich English baritone voice replied. Ben Truscott joined the Albanian on his feet, matching him inch for inch and pound for pound. "The lady is entitled to her prayers. Does anyone else have a view?" He diverted his gaze round the room. The others seated were all women. They demurred, not wanting to get into an argument, or inflame the conversation. The nun had stopped her recital.

The wind had got up further and showed no sign of abating. The four women rose to their feet and held onto the hand rails by the windows. Everyone looked at the scene passing violently from side to side.

After a pause a woman in jeans with red hair, of uncertain age, called Isobel, said "This is global warming. We should expect unusual and extreme types of weather if we continue to trash our planet with fossil fuel emissions. We will all pay for it one way or another. Expect the unexpected. It is a changing world."

The Albanian snorted in derision and turned away, tapping his fingers in irritation on the window. The Baritone smiled and looked sympathetic. Sister Bernadette said absently "We have been entrusted with our world by the Almighty, and look what we have done."

One of the other women, Margaret, in her sixties, exclaimed: "None of this is going to get us out of here. When can we get down from this hellish place. Can't any of you men do anything?"

One woman had remained silent until now. A lady of forty or so, called Delia. "I have calculated the forces at work on this cabin." she said. "the weight of this machine stated on the wall, together with its passengers, is roughly 5.2 metric tonnes. That means that the lateral force being exerted at the apex of the swing on the cable are roughly equivalent to twenty five metric tonnes. I happen to know that the breaking strain of the cable is specified to resist at least three times that force."

There was nothing as sobering as maths. The occupants stared at this quiet woman who clearly had the brain of a top scientist.

"I will let you know if there is any cause for concern" she said. "The plain fact is that the two cabins cannot safely pass on their cables when swinging to this degree. They would collide, causing damage and making them unsafe. We simply have to ride out the wind. Uncomfortable though it is, we are not in danger unless the operator moves us too early, before it is safe again."

Just at that moment the cabin reached the apex of its swing and Costin the Albanian lost his footing. As he clung to his briefcase he only held on with one hand and he crashed to the floor, banging his head on a steel bulwark. His body slid violently down to land next to Sister Bernadette on the downward side of the car. The briefcase crashed against the wall and burst open, showering 100 dollar bills across the floor. Costin seemed to have lost consciousness, and blood oozed from a deep gash in his temple. Delia reached down and felt his jugular vein. "I'm afraid he's dead." She said. "He was almost certainly laundering drug money across this untended border, for deposit in a Swiss account."

"Mary, mother of Jesus!" said Sister Bernadette. "Did you ever see the like of this money? We could save a lot of souls with that, to be sure!" She started scrabbling after the notes on the floor as the cabin swung relentlessly from side to side, trying to stuff them back into the case.

There was a shocked pause as the passengers summed up the situation. Margaret spoke.

"No-one would ever know." She said slowly but loudly in a Liverpool accent. "We share the cash between the five of us. The briefcase goes out the window into the forest below. No-one is any the wiser. This fella had a terrible accident and the Swiss will hand his body to the police. We all walk away, no questions." The others noticed her worn clothes and lined face for the first time. She was a hard bitten woman without a wedding band. This had been the trip of a lifetime in an existence of genteel poverty and loneliness. The gleam in her eye suggested sudden hope and a new found greed.

Delia knelt down without a word and started to count the money into five piles in the open case, using the bundles of notes as equal in value. Very soon there were five equal bundles. Silently the strangers

opened their hands and received their shares. Wiping the case carefully with the dead man's jacket cloth, Delia removed the fingerprints left on the metal and plastic. The Baritone picked it up with his hand sheathed in his newspaper and slid it out of the window in the side of the cabin. The opening was just big enough to take the bag, end on. It fell from view behind the bulk of the cabin.

Two hours later the five rich travellers watched the Swiss ambulance as it drove Costin away to the morgue in Zermatt. Statements had been taken by the police. They were all the same. Five independent witnesses vouched for the terrible death which had struck the man when he slipped and fell in the cable car. No, they did not know him or each other. There had been nothing they could do. There was nothing else to relate.

They looked at each other, nodded farewell, smiled, and walked away.