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Review for
Writers
Abroad*



That Foreign Feeling

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When I was young, one of my favorite books was *The Little Prince*. I especially liked the moment when the Little Prince realized he could be unique in the world despite the thousands of little boys out there if he just learned to love someone.

But I thought I could be exotic the easy way. Moving 5,000 miles from home to live in Switzerland surely had to make me different and interesting—at least to the locals. After all, as an American, I was taught at a young age that I was special and individual and I knew from watching television that I could become even more so by whitening my teeth and firming up my abs—in the United States, being extra special is only a few monthly installments away.

So I moved to Switzerland with high hopes of impressing the Swiss with my specialness, only to realize that Switzerland has a foreign population of 20% and as an American, I was about as exotic as a cowbell. I was tolerated to help the Swiss economy, but they didn't care about my extra white teeth or my shiny brown hair. Often, I didn't feel very well liked or even acknowledged despite my unique attempts at the German language—which involved speaking entirely in the present tense and trying to maintain at least a 33% score when it came to picking out proper articles.

Unlike the experience of my American mother, who lived in Gabon in the 1960s and tells stories that include all the locals touching her hair and admiring her “foreignness,” most Swiss people can't tell I'm not Swiss until I open my mouth. And they certainly don't care one way or the other about touching my

hair (not that I mind).

Three years after moving to Switzerland I had almost given up the fantasy of feeling foreign— until one day, while hanging out with some linguistically talented Swiss friends at the Sechselaeuten Festival in Zurich, we noticed a couple of guys in lederhosen and didn't want them to be alone. So we invited these mountain men, clad in gold-plated cow suspenders, to join us in celebrating the Swiss tradition of watching a snowman being burned to oblivion.

The lederhosen guys were from Appenzell and had come to the “big city” to transport their horses to the festival. Unlike most of my Swiss friends, they didn't speak English or High German, but that didn't matter. It was part of the allure since most Swiss liked to correct not only my High German, but my English as well. These guys just kissed me.

Through translation, my friends informed me that these men worked on a mountain in the middle of the Alps and did things like milk cows, make cheese, chop wood, and yodel.

The Appenzellers wanted to know where I was from, but “Chicago” got blank stares.

“Obamatown,” I offered.

“She's from the town where Obama lived,” translated my Swiss friend Hans.

Now I was a celebrity, and I wasn't about to waste my fame.

“Can you yodel for me?” I asked, “All Americans—even those of us who have been here awhile—dream about hearing yodeling in Switzerland.”

Before I knew it my request had been translated and the Appenzeller

guys were giving me a private yodeling concert on the steps of the Zurich Opera House.

“It’s like no big deal, they learn to yodel when they’re little,” Hans whispered to me as I filmed them with my digital camera. “And have you noticed that they are short? All guys from Appenzell are short. It’s because of all the incest,” he added.

Shortness and incest aside, I found them beautiful.

When they were finished, I tried to ask if they would mind if I posted a clip of their yodeling on YouTube.

They didn’t understand.

“She wants to put your singing on the Internet,” translated Hans into dialect for them.

We don’t have the Internet, was the reply.

Wow. No Internet. These guys were growing more and more exotic by the minute.

“Please grill some sausages with us, American girl. We’ve never hung out with an American before,” said the dark-haired one shyly.

But my English-speaking Swiss friends were leaving, and suddenly I got scared.

“I’m sorry, but I have to go,” I lied.

As the Appenzeller guys kissed me in parting, the blond one stroked my hair in the process.

I couldn’t wait to tell my mom.

This essay first appeared in Swiss News.