

Crossing Borders Writing Contest: What Are You?

“What are you?”

“American.”

“Right, yes, but where are you *from*?”

Sometimes, I offer my name. *Ghoul-yell-mow*. They swish it around in a wine glass, mull it over, decide ultimately that they do not like the Italian scent. They tell me I must be mistaken. Am I sure I’m not Czech? Or Irish, perhaps? What’s your mother’s maiden name?

In Budapest, I told the cab driver that my mother’s name had been *Balazs*. His name was Balazs too, or so it read on the dingy paper slip duct-taped to the dashboard. When I said this, he shook my hand vigorously: “Welcome home, my child. Welcome home.” Fare was half-off for a “local”.

In Bernin, a small village in the French Alps, my host mother sipped at my heritage, deciding ultimately it was too bitter for her taste. Germany, she believed, was a mud-brown and sour beer, while France was the soulful, cherished red wine of a Bohemian artist. “You follow too many rules, *ma puce*. You Germans, you’re all too serious. Go, live life in the moment!”

In Sweden, my sixteen-year-old cousin hunched desperately over a sink, lathering her hair with a mystic brew of newt eyes and fairy blood meant to turn her goldenrod hair white-blonde. *Poof* – the potion was a success! She grinned and twirled in front of the mirror before turning to me: “Geez, how’d I get a cousin with such dark hair? How are you even Swedish?” She tugged at my mousy brown braid. “Ugh, I’m glad *my* dad isn’t Italian. I would literally die if I had dark hair.”

For most of my life, I simply found these comments supremely fascinating. Wherever I travelled, my identity changed along with my location, no matter how much I stayed the same. I treated it like a peculiar sort of game; I knew to be Swedish in France, and Hungarian in Austria, and German in Italy. The ancient nationalities of my grandparents affected these people's perceptions of me more than polished manners or my actual behavior ever could. To me, it was nothing more than situational comedy on par with something out of *Seinfeld* – something to riff on with friends: “Have you ever wondered what airplane food and Germans have in common? Both seem to personally offend the French!”

As I grew older, though, it gradually dawned on me that there were more insidious implications.

In Prague, I browsed a used book stand in a touristy area, but eventually decided to spend my money on chimney cakes instead of overpriced paperbacks. “What are you, a Jew?” the vendor angrily shouted after me as I walked away.

“Yeah, actually.”

“Ah, should have known,” he said, tapping his nose and nodding toward mine. My Nana laughed when I told her this story; she had been baptized Lutheran, but was called “Jew Girl” in school because her nose, like mine, “always gave the truth away”.

On the French coast, where many Italian immigrants are forced to live below the poverty line in decrepit two-room apartments, I know not to mention my last name if I can help it. One bouncer at a club in Marseille checked my passport, and remarked in surprise, “Attends; t'es italienne?” *Wait, you're Italian?* I cautiously responded in the affirmative. *Oh, you're too pretty to be Italian. And clean! Maybe you're really Swiss or something; you know they can have Italian names sometimes.*

In this world of reducing entire nations and peoples to trite stereotypes, I had dementedly learned how to best adapt. Swedes were tall, blond, god-like, humorless; Italians were romantic and idealistic, but dirty and simple; Germans were brutal in their stoicism; Hungarians were at best quaint, like the adorably backwoods cousins of the refined Austrians, and at worst, swarthy and corrupt; and the Jews, dealt perhaps one of the worst hands in human history, were crafty, greedy, villains who maniacally rubbed their hands together as they presided, God-like, over the world order.

Like I said, it's demented, and I'm forever astonished that some people can be so dubious of nuance. As if no fun, short Swedes or well-educated Hungarians exist out of millions. As if America can be comprised of people who aren't morbidly obese gun-slingers with Confederate flags haphazardly taped to the backs of their Dodge pick-ups.

And that, ultimately, is what my international experience has taught me; the great value of nuance, of empathy, of looking past superficial barriers to see the shared humanity. This is a lesson that I've been regurgitating since elementary school, and I'm absolutely sure we've all been beaten over the head with it by our professors and parents, but I'd always assumed that everyone else had been beaten with the same stick. My international experience wasn't one of a singular epiphany prompted by an interaction with someone less fortunate than me; it was the culmination of years of traveling abroad and defending my identity, and the knowledge that there are others out there who have to put up a much more arduous fight.

At the end of the day, the people who lob Anti-Semitic slurs at me will always recede back into the fiery abyss from whence they came. But there are those who must defend the colors of their skin, their religions, their rights to exist in this country (and in others) on what is literally a daily basis. They are forced to live as Exemplary Representations of [*insert minority group*

here] People; they aren't provided the luxury of being able to watch Netflix all day and have no greater accomplishments other than adopting twelve cats, since they are seen as members of a group that must "atone" for negative stereotypes, and not as individuals. This ought to change.

To conclude this long and rambling essay, I just want to urge you (and remind myself) to live in daily understanding of nuance – to view people as individuals, and to not relegate them to preconceived ideas of a proper identity.