



## The Search for Small Talk

*Homesickness has many guises, but for Chantal, it's the supermarket employees and hairdressers of her homeland she misses the most: or more specifically their conversation. Because while Americans believe nothing is something to talk about, the Swiss seem to prefer to get right down to business.*

By Chantal Panozzo | “What can I bring you?” This is a question from many a thoughtful guest before coming to visit an expat. Suitcases poised and open, they expect answers like Jif Peanut Butter, Mac and Cheese or Oreo cookies. But I want the greeter at Wal-Mart. I want the co-worker who says, “How was your vacation?” I want the cashier who asks me if I’m having a party since I’m buying so much beer. What I want is a pointless exchange. And nowhere is that more guaranteed to happen than in my hometown hair salon in suburban Chicago.

I am wearing a black cape and being pumped skywards in a black pleather chair, and all I can see in the mirror is my big white smile.

“So how many inches will it be today?” asks Mandy, as she holds up my hair.

“I’m thinking five!” I exclaim, the smile still plastered on my face. Act normal, I tell myself.

I am way too happy to be getting a haircut. I mean, a haircut is such an ordinary thing, something I didn’t used to think twice about. But after living in Switzerland, my annual hometown haircut has become an event. Something to cherish.

After all, Mandy is saying inches. A unit I can comprehend in a language that is mine. I almost laugh over the word as Mandy massages my head with shampoo.

As she combs and cuts, we talk.

“You got plans for the weekend?”

“Just time with family!”

“That’s always nice.” “How about you!”

“Oh the usual, friend’s party, bar hopping.”

“Wow! Sounds great!”

Brown ringlets fall to the ground, little half moons decorating the white tiles as we talk about nothing. Nothing. The conversation is wonderful. I consider asking for another inch off so I can stay longer. With conversation this good, I just might go bald.

In Switzerland, I often find myself longing for rapid, empty conversations. Because when people talk in my German-speaking office in Zurich, there’s nothing small about it. Each word is at least fifteen letters long and none of them combine to

ask me about my weekend.

Without small talk, I'm awkward. Naked. My Americanisms shine in all their glory when I begin a meeting with, "So I hear you're going to Geneva today" instead of, "Here are the ads we created for your product."

Saying hello and then immediately presenting work makes me cringe even after three years of doing it. I'd be much more comfortable, if I could at least find out what everyone ate for lunch before launching into business.

During meetings between Herr Thisandthat and Frau Panozzo (wait, that's me), I find myself getting a little nostalgic for my client meetings back in the States. Discussing a client's dog's bout with fleas, I'd think. Those were the days. Now I can't even use first names, never mind anything else that might have an element of personality.

Office walls speak volumes about the kind of conversations that go on within them. The more personal the items on the wall are, the higher the level of personal exchange. In my Zurich office, the only things on the walls are charts and ads. However, in my former office in Virginia, the walls weren't walls – they were shrines. You knew whose kids played soccer, who had a cat, and who just got married, without even asking.

In Switzerland, small talk doesn't only fail to exist in offices, but also in everyday life. Even my Swiss neighbor doesn't waste any time with, "Boy, it's hot out," before launching into her usual tirade about how Baden used to be a nice town, but now it's dangerous, trashy and filled with foreigners. Maybe she'd get through to me better if she commented about the constant fog, before telling me that I'm

part of her world's problems – but maybe weather isn't part of the German vocabulary.

For me, the lack of small talk creates a big emptiness. It took being 5,000 miles from home, for me to realize that inane interactions are an important part of life. I can prepare myself for the other things – like stuffing my suitcase full of Rice-A-Roni to beat cravings for processed food – but some things, like small talk, just can't cross borders.

Thank goodness I can. After stepping off the plane, I give my family a smile.

"Hello, how are you?" I ask in my best small talk. Then I rush out the door in search of a meaningless conversation with a cashier to discuss with rare enthusiasm the possibility of getting 10 per cent off by opening a store-sponsored credit card. And then, I head to that pleather throne, surrounded by the queens of small talk who masquerade as beauty professionals. In this little suburban Chicago salon – more than anywhere else – small talk is larger than life.