

One Mouse, Two Mice

14.09.2018, Episode 1

A Thousand Words

Hi. Welcome to my first podcast “A Thousand Words” for Friday 14th September. My name’s Richard. When people here find out where I’m from they usually ask me the same question: “Why did you leave California to come live in Zürich? Are you crazy?” Maybe. Clearly, people here have very special ideas about where I come from.

Twice a month I’ll be telling stories about my experiences living in Zürich, continuing to discover the place I’ve called home for the past twenty years. But are the cultures of California and Zürich really so different that most people here can’t understand why I’ve decided to stay in the heart of Europe?

Today I’d like to introduce myself by telling you a story about the first time I ever came to Switzerland.

At that time, I was still young and living in San Francisco. I was at university, trying to grow my first beard [1], and paying for my studies working as a waiter on Fisherman’s Wharf, when a young woman came into the restaurant. She was from Switzerland, in town for a language course to improve her English, and came into the restaurant only to get away from the cold fog that the city’s so well-known for, especially in summer – Mark Twain said that the coldest day he ever spent was a summer in San Francisco.

After an intense summer romance, she went back to Switzerland. And we then began a long-distance relationship by expensive phone calls and letters by post that took a week to arrive – that was way back, even before email. So, wanting to see her again and visit some places in Europe, I saved up my tip [2] money and later that year flew to Zürich.

She was still living at home then with her mother, and she arranged for me to stay in their small three-room flat about ten kilometers south of Zürich. Fresh off the plane, she took me into the city, and we sat by the lake and ate fresh warm bread and smelly cheese. But for the next evening, she told me, she wanted to cook a special meal – something she watched her mother make for years but had never tried making herself.

“What’s in it?” I asked.

“Mice,” she said.

“Mice?”

“Yes. It’s delicious,” she said. “You’ll love it.”

As I said, that was the first time I ever visited Europe. Growing up in California, where we like to experiment with our food by mixing together kitchens from all over the world, (pizza tacos with goji berries, for example), I was still surprised to hear that people in Switzerland ate mice. You know – one mouse... two mice? Again, pre-Internet, I didn’t have the luxury to google Switzerland to prepare for what I might run into [3] there. Still, I never thought that a country I imagined was quite well off [4], in the middle of Europe, with over a thousand years of culture, would offer a foreign visitor a meal of rodents [5].

“Mice?” I asked again.

“You’ll see,” she said.

I wasn’t in the kitchen when she began cooking this “mice”, as her mother showed me around the apartment and pointed out the dos and don’ts [6] of my two-week stay. During this time, a very nice smell began coming out of the kitchen. And when her mother’s tour ended, I went to check on the smell. But my girlfriend walked me out onto the balcony, saying it made her nervous when anyone watched her cook. She filled me a tall glass of Prosecco, told me to enjoy the afternoon sun that was unusual at that time of year, and returned to the kitchen.

Now, that was at a time early on in our relationship when we were both still very much in love. And while cooking, she kept coming back out onto the balcony to plant kisses on my face [7], and tell me how good it was to see me again, and how nice it was that I was in her country and she could show me where she lived – so much so that at times she forgot about what she was cooking, only to remember again, suddenly, and hurry back to the kitchen.

And when the “mice” was finally finished and served, at the table I ran my fork through the yellow mash [8] and hit something.

Ahhh... the mice.

I lifted my fork and stared [9] at the clump [10] on it.

"I hope you like it," she said, watching me.

I put it into my mouth carefully and bit into a strange texture [11], waiting for the tiny crunch of bones [12].

"Oh, no," she said, eating from her own plate. "I didn't mix it well. It's got..."

"Clumps?" I said.

"Oh... It's all your fault. You distracted [13] me."

"So," her mother said. "What do you think of my daughter's cooking?"

"Very good," I said politely. "Never had it before."

"Oh, come now!" her mother said. "From California, and you never ate polenta?"

"Polenta?" I turned to my girlfriend. "I thought you said we were eating mice?"

"Yes," she said. "Polenta is mice."

"Mice?" I asked.

They both nodded [14].

"One mouse, two mice?" I asked.

They both stared back at me.

Now, where I come from, we don't call it "mice" or maize, as the British do. We call it corn – as in popcorn, or corn on the cob [15], or cornbread, or cornmeal [16]. But not maize, and certainly not "mice". If I were British, I might have better understood what she meant. But my Californian brain could only imagine tiny rodents cooked in a creamy sauce.

The rest of dinner was much more enjoyable after that, less disturbing [17] than when my fork had run across the first of many clumps in the imperfect polenta she had made.

But that was years ago, many years ago, when we were still in love. Over the years her polenta had become much better, at the same time that our relationship turned in the opposite direction. Maybe it was for this very reason, as she could then give more attention to cooking "the mice" instead

of finding me somewhere else in the apartments we lived in together so that she could plant kisses on my face.

Some meals, to do them justice [18] – to do them right, need your full concentration.



Thank you for listening.

This year we're celebrating 10 years of PodClub, and we've prepared a special multicultural episode. You can find that, along with all our other episodes, on our website podclub.ch or by downloading our app. You can also download our vocabulary trainer and you can follow me on Instagram using the hashtags [#podclubrichard](https://www.instagram.com/podclubrichard) and [#athousandwords](https://www.instagram.com/athousandwords).

I hope you enjoyed the episode and decide to join me again on September 28th for another story, where I'll be talking about bicycles and bicycling. Bye for now!

Glossar: A Thousand Words

[1] **beard**: hair on a man's face

[2] **tip**: money for good service

[3] **run into**: learn about by chance

[4] **quite well off**: have enough money

[5] **rodents**: small animals, like mice or rabbits, with sharp front teeth

[6] **pointed out the dos and don'ts**: things you should and shouldn't do

[7] **plant kisses on my face**: kiss someone (hoping they develop similar feelings)

[8] **a mash**: food made soft by cooking a long time in liquid

[9] **stared**: looked for a long time (often without blinking)

[10] **a clump:** a ball of something

[11] **texture:** how something feels

[12] **bones:** pieces of the skeleton

[13] **distracted:** caused someone's concentration to be somewhere else

[14] **nodded:** moved their heads up and down to say yes

[15] **corn on the cob:** corn on the stick it grew on

[16] **cornmeal:** polenta

[17] **disturbing:** not nice

[18] **to do something justice:** to do something in the way you think it should be done