

Bring a Book

by Matt Potter

In June 2008 I went to live in Hamburg for what turned out to be six months, four of them living in a ground floor flat in Altona, wedged between the adult entertainment district of the Reeperbahn and the River Elbe. I found much of it a very lonely experience. I taught English Monday to Thursday, and often went away on a weekend trip early Friday morning, returning late on Sunday. But sometimes — and I would truly dread these weekends — I would stay in Hamburg.

Saturday 25th October 2008

It would be great if next door to every restaurant, there was a 24 hour dental surgery. Then you could sneak in and grab a few magazines to read if you're unfortunate enough to be dining alone.

Reading makes you look busy when you are eating alone ... even if unconvincing.

On the way to Altona Bahnhof from my flat, I pass a number of restaurants and cafés: Italian then Spanish, then Italian again, then cross Max-Brauer-Allee to pass Portuguese, Indian, Italian, African and lastly, Turkish.

It was to the Turkish restaurant I went last night.

The restaurant must be quite well-known because people I know who don't live anywhere near Altona have happily said they have eaten there. It's often busy at night, and the noise of many customers having a good time struck me as soon as I opened the door.

"Table for one, please," I said, in German, to a very Turkish-looking waiter, dark hair and closely-knitted eyebrows. Looking at him, he seemed very preoccupied, and I have to say, I wished he was better-looking.

His head swivelled around the restaurant, and he said, *I think* he said, that the restaurant was full. But then he walked off around the corner, and not knowing just what he was doing or exactly what he had said, given language difficulties and the noise level, I followed him.

He then turned and said something that, while I still couldn't make out the exact words, was obviously, *no, no, no, we're full*.

I shrugged my shoulders and started walking towards the door, hoping I didn't look too foolish, when a customer — initially, I thought he was one of the staff — gestured that his table, freshly vacated, was available. He was by himself, I think, and perhaps recognised someone else who wanted to look desperately like it was okay to be there alone.

(Maybe when we dine alone we grin and grimace too much, all at the same time. Clutching the book we are reading like it's our only friend.

There is only one thing worse than eating in a restaurant by yourself, and that is eating your own cooking by yourself. Especially of you don't like your own cooking.)

So I sat at this table (for two), my order was taken, my yellow (!) Fanta was presented and I opened my book. The table next to me (mum and dad and two kids) paid their bill and left, and then another couple, young-ish (well, younger than me) sat in their place.

Then another waiter approached my table.

“Could you please sit at this table?” the waiter asked, indicating a move across the narrow aisle to yet another table. “Four more guests are coming,” he said, meaning to join the young-ish couple.

“Of course,” I said.

The couple thanked me, and I moved and opened my book again.

It wasn't until my meal came (no. 20 — *Nummer zwanzig* — on the menu, and a lot of food) that I realised the man at the table next to me (on the other side) was also alone. We were both sitting on the same side of our tables, so both facing towards the open kitchen, though I was reading and he wasn't. I wondered who looked the sadder.

I had clearly come prepared, *expecting* to be alone. I had a book which clearly did not fit in my bag, so I *must* have intended bringing it. Whereas he had nothing except the menu to look at, and the distance to stare into.

Perhaps we could have had a conversation.

Though maybe by *not* having a book he looked like he was expecting someone else to join him. So does that mean he was not as sad a sight as I was ... or more of one?

Of course I have no idea what his English was like. Maybe we could have had a conversation in German, if he had done most of the talking.

In between turning pages while I ate, I looked at the cutlery stamped with the restaurant's name in the handles (downmarket IKEA), and the plates stamped with the restaurant's name (green on yellow, around the edge) and thought that the restaurant was probably the swankiest Turkish eating place in Hamburg I had seen. Which, actually, is not saying much.

Eating by yourself is no fun. You can feel the stares (and non-existent stares) of others feeling sorry for you. (I do the same when I see others dining alone, and I am with company.) But in a popular restaurant on a busy Friday night you can lose yourself in the noise and the bustle and the food. And your book, if you have one.

The man at the table next to me left and soon after I was finished too, knife and fork placed on the plate in the way I understand to mean *I am finished and yes, I am well-mannered and cultured enough to know this is the way you show you have finished your meal.*

So I got up to leave, having paid (*Ich möchte bitte zahlen*), and as I put on my jumper and light rain coat, grabbed my umbrella, put my wallet in my bag and picked up my book, another man sat down at the table next to me.

By himself.

He looked like he had a glass of milk, though I think it was some kind of yoghurt drink. He was easily 10, 15 years younger than me

and I thought, hmmm, wonder how many more meals he will have by himself. Bring a book, I wanted to tell him.

As I walked through the door to leave I had to wend my way through a crowd waiting for tables. None of them looked like they were by themselves. None of them had books either. But somehow the noise of the patrons and the hectic kitchen action made me glad I had at least been part of it, if only for a short time, the time it took to eat my *Nummer zwanzig*.

Because there was no way I was going to linger at my table afterwards: that would have made me look truly sad.

