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Germania

Prologue

I only had one experience with Germans before our neighbors moved in, and to be perfectly honest, it wasn't a very positive one. This was before the kids and everything. Stacey and I were driving through the southwest visiting the major attractions: Las Vegas, Indian reservations, the Grand Canyon. In Arizona, we stopped at a campground about twenty miles from the canyon. We paid our eight bucks and found a spot. Within moments a family arrived and parked right next to our campsite. I think it was the only one remaining. While setting up the tent I noticed that they were speaking German. That's how I knew they were German. We hurriedly unpacked the car so we could get to the canyon and watch the sunset. The gift shop and all around the canyon was packed with tourists. It was the high season. A lot of those tourists were speaking German: families eating hot dogs complaining of the heat, I suspected, in German. They took pictures inside the canyon, of themselves in front of the canyon, all over the canyon. Yeah, there were Japanese too, but those Germans made the majority of the tourists all right. We left before it got completely dark, so we could stop by the road for some firewood. Campgrounds never have wood laying around. Tiny bundles, certainly not the size of cords, were for sale at the manager's station for seven bucks. Stacey and I went deep into the woods off the road and collected two big armfuls of kindling apiece. We filled the backseat of the Festiva with it. There were no logs to be found but there was one in the fire pit back at the campsite. The people before us left it. After picking up the wood we went to the store for some hamburger meat, buns, and beer for dinner. Returning to the campsite we unloaded the wood from the car, and I immediately noticed that our log was gone. I called Stacey's attention to this, and she was as pissed about it as me. A fire without logs and just kindling lasts about a half an hour. Logs are gold. It's virtually impossible to cook with kindling because you're constantly having to feed the fire to keep it hot enough. No logs, no coals. I began hollering.

"I wonder where our LOG went! What could have happened to our LOG?"

Stacey joined in. "LOGS just don't get up and walk away!"

All this was directed at our German neighbors who were cooking steaks over a healthy fire.

I yelled, "What kind of person would walk into someone's

campsite and take their LOG?”

The German father was poking at a steak and looked over at us. I thought maybe he didn't know what log meant.

“Our BIG WOOD is missing!” I shouted. “Hey Stacey. Someone stole our BIG WOOD!”

Now I'm not saying that only Germans would go into someone's campsite and steal precious logs. Anyone would do that, I'm positive. I'm just saying that this is the only experience I've had with Germans before our neighbors moved in, that's all.

There were Germans next door. They moved in when we were visiting Lake Tahoe. I didn't know anybody was even interested in the place. They must have bought the house and moved in in two weeks or less. Perhaps they bought the thing without even looking at it beforehand.

It was weeks before I met them. In hindsight, I still feel pretty bad for not being hospitable and just going over and introducing myself. I somehow got the impression that they didn't want to be bothered. I hardly saw them outside and guessed they were German from overhearing some music featuring a German singer coming from their house.

Their lawn was getting unruly and wild from not mowing it. They didn't seem to have a mower. If it gets out of hand the city will send some kid out to mow it and charge you a hundred bucks. They really will. Well, I used this as an opportunity to introduce us, indirectly. I ordered my son Chris to go over and mow their lawn for them. Chris had a problem with this. He was at a bashful age and the fact the neighbors were from another country didn't help much. Prior to this, a few times during dinner we sat and speculated what the neighbors were up to. I suggested they were making human bratwurst; you know, stuff like that.

“Chris,” I said. “How would you feel if you were new to the neighborhood, or new to a country, and there was no one willing to greet you or help out?”

“Where would we go, Dad?”

“That's not the point. You'll learn the value of taking the first step in an endeavor. All you have to do is tell them who you are and where you're from. Take the mower with you in case they're not sure what you're offering.”

“What should I charge them?”

“Offer to do it for free.”

“Great.”

“If they insist on paying you, which they probably will, then take it. Either way you'll probably have a steady job with them.”

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“What if they’re cheap?”

“I doubt that, son. Their home country has a better economy than ours.”

Chris wheeled the Lawn Chief over to their house and got the ball rolling with our new neighbors. That night Stacey and I walked next door and introduced ourselves to the Schreibers. We brought along some oatmeal and raisin cookies. My big surprise when I got there was the kid they had; I didn’t even know they had one. Her name was Rachael. She was seventeen and painfully shy. Her parents had her come out of her room to meet us. We all sat in their living room chatting and munching on cookies. Poor Rachael was ordered to sit and talk with us. I had to ask her to repeat herself several times because she mumbled. No one else seemed to have this problem, they heard her just fine. She was obviously bored sitting there and unhappy to be living in the states. All the hype didn’t touch her in the least: New York, Disneyland, the Grand Canyon, nothing. The only thing that raised her interest was when Stacey asked about her plans after high school. She looked quickly at her parents and answered with directness that she was going to college back in Germany.

Rachael’s parents, Joseph and Mara, finally let her go back to her room. After she left Mara told us they wished she’d try to make the best of her new home, or at least go outside once in a while. I told her I’d have my oldest son Andy come over and introduce himself to her. They thanked me, told me it would be nice. Then Joseph went to the kitchen to get some iced tea. They were trying hard to please and make us feel comfortable. Sitting back down he began telling us about himself, his story. First of all, why he came to the United States. Mara would interject into his story with facts or whatnot that he overlooked. “No, that was Hamburg.” “She was gone for hours.” “We’ve been to the United States before, to visit my aunt.” “I’ve never seen Joseph so happy.”

Joseph owned a small computer company in Germany. Though he maintained a decent living, competition was getting heavier and heavier. New products were being introduced at such a rapid pace he had to sell the outdated merchandise at slashed prices. I got the feeling he was simply getting older and no longer had the energy to run with the pack. Anyway, he bought an American company he had done business with and sold his own. His new company sells computer locks. No software or anything like that. They’re literally steel cables fastened to your personal computer.

Mara took over. “You see,” she said, “everyone needs one. Schools, they’re good business. Companies, too. There’s much less competition in this business. We have a patent. People will pay for something and it’s not too hard to convince them they must pay extra

just too keep it.” She sat back and looked at her husband.

I could tell Joseph was happy he no longer had to run around in that competitive world. He did, however, seem to revere it as a war, where he was pushed to the limits just to survive. “Oh, it was rough,” he said with a faraway look.

I told Andy the next day to introduce himself to Rachael. He didn’t put up as much of a fight as Chris did with the lawn. Returning about an hour later he told me about her. One thing he couldn’t get over and kept commenting on was all the makeup she was wearing. She wore lipstick with a reflective surface, blush which made it look like she’d been smacked, and a porcelain-like base.

“She said she had already been accepted to a school in Germany but is still taking a bunch of advanced placement classes at our school,” he said. “This is her last semester before she graduates. That’s pretty weird.”

“Maybe she’s trying to get a scholarship.”

“Maybe.”

“So what do you think about her?”

“I told you. Too much makeup.”

The Schreibers were our neighbors. Every once in a while we’d have them over for dinner. Most of the time it was on our back porch. Joe never drank any kind of alcohol. I didn’t ask him why. Rather, I waited until he got up to go to the bathroom and asked Mara. Her English was so-so. She said, “He can’t because it hurts.”

“It hurts?”

She nodded and knocked her fist to her heart. Mara didn’t seem so well herself, somehow looking too old for her age. How old was she? Then Joe came back out.

One weekend Mara and I were out getting the mail at the same time. She was in her bathrobe and looked very tired. I asked her how she felt about her daughter going to school so far away, across the Atlantic and everything.

“We’ve decided she’s not going to do that.”

“How come?” I asked.

“She doesn’t need to. There’s good schools in the States. Joe is worried we will never see her again if she goes back to Germany. He sold the company and we moved here so he could be more with his family.”

“Wasn’t she already accepted to a school in Germany?”

“She’ll apply to the state school.”

Every week in spring Chris would mow the Schreiber’s lawn. I

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was right, Joe paid him well, more than I would. One Sunday, however, Chris came back home early. Chris said Joe wanted to mow it himself this time; he wanted the exercise. It didn't bother me at first. We were neighbors. Joe did this two more times in the weeks to come, and I couldn't tell if he refilled the gas tank. Would he have a gas tank if he didn't have a mower? Then it started to bother me. It didn't seem to trouble Chris though, no lawns for him. If that was the case, and Joe not even paying for the gas, he was taking advantage of me and my Lawn Chief. I told Chris the next time he wheeled the mower to the Schreibers to look around their garage and see if they had a gas can. He asked me why I didn't just ask Joe if he refilled the tank. I told him neighbors don't work that way.

Chris couldn't find a gas can in Joe's garage. I didn't know what to do about it. I decided to let it go for a couple weeks, maybe let the tank run out and see what he does about it.

I didn't let the tank run out, it's not good for the engine for that to happen. Well, school let out and it was summer. We had a neighborhood Fourth of July party at our house. We held it in the backyard and on the porch. Just about everyone showed up, even Rachael Schreiber. I was especially excited for the Schreibers. It was their first Fourth of July; their first one in the United States, you know what I mean. Chris was handling the hot dogs. I was taking care of the burgers on the Weber. Andy was manning the keg of Miller; I thought he'd like that. It's exhausting running a party. You run all over the place getting everyone fed and happy, and there's no time to really enjoy yourself. I ran a few burgers over to the Schreibers. Mara looked haggard. In fact, I don't remember ever seeing her look healthy. She was sitting on a patio chair sipping some Hi-C looking like she was about to fall asleep.

"Have a rough night?" I asked.

"Mm," she said. I didn't know whether that meant yes or no.

"You just relax. We'll have those fireworks going real soon."

Joe sat next to her with his hand on hers. He was at her beck and call. He smiled up to me and said he was sorry. I told him there was nothing to be sorry about for crying out loud. Joe still smiled.

Like I said, I was running around the place being Mr. Host. At the grill I was working away when Joe came up.

"You want another?" I asked.

"No. I just wanted to say I'm—"

"Honey!" I hollered to Stacey. "Go inside and get some onions for me to grill. They're on the bottom shelf of the fridge! What were you saying, Joe?"

"I'm sorry about—"

“I told you there’s nothing to be sorry about. Everyone gets sick.”

“It’s more than that, Stu. There’s been trouble and I want to talk—”

“Wait a minute, Joe. I need to run these over to the Pachmans.”

Joe looked real serious when I left him there at the grill, like he was about to burst with something big. I was running a party for Christ’s sake, and Joe was ready for true confessions. Did he expect me to sit down, amongst fifty or so people, and listen to his problems? It looked that way. The only way I’ve learned of anything halfway personal about him is through other people. I kind of liked it like that. Why did he wait until the middle of my Fourth of July party to spill his guts to me? In between the mortar cannon and the cherry bombs he’d tell me his company was going under? I took the Pachmans their burgers and sat down with them to discuss the opening of the new neighborhood pool.

The weekend after the party Stacey found out Mara was dying of cancer. The new pool opened up that weekend, and Steve Debusey was the lifeguard. He baby-sat for us a while back. Now he was life guarding. He told Stacey he was also interning with a physical therapist up at the university hospital. Stacey told me that Steve told her he’s seen Mara a few times at the hospital in the cancer ward. Was that what Joe wanted to tell me during the party? Christ. What did he expect me to do once he told me?

Chris later that night asked me what I was going to do about the lawnmower. It had started to bother him.

“We’re just going to let him use it for a while,” I said.

“But Dad, he’s not paying for the gas. He should at least—”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“What, are you afraid of him?”

“No. I said don’t worry about it.”

“Why should he be allowed to do this?”

“Chris, we’re neighbors. It works a little differently.”

“I wouldn’t—”

“You wouldn’t what? You didn’t buy the lawnmower. You don’t even buy the gas for it. Now don’t worry about it.”

A week later during dinner the Schreibers told Stacey and I that Mara had cancer. Lung cancer. I didn’t know she ever smoked, just never seemed the smoker type. She quit in Germany. It’s tough receiving very bad news you’ve known all along, almost tougher than hearing it for the first time. I felt, and I’m sure Stacey felt the same way, like we had to act shocked. All the emotions associated to the news we already experienced. Did they buy our performance? Did they

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care if it was genuine or not? Sitting there discussing it over coffee and tea, Mara went on about how all this was affecting Joe, who was sitting right next to her. He nodded at her assessments and shook his head in the pity of it all.

Stacey and I acted shocked and stricken the best we could. It's a tiring thing, acting shocked. In fact, it may be more exhausting acting shocked than actually experiencing the emotion. I was so preoccupied with affecting a jolted look to the Schreibers, I realized later I paid very little attention to Mara's talking. I didn't know how her husband was taking it outside a few obligatory nods and sighs.

This act in no way diminished as time went on. Stacey and I had to pretend we were trailing the Schreibers emotionally. Our genuine feelings about Mara's condition was never revealed to her or her family. We were afraid if we made the leap to our present state of mind, it would offend them.

Mara died in September. At the end of the funeral, as we walked to the cars, I told Rachael that we wanted her and Joe to come over to dinner soon.

They did come over to dinner. Things were tough all over for poor Joe, naturally. He looked gutted, scared. I didn't need anybody to tell me that. Strangely enough, Joe and Rachael took this opportunity, dinner at our place, to discuss her college plans. It was a bit more than a simple discussion actually. It was in German. It was fierce. I guess Rachael still wanted to go to Germany, and Joe didn't want her to. The way they argued, it appeared as if they hadn't ever discussed it before. They didn't look at each other much. Anger in German is pretty scary. Stacey and the boys and I sat there eating our lamb chops and asparagus and scalloped potatoes listening to them go at it. I guess they needed us. If it was anybody but a recently widowed neighbor, I wouldn't have put up with it. Yeah, they needed us, just to fill up space. I dismissed the kids from the table and poured myself a glass of wine and listened. Stacey and I just sat there, no pleas of advice from either father or daughter. After fifteen minutes or so, Joe finally caught himself and apologized to us in English. Then he turned back to Rachael and said something in German. He got up and told me he was sorry for ruining dinner. I said forget it. They left quickly and I wondered if they actually did go back to discussing school when they got home, or if they reached an agreement at my table.

I saw Rachael outside a few days later. I asked about her school plans.

"I'm going to Germany," she said.

"So your father finally gave in."

"No. He still doesn't want me to go."

“Can’t he keep you from going if he doesn’t want you to?”

“No.”

“What about money and all the necessities?”

“I got a scholarship. I’m eighteen, and he can’t stop me. He knows there’s nothing he can do about it now. He’s going to sell the house. Has he told you that? No? The place is too big for one person. Oh yes, he said he’s going to come over and borrow your lawnmower sometime.”

The For Sale sign went up on the Schreibers’ lawn and Rachael left for Germany. I hadn’t spoken to Joe since he was all alone. I’m not sure if I even could. He borrowed my lawnmower for the last time. After he returned it I asked him where he was moving to. He said he was moving to a condo in Gresham and that I should meet him sometime for a beer. I never did. He walked back to his house. When he reached the For Sale sign, he yelled over to me.

“HEY STU!”

“WHAT?”

“SORRY ABOUT NEVER FILLING THE TANK WITH
GAS!”

