

Coming In Loud and Queer

BY JOEL NICHOLS

When I studied abroad in Germany, every day of our intensive language course was followed by a cultural event: a movie, a museum trip, the Audi factory tour, or bratwurst and sauerkraut, and so on. Can you think of anything more damaging for a gay vegetarian than the association of high culture field trips and meat?

The group spent the first few months of the program trying to understand German dialect spoken as quickly as possible by strange little tour guides pointing here and there to show us finials and paintings, Roman burial grounds, the Church treasury and the boys' choir. Needless to say, when I found out that our excursion was to the city palace on a freezing-rain-filled March afternoon, I was not bursting out of my Lederhosen with excitement.

Seeing the tour guide, however, changed my mind. He led us into the courtyard of the palace and introduced himself. Like a Cold War sailor, prepared in his crisp white uniform, a blip on my gaydar screen registered. Captain, I said to myself, we seem to have another sub coming into view. Friend or F.O.D., I'm just not sure.

He was pretty cute and wearing a gray sweater; his small-framed, typical Euro-glasses showed his nice eyes, and his tight jeans his nice Hinten. Immediately taking my ship to full red alert, I turned on the extra special gay-

dar — we're talking a NASA-developed, highly refined system of language, gesture, DNA and brainwave analysis. My internal sensors were on alert for any mention of a "friend", San Francisco, ABBA, and the like.

It became clearer and clearer to me as we made our way through the magnificently furnished rooms that he and I probably both had the same homostamp in our passports. As we got closer and closer to the ballroom, we saw some more "fabulous" paintings and decorations. I then decided I would move to the front of the group as I made my greatest attempt at decoding whether or not the guy was gay. Entering the ballroom he said that it kind of reminded him of *The King and I*. *The King and I!* A musical!

Springing to action (my imagined white sailor's pants wrinkle-less swishing over my deck shoes and my cap tilted slightly to one side,) I moved closer to him and, inconspicuously twirling the earring in my right ear said, "It reminds me more of *My Fair Lady*." He looked at me and smiled.

I had hard evidence. He probably had his gay membership card in the back pocket of those jeans.

The tour was coming to an end and I knew I had to act fast. I wanted a coffee date and knew there was nothing else to do but lie as convincingly as I could.

"I'm doing a project on the palace for my language course and I need to interview some-

one. Would you maybe be available to answer a few questions?"

"Me?" he responded sounding flattered, "Well, I don't know much other than what I told you on the tour, but I'd be happy to as long as the questions aren't too hard."

"Oh, I won't ask anything too hard. Should we meet for coffee this week?"

He ended up having a serious boyfriend, but my coffee date proved that reading into conversations can be helpful when trying to figure out if someone is queer like me. It also helped me meet some other gays in my new city and penetrate its gay life.

A lot can be gleaned from stereotypes, but in Germany at least, you can't tell who is gay and who is not by how they look. Every boy there is skinny and dressed from head to toe in tight black clothing. They all have earrings, suck in their cheeks and like to shake it to Cher. It's not possible to rely on American stereotypes to set off your gaydar. One American living in Europe said to me, "Don't you love it here? At home I feel like such a fag."

I've got to admit, I don't mind feeling gay and being able to look around me and identify others. It was actually part of the reason why I got my right ear pierced, wear a rainbow ribbon on my backpack, and have a rainbow sticker on

my car. I like queer visibility.

A linguist named William Leap has done extensive research on queer language and decoding conversations. One of his books, *The Word's Out*, is full of information about the way gay men use language to out themselves subtly and to send "secret" messages to find out if others are also gay, just like my musical exchange with the tour guide. Of course, even Leap notes that it doesn't always work and that it is highly contingent on the creativity and interpretation of the speakers.

Trying to figure out if one guy might like to play ball with me, I called the Oscars the "Gay Superbowl" after someone had mentioned the straight one. The guy I was talking to didn't understand; Mr. Straightie McStraight unfortunately just stared at me. If only we could create a decoder ring to give to our brothers and sisters born with the want and not the know-how.

We all know that a lot of us don't fit those ridiculous

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stereotypes. My long-haired lez friends complain daily that the "dykes" don't even see them. From the way they bitch about it, you'd think that lipstick and nylons constitute a Harry Potter-esque invisibility cloak; my similarly skirt-wearing friend "Miss" Nika assures me they don't.

So what happens the next time the guy in the Square Mall gives you four parking validation stickers for a \$10 purchase and the middle-aged woman ahead of you only gets 1 stamp for a \$100 purchase? Or when that cute waitress smiles at you a little more as she hands over the latte? I say go with it. Smile back. Make a remark about Judy Garland, Ani DiFranco, or maybe even *Will & Grace*. It never hurts anyone to "drop hairpins" as the old saying goes; that is, to subtly reveal your queerness to people who might be gay, too. After all, without the secret decoder ring, most straights would never get it anyway.

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