If ever there was a man with a mission, it was him. An old and frail looking

man, but walking upright with an oblivious determination through the wind

lashed rain.

It was clear from his posture and the look of deep concentration etched into his

face that he was hell bent on a task.

He turned into a café and, on a whim, I followed. We sat at adjacent tables.

He took a plastic green covered note book out of his inside pocket and

immediately began writing, with that same grim feverishness.

He was gaunt and pale, his face criss-crossed with a matrix of skull deep lines.

He wasn`t wearing glasses and his astonishingly bright blue eyes looked as

though they had been transplanted from somebody much, much younger.

Whatever he was writing, he was into it body and soul. Once or twice, he

stopped to ponder and gazed at an invisible point directly ahead and stroked the

wattle of loose flesh under his chin that flopped against the top of a white roll

neck sweater. Wispy, white tendrils of hair floated out from under a yellow

beret, like flimsy white clouds around the sun.

In the breast pocket of his blue creased blazer a line of pens peeked out like a

row of military decorations.

I couldn`t see what he was writing, but I couldn´t help but be impressed by the

depth of his concentration and the frenetic pace of his hand as he furiously

scribbled whatever was exercising him.

His hands were as smooth as a baby`s, in contrast to his near monolithic face,

and he kept his left hand anchored on the edge of the table. Maybe he thought,

with his slight build, and without a solid base, he would ricochet helplessly

around the café, like an opened balloon.

‘A`right?’ I looked up to see the smiling face of an ancient waiter.

‘Coffee please.’ I ordered.

‘Cappuccino for me please’. The old man said.

‘A`right? The waiter turned and soft shooed his way to the counter.

My coffee was delivered with another, ‘A`right?’

‘A`right?’ he said again as a cup was placed on the table beside me.

‘Thanks Arturo.’ The old man said, without looking up.

As a foreigner, in my case a Brit in Germany, I think you develop a sixth sense

about people, your antennae are more attuned to what´s going on than they

would be in your usual habitat.

I cleared my throat and opened contact. ‘It`s like the end of the world outside.’

My British accent conspicuous, even to my ears.

The old man did not respond until he had reached a hiatus in his thoughts.

‘Aren`t the British used to weather like this?’ He replied.

‘As a matter of fact Italy has a higher annual rainfall.’ I answered.

He nodded and turned back to his writing.

I felt a bit superfluous as a yawning silence stretched out between us.

Finally, he stopped writing to sip from his coffee and appraised me over the

edge of his cup. ‘I don`t come from here either. I`m originally from Hamburg. I

like this town though, it`s not too big. I`ve just moved into a flat not far from

here.’

Suddenly you couldn`t shut him up.

‘What are you writing, if I may ask?’ I had the strangest feeling that he wanted

me to ask him.

‘I`m keeping a record of what we`re losing. For future generations.’

‘What exactly are we losing?’

‘You`re not losing it. But we Germans.’ He leant back in his chair and, looking

like an overbearing guest on a talk show, waited for the inevitable follow up

question.

‘Well. What are you losing?’

‘Your language is like a steamroller, it flattens everything in its path. Its

progress is inexorable. We are losing the German tongue to it.’

‘I think you`re exaggerating a bit. You`re not losing your language. The world`s

getting smaller. English is the lingua franca of the world and has been for.... who

knows how long?’

He shook his head from side to side. ‘I was listening to the news last night and

there was a report about a bomb alarm at Düsseldorf Airport.’

I nodded.

‘It was a false alarm, fortunately. But do you know what the newsreader said, in

the report?’ He spoke as though he was rehearsing an emotionally charged death

bed speech.

‘No. I don`t.’ I answered.

His voice slowly increased in volume. ‘The newsreader said that all flights had

been cancelled. But he used the English verb to cancel.’

‘Well it is an international airport.’ I said.

‘The report was in German of course, except for the English word cancel.’ He

said, with exaggerated patience.

I surmised, he was just a lonely old man struggling to adapt to life in a new age.

I knew I couldn´t offer any reassurance. ‘I guess it´s not easy to accept, but the

world´s changing fast, it`s not going to stop now.’ I offered, lamely.

He closed his book calmly, stuffed it into his inside pocket and stood up slowly.

‘I wish you a nice day.’ He said, shook hands and left.

I watched him walk stiffly away and then gently tap the waiter on the shoulder

and slip some money into his hand.

I took to visiting the café more frequently in the hope of meeting the intense old

man.

Mad or otherwise, he was, without doubt, an interesting character.

I met him again a few days later and learnt his name, Helmut Kindsvater.

The following day I arrived clutching a large, thick wad of English

Sunday newspaper.

As usual Kindsvater was furiously filling pages. Is there really so much to

record?

‘Mr. Kindsvater. How are you?’ I offered my hand.

He smiled and with his smooth but cold hand energetically returned the greeting.

We ordered our coffees and began to discuss whatever was dominating the

news headlines.

Kindsvater had the peculiar and irritating habit of suddenly withdrawing from a

conversation and intently scribbling something in his notebook, as though a

further example of earth shattering importance had suddenly occurred to him.

As though struck by lightning, right in the middle of discussing Germany`s role

in the world at large, he abruptly turned away, flicked open his book and began

inscribing.

Exasperated, I skimmed through my newspaper.

After a few moments I glanced over the page to see Kindsvater glaring at the

headlines.

Fortunately the waiter picked that moment to appear at our table and enquire,

‘A`right?’

‘Yes please. Another Cappuccino Arturo.’ Kindsvater ordered.

‘And a coffee for me please.’

‘Do you actually read the German newspapers?’ Kindsvater asked.

I mean, I don´t have the time. You know the size of the English quality Sundays.

You need a wheelbarrow to get them home these days.

‘I do, but I happen to like my language and especially this paper.’ I slapped my

hand on the, not insignificant, pile of newsprint.

‘You are an example of what I said to you when we first met.’

This was developing into an attack.

‘A`right?’ The waiter`s timing was exemplary.

I greedily grabbed my cup, while Kindsvater lost himself in the pages of his

notebook.

A heavy silence choked our conversation, as though we were two children

nursing hurt feelings of self righteousness after a tiff neither of us could

remember.

‘What is your job?’ Kindsvater suddenly demanded.

‘I`m an English teacher.’

His hypnotic blue eyes faded, as though a dimmer switch had been activated

somewhere inside him, and his Easter Island features seemed on the verge of

caving in.

‘I see.’ He drained his Cappuccino in one.

‘A`right?’

‘Thank you Arturo, keep the change.’ He said crisply, dropping some coins into

the waiter´s hand.

‘Good day.’ He shook hands briskly with me, his skin icier than ever and swiftly

negotiated his way through the tables to the door.

Stupid old bugger.

Just to fill you in, I was gainfully employed as an English teacher or trainer, as

we´re sometimes called, at a chemical company and at the German version of

the Adult Education Institute.

I didn´t give up on old Kindsvater, mainly out of curiosity about the content of

his note books. So I was sitting in the café again a few days later.

‘Good evening.’

The cultured tone was unmistakeable.

‘Mr. Kindsvater. How are you?’

‘I am very well and rather busy.’ He tapped his breast pocket. It sounded like he

was knocking on a piece of wood.

After a few moments of pleasantries we settled into our routine of discussing

the news of the day.

But then he was side tracked and began complaining about the unnecessary use

of English in German advertising.

That evening, having already filled her in on my encounters with Kindsvater,

my girl friend Gabi, a translator in English and German, showed me the results

of some research she had done. She had traced an organization in Dortmund

called, ‘Verein zur Wahrung der deutschen Sprache’, or ‘The Society for the

Protection of the German Language.’

‘They´ve actually had some success. They`ve complained about some adverts,

that don`t need to be in English, like all of them, and they`ve been withdrawn or

re-worded.

Mind you, that was a few years ago. What do you think of that?’ She reported.

‘Maybe old Kindsvater is even a renegade member.’ I joked.

‘You know what this means don´t you ? He`s not on his own, there is a bona

fide association committed to this.’ She added.

‘Seriously, you`re right, it`s just surprising to hear it, that`s all. There again,

maybe other languages are similarly protected.’

Gabi read from a typed page. ‘In France there is a committee called the

Academie Francaise which was set up in 1635 by Cardinal Richelieu to protect

the dignity of the language and a law was passed in 1994, which prohibits the

use of foreign elements inthe public language, it`s run by forty, what they call,

immortals.’

‘Typical French, they just don`t want to accept that there are other languages.’

I scoffed.

‘There is also the Accademia della Crusca in Italy which has been Protecting

Italian since 1582.’ She added.

Armed with that and feeling more sympathetic to Kindsvater´s crusade I kept up

my vigil at the café.

A few days later I saw him at his usual table, writing as frantically, as ever.

As I approached, I could see Arturo gracefully stepping from table to table and

issuing the combination question, confirmation, greeting, farewell, thank you

and limitlessly utilitarian phrase, ‘A`right?’

I approached Kindsvater. ‘How are you?’

The old man looked up slowly and gazed at me blankly. A moment later he

recognised me. We shook hands.

‘I`m fine and yourself?’

‘Fine, fine.’ I was glad to remove my hand. If such things were possible, it had

been like shaking hands with a slab of ice cold marble.

‘I saw you yesterday, standing outside the cinema with a young lady.’ He said in

a mildly accusatory tone.

‘Yes, we went to see the new Clint Eastwood.’

‘I´ve heard that when foreign films are dubbed into German, they try to find

German words to match the actors` lip movements. An immensely difficult task,

I would think.’ He said.

An alarm bell clanged somewhere in my head.

‘Well actually, we saw the film in the original version, in English.’

‘Why did you and your young lady not see it in German?’

Before I could answer, Kindsvater fired off another question. ‘I take it these

films are for foreigners like yourself?’

I didn`t like the intonation on the word foreigners very much. ‘Not only. As far

as I could determine most of the audience were German. It`s like my girlfriend

says, she always prefers to read a book in the language in which it was originally

written, if possible, and the same applies to films.’

‘I see.’ He sounded like a businessman, gravely reacting to being told his bank

was cutting off his lines of credit. He carefully picked up his notebook and

seemed to look for solace in the yellowed pages.

‘Mr. Kindsvater. I`m sorry to be blunt, but we are living in the age of the

internet and smart phones. Many Germans, young people especially, love to use

English words, they think it´s cool, it´s called Denglish, a mixture of Deutsch

and English. Other languageshave their own variations, Chinese or Chinglish,

Korean or Konglish, for example.’

Kindsvater nodded his head laboriously, as though it weighed a ton. ‘You don´t

understand. The problem is not the slang that the youth adopt, or business or

computer English, it´s when English words are deliberately used, although there

are perfectly adequate German words. Our language is our cultural identity.’

‘In a united Europe, you´re going to lose your cultural identity anyway.’ I

argued.

‘That´s, hopefully, not completely true’, He answered. ‘And as for the

internet, a world of semi-illiterates is being created who are no longer able to

communicate effectively or sensibly. And as for obtaining information, I am

informed that the internet is not the most reliable source.’ He sank back into his

chair.

‘You compared English to a steamroller at our first meeting. I remember I read

an article a few years ago in which English was compared to a vacuum cleaner,

sucking up words from languages everywhere, and if any language is in danger

of changing, it`s English. Some experts say spoken English will be

unrecognisable in 100 years, less maybe, with all the different variations spoken

everywhere.’ I realised I had been lecturing, and that my voice had been getting

louder, and stopped abruptly.

Kindsvater descended into a heavy brooding silence, like the eerie calm before

a storm. He fidgeted with his book as if building up to something, like a light

breeze swirling through fallen leaves and debris before gradually picking up

pace and reaching a crescendo. I could actually imagine him boiling inside and

wondered how he could release the pent up pressure.

‘I have to go Mr. Kindsvater. I`m sorry, genuinely sorry, that my language

causes you such unhappiness. I do really understand, not completely, but.....’ I

didn`t actually say that. I thought I might like to, but then I decided, I wasn`t

sure I wanted Kindsvater hanging around in my life, interesting or not, it could

be stifling.

Instead he stood up, shook hands limply and, crestfallen and looking even older,

slowly trudged away.

The following day I returned, having been bothered all evening by old

Kindsvater´s demoralised face. I hadn`t ordered but as soon as Arturo registered

my presence he glided to the counter to collect a coffee.

‘A`right?’ He put the coffee on the table and then from the white apron wrapped

around his waist he withdrew a package. A white plastic bag wrapped several

times around what appeared to be a box, with a label bearing my name.

‘A`right?’

‘Thanks Arturo.’ I took the package, instinctively knowing what it was, placed it

on the table and looked at it, hoping to divine some meaning from it.

There were no rays or messages emanating from it. It lay there lifeless and non-

judgemental.

I picked it up, removed the two thick red elastic bands that secured it and

unwrapped the bag. Inside were two identical, green plastic covered note books.

I was only dimly aware of the hustle and bustle around me, cups being put to

rest on saucers, spoons stirring beverages, people talking and slurping, chairs

scratching the tiled floor. I felt myself withdrawing from my surroundings,

almost like an out of body experience.

The books lay in front of me, a testament. I prodded them and nervously opened

one.

The handwriting was an old fashioned copper plate, and was written in green

ink. On the first page was a title: ‘Das unerträgliche Gewicht’, The Unbearable

Weight.

I browsed, respectfully through the pages, which contained many examples of

English words now commonplace in everyday German, hoping to read cursorily

through the written passages, but that wasn´t easy because of Kindsvater´s old

fashioned, stilted prose.

That evening, I presented them to Gabi. She pored through them. ‘It seems as if

he has finally realised the futility of it all.’ She said.

I felt a bit guilty because of the way I had rejected old Kindsvater and genuinely

sad and sorry. ‘What do you mean?’I asked.

‘What he´s written. Have you checked them, maybe there`s an address?’

We each took a book and leafed through them looking for some clue to the old

man`s whereabouts.

‘This is more like a lament.’ Gabi said. ‘Sometimes I despair, I really do,’ She

began translating into English. ‘This mission is, Sisyphean, horrendously

daunting in its scope I worry whether I am strong enough to carry it through. It

is ongoing, never ending. The sheer mechanics of this task are almost

overpowering.’ She stopped and flicked past more pages containing neat

columns of words. ‘Yes, here`s another interesting bit, I fear our language will

be reduced to a historic, ceremonial means of establishing legality or it may

be driven underground, to become a language only spoken between a

diminishing group of refuseniks huddled around a campfire in an old derelict

building, jumping in fear every time a shadow leaps up the walls.’

‘A bit unbalanced, I think.’ I said.

‘What´s in your book?’ Gabi asked.

‘More or less the same, really,’ I quoted, falteringly .‘It should be possible,

although I´m not sure how, ..’ The thing is I could understand the gist of it, but

the effort involved in translating it, was considerable.

Gabi took over. ‘...to join together with like minded souls, on the basis that the

more people involved, the easier the chore. I feel sure, there are others fearing

for their language, not just Germans, who are attempting to record the changes. I

mean the changes as they happen. Forget dictionaries and school books, you

have to identify the intrusion as and when it occurs, to obtain a faithful and

reliable record. The mass embrace of the internet, peopled as it is by unqualified

and ill informed individuals, is certainly not a medium to be relied on.’ She

finished.

‘I`ve had enough of this. What do you think we should do? If anything.’ I said.

‘I don`t think there is anything we can do. He`s chosen you as a sort of

guardian.’

She stared at me.

‘What makes you say that?’

‘This book is finished. Look.’ She held it in the air and skimmed the pages, they

fluttered like the wings on a cartoon bird.

‘And?’

‘On the last written page, it says, ‘As with any form of guardianship, there

comes responsibility. This has become for the recorder an unbearable weight. A

weight that needs to be passed on to someone younger and stronger. I believe, I

have finally found that person. From the moment I assumed this onerous role, I

knew that my most important labour was to find a representative to continue my

work and to present it to the world.’

‘He doesn´t mean me I hope.’

She nodded her head slowly.

‘Let`s chuck them in the bin, come on.’ I said.

‘Why don`t you go back to the café with them ? Maybe you`ll see him there.’

She suggested.

‘You´re right. Let`s, or rather I`ll, bring them back and just leave them at his

usual table, and if he doesn`t come, which I`m sure he won`t, then somebody

else will throw them out. And I won`t have the responsibility.’

The following morning we continued our discussion.

‘I´m still not sure what I should do. But I´m sure, I´ll never see him again.’ I

said.

‘Cometh the hour, cometh the man.’ Gabi quoted.

‘What do you mean?’

‘He´s chosen you. He feels he´s fulfilled his task. I think you should throw them

away, after all. I´ve been thinking about it again.....’

‘I haven´t stopped....’

‘Look. These books are representative of the fears of lots of German people, but

especially older people. You´ll come across it again sooner or later in one of

your classes. Not all Germans are the hopelessly devoted Europhiles you Brits

think they are.’

That made me sit upright and take notice.

She carried on, ‘I believe it´s a feeling people have, when they see something

that they´ve worked hard to create suddenly taken from .........’

When I got her drift, I just couldn´t stop myself. ‘I think I´m beginning to

understand.

Do you mean like the Deutschmark?’  
  
‘Exactly. This generation, today´s pensioners, they remember when the

Deutschmark was introduced, in 1948 in case you´re interested, and when it was

replaced by the Euro, some, maybe many, certainly not all the pensioners, who

had a special affinity to it, felt betrayed.’

‘And now they feel their language is under threat?’  
  
‘No. But they´re worried about the future, not just their own future, but their

children´s and grandchildren´s. Nobody likes to feel they don´t have a say in

their own future. In the EU they see something dedicated to its own importance;

corruption, criminal waste of resources and money, and they feel they´re.......’

She paused thinking of a word or phrase to describe what she meant.

So I leapt in. ‘Being swallowed alive by the system or drowned in a fetid

swamp of bureaucracy....’`  
  
She laughed. ‘More or less. Kindsvater´s obsession with English is just how this

fear has manifested itself in his mind.’

‘Wow ! You´re in the wrong business.’ I applauded her.

I turned up at the café, not in the hope of seeing Kindsvater, but with the

intention of dumping the notebooks. I sat there, exchanged ‘A´rights’ with

Arturo and when he disappeared for a few minutes, wolfed down the still hot

coffee, left the books on the chair and a few coins on the table and legged it.

‘A´right.’ Arturo yelled and came bounding up to me as I opened the door, with

the books in his hand. His face bore the expression of a long suffering but

eternally faithful dog, silently chiding an increasingly forgetful master.

I smiled weakly, mainly because the coffee was still burning its way through my

system, and took the books.

At home I placed them reverently on the bed side table, where I knew they

would leak some unknown but disturbing power, like green Kryptonite, until I

could think of a suitable way of disposing of them.

‘Why pick me ? Or should I say, pick on me?’

‘He was looking for somebody he could trust. Perhaps he recognised something

in you, in your pride in your language. A kindred spirit almost.’ Gabi answered.

I went back to the café with Kindsvater´s books, took his usual seat and

ordered a coffee.

I turned to the next clean page, in the second of Kindsvater´s books, wrote my

name and the date at the top and waited for inspiration.

Two heavily made up and expensively dressed big haired ladies of a certain age

settled ostentatiously onto a sofa beside me.

‘Wann gehen wir wellen wieder? When shall we go wellen again?’Asked one of

them.

At first I was puzzled, but as they compared diaries and made arrangements, it´s

meaning soon became clear: wellen has now become an example of Denglish

and is used in connection with Wellness centres.

I was actually tingling with excitement as I made my first entry. As somebody

once said,

‘There´s none so zealous as a convert.’

Then I thought, ‘Bugger it!’.

I stood up, deposited a book in front of each lady and, in my best German, said,

‘Here´s a little something to read, while you´re wellen.’

Feeling suitably relieved, I patted the old waiter on the shoulder, gave him a

generous tip and left the café.

The café became my local, I even forgot about Kindsvater, well nearly. But, I

suppose it was too good to be true. It´s always when you least expect something

to happen or something has faded from your mind that it comes roaring back.

It must have been a couple of months after I´d last seen Kindsvater, I went to

the café claimed my usual table (Kindsvater´s old table), and waited for the

waiter to deliver my coffee.

‘A’right?’ Arturo winked as he placed my coffee carefully on the table, together

with Kindsvater´s books.

I shivered from head to toe. Reluctantly but powerlessly, I pulled the books over

and opened the top one, it was the unfinished book. I flicked to the last written

page, to my entry, wellen. I had a half suspicion what I would find, underneath

was a paragraph written in Kindsvater´s concise script and in his trademark

green ink:

‘I write these words with an enormous sense of relief, my successor has

accepted the baton and begun his section of the marathon. I feel confident and at

peace knowing he will decide how best to continue our campaign. I wish him

well.’

I put the open book on the table and rummaged through my pockets for a pen,

but Arturo beat me to it and placed a biro across the open pages.

I looked up at him.

‘A’right?’ He said, but for the first time he wasn´t smiling