



Switzerland: A Perfectly Scary Place to Call Home

You wouldn't think it to look at it, but Switzerland is a pretty scary place. The streets sparkle hours after Street Parade, the trains are so punctual you miss them, and the people speak four different languages and still somehow understand one another. Is this paradise? Is this perfection? Or is this just plain scary?

By Chantal Panozzo | The laundry room door wouldn't open, even with my key. That's strange, I thought, jiggling the key and trying to turn the knob. Then something stranger happened. A voice from inside said, "Hallo?"

It was the voice of my 75-year-old Swiss neighbor, Rosmarie. She had locked herself in the laundry room: on purpose. I should have known. Because a few weeks ago, she had installed a special alarm on her door in addition to its double locks. She had told me many times that "Switzerland was trashy, dangerous and filled with foreigners" (and although I always try to overlook the foreigner comment, I have never understood her point about the danger or the trash). Locking herself in the laundry room while she washed bed sheets was the next logical

step in her mission to protect herself from all the knife-wielding foreigners who were taking over Switzerland. The problem was that it also shut out the empty-laundry basket types, who wanted nothing to do with crime and everything to do with dry towels.

"It's me," I called, leaning my empty laundry basket against my hip. "It's Chantal."

The door opened a crack as Rosmarie peered out.

"Sorry," she said, flinging the door wide open while repeating her usual line about trash, danger and foreigners. "I don't mean you," she added. She never does.

As Rosmarie hung up her sheets, I started thinking about Switzerland as I attempted to clean out my dryer lint with the tiny brush Rosmarie leaves on top of the 20-year-old dryer to ensure that no matter how old it gets, it always continues to look brand new.

There are very few places in the world that are as shiny and safe as Switzerland, and yet my neighbor is scared to be alone in the basement of our locked building on a Sunday night. I have never, in four years, seen anyone in the basement other than her, my husband, and the spiky-haired teenage coiffeurs from the first-floor salon with whom we share the laundry room. While I find these teenagers scary, it is only because at the age of 15, their destiny is to remain a hairdresser for life thanks to the Swiss education system. However, my neighbor is scared of Switzerland in an "I'm going to be attacked and killed" kind of way.

To be fair, she was once mugged at umbrella-point by the Limmat River.

But to be fairer, I think there are bigger things to fear in Switzerland than umbrella carriers – the main one being the Swiss People’s Party (SVP). These politicians have exaggerated danger and criminalized foreigners in their political advertising and policies (to the point where human rights organizations get involved) and my neighbor’s actions are proof that the SVP’s tactics are working.

That’s too bad.

Because although I think of Switzerland as nice, safe and clean, thanks to the SVP, many Swiss people no longer do. When I witness people, such as my neighbor, living in fear in a country so pristine that the scariest thing is a foreigner, I almost want to laugh. Because when you fly over Zurich in an airplane and look down, you see nothing but tiny houses and manicured rolling hills. And it’s the only country I know of where the perfection seen from 15,000 feet holds true up-close. Zurich has a skyline composed of church steeples, a wide pedestrian street with shops selling thousand-franc coats and three-hundred-franc shoes, and a population that appears to be able to buy every-thing they need – with the exception of a sunny day.

To me, Rosmarie’s fears seem a bit ridiculous, but then again I’m a foreigner and Switzerland itself seems a bit ridiculous. The country is so well taken care of that things often look fake. Trashcans are shiny, benches are bright red and everyone competes for a non-existent gardening award. No one ever arrives late for anything. They speak four different languages but still somehow understand one another. You can ride the bus for years (and eat your lunch off the shiny clean floor) without someone actually checking to see if you bought a ticket. And companies will send you a bill

for anything from stamps to sofas— after they’ve already delivered your goods. How long can this way of life last? Is Switzerland doomed to – heaven forbid – become somewhat normal? Are my neighbor’s fears really a normality that most human beings already know? Or are certain political parties ruining the country for the very people they are trying to protect?

As I’m pondering this, I realize that Rosmarie is standing near me, watching me clean the lint from the dryer. All of a sudden, I’m nervous because I don’t know if I’m doing it to the high standards she expects.

As I wallow in fear, Rosmarie reiterates hers: “I’m going to wait for you, so we can go upstairs together.”

I put down the little brush thinking the dryer couldn’t get any cleaner, but then Rosmarie grabs the brush and proves to me otherwise.

As she finds lint in crevices of the dryer I didn’t know existed, I watch in disbelief, realizing, she’s right. Switzerland is scary. In fact, I think it might be the scariest place I’ve ever lived.