

# WHAT CAN STILL BE DONE

Lorenz Langenegger

Translation by Simon Pare

## 2

Manuel had never really thought about what job he might one day do. As a kid he wrote 'composer' on the relevant line in the school yearbook. When he was twelve Daniela told him that composer wasn't a proper profession, not something you could become. To be a composer you had to be dead. Wouldn't he rather be a bank manager?

Daniela was his first girlfriend. If he counted the two days they had spent passing messages secretly back and forth during lessons, then their relationship had lasted a week. Maybe it would have lasted longer if he'd backed down, but Martin and Heinz in his class already wanted to be bank managers, and he didn't like Heinz. He was the only boy ahead of him when they had to line up in order of height. Manuel's best friend Roman wanted to be a programmer, but Manuel couldn't go along with him because he had no idea what a programmer was. When he met Daniela many years later at a class reunion, she had become head secretary in a consultancy firm. Heinz wasn't a bank manager, but he did drive a fast car and do something financial.

Even though their relationship didn't extend beyond the first weekend, Manuel couldn't get what Daniela had said out of his head. He asked his mother if being a composer was a real job. She hesitated and asked why he wanted to know. His mother was the last person he wanted to talk to about his unhappy love affair. He heard that it was too early to agonise over career plans.

Manuel moved out of his parent's house at the age of twenty into a flat share with a photographer and a maths student. He signed up for university courses in political science

and journalism but in fact spent less time in seminar rooms and lecture theatres than in pubs near the campus where the beer was not too expensive and the music loud enough. Despite finishing his first year without any clearer idea of what he might do later, he did know that university wasn't teaching him the life skills he needed. He rang his father to tell him that he need not pay the fees any more.

'What does that mean?' his father wanted to know.

'I'm breaking off my studies.'

'And what are you going to do instead?'

Manuel started with his friend Roman. Even before he had completed his computer science degree, Roman had set up a restaurant platform that matched hungry diners with available tables. Manuel didn't had no need to use any rhetorical skills to persuade his friend to employ him – it was impossible to find enough reliable and capable staff to keep pace with the platform's rapid growth.

A few months later Manuel met Sonia at a new Italian restaurant he'd been assigned to review. She was sitting at the next table with a girlfriend and was surprised to see him order a five-course menu and a bottle of wine all for himself. When her friend started yawning and said goodbye, Manuel made the most of the situation and invited Sonia to join him, pointing out that the bottle was still half full. He was glad to find that she knew and used BestResto; in two days she'd be able to read his report about how the food tasted today. He was encouraged by the fact that he made her laugh.

When the owner politely asked them to leave the garden shortly before closing time, Manuel and Sonia agreed that it was too early to go home. The next morning they stayed in a bed for a long time and lingered over breakfast. Then Sonia took him through the cemetery to the parks department's tropical palm houses. For over an hour they sat on two chairs by the artificial pond watching the turtles and coy carp splashing about in the water. They were sufficiently entertained by the fish keeping themselves stationary with the odd flick of a fin or a small turtle clambering onto a larger one's shell to get closer to the heat lamp.

Manuel finally found out what he had become when he quit his job because Sonia and he were moving to Vienna. Roman asked him to check the advert he was intending to post on the relevant job sites. The company was looking for a half-time content manager (m/f). The promise was an attractive environment in a young company with flexible hours and

opportunities for promotion. Applicants must be graduates with good foreign language proficiency who could work independently, diligently and efficiently. People who wanted to take on Manuel's job had to be better qualified than he was and able to cope with a heavy workload and stay calm even when the pressure was on. Manuel printed out the advert and knocked on the door of Roman's office.

'Are you serious about this?'

'Please send me your corrections in writing.'

'Keep calm even when the pressure is on?'

'Annika's words.'

'Who's Annika?'

'Annika has been Head of HR for the past month.'

'What does she do?'

'Just send it out.'

'Why a half-time job? That must be a mistake.'

Manuel had increased his working hours long ago. At his last appraisal he had asked Roman if he could hand over some of his administrative tasks to a secretary so he had enough time for content.

'I started off at twenty hours a week. You know about all the extra tasks added since.'

'You still type with two fingers.'

'With two fingers I'm nearly as fast as—'

'Young people are sharp.'

'Young people?'

BestResto was a classic garage start-up apart from the fact that such things were not established in garages in Zurich but at the Institute of Technology. Roman had graduated with a computer science degree in record time but had actually wanted to become a diplomat. Having failed to make it through the second round of tests for the Swiss foreign ministry, he had focused on the other passion in his life – good food. His scheme satisfied the needs of both diners and restaurant owners. It grew a thousandfold in the very first years, and major breweries and food companies soon came on board. BestResto's main pitch was selling free tables to hungry diners, publishing menus and doing promotions, but obviously rising clicks

and user numbers made it an increasingly attractive advertising platform. Manuel was in charge of witty reviews and moderating user comments.

‘Do you mean to spend the rest of your life writing food reviews?’

Sonia had got a job with a leading publishing house as its representative in Austria. She would now travel around the country twice a year visiting bookshops. In Vienna Manuel would at last have time to do all the things he had always wanted to do. In Vienna he would be liberated from office routine and become the man he really was. He had worked for Roman for years, sitting in his office day after day and week after week, first in an old flat near the main station, then in the converted arch of a disused railway viaduct. He had stayed too long for Sonia’s liking. Manuel had bristled at this suggestion. The company’s early years had been a gas. He appreciated working as part of a team and liked the friendly atmosphere. If he wasn’t making any headway on a piece, someone would always be up for a game of table football. The Wednesday strategy meeting made a nice change from the daily grind. Every first Friday in the month Roman would fire up the barbecue at six o’clock sharp, whatever the weather, whatever the season.

Sonia urged Manuel to be brave and make the leap to Vienna. ‘You’re not really interested in the restaurant industry.’

‘That’s not quite true. I like good food.’

‘As long as the portions are big enough.’

In her opinion his primary job was to moderate the comments section. A Sisyphian task. And even if you thought Sisyphus was happy, she was sure it wasn’t right for Manuel.

Sonia listed the attractions of Vienna: the coffee houses, the theatres and museums, psychoanalysis. Where else could Manuel enjoy such favourable conditions? He had been writing for years, developing a style of his own with acerbic wit and a sense of humour that people liked. In Vienna he’d be free to write whatever he wanted. Compared with Zurich, life was cheap. He’d built up some savings. He had a steady job. And at long last he’d have time for what was essential.

Manuel had to agree with Sonia that moderation was taking up an ever-increasing share of his working time and reminding people to stay polite and considerate wasn’t much fun. But what was essential?

As he walked along the airport corridors, Manuel wondered what caused the feeling of home that had hit him almost immediately he got off the plane. He couldn't have landed here more than a dozen times, which was a lot in comparison with his grandparents who had never flown in their lives, but not very much compared with the countless times he'd arrived at the main station from every conceivable direction. Why did arriving at the airport feel different? Was it the gleaming surfaces? Impeccable straight joints, not a cable out of place, the impeccable finish. His father had always been proud of Swiss quality and could get extremely worked up if someone used the country's flag illicitly to advertise their services. If Manuel mentioned the high prices, his father would slam his fist on the table. Switzerland wasn't more expensive, just more consistent. Maybe that was why he didn't live here any more, Manuel thought; because he preferred the improvised and distrusted the perfect?

*Landed and waiting for my suitcase. Going home. Where and when should we meet?*

The baggage claim belt continued to revolve with nothing on it even after the alarm sounded, as if to prove his father wrong. Manuel looked around. Welcome messages from industrial companies, digital cowbells and chirping birds. He was astonished that of all places it was the airport that triggered this pleasantly melancholy feeling. Maybe it was grief making him susceptible? Even though aeroplanes had long since become a mode of transport for the masses, many airlines still used courtesy to convey a sense of exclusivity.

*Still busy. I'll drop in this evening. About 9?*

Was that his suitcase? Matthias's reply had distracted him. Manuel pushed his way past three or four other people waiting and had almost reached the case when a businessman picked it up from the belt, deftly sidestepped the queue and headed straight for the exit. Manuel watched him go with disbelief until he realized he had no cause to be indignant. The man's suitcase, which happened to look like Manuel's, had come round before his own. But what if it was Manuel's? Did he trust the stranger or was he merely scared of looking ridiculous if he ran after him to make sure?

*We're coming into our inheritance, so we'll drink the best bottle in the cellar.*

Manuel hesitated as he walked through the green channel to declare that he had no duty to pay. He was in no hurry: the two uniformed customs officials were very welcome to open his suitcase, shine a torch into it and let their dog sniff it. It was as if his father's death would only become an irreversible fact when he entered the empty house. As long as he was travelling, he imagined that his father was like Schrödinger's cat – simultaneously dead and alive. His final state would be decided only when Manuel opened the front door. The uniformed men didn't react to Manuel's inviting nods.

*Two bottles.*

He put his phone away and looked for the fastest way to the station. The arrivals hall with its many stores and counters looked different every time. A new jeweller here, silk ties and sewn-welted shoes instead of chocolate there. Surprisingly, the currency exchange booth was the one fixed point by which he could get his bearings. There were more ticket machines than before and he didn't need to queue behind tourists confused by the many options. He typed in his destination and paid by card. The next train to the main station was leaving in a couple of minutes, so Manuel walked onto the escalator and was greeted by a whiff of rust and iron as he descended to the underground tracks.

He started as the train pulled away. Had he forgotten his card in the machine? He searched his rucksack for his wallet and couldn't immediately find it. He could feel sweat starting to ooze out of his pores. *No way, oh please*, he thought and gradually, even before he had found it, he could picture himself putting his card back. Yes, he was almost certain. He had read the display message: *Transaction complete. Please remove your card.* Finally his fingers touched the smooth, worn leather, and the card was in its proper place. He leaned back, slipped off his shoes and put his feet up on the seat opposite.

*Looking forward to it. See you later.*

Manuel opened the coin pocket. The key to his parents' house was there among the small change left over from his previous trip to Switzerland. He'd stopped carrying the key around on a fob when he left home. He'd removed it to give it back to his parents, but they'd insisted he keep it and it had been in the coin compartment ever since. He turned it over in his fingers and read *keller*.

He forced open the ring with his thumbnail and slid the key onto it. His father had made their surname his company name and then a brand. After completing his studies as a mechanical engineer, he had developed and patented a variation on the symmetrical dimple key. The primary advantage of his key was not that it was particularly secure but that it was cheap to make and could be easily copied by store owners selling shoelaces, heels and replacement keys at every major station.

His father had been a DIY freak and a tinkerer. Their house was full of homemade machines intended to simplify daily life but which tended not to work because the man preferred inventing new machines to maintaining and mending the old ones. He also invented machines that had already been around for some time. He would rather open his garage door by hand because his automatic system was on the blink than equip it with a reliable sensor he could have bought at any DIY store for peanuts. His wife in particular had to battle with the irks and quirks of his boffin-like activities. There were days when she could only get out of the kitchen through the window because the door latch was on strike. If his father happened to be away on a business trip marketing his keys, a week might pass when he and Matthias had to clamber in and out of the window when they returned from school hungry.

Manuel's father set up his company just after receiving his degree from the Federal Institute of Technology during a solemn ceremony. The banks vied with one another to give him a loan. The secretary he had handpicked even before he designed the machine to manufacture his dimple keys succumbed to his charms in a matter of weeks. Within three months she was pregnant, the wedding was six months later, and before they could celebrate the company's first anniversary, she left the firm again. A new secretary was hired. Manuel slept through the ground-breaking ceremony for the construction of the factory in his pram. His first birthday coincided with the delivery of the first cut keys. By the time he was thirty his father knew precisely what he would do with the rest of his life.

Since quitting his job with Roman, Manuel had changed his social insurance status to self-employed. He was a freelancer. This had sounded enticing when he moved to Vienna, but now his savings had run out. Sonia had taken over paying the entire rent. But how was he going to earn money next month, next year? A few years ago he may well have got a foot in the door somewhere as a university dropout and had the chance to prove himself, but nowadays? His CV wasn't exactly impressive. His father had never had to contend with such

matters. Engineers were in demand. What would his father advise? He could only have an opinion about self-employment by considering his son as a company.

Manuel had rung him up about seven one morning. He imagined his father sitting in his office with a view over the industrial area as the sun was just rising over the horizon. He was in an excellent mood.

‘Listen. You have to be concise. People have no time. They’re constantly distracted. They want to be entertained. Who reads big novels nowadays? *War and Peace*? There’s enough of that in the news.’

Manuel sat up when his father mentioned the book. ‘How did you guess I was writing a book?’

‘Clear, concise and clever. The three Cs.’

‘And funny?’

Clear, concise, clever comedy. Even better!’

His father was a born entrepreneur. He radiated optimism. He made a success of everything he put his mind to. It wasn’t all down to skill, though. He had improved an existing key and been lucky enough that officials considered his product patentable. A new age had dawned. Prosperity drove population growth, scaffolding and cranes dominated the landscape, and every new building was fitted with a lock. Every bar, every garden gate and every chicken coop needed securing.

‘What are you up to in Vienna?’ his father asked.

‘I only just got here.’

‘Sonia tells me you want to write.’

‘You’ve talked to Sonia?’

‘She’s my daughter-in-law.’

‘We aren’t married.’

‘As good as.’

Manuel remembered their sitting together in the garden on a summer evening. He was at an age when you’re not yet grown-up but already precocious. His father wasn’t sleeping because of a lack of qualified personnel. An experiment with an Indian engineer, expensively headhunted by a recruitment firm, had proved a failure after only a few months, and the other staff were working overtime. The friendly, family-like atmosphere in the company was

in danger of turning sour. His mother was clearing the table. His brother was whining because he didn't see why he had to go to bed while it was still light and Manuel wanted his father to tell him if increasing prosperity was leading to more stealing and causing more robberies. Did prosperity corrupt morals, and would the right sum necessarily turn everyone into a thief? Or was the number of crimes stable and there were more locks because the losses were keeping pace with increasing prosperity? His father looked at him in bemusement. He talked about investments and larger machines and more storage space and how he could never have imagined that rising demand would become a headache. He scratched the back of his head with his biro, scribbled something on a paper napkin, got up and went inside. Manuel watched him go and wondered if his father really had been selling more and more keys for all these years without considering what caused the trend and what it signified.

Several small and medium-sized construction companies had chosen his father's dimple key; the big ones negotiated unbeatable terms with the market leader. Still, the market was big enough for the *keller* company to keep growing throughout its first twenty years in business. The firm reached its peak in the nineties when it employed just under thirty people and was swamped with work. The bank tried to persuade his father to take out a loan to finance new factories and expand abroad. His adviser pressed him to borrow the money with talk of possibilities for growth and unique opportunities, declaring that the potential was particularly attractive in eastern Europe. His father declined. He didn't want growth at any cost. His family came before the company, and Matthias was still small. Manuel's brother's difficult birth and the doctor's urgent warnings not to have a third child had convinced his father to have a vasectomy. He had always wanted at least four children, preferably five or six.

After his wife's far too early death he attached his affections to the children as if they lived on in her stead – which was partly true. It was so unjust that she had been hit by a 4x4 while walking along the pavement one dazzlingly bright and beautiful spring morning and knocked onto the other side of the road where an 88-year-old driver had reacted too slowly to avoid a second collision; Manuel's father had enough love for her for many decades to come. During the three days when doctors fought to save his wife's life, he tried to give her as much of that love as he could. He divided between Manuel and his brother what was left when her heart stopped beating. It was too much. The children felt swamped.

It felt like a betrayal. Manuel had actually intended to broach the subject immediately after saying hello, but when his father opened the door in an apron, he couldn't bring himself to do it. His father had assumed the role of widower with the same confidence and seriousness as he had those of husband, father and entrepreneur. He learned to cook, he did his own washing and he ironed his shirts. He took care of the flowers in the front garden. After Manuel had praised the chocolate mousse and turned down an offer of brandy, he finally dared to put the slip of paper with the psychologist's contact details on the table. His father picked it up, studied it and looked at his son with astonishment.

'You think I need help?'

Manuel didn't know where to look, 'Yes, Matthias and I think it would do you good to talk to someone.'

'OK then, let's do it.'

He put the piece of paper by the phone. It was done. Manuel was relieved. His father poured him a brandy.

He only went to see the psychologist as a favour to his children. As soon as he got home from the first session, he rang Manuel to tell him that he and the doctor had agreed he didn't need treatment. 'I told you there was no need to worry about me.' The healthy, of whom he considered himself one, had a responsibility not to place unnecessary demands on the health system.

Manuel and his brother were just as affected by the loss of their mother, especially Matthias who had only just moved out. His spartan room in a hall of residence and parties in the communal kitchen did nothing to alleviate his silent pain. Manuel took him in for a while, and they had never been closer than they were back then. The anger, grief and doubts that tormented them didn't prevent their father from reverting to blithely celebrating life – even in the eulogy. The fact that he spoke through tears only reinforced the impression his words made on the gathering. There was unanimous praise for his attitude afterwards. Manuel could have strangled him.

After getting off the train at the main station he looked for a quiet corner to phone Sonia. It took a while to establish the connection, and through the silence he heard the soft wheezing sound again. He took a step to one side and turned around; there was no one behind him.

Irritated, he held the phone away from his ear. He pinched his nose and cleared his ears. There was a pop, but the noise was still there. He could see from the display that he had already been on the phone with Sonia for five seconds.

‘Hello?’

More silence, more wheezing. He hung up. The noise didn’t hurt, but it was annoying. Manuel dialled again. This time he was informed within seconds by the familiar voice that the person he was calling was currently unavailable. It was quite possible that Sonia hadn’t yet landed in Vienna. After the beep he apologised for his failed message and asked her to ring him back when she arrived.

He took the tram and within half an hour he was standing outside his parents’ house in a calm Zurich suburb. It looked the same as ever. Brown tiles on the pitched roof, the rendering on the outside walls grey with a hint of green, white window frames and doors, the garage door. The fir tree towering dark green and heavy over the roof. Legend had it that the first owner had planted it to mark the birth of his child who had a heart condition. It should have been felled years ago, not only because it cast permanent shade on the first-floor rooms but also because its roots were damaging the cellar walls.

Two days ago his father had locked the door behind him and taken a taxi to the hospital. Had he called it to home or to the office? Manuel didn’t know. His father hadn’t mentioned it. If the old Saab was in the garage, it was likely that he’d taken it from here. On the other hand, his father often took the tram to his office when he didn’t have appointments elsewhere. Manuel would have to piece together many of the details of the preceding days like a detective. Were they important, though? Why this need to know everything about his final hours? There were so many days and weeks of his father’s life that Manuel knew nothing about.

His face and hair were damp with drizzle. It was unusually cold for the time of year and almost dark, even though it wasn’t yet seven. As Manuel pushed the gate open and stepped on the first stone slab, the outside light came on. He thought back to how long his father had stood on the ladder under the overhanging roof until the movement sensor was working properly. It was only when he took the house key out of his pocket that the realisation hit him for the first time with full force that he was an orphan. There was no one left here. He was the oldest in his family and statistically the next to die.

Manuel unlocked the door to hide his tears from the neighbours. He pressed down the handle but something held him back – he didn't dare go inside. He pulled the door shut again and sat down on the top step. Awaiting him inside was not only his own bedroom and his mother's wardrobe that his father had never disposed of, but also his father's everyday affairs: the newspaper on the kitchen table, the dirty coffee mugs he liked to leave in the sink until the cupboard was bare, maybe even some glimpses of the private life he would never have offered his son of his own volition. Manuel didn't want to know about his father's sex life. He didn't care if his father wore nappies, took antidepressants or piled up empty whisky bottles in the cellar; he wanted to remember him as he had presented himself.

He called his brother and was relieved when he picked up the phone.

'Where are you?' Matthias asked.

'I can't go inside.'

'What can't you do?'

'I can't do it.'

'Where are you?'

'Sitting outside the front door.'

'But you have a key.'

'That isn't the problem.'

'OK, I've just got to finish up something here and I'll be with you in a couple of hours. Will you wait for me to eat?'

Of course Matthias knew what Manuel's problem was. Though their father's death must have affected him, so far he had shown no emotion. He complained about the inconvenience of it happening now, even though he knew that there was no good timing for a relative's sudden death. Matthias was just preparing his second field trials with genetically modified wheat – a subject on which everyone lost their minds. Only one time, when his brother was doing his PhD and involved in the first trials, did Manuel venture to express his naïve and sceptical thoughts.

Matthias looked at him with amazement. 'Of course there are old, endangered plant varieties, but what does that have to do with my research? What would you say if a few crazy people broke into your house and destroyed your books, all because there are already enough

books in the world? They justify their actions with the fear that the new books are a threat to the old ones, even though there's no quantifiable evidence that they are.'

'It makes a difference, though, whether my intention is to improve an old story or invent a new one,' Manuel offered in justification. Matthias merely shook his head.

After this, Manuel studied the statement of the Expert Committee for Biosafety, but his school knowledge didn't allow him to make sense of what Pm3 alleles did. His little brother was now the university's youngest professor and conducting his own field trials. Manuel was proud of Matthias and didn't mind being left to stand out in the cold because he had one more petri dish under his microscope that would otherwise spoil by tomorrow.

It was raining harder now. Manuel had no choice but to go into the house alone. Maybe if he looked around the house first, he could spare his brother a nasty sight. There had always been something awkward about this rising instinct to protect his brother; if anyone could get by on his own it was Matthias. Unlike Manuel he had always been a leader as a child. He set the tone and everyone had always wanted to be friends with him. It was Manuel's good fortune to be so much older than Matthias. If they had been only a couple of years apart, he would have had to experience the shame of being outdone by his little brother as early as primary school.

Manuel stood up and imagined what Matthias might do in his shoes. He was sure that his brother would not hesitate to go inside. He wouldn't read their name engraved on the key either. He wouldn't think of the factory or the staff or Mrs Sabine, their father's longstanding secretary, and what might become of her now. The only thing on Matthias's mind would be to get in out of the rain. Everything else could be dealt with over a cup of tea.

He opened the door and went inside. He took off his shoes and hung up his jacket next to his father's camel-hair coat. He examined the high-class item. It didn't fit him, but maybe his brother? It was warm in the house. His father had had no reason to turn down the heating. Now what? Where first? He climbed the stairs to the first floor to put down his suitcase. Everything in his room was as he had left it at the end of his previous visit. Even the homeless paper was still there on top of the piano. He'd bought it from a woman who was standing so inconspicuously and quietly outside the supermarket that he wasn't sure if she would be happy to be unmasked as a newspaper vendor.

The washbasin in the bathroom was clean. Under the mirror he found a piece of used dental floss. Manuel picked it up with his fingertips and threw it away. There were a few crumpled paper tissues and an empty bottle of mouthwash in the bin. What was he doing? Was he checking if his father had kept himself clean? He felt like an idiot. Why did he assume he would find something he'd rather not know about? He didn't believe there was any hidden dark side to his father, so there was no point acting as if he might stumble across a secret trapdoor in the cellar or bedroom.

Manuel heard his phone ringing some way off. He ran down the stairs and rummaged hastily through his jacket pockets. It was too late by the time he laid his hands on it. He went into the kitchen, put on the kettle and washed up a mug. Sonia left a message. She'd finally landed in Vienna. Her flight had been delayed because a piece of luggage had to be unloaded. How could someone check in their luggage on time and yet miss their flight? She groaned. Now she was on the bus, heading home.

Manuel looked on the key rack for the spare key to the letterbox and slipped his shoes back on. He rifled through the post and threw the begging letters in the bin. He put the phone and health insurance bills to one side. Did they still need paying?

The living room looked deserted, but it had been that way for a long time, not just today. One decorative cushion was lying on the floor by the window. Manuel patted the dust off it and put it on the sofa. Since his mother's death his father had lived in the kitchen. When he got home from work he would sit down at the round table and eat some cheese on toast or, if he couldn't face the effort, have a sandwich and a beer, though not from the fridge – too cold. He would only tidy up the living room if non-family guests came round, people he couldn't host in the kitchen, but that was a very rare occurrence.

Manuel booted up his computer. Where was the Wi-Fi password? When was he due to meet the undertaker tomorrow morning? Was there time to go to the hospital beforehand? He stared at the cursor and all of a sudden he heard the quiet, regular wheezing again. Was it coming from the computer? Wasn't the ventilation working properly? He put his ear to the keyboard. The sound wasn't any louder. He gulped. It was still there. The tea was still too hot so he drank a glass of water and turned on the radio.

Matthias came into the house a little after ten o'clock and gave him a hug. He asked how Sonia was and whether his flight hadn't been expensive at such short notice. His brother

strolled around their parents' house quite naturally as they talked. He switched on the living room light, pulled back the curtain and glanced out into the garden; he went into the bathroom to wash his hands. He behaved as if he still lived there. It was only when he came back into the kitchen that he stopped. It hadn't occurred to Manuel that he wasn't sitting in his normal place. The kitchen table was round. Their mother's side had remained empty for years. When the three of them met up, no one contemplated sitting down on her chair. Matthias didn't say anything. He opened the fridge.

'Cheese on toast?' he asked, and they both laughed.

Manuel went down into the cellar to fetch a bottle of wine, then hesitated as he came back into the kitchen. Should he sit down on their father's chair again? Matthias gave him an encouraging nod.

'Go for it. You're the elder.'