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Talking Foreign

by Sue Hitchcock

I always liked to talk to foreigners. What I really mean is, I like them to talk to me, to tell me about their lives and what it is like where they come from. I'm good at asking questions and I seem to understand, even when I don't know their language properly. Maybe I'm telepathic. To me, my life is rather humdrum and the foreign girls at school lived the same life as me, so they don't count.

Maybe I'm gullible, but the stories I heard were so exciting – like the Hungarian with the steel kneecap. He said he was shot by a Russian soldier, when they rolled into Budapest in tanks to put down the anti-communist revolt in 1956.

When I started work I had a Nigerian friend whose life seemed extraordinary to me. Before she married in Nigeria, she had to wrestle the girls in the village her husband came from. Then she had to work in a soap factory for a few weeks to make her skin soft before the wedding. In England her marriage went sour and even though they had five children, she allowed her husband's other woman to move in, and resorted to sleeping on her kitchen table, until the council rehoused her.

Of course, it is a mistake to get too involved. The Algerian boy I wrote to for a year after a holiday romance, decided to visit me at my parents' house. Finding I had gone away with my current boyfriend, he burned all my letters on my parents' windowsill, melting the paint.

The lesson still hadn't been learned even after twenty years of marriage. Three French girls had been funded by a French employment agency to work at the library where I was employed. Two of the girls were complaining that the third was dangerous, mad even. Apparently she had a knife, which she kept under her pillow. I volunteered to take her under my wing and we got on well, with my propensity to enjoy outrageous stories.

Emmanuelle wasn't so outrageous, having the ambition to be an actress and only getting work sporadically. Her most recent job had been at Disneyland, Paris, playing the girlfriend of Asterix. I don't remember now how it came about that the following year she came to stay for a week. We gave her a nice time, but at the end she thought she should stay and it was only reluctantly she abandoned the idea of our adopting her.

I think I have learned my lesson, now enjoying the humdrum routine of my retirement, but my husband had warned me off speaking to strangers at the bus stop.