

The Exchange

I'm sitting at the table, we're having dinner, and I just don't want to eat this Kartoffelsuppe right now. I don't want to do anything right now. My father is telling a stupid joke in my opinion but Dora, his girlfriend, and our dinner guest, his friend, Arno Fellenberg, seem to find it funny. I don't laugh. I'm just staring down on my bowl, while I'm thinking about dogsledding, or more precisely the fact that I'm not going to get to do it soon. Actually I just want to go upstairs and lie on my bed.

And I think about how my problems all began: There was this event in the assembly hall a few months ago. It was all about student exchanges and I actually just went there to get some extra credit points for my English class. I had never thought about doing my schooling anywhere other than Germany. Too expensive, too much effort!

But there were all these former exchange students telling with excitement about their experiences, and there was that girl who had gone to British Columbia in Canada. She told us younger students a whole bunch about her time there but what really fascinated me was when she talked about going with her sports class dogsledding in winter. This was the moment when I decided that I wanted to do that, too. This girl had done her exchange with the organization "Europe x-changes".

So I went to their website and figured out that they offered indeed placements in British Columbia, but when I looked at the price I got a little shock- 16,000€ for one year. My dad told me we could never afford to pay that much.

But I didn't want to give up so early. The girl had also said something about scholarships that I could get. And yes, the organization offered some—two, to be exact. I applied for the one which would cover all the costs of the exchange and spent a whole week, every evening, working on an essay in which I presented myself the best way I could and said why I should get the scholarship. Three months after I sent it in, an answer came saying that unfortunately I wouldn't be given the scholarship. The organization suggested me to apply for the other, the 2,000€-scholarship.

Since that didn't work out, I tried to get into the program of Education brought by Youth (EbbY). This organization only charged half as much money but except for the country you couldn't choose where you'd get to go. I made it successfully into the program but then EbbY told me that there was only a possible placement in Quebec. Seriously, who wants to go to Quebec?

By the time I withdrew from their program, I was really frustrated and also kind of sad. Well, that was last week and now I am not feeling like applying for another program or any more scholarships.

“Don’t you like the soup, Nico?” asks Dora.

“It’s fine,” I say, still staring at it.

“You look as if the soup did something evil to you” says Herr Fellenberg. Another one of these jokes only adults seem to laugh about. Yet, I force myself to make a halfhearted smile.

“He’s just a little depressed,” Dad says and I observe Herr Fellenberg from the corner of my eye. He makes an asking look so my father continues, “Because he can’t go to Canada next year to do a student exchange, you know.”

No, stop it dad! You’re making me mad. Don’t say anything else. You’re making me think about it again and I don’t like that. He doesn’t even care; he just asks to be polite. He’s a politician! They always pretend to care about people but they lie. They only care about themselves and want to make themselves richer. Why did you even invite him for dinner? Old friends from school from 20 years ago? That’s ridiculous. You’ve changed and he is a politician.

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear that.”

No, you’re not!

“Yes,” my dad says “It’s a pity.”

“How comes?” Herr Fellenberg asks.

“Because not everyone has got the money to pay 15,000€ for a student exchange,” I say loudly, in a voice everyone sitting at the table understands to mean I think and I don’t like that the politician could easily afford it. I look up for the first time during the dinner.

My dad gives me a critical look before he says, “Nico really wanted to do this exchange year. But the problem is, Canada is one of the most expensive countries, you know? Schools and families in Canada usually get paid for providing an exchange. The non-profit organizations which don’t do that only have very few spots and even then, it is quite expensive. Nico also applied for scholarships but without success. Well, as a result I honestly can understand why he’s a bit depressed.”

Doesn’t help me, though.

“Well, actually, there might be a chance for Nico to get to experience a Canadian-student exchange,” Herr Fellenberg replies.

I stare at him. I'm curious about what he has to say, but I'm not sure I trust him. Is there actually another possibility of going to Canada, or is he just going to talk my father into something stupid?

"Starting next school year, the ministry of education I work for is going to send two students, one in summer and one in winter, to Canada for three months. What's really good is the fact that since it's already May the first two students are going to get a basically free trip. That's because the ministry did a really bad job promoting its exchange program. As a result, nobody applied. Now it's up to those of us who work there to find students willing to go. If you go, Nico, your job will be to promote this exchange program by writing an essay about it and do some promotion afterwards in your school."

I can't really believe it, yet my anger and bad mood turn slowly into excitement and hope.

"Yes! Dad, let's do it!" I almost shout.

But he doesn't seem convinced.

"I don't know. I thought you wanted to do an entire school year?! And anyway, Arno, what do you mean when you say 'basically free'?"

First, he and I start talking at the same time and you can't understand anything. So I wait politely for Herr Fellenberg to talk. The politician has become human.

"What I mean is that my ministry would pay for the flight and the cost of family placement and all the administrative details but you still would have to pay for his visa and give him monthly pocket money, which could be around two hundred Canadian dollars a month, for example."

I say, "I think we can afford that, it's only like one hundred twenty Euros or so, right? And you wouldn't have to buy food for me, either. You know, dad, I actually wanted to do ten months of student exchange, but I mean if the prices are too high I prefer doing only three months. Especially since it's 'basically' free as Herr Fellenberg said. It's better than not doing an exchange at all."

"Yes, I agree with Nico. That's a good solution. What do you think?" says Dora.

Everyone looks at Dad. Dora is smiling, Herr Fellenberg looks as if he's about to make a good business interaction. I'm just hoping so much for his consent. Now it's my dad's turn to look at his empty soup bowl. Finally he says, "Alright. You all seem to agree. I guess it could work out."

"Yes!" I feel as happy as I have ever felt before.

“Alright then,” Herr Fellenberg says. Dora collects the bowls. It’s time for the Schnitzel.

A few days later we get some forms to fill out. I send them back in and I get officially accepted. And then it’s the end of January and my moment has come. I sit in the airplane heading to Toronto. From there, I will go to some little town in Ontario, that is a suburb of Sudbury.

It’s damn cold here, is my first thought once I’m outside the airport. But I like Canada. It seems big. Large. Everything seems more spread out here than in Germany, which gives me an odd feeling of freedom. The people here are friendly and as long as there’s only one person talking to me I almost understand everything. Only talking myself is kind of difficult for me because I don’t really want to make mistakes. I make a lot of mistakes, of course. But the people, and especially my host family, are helpful, trying to guess what I mean and finding the right words. I have my own little, cozy room. I also have a host brother but he’s like five, so not the best person I could talk to. He laughs at my mistakes, but that’s fine. He even likes soccer!

Then my first school day comes. I am very excited. The school isn’t that big, it’s got about 800 students. That’s smaller than my school back in Germany. But I think that’s better because then it’s more likely I will get to know a bigger percentage of the students. In every class it’s the same. When people take attendance and they ask “Nico?” then I say “Here” but that seems to be enough to hear my accent. The whole class looks at me and the teacher starts asking questions about me and Germany and how I am liking it so far. The students also ask questions, partly because they are actually interested in me but also to have less time doing class, I guess. Either way, it’s a practical way to get to know with them. Awesome.

Then it’s sports class, the subject I cared the most about. I’m a little late because I had troubles finding the gym, but I’m just in time to see the last people walk out the back door. To my surprise, they’re dressed in cold weather gear instead of sport clothes. Then again, it’s -20° Celsius outside!

Has the moment finally come? The moment I waited for almost for two years now., the main reason why I originally decided to do the exchange. Am I about to finally learn how to dogsled? I catch up with the other guys.

“Sorry, uhm, I mean excuse me! Can you tell me where we are going?” I ask politely one of the kids, who seems to be constantly checking his phone.

Without looking up he says, “To the ice hockey rink.”

“Sorry, can you say that again, please?”

“The ICE HOCKEY RINK.” It’s like he thinks I’m deaf, just because I didn’t understand him.

“Oh okay,” I say, and pause. I am confused. “The hockey rink, really? Is this school big enough to have a hockey rink?”

“No, silly, we’re using the town one.”

“Are we learning how to play hockey? I thought in winter we would do dogsledding.”

Now he puts his phone into his pocket and looks at me.

“All Canadians know how to play hockey from birth on, so we don’t need to learn it. No, Mr. Phillips said that we are gonna start our curling unit, isn’t that great?”

“Uh...sure.”

“We’re using the hockey rink because we have no better place to do it. And who the heck told you we were gonna dogsled?”

“That’s just what I thought,” I say, hesitating. “Maybe that girl was just taking my arm.”

“Taking your arm?” he looks at me for a second, then says, “You mean she was pulling your leg?”

“Okay, maybe that’s what I mean.”

We reach the hockey rink and what’s strange is that I notice that I’m not disappointed at all.

I’m in Canada, I think, and even if I don’t get to dogsled it’s gonna be three amazing months. I started experiencing something only a few people get to experience. So I am going to enjoy it as much as I possibly can and I am also going to take as much out of it as I am possibly able to. Besides, curling can’t be as boring to play as it is to watch!

“Is curling any less boring to play than it is to watch.”

“So, you’re from Germany, right?” he says, and he hands me a broom.

The End