‘My name is Dr. Ursula Niebaum.’

She had arrived with about thirty minutes left of my English Conversation

lesson, at the local Adult Education Institute, during which we had been

discussing the merits of various world leaders, and created a minor stir among

the other participants. No wonder.

I estimated she was in her mid 50s to early 60s, with a stunning figure, poise,

and thick tumbling blonde hair licking her shoulders, and just oozing oceans

of self confidence.

Basically, I’m one of an army of qualified and unqualified English teachers or

trainers as we´re also known, spread out across Germany working in firms and

the aforementioned trying to satisfy the almost insatiable demand of the natives

for the English language.

‘We’re discussing world leaders,’ I advised her as she sat down ‘and I was

asking, are there any recent world leaders who, through their personalities, have

secured their place on the world´s stage.’

There was a long drawn out silence. All eyes remained focused on the

newcomer.

‘What about Helmut Kohl?’ I suggested.

‘Helmut Kohl was not every German’s idea of the ideal chancellor.’ Niebaum

stifled a surprised laugh.

‘I don´t know about his abilities as a politician, but he is a personality. There are

others in Kohl’s era, Thatcher, Mitterand.....’

‘I think you could to your list add Gorbachev.’ Someone suggested.

‘Add to your list.’ I corrected

‘What is with Ronald Reagan?’ Suggested another.

‘What about.’ I corrected.

‘Some of these people are very old now or even dead. What made them so

different?’ Asked a young woman.

‘They were political superstars, they dominated the world stage. Some still

cast a shadow.’

‘What means this cast?’

‘What does it mean? It means their influence is still felt, `spürbar`.’

‘Well, that’s it.’ I announced, glancing at my watch.

Slowly they re-arranged the desks and shuffled out, exchanging goodbyes.

I packed my papers together satisfied at, what I considered to be, a pretty

successful lesson.

Aware that I was not alone, I turned around and found myself at the end of

Ursula Niebaum`s white hot stare. I felt helpless, as though she were dissecting

me.

She scrutinised me from within her own sweet smelling but voracious aura.

 ‘I would like to ask you a favour.’ She breathed.

‘How can I help you?’

‘I have a report to present to a conference. It is about accidents and injuries at

the work place. As it is to be in English, I would be very grateful if you would

check it for me.’

She sort of smiled, but her eyes remained cold, her facial muscles immobile.

‘I`d be glad to look through it.’

‘I would like to invite you to my house. ’

She was an overpowering woman and must have sensed my surprise.

‘Is there something wrong?’ Her doctor’s voice took over. It was a no nonsense,

clear and inquisitorial instrument.

‘When and where?’ Slowly I began to haul myself back onto an even keel

and dared, what I hoped was, a cool, charming smile.

It probably looked more like a grimace of shame from a schoolboy caught

by his mother while slavering over a porn web site.

‘Would Thursday evening be possible? I could offer you a glass of wine.’

‘Yes of course. I’d be delighted.’

She gave me an address. Unsurprisingly, it turned out to be in the most

expensive and select part of town.

I turned up at the appointed hour after cycling through a torrential downpour

and turned into the exclusive street.

Sentinels of massive oak trees, stripped of their leaves, looking like x-rays

in the ineffectual street lights, gave the area a stark, unwelcoming atmosphere.

I found the house, a dark, brooding villa, almost concealed behind a towering

wall topped with cemented in chunks of broken glass.

There was a heavy door in the wall, which seemed to be a thick slab of steel.

Embedded in the slab were a letter box, a door bell and a metal door knob.

I rang, announced myself to a robotic sounding voice and was buzzed in.

I left my bike just inside the door and walked under a covered walkway to

reach the front door, which stood half open. Behind the door was a brightly lit

hallway.

I tapped on the sturdy, black gloss door and Dr. Ursula Niebaum’s head

appeared in the doorway.

 ‘Good of you to come.’ She greeted me mechanically, in semi darkness, and

offered her hand, as icy as her manner.

‘Oh, you are wet. Please take off your shoes and coat.’

Obediently, I struggled out of my outer layer of clothing and, when she made

no effort to take my anorak or direct me to a coat stand, I dropped it onto the

doormat. She smiled approvingly. ‘Please come in. Follow me. ’

She was wearing figure hugging trousers which favourably highlighted her

firm rear. She flicked back her hair as we walked and I caught a whiff of a

musky and, no doubt, expensive scent.

In the hallway we passed typical, dark, imposing old style German furniture,

and large gloomy oil paintings, until she showed me into a small, dimly lit,

but warm sitting room.

She motioned for me to sit on a salmon coloured sofa and turned up a dimmer

switch. To my right stood a small, immaculately tidy, dark brown antique desk.

She eased herself elegantly into a salmon coloured armchair, directly opposite

me.

Between us, like a barrier between the classes, a long glass topped coffee table.

‘You found the address without a problem. I hope? ’

‘No problem at all. You have a huge house. Do you live here alone?’

It shot out of my mouth, but I’m sure it was a question swimming around in

my subconscious.

‘Not always. Now, before you start work, may I offer you a glass of wine? ’

‘You may and yes please. ’

We automatically spoke English. I always take my lead from the natives. If

they speak English, then so be it, and a lot of them do when they meet me

socially or at least in a non - school environment.

She stood up gracefully and from behind her chair pulled a wooden trolley

containing a bottle of rosè and two glasses.

‘This wine is from my friend’s vineyard.’ She poured two glasses. ‘Cheers.’

She raised her glass, it sounded strange escaping through her tight lips.

‘Up yours.’ I countered.

‘I have not heard that before. ‘

‘It’s a pub expression’

 She studied me.

‘It`s a very nice wine.’ I said, lowering my eyes.

‘I am pleased you like it. There is my report. If you would like to read it.’ She

pointed to a transparent file on the coffee table.

‘I will leave you alone to concentrate. Please take more wine if you wish. ’

‘Very kind.’ I watched her glide smoothly away.

The room was spotless, more oil paintings in thick wooden frames hung

stoically on beige walls. On the desk I could see small photographs in gold

frames, expensive looking gold knick knacks, and a neat pile of papers.

The door was not completely shut and I could see a band of light under it

and soft piano music trickled in from somewhere.

I finished my glass and poured another.

I opened the file and from the typed pages, traces of Niebaum’s perfume

wafted free.

Carefully, I read the double spaced pages. Searching only for mistakes or

inconsistencies, I was able to bypass the dull, plodding prose devoted to her

theme.

I looked around for a pen to indicate where corrections were required and

crossed over to the desk. While there I looked more closely at the photographs.

They were all postcard size and in identical, ornate gold frames.

There was, what I took to be, a much younger Niebaum sitting on a horse,

proud and erect, her hair gathered in a ponytail.

Niebaum in a floppy sun hat and near transparent flowery dress, standing in

front of the sun, in what looked like a cornfield, and a couple of her standing

between a donnish, looking man and woman.

Then a few more of her, at what looked like formal occasions, with groups

of predominantly male, business types.

Then, looking more closely, I noticed her shaking hands and dwarfed by a

tall, daunting, but noticeably slimmer and younger, Helmut Kohl. They were on

an outdoor stage somewhere. She, a young woman, gazing longingly into the

eyes of a suave, charismatic hero.

He was looking generously, his face creased by a victorious smile, into her

wide eyed, star struck face.

Underneath there was a date, written elegantly in mauve ink, November 1969.

Beside that another picture, Niebaum forefront, in a crowd of, presumably,

party workers. Backstage I guessed at some party conference. She was again

shaking hands with Kohl, hers almost invisible in his huge paw, but he was

looking beyond her clearly enraptured, but more defined, face.

That was dated June 1973.

The pictures hardly bore out her previous condemnation of Kohl. I picked up

a gold pen and returned to the sofa and poured myself another glass of wine.

I finished correcting the report and reading it through just before she returned.

The file lay open on the sofa and, just as she entered the room, some of the

pages slid onto the pristine, pale beige carpet, looking like a child’s discarded

drawing paper.

Her face tightened with distaste.

‘Have you finished checking?’ She asked.

I bent forward and shuffled the pages untidily together.

‘Yes. I have.’

‘And, what do you think?’

‘Very impressive. I’ve made some corrections, but nothing too dramatic.’

Bowing before her unrelenting gaze, I put the pages back into numerical order.

‘When do you have to make your presentation?’

There was a long pause before she answered. ‘Saturday.’

‘Well, that’s it then. I suppose I should be going.’ I handed it to her.

She looked past me to the antique desk and the photographs and, obviously

looking for something, noticed her gold pen on the sofa.

‘Did you look at my photographs?’

‘I had a quick look. Yes.’

‘Were you surprised to see Helmut Kohl?’ She asked. Her eyes had lost their

drill like intensity and now her entire face was a vulnerable, unsure facade.

‘Yes. A little.’

She swallowed heavily, as if preparing to reveal something earth shattering.

‘What you said the other night, in the lesson was, I think, true. About what

strong personalities people like Kohl and Mitterand were’

 I nodded.

‘I have always been interested in powerful men.’

She seemed crestfallen, burdened with disappointment.

‘In your country, in America, even in the old Soviet Union, they become

international figures, bigger.....’

‘Larger than life’ I suggested.

‘Yes, that is right. And although we have had strong chancellors before. I am

thinking about Adenauer and Schmidt, when Kohl came..........’

She tailed off, she evidently found it difficult or taxing to discuss.

She sat down.

‘Do you mean he really took his place on the world’s stage, and made it his

own, mixing with Reagan and the rest?’

‘Yes. But he wasn´t like them, a typical politician. He is from around here you

know?’

‘Yes. I know.’

‘Some people also thought he looked..fehl am Platz..’ She fiddled with her

papers.

‘Out of place.’

‘Yes. As though he had no right to be there.’

‘It’s not very easy being German, is it?’

‘No. It can be difficult.’ She smiled faintly.

‘Do you actually like Kohl?’ I asked.

She padded over to her desk. As she slipped past, her trade mark perfume

infiltrated my nose and I thought, being a powerful German may have its

advantages, after all.

She came back with a gold covered photo album in her hands, squeezed onto

the sofa beside me and held it open, inviting me to look.

It was devoted to Kohl.

I could see the years gradually adding to Kohl’s padding as she slowly went

through the photographs.

The pictures were faithfully marked, where and when they had been taken.

She appeared in a large number from the late 60s to the end of the 80s, the

crowds around Kohl becoming denser as he grew in stature and importance.

Even from the photos the man emanated an irascible charisma, his huge head

holed by a gaping smile.

‘You still haven’t answered me Mrs. Niebaum.’

She looked up, surprised.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Do you like him?’

‘Like him?’ She mulled over the words.

 ‘That is not the question.’ She answered finally. ‘What do you think of him?’

She asked.

We were looking at a picture of him with Mitterand, dated April 1990.

Mitterand, dainty and neat, beside Kohl’s mighty, all eclipsing figure.

Kohl’s massive flabby cheeked head loomed above the Frenchman,

while Mitterand looked like a wizened, prematurely aged, schoolboy.

I was drawn to Kohl’s small dark eyes, dominating the picture.

‘He looks unbearably sad, like he’s bending under a numbing weight.’ I said.

She didn`t react.

‘I know a number of people who think he got a raw deal.’ I said , referring

to a political donations scandal that had engulfed Kohl´s party in the late

nineties.

She met my look, her eyes vulnerable and watery. ‘I am sorry. I do not

understand.’

‘Many people think Kohl was really hounded.’I clarified.

‘Hounded?’

‘Oh, gejagt. I mean after mixing with all these world leaders, reunification,

the EU, and all that.’

‘Yes, but he was the leader......’ She said plaintively.

‘It´s tough at the top.’ I answered.

She stared at the photographs.

‘Mrs. Niebaum. I have to be going now.’

‘Yes, of course.’ She answered limply. ‘Where did you leave your coat?’

‘On the floor.’

 She looked away and led me to her front door.

 I struggled into my creased, sodden anorak.

 ‘I nearly forgot. How much do I owe you?’

‘No please. It was my pleasure.’

‘One moment please.’ She walked down the hall dejectedly, shoulders slouched,

with me following every move of her trim body.

While I was pondering the merits of her voluptuous figure, she returned,

poise regained, a thin, blood red, professional smile signalling that any dropping

of barriers now belonged to the past.

‘I hope that will cover everything.’ She pressed two bottles of rosé into my

hands.

‘Thank you.’

‘We will see us at your next lesson.’

It’s funny, according to the gossip circulating about her, she was supposed to

have a whole string of men drooling after her, but I’ve never seen her with a

man, at least not in any way that could be considered romantic.

Maybe she’s never found anyone to live up to the image she carries around in

her head.

A case of unrequited devotion?