

Candi – The Girl Out of Ilford

A PERFECTLY LEGITIMATE FORM OF COMMUNICATION



No-one ever believes me, but I was the cleverest girl in my school. I'm not showing off, I really was, and when I had to choose my A-levels a war broke out between the German and the English department. A proper war. They almost had to get the UN in and everything, but in the end I appeased everyone, chose both, and Mrs. Linhof and Miss Olders started sitting together at lunch again.

The girls were used to me being clever, they'd ask me about Northern Ireland and stuff. I was like the Günter Grass of Chadwell Heath High. But they couldn't understand it when I said I was going away to university.

"A Degree Course?" Tanya Baker's voice was so sceptical, you could actually hear the capital letters. "Can't you do a Degree Course in London, Candi? People are normal in London."

And when I arrived at Exeter I kind of wished I'd listened to her. The first girl I met in my Halls was called Suzie, and she had a framed photo of her horse on her wall.

"Hi!" She said, oozing upper-class self-confidence through her rabbit-teeth. I'd never met anyone with so much self-confidence – or with so many teeth. It was dazzling.

"Alright," I said.

"I'm Suzie!" She beamed at me.

"I'm Candi Girl," I answered.

"Do you come from inner London?" She asked.

"No," I said. "From the outskirts."

"You know, I did a project for Social Studies on people who speak like you." She said breezily. "And do you know that sociolinguists view it as a perfectly legitimate form of communication?"

"Oh right," I said. I didn't know what she was on about. I talked proper, like.

I loved uni, though. I liked German more than French – that was how come I decided to do my Year Abroad in Germany and not France. I mean, in German all we had to do was watch a documentary once a week and then discuss it, which was brilliant, since just sitting around talking about the telly was one of my major hobbies anyway. The documentaries were always about the war or the wall and they were always brilliant and plus the only books we did in German were really short and had been written in the the 20th Century, and I really liked the 20th Century. And plus, all the kids who came back from their years abroad told us what it was like, and all the kids who had gone to Germany had spent the entire year taking pills at techno parties whereas all the kids who had been to France had just eaten lots of croissants and stuff.

But if Tanya and the girls had thought I was crazy for going away to uni, you should have seen their faces when I told them I was going to spend a year in Germany.

“It’s for my Degree Course,” I said, feebly.

“Candi Girl, they will make you eat weird sausages and stop shaving your armpits,” said Tanya, shaking her head fearfully.

“Yeah, and plus you’ll get attacked by neo-nazis and stuff,” added David Harrison.

“I won’t,” I said. “I’m going to Berlin, and they’re really sorry for the Holocaust in Berlin – they’re all converting to Judaism out of guilt, like. The teenagers. I had to watch a documentary about it for my Degree Course.”

“You reckon,” shrugged David Harrison. “Well, all I can say is you better not get killed and murdered by a bunch of neo-nazi skinheads. Then you’ll really wish you’d stayed home.”

“Can’t you just say no?” Asked Debbie. “You’ll miss the opening of the new Superbowl.”

“Well, I’d never do it, I must say.” Tanya said, curling her lip up defiantly. “Even if I was doing a Degree Course. I mean – maybe I’d go and live in France – for a month. Maybe. But I’d never go to Germany for a year.”

That night, when I got in, my mum was watching a documentary on gayness in the Third Reich.

“Do you want to watch this fascinating documentary?” She asked me, not lifting her eyes from the screen. “It might come in handy for your degree course?”

I sat down next to her on the sofa.

“Apparently,” she said, “Hitler was a bit gay. Actually, they were all a bit gay, except for Goebbels. It’s totally fascinating.”

What it was, was that Channel 4 were running out of ideas on how to come up with fascinating new insights into life under the Nazi regime and had now decided to just let their imaginations run away with them. I looked at the TV screen. They were showing footage of young Hitler Jugend boys frolicking around naked by a lake. I looked back at my mum. Her eyes were shining with delight.

“They were lovely to look at, some of those Hitler Jugend boys, weren’t they, Cand?” She said. “Yeah,” I grinned.

She looked at me a moment, her face fell a tiny bit. “I hope you’ll be alright over there,” she said. “On your own, in a foreign country. You’re so clueless sometimes, aren’t you, girl.”

“I’ll be fine,” I answered.

“What about your big dictionary? How are you going to take that over with you? It’s ever so heavy, like.”

“Oh, mum,” I said. “I don’t need my big dictionary. I’m, like, totally almost fluent and stuff.”

“I don’t know what I did,” she smiled, “to end up with a daughter like you. It must have been them vitamin pills, like.”

“Do you want a cup of tea, mum,” I said, walking into the kitchen. I plugged the kettle in.

“Anyway, what about Eva Braun, like?” I called through to the living room.

“He was only a little bit gay, like,” she called back.

“Oh right,” I said, as the kettle boiled. “I was going to say.” →