

## Scout Magician

I was bored, hungry and in no mood to hear hungry children -- in any language. There were other things going on with me too, but we won't go down that trail, okay?

Eating dinner by myself has always been something I have tried to avoid as much as possible. I love having a dinner companion, someone who shared some bit of interest in what I do, why I was there in their town, when I am going to leave and how I got there.

Most of the time however, I end up eating alone.

Not fun at all.

Sometimes I bring a book to read and get caught up in. Edward Aarons' "Assignment: " series; or the Mack Bolan "Executioner" series, or a book by my favorite author. Problem is, I just finished "Ford County", the latest book by John Grisham -- read it when you can, it's a great read and the characters pop out at you -- and my attempt to read Eric Haney's new novel introducing a soldier-of-fortune ended up being a bust.

I left the novel on top of the rental car when I parked and before I entered the restaurant.

My loss.

So with nothing to read, and a relatively full dining area, I was relegated to the "singles table" in which I had to share space with total strangers. Nothing wrong with that normally, except that the men here around me all had something to read, or email to catch up with via their PDAs. The lone woman was writing something in a journal.

My favorite waitress -- for I have been there at this place so many times that they knew my first name -- came over with the wine and coffee I really did not have to ask for. She knew that I would ask for it. German wines are great and the coffee is okay but must be "doctored" with sugar and imitation milk.

On my end of the long table, the empty chairs allowed me to place my bag of things I had purchased earlier onto one of the chairs. I draped my light fleece jacket over the back on that chair -- if nothing else but to give the simulation that someone else was indeed joining me for dinner.

Not.

As I sipped my coffee and looked around, they came in. Mom looking really frazzled and her son -- no more than seven, I estimated -- came in wanting to talk her ear off. The German was fast and furious between the two. I caught parts of "let's eat first and then catch the movie" and "Johannes, turn around and sit. What do you want to eat?"

Typical parent-child conversations. Then she -- Mom -- noticed my cell phone. She explained to her son that she wanted a phone like that -- more of a computer than a phone. As she glanced at me to see if I was going to object, she explained to the child that some phones have a keyboard and internet access.

In my best Vanna White, I opened my phone and revealed the keypad and screen. The child's eyes lit up. "Where has this child been -- surely this isn't the first time he's seen a phone like this close up..." I was thinking.

Then I closed the phone, turned it on its back and showed the camera lens. Mom said in German that some phones can even take photos of things and people, although it is not a substitute for some of her cameras.

Ah, a professional photographer.

Looking at the phone and listening to his mother entertained the child long enough to get him paying attention to the menu. I used the opportunity to leave my phone sitting on the table -- I would NEVER do this in the States -- while I went to go clear my nostrils and wash my hands in the men's room downstairs.

Allergy season really hit hard this day and added to my frustration and downness.

I returned and it was their turn to go downstairs to wash up before dinner. That gave me preparation time and I took advantage of their absence to do so.

Now let me share some things with all of you. My parents -- especially my mother -- were not big on magic tricks or stunts. She viewed magic as a demonic act, like casting spells, having cats, and seeing the future through tarot cards. As she got older, she moderated after Marshall Brodine brought the "TV Magic Cards" to the little screen and thousands of children -- me among them -- who wanted to do tricks "just like he does on TV." I got pretty good with the cards but as time went onward, my interests changed and the thought about becoming a David Copperfield or one of those other acts during that time seriously waned.

As a Cub Scout Den Chief, however, Mrs. Zuniga, the Den Mother I worked with for almost two years, always asked me to "do something to keep the attention" of the boys. I talk about it in my book "Patches and Pins". The tricks and stunts were more to impress her daughter Connie Higginbotham, staying with them over the spring and summer that year -- than impressing a bunch of 8- and 9-year olds.

My justification for getting the cards -- and learning some simple magic tricks -- was to be a good Den Chief. My mom bought the argument but insisted that none of that "stuff" would come into the house. The TV Magic Cards was the big "break" I needed to practice my skill in my room and to try some of it on with my brothers before I took it to the Cubs.

I was never a good magician -- those observant enough can see how the "trick was done" and parents smiled when I dropped the extra quarter or when a card suddenly appeared from my sleeve.

Kids -- little kids especially -- thought I was the biggest thing since peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, however.

My waitress took my order -- the usual things I would order from the steakhouse -- with the extra sour cream, pepper and the well-done meat. The salad without some veggies. The additional items I wanted on my salad and the "American salad dressing" as opposed to the German salad dressing.

The mom and child returned and took their places at the table. The waitress returned to receive the order and once again the child was doing everything it could except sit.

I was ready.

"Hallo!" I stated, getting his attention. Mom tapped him on the shoulder and pointed in my direction.

"Wasser sum Ice." I didn't know the word for "ice" but I figured he would catch the clue.

His mother pointed to the water and then to me as I poured a small bit of water into one of the coffee mugs I purchased earlier in the afternoon. I said "Rumplestikin", an attempt to try to say "hocus, pocus" in German -- and then I turned the mug over and a small block of ice fell onto the napkin I placed on the table for that purpose.

The young man almost leapt out of his seat. Mom was impressed too.

"More Glech", I stated to the young man, "sitz da und be still..." Mom translated what I was trying to say to her son -- he'll show you more if you sit and stop squirming around so much.

The food came for them first -- she only ordered a salad and a small sandwich and fries for her son -- and he ate the fries quickly.

"Hungry, no?" she tried to apologize for her son.

"I think so," I said in English.

"How did you do this -- this ice thing?" she asked, sipping a small bit of her wine before asking me.

"Pfadfinderin, " I said, adding "Boy Scouting."

She nodded her head up and down. "You do this a lot -- a Scout magician?"

"No," I said, smiling, "I have not done this since I was 12 or 13." I lied. I have done this before while waiting on a helicopter ride to the Ivory Coast decades back. And I have done this same trick for the daughter of a woman I am sweet on about eight years ago. I introduced her to the TV Magic Cards too, buying a pack off of eBay and giving them to her to practice.

Her son started to get bored of the fries and being still. So the next trick had to be good.

"Translate for me please," I asked the mom in my best German. She nodded and pointed to me as she explained that "the black man will do another trick for you now..."

I smiled softly at being called the "black man". I went onward.

I took out of my bag two large rubber bands. I placed one band over my two of my fingers on the left hand and then used the other rubber band to lace up my four fingers together.

I then explained to the mom, who explained it to her son, that I would make the bottom rubber band jump from one set of two fingers -- showing with my upturned hand -- to the other set of two fingers.

I curled my hand up and covered it with my right hand and said "Rumplestikin!"

I removed my hand, and sure enough -- the band was on the OTHER TWO fingers!

I did the same things again, and the rubber band returned to the original two fingers!

The child clapped -- so did one of the men observing the trick being performed.

"Vielen Danke", I said, "Thank you very much."

My food finally arrived and as I sat and ate, the mother explained to her child that I learned how to do those things in Boy Scouting.

I nodded as I listened to mom talking with her son.

"You think that I would learn how to do those things?" Mom mussed up her son's hair.

I nodded up and down and added in German, "Naturally".

Mom paid for their food and then bent over and said in English "thank you. As you see, my son has some problems and you made dinner enjoyable for us."

"Thank you both for being a good audience and helping me get over some sadness," I said.

"Say thank you, Johannes," Mom prompted her son. Johannes came over and hugged me.

"Schones Danke!" I looked up at his mother while accepting the hug while still seated. She approved. "Danke auch," I said in response -- thank you also.

I gave him the two rubber bands -- I can get more at the Shoppette tomorrow.

As I ate the remainder of my dinner, my hostess came over and informed me that my meal has been paid by the man sitting two tables over from where I was sitting. I turned back and tipped my head in his direction.

"He said that you must have been quite a, um," the waitress was searching for an English word, "ah performance."

"Performer" I corrected her. She repeated the word.

"He was watching you and liked the show." She walked away and I placed my napkin beside my plate, in front of my coffee and wine, and walked over to the man.

"I haven't seen any of those tricks since my days as a Cub Scout," the man spoke in perfect American English. There are a lot of Americans who come to eat at this steakhouse. "I am on my way back to Berlin after dinner, but I wanted to just thank you for the excellent performance."

"Thank you for paying for my dinner, sir."

"With the American military here?" the man asked. This is always a trick question to answer, for we American military people are supposed to keep a relatively low profile while out in public -- we may never know who is watching us for whatever reason or justification their nations may have.

"I work on one of the military bases," I answered.

"The hair and bearing gave you away," the man responded, looking at his German friends before pulling out and handing me a card. "If you're ever in Berlin, give me a shout and we'll do a lunch or dinner there. They've got one of these Block Houses there too."

I looked at the card and then at the man. I extended my hand and as we shook hands, I explained, "I don't have a card myself sir, but I will be happy to meet you in Berlin perhaps in a few weeks."

The card identified him as a regional vice-president for one of America's leading defense contractors.

I tucked the card back into my pocket and returned to my table and finished my meal, drinking the rest of my wine and coffee, and polishing off the baked potato. I sat and looked across at the two empty chairs which previously housed the mom and her son.

"If every night was like this," I said to myself. "Companionship, free food, great atmosphere. Some day -- some day!"