RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

Small World

Martin Suter

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About the Author

Martin Suter was born in Zürich in 1948 and now lives in Spain and Guatemala. He worked as an advertising copywriter and has written features for the nature magazine *GEO* and scripts for film and television.

FOR FATHER

Martin Suter

SMALL WORLD

TRANSLATED FROM THE GERMAN BY
Sandra Harper

VINTAGE

1

WHEN KONRAD LANG came back everything was on fire apart from the wood in the fireplace.

He lived in the Koch villa on the coast of Corfu, about 40 miles north of Kerkira. The villa's rooms, gardens, terraces and pools cascaded down to a sandy bay. Its small beach was accessible only from the sea or by a sort of funicular railway which ran through all the levels of the complex.

Strictly speaking, Konrad Lang did not live in the villa itself but in the caretaker's house, a cold, damp, stone-built annexe higher up the slope, which stood in the shade of a small pine forest next to the front gates. Konrad Lang was not one of the villa's guests, more like its manager. In return for his food, accommodation and a lump sum he had to make sure that the house was ready at any time for members of the family and their guests. He had to pay the staff's wages and the bills of the maintenance men who were locked in battle with the damp, salty air corroding the structure of the building.

A tenant took care of the farming side of things: some olive, almond, fig and orange trees and a small herd of sheep.

The winter months were stormy, rainy and cool, and Konrad had practically nothing to do, apart from driving to Kassiopi once a day to meet some of his fellow sufferers who were likewise spending the winter on the island: a retired antique dealer from England, the German lady who owned the now rather old-fashioned boutique, an elderly

painter from Austria and a couple from the west of Switzerland who were also keeping an eye on a villa. They would get together for a chat in one of the few tavernas which stayed open out of season and have a few drinks, usually one too many.

The rest of the day he would spend sheltering from the damp and cold that chilled to the marrow. The Koch villa, like many holiday villas on Corfu, was not built for winter weather. The caretaker's house did not even have a fireplace, just two electric heaters which he couldn't have on at the same time or the fuse would blow.

And so, on particularly cold days, and sometimes at night too, he would use the guest wing on the lower level. He liked it there. At the front window he felt as if he were a captain on the bridge of a luxury liner: a turquoise-blue pool beneath him, ahead of him nothing but the indifferent sea. And there were the bonuses of a very effective fireplace and a telephone. The caretaker's annexe had originally housed the staff for the guest wing below, so he could transfer calls down to the guest rooms and pretend he was where he was supposed to be. Elvira Senn, the owner of the villa, had issued instructions that the rooms of the main building were out of bounds for Konrad.

It was February. A stormy east wind had ruffled the palm trees all afternoon and driven wisps of grey cloud across the sun. Konrad decided to tuck himself away with a few piano concertos in the guests' living room at the bottom. He loaded some wood and a can of petrol on to the funicular railway and went down.

He needed the petrol to help light the wood. Two weeks ago he had ordered a load of almond wood, which burned for a long time and gave off a good heat when it was dry. But the new delivery was damp. There was no other way of lighting it except with petrol: not very elegant but effective. Konrad had done it like this dozens of times.

He built up a few sticks of firewood, poured petrol over them and lit a match. Then he went up on the railway to fetch two bottles of wine, a half-full bottle of ouzo, olives, bread and cheese from his little kitchen.

On the way back from his house he bumped into the tenant farmer, who wanted to show him a place on the wall where the saltpetre had eaten away the plaster.

As the railway car started back down the slope Konrad Lang could already smell the smoke. He put it down to the wind, which was blowing from an unusual angle off the sea and into the chimney, and thought no more about it.

When the railway car stopped at the guest wing, everything was on fire apart from the wood in the fireplace. It was one of those mishaps that happen to a person when he is lost in thought: he had piled up the firewood in the fireplace but then set light to the stack of wood at the side of the fireplace. In the time he had been away the flames had spread to the Indonesian rattan seats and from there to the ikat fabrics on the walls.

The fire might still have been tamed had the open petrol can not exploded at the very moment when Konrad Lang was getting out of the car. Konrad did the only sensible thing: he pressed the top button.

As the car crept upwards, the shaft filled with acrid smoke. Between the two upper levels the car hesitated, shuddered violently, and then stuck fast.

Konrad Lang held his sweater over his mouth and looked at the smoke, which was growing blacker and ever more dense. He levered the handle of the car door in a panic, managed to break it open somehow, held his breath and crawled up the steps at the side of the track. After only a few metres he reached the top level and emerged coughing and spluttering into the open air.

Not long before the fire, the Koch villa on Corfu had been completely refurbished by an interior designer from Holland. It was bursting at the seams with Indonesian and

Moroccan antiques, exotic textiles and ethnic kitsch. The whole lot went up like a tinder-box.

The wind fanned the flames up through the railway shaft into the living rooms on every floor and from there into the bedrooms and adjoining rooms.

By the time the fire engine arrived the fire had finished with the house and, chased by the wind over the palm trees and bougainvillea, was heading for the pine forest. The firemen confined themselves to preventing the flames spreading to the pines and surrounding olive trees. There had been surprisingly little rain for the time of year.

Konrad took himself off to the caretaker's house with a bottle of ouzo. Not until the king pine in front of the window exploded into a sheet of flames did he stagger out and watch from a distance as the fire destroyed the little white house with all his possessions.

Two days later Schöller was on the scene. He was taken round by Apostolos Ioannis, the manager of the Greek subsidiary of Koch Engineering. He poked around in the charred rubble with the toe of his shoe. He soon put his notebook away. The villa had been gutted.

Schöller was Elvira Senn's personal assistant. A thin, neat man in his mid-fifties. He fulfilled no official function in the firm – his name did not appear in the commercial register – but he was Elvira's right-hand man and as such feared even by people at the very top of the company.

Until now Konrad Lang had concealed his fear of Schöller by treating him with the condescension of a person more highly born. Although it was Schöller who gave the instructions, Konrad had managed to accept them as if they merely confirmed the result of his earlier confidential consultation with Elvira. Even though Schöller knew perfectly well that all communication between Elvira Senn and Konrad Lang went through him, he personally

held it against the arrogant old man that the *grande dame* of Swiss high finance was always pulling strings for Lang, always finding him a place in life as a companion, caretaker or general dogsbody somewhere in her broad empire and her international circle of acquaintances. Simply because he had spent a part of his youth with her stepson Thomas Koch, she felt duty-bound to keep his head above water, albeit at a distance.

For Schöller, Lang was one of his most tiresome duties. He hoped that the fire would enable him to cross “dear Koni” off his To Do list for good.

For hours Konrad Lang stood amidst the commotion of the fire-fighting teams, transfixed by the flames. He only moved to swig from the bottle or to duck as the fire plane roared low over the pine trees to drop another load of water. At some point the tenant farmer arrived with two men who wanted to question him about the incident. When they noticed that Konrad was not in a fit state to be interviewed, they took him to Kassiopi where he spent the night in a police cell.

The following morning when he was being questioned he said he could not explain how the fire had started. And he was not lying.

His memories about the cause of the fire only re-surfaced in little snippets during the course of the day. But by then he had already indignantly rejected any feelings of guilt and desperately stuck to his story. Perhaps he would have got away with it if the tenant had not stated that he had seen Konrad Lang that afternoon on his way to the guest wing with a petrol can.

As a result Lang was taken to police headquarters in Kerkira on suspicion of wilful arson pending clarification of the matter. He was still there as Schöller, in his room in the

Corfu Hilton International, washed off the soot, changed and took a tonic water from the minibar.

An hour later Lang was led out of his cell into the bare room where Schöller was waiting for him. He had spent more than 50 hours in police custody, long enough to shed all his arrogance. The man who took care to be correctly dressed and clean-shaven for every situation was now wearing soot-stained cords, filthy shoes, a dirty shirt, a crumpled tie and the once-yellow cashmere sweater that he had used as a smoke filter. His short clipped moustache merged into his stubble, strands of grey hair straggled over his face and the bags under his eyes were darker and heavier than usual. He was shaky, from agitation certainly, but mainly from the sudden withdrawal of alcohol. Lang was just past 63, but that afternoon he looked 75. Schöller ignored the hand he was offered.

Konrad Lang sat down and waited for Schöller to speak. But Schöller said nothing. He only shook his head. And when Lang shrugged his shoulders helplessly he continued to shake it.

“What now?” Konrad asked at last.

Schöller was still shaking his head.

“The almond wood. It doesn’t burn when it’s damp. It was an accident.”

Schöller folded his arms and waited.

“You’ve no idea how cold it can get here in winter.”

Schöller looked towards the window. A glorious day was drawing to a close outside.

“That’s rare for this time of year.”

Schöller nodded.

Lang turned to the officer: “Tell him a day like today is very rare for this time of year.”

The officer shrugged. Schöller looked at the clock.

“Tell them I’m not an arsonist. They’re going to keep me here.”

Schöller stood up.

“Tell them I’m an old friend of the family.”

Schöller looked down at Konrad Lang and shook his head again.

“Did you explain to Elvira that it was an accident?”

“I shall be speaking to Frau Senn tomorrow.” Schöller moved towards the door.

“What will you say to her?”

“I shall advise her to start legal proceedings.”

“It was an accident,” Lang stammered again, as Schöller walked out of the room.

The following day Schöller took the only plane that flew from Ioannis-Kapodistrias airport to Athens out of season. He had a reasonable connection back to Switzerland and by late afternoon was in Elvira’s study in the “Stöckli”. This was the name the Kochs gave to the bungalow of glass, steel and exposed concrete that a famous Spanish architect had designed for Elvira as a retirement home in the grounds of the Villa Rhododendron. It was set in over two acres of gently sloping land with little paths winding through a great range of rhododendrons, azaleas and old trees. The study, like all the rooms, faced west and had a magnificent view across the lake to a range of hills beyond and, on clear days, the Alps.

Elvira Senn had come, aged 19, to work as a nanny for Wilhelm Koch, the widowed founder of the Koch empire. His wife had died not long after the birth of her only child. Elvira soon advanced from being child minder to wife. Two years after Wilhelm’s untimely death she married again; this time the managing director of the Koch Works, Edgar Senn. He was a competent man who, during the war years, had brought prosperity to the works – an engineering

factory which was solid rather than innovative. He manufactured unavailable spare parts for German, English, French and American cars, engines and machines. After the war Senn made use of this experience and manufactured many of the same products under licence. He invested in property on a grand scale using the profits from the years of the economic miracle, sold at the right moment and thus created the means for wide diversification. Thanks to him, Koch Industries survived the recession. Not unscathed, but well enough.

It was generally believed that his shrewd hand was guided by the even shrewder hand of his wife. When Edgar Senn died of a heart attack at 60 in 1965 and the enterprise continued to thrive without a hitch, many people were confirmed in their suspicions. Koch Industries were now a well-balanced mix of companies, in several sectors: engineering, textiles, electronics, chemicals, energy. Even green technology.

Ten years ago, when Elvira announced that it was time to make room for the younger generation, she had moved into the Stöckli. But she contrived to keep a tight hold of the reins which, according to the press releases, she had handed over to her 53-year-old stepson Thomas. Although she did not remain on the board, the decisions taken at the regular meetings at her home were more far-reaching and binding than anything decided by the directors. And she wanted it to stay that way until Thomas's son Urs was ready to take over her role. She intended to miss Thomas out, for reasons to do with his character.

She received the news of the disaster in Corfu with her usual composure. She had been there only once in her life – more than 20 years ago.

"How will it look if I put him in prison?"

"You won't be putting him in prison. The courts will. They lock up arsonists, especially in Greece."

“Konrad Lang isn’t an arsonist. He’s just getting on a bit.”

“If you want them to call it causing fire by negligence we’ll have to testify in his favour.”

“And what will they do with him then?”

“He’ll be fined. If he can pay he won’t have to go to prison.”

“I don’t need to ask you what you would do in my place.”

“No.”

Elvira thought it over. The idea of knowing that Konrad Lang was safely behind bars 1,500 kilometres to the south was not entirely unattractive to her. “What are Greek prisons like?”

“Ioannis tells me everything can be made quite bearable with a few drachmas.”

Elvira smiled. She was an old woman although you would not have thought so to look at her. All her life she had spent time, trouble and money on not becoming old. From the age of 40 she had begun to undergo minor corrective cosmetic surgery at regular intervals, especially to her face. True, this had endowed her for a while with a rather prematurely well-preserved look, but now that she was 78, on good days she could pass for 60. This was not only due to money and surgery; nature had been kind to her too. She had a round baby-doll face and so, unlike other women, she had never had to choose between face and figure. She could afford to stay slim. She was healthy apart from diabetes (her GP had been discourteous enough to call it “old-age diabetes”), and because of this for several years now she had had to inject herself twice a day with delayed-effect insulin, using a syringe that looked like a fountain pen. She kept strictly to her diet, swam every day, went for massages and lymphatic drainage, spent three weeks in a clinic on Ischia twice a year and tried not to become irritated, something which was not easy for her.

The ball was still in Schöller's court. "No one can reproach you after all you've done for him. After this incident there's nowhere else you can put him. Or can you still take responsibility for him even now?"

"People will say I've put him in prison."

"Far from it. They will think well of you not suing him for damages. No one will expect you to get a man who set fire to a five-million-franc villa out of prison."

"Five million?"

"The insurance value is about four."

"How much did it cost us?"

"About two. Plus about one and a half which Herr Koch invested in it last year."

"In the interior designer, that Dutchwoman?"

Schöller nodded. "There'll never be a more convenient way of getting rid of him."

"What do I have to do?"

"That's the nice thing about it: nothing."

"Then that's what I'll do."

Elvira put on her reading glasses and turned towards a sheet of paper on the desk in front of her. Schöller stood up.

"And Thomas," she said, without looking up. "There's no need to rub Thomas's nose in every aspect of the story."

"Herr Koch will not learn anything from me."

Before Schöller had reached the door, there was a knock and Thomas Koch strode into the room.

"Koni's burnt down Corfu." He failed to notice the look that passed between Elvira and Schöller.

"Trix van Dijk has just phoned. The villa looks as if a bomb's hit it." Then he grinned. "She was there with a team from *The World of Interiors*. They wanted to do a front-page story and make a big splash about it. But there weren't any interiors any more. She says she'll kill Koni. The way she was talking, I believe her."

Koch was bald except for a tonsure of black hair; the sun broke through the clouds and shone briefly into the room, making it gleam unnaturally. His face seemed too small for the polished expanse above it, even when Thomas was grinning broadly, as at this moment.

"I think you should go and see everything's all right in Corfu, Schöller. Deal with the formalities, and for God's sake keep that van Dijk woman away from me." Koch turned back to the door.

"Oh, and get Koni out of prison. Explain to them that he's a boozer, not an arsonist."

As Thomas Koch closed the door behind him, they could still hear him chuckling: "*The World of Interiors*!"

Three weeks later Lang and Schöller met again. Apostolos Ioannis had been commissioned by Koch Industries to arrange bail and to provide Konrad Lang with temporary papers, essential clothing, some pocket money and his second-class steamer and train tickets.

Konrad Lang had spent eight rough hours on the ferry-crossing to Brindisi and then hung around the station for another three. He arrived the next day, at a quarter past five on the dot, at the address that Ioannis had given him. It was already dark.

Tannenstrasse 134 was a block of flats on a very busy street in which, despite its name, there was not a fir tree to be seen. It was in a working-class district of the town. Konrad Lang hesitated for a moment at the entrance to the flats. His slip of paper gave no indication of the floor. He studied the black name plates neatly set into an aluminium frame. "Konrad Lang" was already engraved alongside a bell for the third floor. He pressed the button and moments later the buzzer sounded. Three floors up, Schöller was waiting for him in the doorway of a flat. "Welcome home," he grinned.

Lang’s journey had lasted 33 hours. He looked almost as bad as he had at their meeting in the police headquarters in Kerkira.

Schöller showed him around the small one-bedroom flat. It was simply furnished. The kitchen cupboards and drawers contained the bare necessities of crockery and cutlery, a few pots and pans and some basic stores. There were bedclothes and towels in the bedroom cupboards and a television in the living room. Everything was new, including the fitted carpets and the paint on the walls. Just like a brand-new holiday flat, Konrad Lang thought. Apart from the noise of trams and car horns. He sat down on the reclining chair.

“The agreement goes like this,” Schöller said, sitting down on the little sofa next to him, and putting a piece of paper on the coffee table. “Frau Senn will pay for the flat. If you want to add to the furniture, you can make a list of what you would like. I have the authority to comply with your requests within reason. Insurance, health care, dentist are all taken care of. Clothing likewise. One of my female colleagues will report to you tomorrow and will accompany you and advise you on the purchase of your wardrobe. The advice will mainly be of a financial nature. She has only a modest budget.”

Schöller turned the sheet of paper over. “Diagonally opposite is the Café Delphin, a very pleasant tearoom where you can have breakfast. For your other meals we have spoken to the Blaues Kreuz, a very respectable alcohol-free restaurant four tram-stops away. Do you know it?”

Konrad Lang shook his head.

“You will have an account at both establishments which will be paid by Frau Senn. For any expenses outside this arrangement you will have 300 francs a week pocket money which you can draw every Monday from the manager of the Rosenplatz branch of the Kreditbank. He

has instructions not to give you an advance. Frau Senn has asked me to tell you that she does not expect or want anything in return for all this. But if I may add a personal piece of advice: you should avoid playing with fire from now on."

Schöller pushed the sheet of paper over the little table towards Konrad Lang and took a biro from his breast pocket. "Read that through carefully and sign both copies."

Lang took the biro and signed. He was too tired for reading. Schöller picked up his copy, stood up and went out. At the door of the flat he turned round and came back again. He had to say it. "If it had been up to me, you would have stayed in Corfu. Frau Senn is much too generous."

No reply. Konrad Lang had fallen asleep in the reclining chair.

2

I HOPE URS isn't at home, Konrad Lang thought, and rang the bell. In the past, Lang would have been able to hear it ringing far away in the Villa or even, when the wrought-iron bellpull was still working, clattering under the porch above the main door. But now he was almost 65 and his hearing was not what it used to be.

For the same reason, he also didn't hear the footsteps of a couple who had just got out of a four-wheel drive and were now approaching him. They were both wearing jodhpurs, riding jackets and muddy boots. The man was in his late twenties, tall and handsome, if you disregarded his receding chin.

The woman was younger, not much over 20, with brown hair, and pretty rather than beautiful. She looked inquiringly at her companion. He was holding his index finger to his lips.

They walked quietly up to the old man standing waiting at the garden gate. He was wearing a Burberry and a green felt hat that from a distance gave him the air of a country squire.

One of the family's many friends, the young woman presumed, and played along with it. They crept up to him on tiptoe.

Konrad Lang put his ear to the gate and listened carefully. Was that footsteps?

The couple had reached him now and the man struck the metal gate hard with the palm of his hand.

“Hello, Koni! Are you after some money?” he shouted.

Konrad Lang felt as if something had exploded in his head. He pressed his hands to his ears. His face looked strained as if he expected another blow. He recognised the young man now.

“Urs,” he said quietly, “you gave me a fright.”

He noticed the young woman standing next to Urs, who was looking quite taken aback. He raised his hat and ran his fingers through his grey hair, which was combed back from his high forehead. He looked distinguished, albeit in a rather down-at-heel way.

“Konrad Lang.” He held out his hand to her.

She shook it sympathetically. “Simone Hauser.”

“Urs and I are old friends. He doesn’t mean it like that.”

In the meantime Urs had opened the gate. The intercom crackled. “Yes?” said a woman’s voice with an accent. “Who is it?”

“No one, Candelaria,” Urs Koch replied. He held the gate open for Simone and rummaged in the pocket of his jodhpurs. Simone turned round just in time to see Urs slipping a crumpled note to the old man before slamming the gate in his face.

The clash with Urs had its good side. He was better off by a 100 francs. Perhaps because Urs regretted his ill-mannered attack, or perhaps because he wanted to impress his new girlfriend, or perhaps simply because it was the only note he could find in a hurry. At any rate a 100-franc note was a good haul. He would normally have gone away empty-handed from Urs Koch.

Probably from Tomi, too. Unless he had caught him in one of his sentimental moods. But these had become less frequent of late. Or Konrad’s timing had got worse. More often than not Thomas Koch was irritated whenever Konrad turned up. He pretended not to be there or sent him

packing over the intercom or, worse still, dismissed him to his face at the gate.

Normally one of the members of staff opened it for him. If he was lucky it was Candelaria, who would sometimes lend him 20 or 50 francs. He owed her a few hundred by now. He paid her back some smaller notes from time to time out of his pocket money, as a gesture of good will and for tactical reasons, for the next time.

Undoubtedly, a 100 francs does not go very far in the bar of the Grand Hotel des Alpes. But they treat you like a human being there and Konrad Lang needed that at the moment. The barmaid on duty in the afternoon was called Charlotte and she addressed him as Koni, like an old friend. She was old enough to have known him from the days when he sometimes occupied the tower suite in the hotel. Tomi and he, that is. Tomi in the tower suite, and Konrad in the room directly underneath it. But in those days, she told him, she had had no need to work. So she was like him, not rich but independent.

“Your good health, Koni,” she said as she brought him his Negroni.

A Negroni is the ideal afternoon drink, Koni always maintained. It looks like an aperitif but has the effect of a cocktail.

This one she was bringing him now was only the second. There would be enough for three, if you counted in Charlotte’s flutes of champagne which she poured for herself each time he gave a sign and which she placed behind the bar alongside the ashtray where her Stella Filter was smoking.

“Health and happiness,” Konrad said, raising his glass to his lips. His right ear was still ringing from Urs’s thump on the iron gate and his hand was trembling more than usual for this time of day.

The bar was nearly empty, as it tended to be in the late afternoon. Charlotte was putting dainty silver dishes of

salted nuts on the little tables. A dim light came through the curtains. Behind the bar next to the till a lamp was already on; blue smoke from Charlotte's forgotten cigarette curled upwards in its light. Roger Whittaker sang "Smile, though your heart is aching", and from the little table next to the piano came the rattle of teacups from the two Hurni sisters, waiting in silence for the pianist, as always.

The Hurni sisters were well over 80 and had moved into the Grand Hotel des Alpes a few years ago, in the same way as other people who have not inherited twelve per cent of a brewery move into an old people's home. Both of them were thin and frail right down to their unshapely legs in flesh-coloured support stockings, peeping out like sausages from under their large floral-patterned dresses. Each time they went solemnly up to the bar Konrad Lang felt he was being reminded of something from the distant past. It was so far back that it did not recall any image, but rather an intimate, long-forgotten feeling that he could not describe. It made him smile warmly at the sisters, but they always ignored him indignantly.

Konrad Lang took a little sip and put the glass back down on the table. The Negroni had to last him until the pianist arrived. Then he would order another. And a glass for Charlotte, "with a beer for the man at the piano". Then he would have to decide whether he should invest the remaining francs in a taxi or take the tram and have a few ordinary schnapps with Barbara in the Rosenhof.

It did not happen often that one of Urs Koch's girlfriends was introduced to Elvira Senn. They were all the same type and he changed them so frequently that Elvira could not tell them apart. But recently she had made inquiries about "this Simone". A sign that it would suit her plans if Urs entered into a more permanent relationship.

Elvira had chosen afternoon tea in the Villa's small drawing room for the presentation. Intimate enough to form a first impression but not so familiar as lunch, nor so official as dinner.

Urs and Simone, no longer in their riding gear, sat holding hands on a leather Breuer sofa. Thomas Koch poured champagne into four glasses.

"When we say 'for tea' it's the setting we mean, not the drink," he said, laughing. He put the bottle back into the ice bucket, gave everyone a full glass, took one for himself and raised it. "What shall we drink to?"

"To us," Elvira said, pre-empting Thomas, who was about to say something hasty. This was obviously not his first drink today and he was feeling rather euphoric about his potential daughter-in-law. As he did about all pretty young women.

In order to relieve the awkwardness of the silence that followed the toast, Urs said, "When we got back from our ride Koni was standing at the door."

"What did he want?" his father asked.

"No idea. Probably the west wing, a chauffeur-driven Bentley and an unlimited allowance. I gave him 100 francs."

"Perhaps it wasn't money he wanted. Perhaps he just wanted to pay us a visit."

"He didn't complain about it, anyway." They both laughed.

Elvira shook her head and sighed. "You shouldn't give him money. You know why."

"Simone would think me inhuman," Urs smiled.

Simone felt she had to say something. "You have to feel a bit sorry for him."

"Koni's a tragic case," Thomas Koch confirmed, pouring out champagne.

"Has Urs told you about Herr Lang?" Elvira wanted to know.

“Please don’t get me wrong, I think it’s wonderful what you’ve done for this man. And still are doing, after what happened.”

“He’s my grandmother’s little mascot.”

Thomas Koch nearly choked. “I thought mascots were supposed to be lucky charms.”

“She keeps an unlucky one. She always was a little eccentric.” The way Elvira looked at him caused Urs to stand up and give her a conciliatory kiss on the forehead.

Thomas Koch leant over towards Simone. “Koni’s all right, he just drinks too much.”

“He simply can’t get it into his head that he isn’t a member of the family. That’s his problem,” Urs added. “He doesn’t know where to draw the line. You daren’t give him an inch: he’s just one of those types. So it’s better to keep your distance.”

“Which is not always easy, as you probably saw today, Simone.” Thomas picked up a little silver bell and rang it. “But will you have some more tea?”

“I don’t know,” she answered, looking uncertainly at Urs. When he nodded, she nodded too.

As Thomas was opening the second bottle of champagne, Simone said, “It’s very sad when a person loses his dignity.”

Thomas pretended he had misunderstood her. “Don’t worry, my dear. It will take more than three glasses of champagne for me to do that.”

Father and son laughed. Simone blushed. The perfect woman for someone as self-centred as Urs, Elvira Senn thought. Perhaps a little too much make-up for the middle of the afternoon, but nice, straightforward and easy-going.

The bar at the Grand Hotel des Alpes was filling up. The lamps over the tables were on now, Charlotte was taking orders and the pianist was playing his cocktail repertoire.

The Hurni sisters were lost in thoughts of another age with the same tunes. Konrad Lang was imagining that he was the one playing.

In the summer of 1946 he had resolved to become a famous pianist. Elvira had removed Tomi from the private grammar school that spring after the school had gently brought it to her attention that her stepson would be better off at a less academic school. She had put him into an expensive boarding school on Lake Geneva and Thomas had insisted that Konrad should accompany him. Konrad, for whom the grammar school presented no difficulties, reluctantly went with him.

A large proportion of the children of those whom the war had made rich, or at least not poor, were assembled at St Pierre's in those days. The new and the old money from what remained of Europe sent their sons to the 17th-century manor to prepare them for the burden of being the future elite. Konrad lived amongst boys whose names he had previously known only as cars, banks, stock cubes, companies, and dynasties.

There were four boys to a room at St Pierre's. Thomas and Konrad's room-mates were Jean Luc de Rivière, junior member of an old banking family and Peter Court, an English boy. That was Court as in the Court Gas Mask, which had been adopted under licence by virtually all the allies. His father held the patent.

"Of Koch Industries?" Jean Luc asked of Thomas, as they shook hands amongst their suitcases.

Thomas nodded. "Of the bank?"

Jean Luc nodded. Then he offered his hand to Konrad and looked inquiringly at him and then, when he hesitated, at Thomas.

Thomas was a loyal friend provided that he was alone with Konrad. But as soon as someone else turned up whom he wanted to impress he was quick to change sides.

“He’s the son of a former employee of ours,” Thomas explained. “My mother’s helping him.”

This also settled the question as to who was given the bed by the door.

From then on Konrad was treated with patronizing politeness by all the schoolboys. Never once – in the whole of his time at St Pierre’s – was he involved in any of their many intrigues and never once was he the victim of their cruel pranks. They could not have made it any clearer to him that they did not regard him as their equal.

Konrad tried everything. He surpassed the most nonchalant in nonchalance, the coolest in cool, the most insolent in insolence. He made himself look ridiculous simply to make them laugh and he invited punishment simply to impress them. He climbed over the wall and bought wine in the village. He obtained cigarettes and porn magazines. He kept watch for his fellow schoolboys during their rendezvous with Geneviève, the head gardener’s daughter.

But in this schooling for life as a rich man, Konrad forever remained the one who had forgotten to bring the most important prerequisite: money.

At the farewell party before the summer holidays of 1946 – St Pierre’s, as an international institution, began its school year in the autumn – Konrad decided to become a pianist.

It was a sultry day in June. The gates of St Pierre’s were standing wide open, and the limousines were lined up nose to tail on the large gravel square in front of the main building. On the lawn at the lakeside they had set up seating in front of a small stage with a grand piano and alongside it, under a canopy, a cold buffet. Parents, brothers and sisters, old boys, teachers and pupils stood holding glasses and plates, chatting in small groups and looking with increasing concern at the sky. Heavy clouds were gathering.

Konrad stood with Thomas Koch and Elvira Senn. She was holding a conversation in French with Jean Luc de Rivière's mother. Like all the pupils, Konrad was wearing a school blazer with the gold embroidered emblem of a cross, anchor and bishop's crosier, and a green, blue and gold striped school tie. The mothers had put their hair up and were wearing silk floral-patterned summer dresses, the few fathers who had taken time off to collect their sons were wearing dark lightweight suits, white shirts and ties, here and there in the St Pierre colours.

In the midst of this elegant, self-assured society, unnoticed by the smiling groups that casually broke up and re-formed again, stood a small, pale, stooping man in a badly fitting morning suit, sipping at his empty glass. As Konrad was watching him, the man caught his eye and gave him a smile.

Konrad almost smiled back but then he remembered how the others had all been avoiding the little man and, so as not to make a blunder, let his gaze wander coolly away.

The first thunder rolled over the lake and heavy raindrops began to spot the summer outfits of the guests. In no time at all the lawn was empty, the grand piano covered and the group reassembled, laughing and gasping, in the gym where the senior teachers had prepared a second grand piano and everything else necessary in the event of bad weather.

During the headmaster's speech and the solemn goodbyes of those who had done their final exams Konrad searched in vain along the rows for the inconspicuous little man whose melancholy smile he had not returned. Not until the headmaster announced the musical part of the ceremony, a piano recital by the pianist Jósef Wojciechowski, did he see him again. Suddenly there he was standing on the stage, bowing and sitting down at the piano, waiting with his smile until the noise had died down