

Chapter 2

SWITZERLAND

Happiness Is Boredom

The first Swiss people I ever met pissed me off like nobody's business. I know what you're thinking. The Swiss? The nice, neutral, army-knife-toting, watch-wearing, chocolate-eating Swiss? Yes, those Swiss.

It was the late 1980s, and I was in Tanzania. My girlfriend and I were on a safari. We were doing it on the cheap, along with four other budget travelers: two easygoing Norwegians and a quiet Swiss couple.

Our driver was a Tanzanian named Good Luck. We thought this was fortuitous. Only later did we learn that his name represented a wish and not a point of fact. But by then it was too late, and things started to go terribly wrong. First, a truck kicked up a rock that came crashing through our windshield, shattering it. Nobody was hurt, but we spent the next two days stopping in every village in Tanzania looking, in vain, for a replacement. Then came the rain, even though it wasn't the rainy season. My girlfriend and I managed to set up our tent, but a few minutes later it collapsed, leaving us drenched, muddy, and miserable. The Norwegians' tent was barely hanging on.

But the Swiss? Their tent was geodesic and as sturdy as the Matterhorn. Unflustered by the driving rain and strong winds, it kept them warm and dry. I bet they were sipping hot chocolate in there. Damn them, I thought at the time, damn the efficient, competent Swiss to hell.

This memory is fresh in my mind as the train from Rotterdam passes through Germany and into Switzerland. I am here for a reason, and that reason doesn't involve revenge, I swear. The Swiss, it turns out, occupy a place near the pinnacle of Ruut Veenhoven's happiness pyramid. Prime real estate. Yes, the Swiss are on to something—the happy, happy bastards.

My train is eighteen minutes late, causing mass consternation in Basel, the border city where I am supposed to catch the train to Geneva. Schedules are thrown into disarray. Passengers, myself included, scramble off the slightly late German train and run to catch our perfectly on-time Swiss train. Amazing, I think, huffing and puffing up a flight of stairs, only the Swiss could make the Germans look sloppy.

Okay, so the stereotype is true. Switzerland is efficient and punctual. Also wealthy and with hardly any unemployment. And, oh, the air is clean. The streets are nearly spotless. And don't forget the chocolate, which is delicious and plentiful. But happy? I saw no joy on the faces of the well-tented Swiss couple in Africa. Only quiet satisfaction, tinged with just a trace of smugness.

To solve this mystery, we turn once again to those dead, white, and unhappy philosophers. None was less happy than Arthur Schopenhauer. If happiness is indeed the absence of misery, as he believed, then the Swiss have every reason to be happy. But if happiness is more than that, if happiness requires an element of joy, then Swiss happiness remains a mystery as deep and dark as a slab of Lindt chocolate.

Why should the Swiss consistently rank higher on the happiness charts than the Italians and the French, two countries that possess oodles of *joie de vivre*? Heck, the French practically invented *joie de vivre*.

All of this is rattling around inside my head as my taxi pulls up to my friend Susan's apartment in Geneva. Susan is a writer from New York. She is a woman who speaks her mind, in English and French. Her candor is constantly bumping up against the Swiss reserve. Susan complains that the Swiss are "culturally

constipated" and "stingy with information." Even if that information is vital, such as "your train is leaving now" or "your clothing is on fire," the Swiss will say nothing. To speak out would be considered insulting, since it assumes ignorance on the part of the other person.

Susan's in-your-face New York ways do not always endear her to Geneva's diplomatic corps—thousands of well-meaning men and women who fret full-time about the world's problems. They do their fretting well dressed and, whenever possible, over lunch. Or, if extreme fretting is required, at conferences. Europeans love conferences. Get three Europeans together, and chances are quite high a conference will break out. All that's needed are those little name tags and many, many gallons of Perrier.

Geneva has been called a great place to live, but you wouldn't want to visit. There is some truth to that. The Swiss consider Geneva boring, and if the Swiss consider someplace boring, you know it is very boring indeed. It doesn't seem that way to me, though. Susan's apartment overlooks a warren of narrow streets and alleys. Geneva, like most European cities, is built on a human scale, and that makes it intrinsically interesting.

Even Susan isn't all negative. She finds aspects of life here endearing—the civil-mindedness, for instance. The way you'll be riding the bus, and there will be this teenage boy with a Mohawk and combat boots, looking like trouble, who will politely offer his seat to an older woman. "In New York, nobody would move," says Susan, amazed.

I unpack my bags. I have, of course, brought along my Swiss army knife. Mine is an old-fashioned model—these days, they come with flash drives—and I love it. I take it everywhere. If only every army in the world was best known for something like the Swiss army knife. As far as I know, no wars have been waged with Swiss army knives, no international commissions established to discuss their dangerous proliferation.

Spring in this part of Europe arrives late but with a delightful vengeance. Almost instantly, at the first hint of warmth, people

begin to disrobe, and before long the Speedos are in full bloom along Lake Geneva. It is indeed a gorgeous day, so Susan and I do the only sensible European thing: We head for a café.

Susan has arranged for me to meet some real-live Swiss. We commandeer a large table and settle in, the way Europeans do, as if we're not merely having a few drinks but moving in for a few months. Beers are ordered, cigarettes lit, cheeks pecked.

At our table is an eclectic bunch. There's Tony, a wealthy banker who describes himself as "culturally English but geographically Swiss." I think but don't say, "What the hell does that mean?" By that measure, I, too, am geographically Swiss since, geographically speaking, I am in Switzerland at the moment. Then there's Dieter, who is Swiss, geographically and in every other sense. He's a doctor, with an abundance of hair and self-confidence. Next to him is his American wife, Caitlin, a former Hollywood agent who has lived in Switzerland for the past ten years. I notice that she is the only one at the table with a BlackBerry, which she thumbs nervously during lulls in the conversation.

Everyone is surprised that my research has taken me to Switzerland. The Swiss happy? There must be some mistake. No, I insist, that's what a Dutchman who looks like Robin Williams told me. And he has studies to back it up, too. I take an informal poll around the table. Overall, how happy are you these days? The results are in: solid eights and nines all around, and a seven from the American. The Swiss at the table look surprised, as if they're thinking, "Hmmm. Maybe we *are* happy. Who knew?"

"So, now that we've determined you are indeed happy, what is the source of Swiss happiness?" I ask.

"Cleanliness," says Dieter. "Have you seen our public toilets? They are very clean." At first, I think he's joking but quickly rule out that possibility, since the Swiss do not joke. About anything. Ever.

He's right. Swiss toilets are indeed clean. I wonder if Ruut Veenhoven and his colleagues have done any studies correlating a nation's happiness and the cleanliness of its toilets. I bet the results would be enlightening.

Not only are the toilets clean in Switzerland, everything else is, too. In some countries, it would be suicidal to drink the tap water. In Switzerland, it is fashionable to do so. Zurich even boasts about the quality of its tap water to tourists.

There are no potholes on Swiss roads. Everything works. Switzerland is a highly functional society, and while that may not be a source of joy or even happiness, it eliminates a lot of the reasons to be unhappy.

So appealing is the image of Switzerland as an affluent, clean, and well-run society that other countries fancy themselves the Switzerland of their particular region. Singapore is the Switzerland of Asia, Costa Rica the Switzerland of Central America. But here I am in what can rightfully be called the Switzerland of Europe. The real deal.

Sometimes, though, even the real deal falls short of its own expectations. Sometimes things don't work so well in Switzerland. Dieter tells me that "if a train is twenty minutes late, people get very anxious." A few years ago, he says, the entire rail system broke down for eighteen hours, hurling the nation into a period of deep existential doubt.

"So what is your source of happiness besides the clean toilets and on-time trains?"

"Envy."

"That's why you're happy?"

No, he explains, the Swiss are happy because they go to great lengths not to provoke envy in others. The Swiss know instinctively that envy is the great enemy of happiness, and they will do anything to squash it. "Our attitude," says Dieter, taking a sip of beer, "is don't shine the spotlight too brightly on yourself or you might get shot."

The Swiss hate to talk about money. They would rather talk about their genital warts than reveal how much they earn. I met a few Swiss people who couldn't even bring themselves to use the "m" word; they would just rub their fingers together to indicate they're talking about money. At first, this struck me as odd, given

that Switzerland's economy is based on banking—a profession that, last time I checked, had something to do with money. But the Swiss know that money, more than anything else, triggers envy.

The American way is: If you've got it, flaunt it. The Swiss way is: If you've got it, hide it. One Swiss person told me, "You don't dress or act like you're rich. Of course, you might have a four-thousand-dollar espresso machine in your apartment."

I ask Dieter why the subterfuge.

A rich Swiss person, he explains, doesn't show off his money because he doesn't have to. Everyone knows he's rich, because the Swiss know everything about their neighbors. In fact, if a rich person suddenly starts flashing his money around—buying a fancy new car, for instance—people suspect something is amiss, that he's facing some financial trouble.

In America, the worst thing you can be is a loser. In Switzerland, the worst thing you can be is a flashy winner, *nouveau riche*. "Dreadful thing," one Swiss person told me of the newly monied, as if he were talking about some terrible disease.

The philosopher Martin Heidegger once defined boredom as "the hot breath of nothingness on our necks." In Switzerland that hot breath is pervasive. It's in the air. The Swiss have done for boredom what the French did for wine and the Germans for beer: perfected it, mass-produced it.

The Swiss live attenuated lives. They hum along, satisfied, never dipping below a certain floor but never touching the ceiling, either. A Swiss would never describe something as awesome or super, but only *c'est pas mal*, not bad. Is that the secret to happiness, a life that is *c'est pas mal*? Or perhaps the Swiss really do find many aspects of life awesome but know on some subconscious level that such superlatives diminish the experience. Describe something as awesome, and it ceases to be so.

Happiness researchers have found that, from a statistical point

of view, the Swiss are on to something. Better to live in this middle range than to constantly swing between great highs and terrible lows.

No one knows more about Swiss boredom than Jonathan Steinberg, an academic who has spent his entire career studying Switzerland. When he announced to his students that he would be devoting a lecture to the Swiss civil war, half the class got up and left, leading Steinberg to the depressing conclusion that "even a civil war, if it takes place in Switzerland, must be boring."

Not only boring but humorless. Maybe I'm wrong. Maybe Swiss humor operates at an entirely different frequency, undetectable to my non-Swiss ears. And so, with this open-minded attitude, I ask Dieter—diplomatically, of course—if it's true that the Swiss have no sense of humor.

"Define sense of humor," he responds instantly, thus sealing the case.

Swiss humorlessness has a long and serious history. One academic tells me that in the seventeenth century in Basel, there was actually a prohibition on public laughter. There is no longer such a law, of course. That's because there is no need for it. Swiss humorlessness, like most aspects of life here, is self-policing.

The Swiss are as fond of rules as the Dutch are of marijuana and prostitution. In many parts of Switzerland, you can't mow your lawn or shake your carpets on Sunday. You can't hang laundry from your balcony on any day. You can't flush your toilet after 10:00 p.m.

I met a British woman living in Switzerland who has repeatedly run afoul of Swiss rules. Like the time she came home from working the late shift and shared a few laughs and a few beers with some colleagues. Nothing raucous, just your usual after-work decompression. The next day, she found a note pinned to her door. "Please," it said, "no laughing after midnight."

Leave your car dirty in Switzerland and someone will pin a note to it saying "Please wash your car." Not a cute "Wash me"

sign that an American might scrawl on it. The Swiss, lacking any detectable sense of irony, mean what they say. Sort your trash improperly, and some nosy neighbor will find the offending item and return it to your doorstep with a curt note attached. This isn't just a nanny state. It's a supernanny state.

Everything is regimented in Switzerland, even anarchy. Once a year, on the May Day holiday, the anarchists break a few shop windows, but it's always exactly at the same time. As one Swiss person quipped, in a rare display of humor, "Yes, we have anarchy. It's in the afternoon."

Let's tally what we have so far. The Swiss are a humorless, uptight nation. Everything works, usually, and envy is squelched, but at a cost: You're always being watched, monitored, judged. Where's the bliss?

"It's simple," says Dieter. "Nature. We Swiss have a very deep connection to nature." I am surprised, not so much by the statement, which I've heard mouthed by many a tree hugger and even by myself on occasion, but by who is saying it. Dieter is about as urbane a city dweller as you'll find, not a crunchy bone in his body.

He's right, though. A Swiss person, no matter how cosmopolitan and seemingly removed from his natural surroundings, never loses his love of the land. Even billionaires in Switzerland see themselves as mountaineers at heart.

You can't understand the Swiss without visiting the Alps, Dieter tells me. So I go.

Susan and I arrive in the kitschy Alpine town of Zermatt. Recorded greetings welcome us in Japanese and four other languages. Little electric cars zip around town. Regular cars are banned, an environmental regulation that the Swiss gladly accept to protect their beloved Alps.

We take a cable car to the top of a mountain adjacent to the famous Matterhorn. It's still ski season, and everyone (except us)

is decked out in fashionable ski attire. It's an older crowd, their skin leathery and monied.

The most sublime aspect of this mountainous terrain, I realize as we coast upward, is the light. The hue and intensity is fluid, constantly shifting as the sun ducks in and out of the peaks. The nineteenth-century Italian painter Giovanni Segantini once said that people of the mountains see the sun rise and set as a golden fireball, full of life and energy, while flatlanders know only a tired and drunk sun.

Finally, we reach the peak: 12,763 feet. A sign informs us that this is "Europe's highest mountaintop accessible by cable car." The qualification somehow deflates our sense of adventure. It's snowing lightly. There's a wooden crucifix, which strikes me as odd in such a secular country. Underneath are three words: "Be more human."

A sense of calm sneaks up on me, a feeling so unusual that, at first, I am startled by it. I don't recognize it. But there's no denying its presence. I am at peace.

The naturalist E. O. Wilson gave a name to this warm, fuzzy feeling I'm experiencing: biophilia. He defined it as "the innately emotional affiliation of human beings to other living organisms." Wilson argued that our connection to nature is deeply ingrained in our evolutionary past. That connection isn't always positive. Take snakes, for instance. The chances of encountering a snake, let alone dying from a snakebite, are extraordinarily remote. Yet modern humans continue to fear snakes even more, studies have found, than car accidents or homicide or any of the dozens of other more plausible ways we might meet our demise. The fear of snakes resides deep in our primitive brain. The fear of the Long Island Expressway, while not insignificant, was added much more recently.

Conversely, the biophilia hypothesis, as Wilson calls it, also explains why we find natural settings so peaceful. It's in our genes. That's why, each year, more people visit zoos than attend all sporting events combined.

In 1984, a psychologist named Roger Ulrich studied patients recuperating from gallbladder surgery at a Pennsylvania hospital. Some patients were assigned to a room overlooking a small strand of deciduous trees. Others were assigned to rooms that overlooked a brick wall. Ulrich describes the results: "Patients with the natural window view had shorter post-operative hospital stays, had fewer negative comments in nurses' notes...and tended to have lower scores for minor post-surgical complications such as persistent headache or nausea requiring medication. Moreover, the wall-view patients required many more injections of potent painkillers."

The implications of this obscure study are enormous. Proximity to nature doesn't just give us a warm, fuzzy feeling. It affects our physiology in real, measurable ways. It's not a giant leap to conclude that proximity to nature makes us happier. That's why even the most no-nonsense office building includes a park or atrium (in the belief, no doubt, that a happy worker is a productive one).

The biophilia hypothesis is not your run-of-the-mill Berkeley/Al Gore/Eat Your Spinach environmentalism. It does not appeal directly to our sense of stewardship or responsibility. It appeals to a much more base, and common, human proclivity: selfishness. It says, in effect, protect the environment because it will make you happy. For a country like the United States, with the word "happiness" in its founding document, you'd think environmentalists would have latched on to biophilia a long time ago.

I've certainly latched on to it. I feel like I'm floating above the valley below. I read another sign: "Great are the works of the Lord," it says, and I nod my head in silent agreement. I feel pleasantly light-headed and imagine a melodic chirping sound. Am I having a transcendental experience?

No, it's Susan's cellphone, announcing that a text message has arrived. Europe's highest peak accessible by cable car is also, it turns out, accessible by cellphone. My moment of bliss evaporates like snowcaps in July.

Back in Zermatt, I ponder what happened to me up there. One

rational explanation is hypoxia, a lack of oxygen. It can lead to many symptoms (including death, the ultimate symptom), but one of the more common is a sense of euphoria.

It also, I discover, leads to hunger. Susan decides I need a fondue experience. The last time I heard the word "fondue," or thought about it in any way, was 1978. My mother owned a fondue set. I can picture it clearly. It was a sickly orange color, with little indentations for tiny forks. It sat in our dining room for years like some museum piece. I don't remember anyone ever using it.

Our fondue comes in a large bowl, not orange, and it's good. After a few helpings, the euphoria is gone, but I'm feeling, I think, very Swiss. Satisfied. Neutral. Maybe this explains Swiss neutrality. Maybe it's not based on a deep-seated morality but a more practical reason. Fondue and war don't mix.

Back in Geneva, Susan introduces me to Jalil, a young Swiss guy who is in a band. We're drinking wine. His English is a bit rough, so his American girlfriend, a bittersweet blonde from Minnesota, translates. Her name is Anna. She is sweet when sober, but a raw bitterness emerges when she drinks, which I gather is fairly often.

"Why are the Swiss so happy?" I ask Jalil.

"Because we know we can always kill ourselves," he says with a laugh, but he's not joking. Switzerland has one of the world's most liberal euthanasia laws. People travel from all over Europe to die here.

The strangeness of it all sinks in. In Switzerland, it's illegal to flush your toilet past 10:00 p.m. or mow your lawn on Sunday, but it's perfectly legal to kill yourself.

When I told friends I was going to Switzerland as part of my research into happiness, some people replied, "Don't they have a high suicide rate?" Yes, they do, one of the highest in the world. This seems to make absolutely no sense. How can a happy country have a high suicide rate? In fact, it's easily explained. First of all, the number of suicides is still statistically low, so it doesn't affect

the happiness surveys very much, since the odds of the researchers interviewing a suicidal person are quite low. But there's another reason. The things that prevent us from killing ourselves are different from those that make us happy. Roman Catholic countries, for instance, tend to have very low suicide rates because of the Catholic prohibition on suicide. Yet that doesn't mean these countries are happy. Good government, meaningful work, strong family ties—these are all major contributors to happiness, yet if you are unhappy, truly despondent, none of them will prevent you from committing suicide.

Part of the problem, perhaps, is that being surrounded by happy people can be a real bummer sometimes. Franz Hohler, a well-known Swiss author, told me: "If I'm not happy, I think, 'Shit, all of this beauty, all this functionality, why the hell am I not happy? What's wrong with me?'"

Every country has its cocktail-party question. A simple one-sentence query, the answer to which unlocks a motherlode of information about the person you've just met. In the United States that question is, What do you do? In Britain it is, What school did you attend? In Switzerland it is, Where are you from? That is all you need to know about someone.

The Swiss are deeply rooted in place. Their passports list the name of their ancestral town. Not their hometown but the town of their roots. Maybe they weren't born there. Maybe they've never even been there. But it is their home. It's said that the Swiss only become Swiss upon leaving the country. Until then, they are Genevans or Zurichers, or otherwise defined by wherever they happen to come from.

No wonder it was the Swiss who invented the modern concept of homesickness; they were the first to put a word, "*heimweh*," to that nagging feeling of dislocation, that feeling of loss we experience when uprooted from the place we call home.

I wonder: Is all happiness, like all politics, local? I'm not sure.

But clearly the Swiss focus on the local makes people feel grounded. There are downsides, though, to this hyperlocalness. As Jonathan Steinberg puts it: "There's an awful lot of ignorance about what goes on next door." That's not surprising in a country with four official languages. Or, as a Swiss friend told me, "We Swiss get along so well because we don't understand each other."

Maybe, but they do trust one another. I was able to book a hotel room without providing my credit-card number. I pumped gas without paying first. A lot of Switzerland works on the honor system, like the little rest huts that dot the Alps. There's food inside. You eat the food and leave some money behind.

John Helliwell, a Canadian economist, has spent many years studying the relationship between trust and happiness. He's found the two to be inseparable. "You can't feel properly engaged if you don't trust the people you engage with on a regular basis. Engagement breeds trust; trust supports engagement. It's a two-way flow; both parts are critical."

Or consider this statement: "In general, people can be trusted." Studies have found that people who agree with this are happier than those who do not. Trusting your neighbors is especially important. Simply knowing them can make a real difference in your quality of life. One study found that, of all the factors that affect the crime rate for a given area, the one that made the biggest difference was not the number of police patrols or anything like that but, rather, how many people you know within a fifteen-minute walk of your house.

I'm in love. The object of my amour is not a woman or even a person. It is the Swiss rail network. I love it. I love the way the trains are whisper-quiet and the way the sliding glass doors between cars open and close so gracefully. I love the way jacketed attendants come around with fresh coffee and croissants, and the dining cars with their gourmet meals served on real china. I love the wood paneling in the bathrooms. I love the leather seats. I

love how when it's time to disembark little platforms miraculously appear under your feet. I am, in fact, overwhelmed with the urge to stay on the Swiss trains forever, shuttling among Geneva and Basel and Zurich and wherever. It doesn't really matter. I could be happy here, on the Swiss trains.

But I don't stay on the train forever. I get off in Bern, the sleepy Swiss capital. It is as Anna, a bittersweet American, described it: quaint in the extreme. Yes, there is such a thing as too quaint, I think, as I walk around the old walled city. Then I see that someone has written on a wall: "Fuck the police." That is not quaint. Anyplace else, I'd find it offensive, disturbing. But in Switzerland I'm just glad to see signs of life.

I visit the Swiss parliament building, a building that manages to be grand and ornate yet at the same time understated. Every nation has its iconic figures, statues that neatly sum up what the nation is all about: the Marines hoisting the flag at Iwo Jima; Lord Nelson, looking regal, in London's Trafalgar Square. The Swiss have someone known as Nicholas the Reconciler. His statue is on display here. He has an arm outstretched, palm facing downward, as if to say, "Calm down, everyone; let's talk about this rationally." It's very Swiss.

Albert Einstein lived in Bern. This is the city where, he says, he had "the happiest thought of my life." That thought was the revelation that led to his Special Theory of Relativity. The place was a modest apartment on the city's main shopping street. It's now a small museum. It's been restored to exactly the way it looked when Einstein lived here: a sofa, wooden chairs, a bottle of wine labeled 1893, the carriage for his son Hans, the suit he wore to his job as a clerk at the patent office. There are also several black-and-white photos of a young Einstein, before his hair went wild, posing with his family. His wife and son are looking into the camera, but Einstein, in every photo, is looking off into the distance. Was he ruminating about energy and mass? Or was he thinking, "I've got to get out of this marriage"? (which he eventually did).

I open the French windows, crane my neck, and look down

the street. Except for a few cars, the scene is, I imagine, virtually unchanged from 1905. I close my eyes for a few seconds, then open them again, half believing that I might be transported back in time. Einstein, after all, proved that such a thing is theoretically possible.

Somebody lives upstairs from Einstein's old apartment. A graphic designer. Living in the same building where Einstein lived! At first, I think that would be wonderful. A real thrill. Then, I realize, the pressure would be enormous. Every time I climbed the stairs—the very same stairs Einstein climbed—I'd be disappointed if I didn't come up with something like $E = mc^2$. No, not for me.

Einstein, like myself, found Bern pleasant but boring. And so I wonder: If the Swiss were more interesting, might he never have daydreamed as much as he did? Might he never have developed the Special Theory of Relativity? In other words, is there something to be said for boredom?

The British philosopher Bertrand Russell thought so. "A certain amount of boredom is... essential to a happy life," he wrote. Maybe I've misjudged the Swiss. Maybe they know something about boredom and happiness that the rest of us don't.

Patience and boredom are closely related. Boredom, a certain kind of boredom, is really impatience. You don't like the way things are, they aren't interesting enough for you, so you decide—and boredom is a decision—that you are bored.

Russell had something to say about this: "A generation that cannot endure boredom will be a generation of little men, of men unduly divorced from the slow process of nature, of men in whom every vital impulse slowly withers as though they were cut flowers in a vase."

I'm beginning to think that perhaps the Swiss aren't boring after all. They just appear that way from the outside.

I'm reunited with my love. I'm back on a Swiss train. My next stop is Zurich, a city so clean it makes Geneva look like a slum. I check into my hotel and then have some time to kill. I take a small train to

a nearby hilltop. Zurich's public transportation works on the honor system, except that undercover wardens travel the trains, too, and bust people who don't have a ticket. Trust but verify. That's what's happening on my small train. A middle-aged man is being interrogated. He's clearly trying to explain his way out of it. He looks ashen, not with fear but embarrassment. I realize it's not the fine that deters free riders but the public humiliation of getting caught.

On the hilltop, the entire city of Zurich is spread below, like in a Renaissance painting. I feel safe up here, and it occurs to me that maybe that's why we like hilltop terrain. Maybe it goes back to our days as chimps swinging from the trees. From a high vantage point, you could see any potential danger and therefore relax if none was spotted.

It's a beautiful day, the sky a deep blue, the visibility endless. People have brought their lunches and are indulging in impromptu picnics. I see an old man and a woman sitting on a park bench. He's wearing an Italian driving hat and is sitting motionless. Nearby, a woman is walking her two dogs. They are nipping at each other's heels and smiling, I swear. They're not on leashes but don't attempt to run off. They are Swiss dogs.

Well, this is all very nice, I think, but I better get going. It's the kind of thought I'm constantly having and usually don't think twice about, except this time I stop myself cold. And where exactly must you be going? It's 3:00 p.m. on a beautiful spring day in Switzerland. I have no one to see, nowhere to be.

British academic Avner Offer wrote that "affluence breeds impatience and impatience undermines well being." He's right. You don't see many impatient poor people. (They are unhappy for other reasons. More about that later.) And then it dawns on me. The Swiss are wealthy *and* patient, a rare combination. They know how to linger. Indeed, I've been in Switzerland for two weeks now and not a single person has looked at his or her watch—that perfectly synchronized, gold-plated Swiss watch—and said "I have to go" or "I really should be getting back to work." In fact, it is always me, the loafing writer, who is stealing glances at my fifty-dollar Seiko.

With the help of a friend, I had set up a blog to solicit comments from the Swiss about happiness. One in particular caught my eye, and I'm reminded of it now.

"Maybe happiness is this: not feeling like you should be elsewhere, doing something else, being someone else. Maybe the current conditions in Switzerland... make it simply easier to 'be' and therefore 'be happy.'"

So I sit on that hilltop for another twenty minutes. I fidget the entire time. It practically kills me. But I make it without going insane. I consider that a minor breakthrough.

It dawns on me how very un-Swiss I am, and on so many levels. I don't like rules. I am not neat. I am prone to wild mood swings. I do not have any old money, unless you count that crumpled ten-dollar bill in my wallet that I think was printed back in 1981. The one thing we do have in common, the Swiss and I, is our love of chocolate. This is not an insignificant commonality. The Swiss consume mass quantities of chocolate, and there is some credible evidence that chocolate makes us happier.

In order to investigate this link, I visit a chocolate store. It reminds me of an art gallery, an edible art gallery. The clerks lift the truffles with tongs, as if they were handling some rare and precious jewels. There is an entire wall of chocolate, with every type imaginable. Chocolate made with cocoa from Colombia and Ecuador and Madagascar. Chocolate laced with orange and raspberry and pistachio and raisins and cognac and rum and pure malt whiskey. I buy one of each and take them back to my hotel room, feeling quite literally like a kid in a candy store. I lock the door and spread my catch on the comforter. I bite into the Madagascar, and it is good—there is no such thing as bad Swiss chocolate.

But, as I said, this is not mere indulgence. This is research. Scientists have isolated the chemical in chocolate that makes us feel good. Actually, there are several chemicals involved. Tryptophan is what the brain uses to make the neurotransmitter serotonin. High

levels of serotonin can produce feelings of elation, even ecstasy. Then there is something called anandamide. It's a neurotransmitter that targets the same regions of the brain as THC, the active ingredient in marijuana. But this chocolate-as-marijuana theory remains just that, a theory, since according to a BBC article on the subject, "experts estimate you would need to eat several kilos of chocolate" in order to feel this effect. Several kilos, huh? What is that in pounds, I wonder, as I get busy with the chocolate spread before me like a banquet.

The relationship between choice and happiness is tricky, and nowhere more so than in Switzerland. We think of choice as desirable, something that makes us happy. That is usually true but not always. As Barry Schwartz has shown convincingly in his book *The Paradox of Choice*, there is such a thing as too much choice. Faced with a surplus of options (especially meaningless ones), we get confused, overwhelmed, less happy.

On the one hand, the Swiss have more choices than any other people on the planet, and not just when it comes to chocolate. Their system of direct democracy means that the Swiss are constantly voting on issues large and small: whether to join the United Nations, whether to ban absinthe. The average Swiss person votes six or seven times a year. The Swiss believe that anything worth doing is worth doing seriously. And so it is with voting. At one point, the Swiss actually voted to increase their own taxes. I can't imagine American voters doing the same.

The system of direct democracy is not perfect. It is truly a democracy of the people, and sometimes the people can be complete morons. For instance, the Swiss didn't give women the right to vote until 1971—in one canton, or state, not until 1991.

Still, Canadian happiness researcher John Helliwell believes that quality of government is the single most important variable that explains why some countries are happier than others. Another researcher, a Swiss economist named Bruno Frey, examined

the relationship between democracy and happiness across Switzerland's twenty-six cantons. He found that the cantons with the greatest number of referendums, the most democracy, were also the happiest. Even foreigners living in those cantons were happier, though they couldn't vote. (Their happiness boost, though, was not as great as the voters'.)

Okay, so it seems that the Swiss like choices. Then how to explain the results of an ingenious little experiment by psychologist Paul Rozin of the University of Pennsylvania. He asked a cross-section of people from six countries (the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Italy, and Switzerland) a simple question: "Imagine that you feel like eating ice cream and that you have the choice between two ice-cream parlors. One offers a choice of ten flavors. The other offers a selection of fifty flavors. Which ice-cream parlor would you choose?"

In only one country, the United States, did a majority (56 percent) of respondents prefer the ice-cream parlor with fifty flavors. The Swiss were on the other end of the spectrum. Only 28 percent preferred the ice-cream parlor with more choices. Choice translates into happiness only when choice is about something that matters. Voting matters. Ice cream matters, too, but fifty flavors of it do not.

On a train again. This time my destination is Saint-Ursanne, which I was told was a "middle-aged town." When I heard this, I imagined an entire town filled with balding, overweight men driving red sports cars. In fact, the Swiss person on the other end of the line had meant a medieval town, as in from the Middle Ages.

His name is Andreas Gross, and everyone said he is someone I should meet. He is a member of the Swiss parliament and a big proponent of direct democracy. He travels the world espousing its virtues. He's most famous, though, for a ballot initiative he brought forth in 1989. Gross wanted to abolish the Swiss army, just get rid of it. Nobody thought the initiative would get more than a tiny number of votes. In fact, 35 percent voted for it. The

Swiss were shocked. The initiative shook up the establishment, and the Swiss army today is half the size it was in 1989.

I go to the dining car. This is not Amtrak. The menu, in four languages, informs me of my choices: penne with fresh mushrooms or a risotto with fresh asparagus. I am in heaven.

The train crosses the linguistic dividing line between German- and French-speaking Switzerland, and I transition seamlessly from Caveman French to Caveman German: "Me want coffee. You have?" The Swiss translate everything into at least three languages. This means that even the simplest sign takes up lots of real estate. I see one that says "Danger: Do Not Cross the Railroad Tracks." By the time you get to the English, at the bottom of the linguistic pyramid, you could be electrocuted.

We arrive in Saint-Ursanne, and Andreas Gross is there to meet me. He's wearing jeans and has a fuzzy salt-and-pepper beard and just the hint of a gut. He looks more like an aging hippie than a distinguished parliamentarian. We head to his institute, which is really just a converted old house.

Andreas makes me a cup of espresso—Italy's contribution to happiness—and we sit down to talk. It quickly becomes apparent that Andreas is not too keen on this whole happiness business. It's not serious enough for him. He wants to talk about direct democracy and plenary sessions, serious Swiss subjects. He quotes Rousseau and says things like, "I would like the Swiss to be more like the Swiss they think they are." I have no idea what he's talking about.

He tells me how Switzerland cares so much about its environment that it's about to spend the equivalent of twenty billion dollars to dig a huge tunnel under the Alps. Trucks that want to cross the country will be put on trains and transported literally through the mountains. He tells me that "human rights are the child of war. All of humanity's great advances have come through war." The Swiss haven't fought a war since 1848.

"So I guess the Swiss need to fight more wars," I say.

"No, no, no," he says, missing my dry humor, as I knew he would. "We need to find other ways to promote human rights."

We talk some more, about postmodernism and democracy and neutrality, before circling back to where I began my Swiss adventure: clean toilets. Andreas, like Dieter, is very fond of them. "Even the tiniest rail station has a clean toilet," he says proudly.

We continue our conversation as Andreas drives me to the train station. We arrive early, and it's raining outside. The air smells sweet. We sit in his musty old Saab and talk awhile longer. He tells me how he once met an aging American activist, an old-timer, a 1960s diehard, a union organizer who went to Nicaragua and stood shoulder to shoulder with the Sandinistas.

The old-timer was impressed with Andreas's idealism and complained that American youth have lost their rebellious spark. Nothing anyone does seems to make a difference in the United States.

"Why don't you fight for proportional representation?" Andreas asked him.

"I don't have time for such procedural stuff," the old-timer snapped.

"So you want to bang your head against concrete for another twenty years?" retorted Andreas.

For Andreas, the problem isn't the banging but the concrete. Change the system, he believes, one boring procedure at a time. It's a very Swiss approach and, in its own quiet way, admirable. It requires patience and a high tolerance for boredom. The Swiss possess both in spades.

I steal one last look at Andreas Gross. In the United States, I realize, he would be relegated to the angry and inert chatter of a Berkeley coffeehouse; here, he is a distinguished parliamentarian who nearly abolished the entire Swiss army. More proof that the Swiss aren't so boring after all.

As I board one more train, the train that will take me out of Switzerland, a sudden twinge of sadness sneaks up on me. I'll miss this place. The Swiss don't piss me off anymore.

But are they happy? Content seems more like it. No, content

isn't quite right, either. Words fail me. We have far more words to describe unpleasant emotional states than pleasant ones. (And this is the case with all languages, not just English.) If we're not happy, we have a smorgasbord of words to choose from. We can say we're feeling down, blue, miserable, sullen, gloomy, dejected, morose, despondent, in the dumps, out of sorts, long in the face. But if we're happy that smorgasbord is reduced to the salad bar at Pizza Hut. We might say we're elated or content or blissful. These words, though, don't capture the shades of happiness.

We need a new word to describe Swiss happiness. Something more than mere contentment but less than full-on joy. "Conjoyment," perhaps. Yes, that's what the Swiss possess: utter conjoyment. We could use this word to describe all kinds of situations where we feel joyful yet calm at the same time. Too often when we say we feel joyful, we're really feeling manic. There is a frenetic nature to our joy, a whiff of panic; we're afraid the moment might end abruptly. But then there are other moments when our joy is more solidly grounded. I am not speaking of a transcendental moment, of bliss, but something less, something Swiss.

We might experience conjoyment when we are doing something mundane, like sweeping the floor or sorting our trash or listening to that old Bob Dylan CD we haven't heard in years. Yes, that's it. The Swiss may not be happy, but they sure know how to conjoy themselves.

Chapter 3

BHUTAN

Happiness Is a Policy

There came a time, he realized, when the strangeness of everything made it increasingly difficult to realize the strangeness of anything.

— James Hilton, *Lost Horizon*

The Airbus levels at thirty-seven thousand feet, somewhere over the Himalayas. The cabin lights glow soft and warm. The flight attendants glide down the aisle, gracious and attentive.

I am looking out the window, for I have been advised by Those in the Know that an aisle seat just won't do. Not on this flight.

For a long while I see nothing but a solid blanket of cloud. I am beginning to question the wisdom of Those in the Know when suddenly the clouds are gone, and the mountains reveal themselves. Towering, mesmerizing mountains. The Himalayas make all other mountains look like bunny hills.

People around me are craning their necks, reaching for cameras, ahhhing and oohing. My thoughts, however, are elsewhere. I'm thinking of another airplane and another time. The year is 1933, and this airplane is a rickety propeller plane. It, too, is flying over the Himalayas, not far from where I am now, but the cabin on this plane is cold, the seats hard, the flight attendants nonexistent. The passengers—three Brits and an American—need to shout to make themselves heard over the engine noise. The