Marja Pruis – Homework



English Dossier

Sample translation by Antoinette Fawcett

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‘She exposes the complexity of the zeitgeist and the hypocrisy of a cultural elite, which pretends that there is no distinction between the underclass and the upper class, and crampedly tries to keep up the appearance of equality.’ *Het Parool*

- A reimagining of *Mrs. Dalloway*
- Reminiscent of Deborah Levy and Rachel Cusk
- 7.500 copies sold
- **Named one of the best books of the year by *de Volkskrant, Trouw and NRC***
- Translation subsidy available

About the book

As Clara Feij settles into her new home in Amsterdam, she can't help but think it's the most beautiful house she's ever seen. She leaves cleaning to a parade of workers, refugees from their own country. When Rose comes to her home, everything changes. How can you help someone, if you know nothing about her? And how do you continue to trust someone, when everything argues against her?

Homework is a confrontational novel about intimate happiness and domestic betrayal. About being the boss and not wanting to be. With great precision, Marja Pruis exposes the confusion in which wealthy westerners are caught with their good intentions.

Novel | 216 pages | 46,000 words | First published: September 2023

About the author

Marja Pruis is a writer, columnist and editor of *De Groene Amsterdammer*. Her novels received nominations for the Golden Owl, the AKO Literature Prize, the Libris Literature Prize and the Anna Bijns Prize. For her essays and columns, collected in *Kiss me, Punish Me*, *Enough About Me* and *Solutions*, she received the Jan Hanlo Essay Prize, the J. Greshoff Prize and the J. L. Heldring Prize.



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The Press on *Homework*:

The Press on Homework

'you could be seduced by her wisdom, her open narrative style, her ingenious technique, while losing sight of the limitations of her vision. That boomerang returns. Marja Pruis knows how to make something painful out of her delicious cleverness.'
*****NRC Handelsblad*

'It's pleasant to be inside Clara's head [...] A novel full of linguistic ingenuity. […] The storyline is the glue between the swirling thoughts on the zeitgeist, on ageing, femininity, literature and shame, the wanderings that betray the puckish essayist in Pruis.'
Trouw

Through a small event, Pruis broaches big themes. *Homework* deals with racism, gentrification, ageing and the generation gap, betrayal and ethics, all in a subtle, elegant way. […] 'In *Homework*, Pruis uses everything that makes her essays so appealing and adds the power of fiction. […] she is an outstanding novelist.'
*****De Standaard der Letteren (BE)*

'With smooth sentences that glide like a knife through butter, she draws the reader into the story. Delightful! […]'She exposes the complexity of the zeitgeist and the hypocrisy of a cultural elite, which pretends that there is no distinction between the underclass and the upper class, and crampedly tries to keep up the appearance of equality.'
Het Parool

'a sharp novel about a spoilt Western woman full of good intentions.'
De Volkskrant

'Homework is about how Western man is trapped in his good intentions [...] Pruis won't let you get away with it easily.'
Nieuwsweekend

'Homework is a typical Pruis; bouncy, associative, multifaceted, imaginative, humorous, you regularly burst out laughing, but ultimately more serious than expected.'
Tzum

'Light-hearted, beautifully composed - gives food for thought. Marja Pruis at her best'
De Leeuwarder Courant

'Thinking conscientiously about the little things in life that are actually very big; Marja Pruis brings it close and makes it recognizable. She does this carefully, with integrity and credibility'
Friesch Dagblad

'This novel is worth your time […]with essayistic digressions on good intentions, hypocrisy and complacency.'
De morgen (BE)

‘With *Homework*, Marja Pruis has written an intriguing, cleverly constructed novel about current human relationships.’
boekenbijlage.nl

‘Beautiful and meaningful here is the way Pruis cycles her narrative. [..]Confronting’
MappaLibri (BE)

On other work of Marja Pruis:

'One of the best writers of our time.'
HP/De Tijd

‘Pruis virtuosically plays various literary registers. […] She also seduces readers for whom her subjects are strictly unknown territory, thanks to her breathtakingly accessible style.'
Jury report Jan Hanlo Essay Prize

Erudite, but never pedantic […] Critical of what she sees, including her own reflection. Shamelessly shameless. Aptly, intelligently uninhibited, mundane and unexpected.'
Jury Report J. Greshoff Prize

'The queen of the personal essay.'
Connie Palmen in De Volkskrant

Her words are highly constructed and at the same time give the impression of being off the cuff, as if she is just telling it all to you over a coffee’
De Standaard

‘Literature, life, death, discomfort. That's what Pruis writes about smoothly and superlatively.'
De Revisor

'Marja Pruis approaches literature and life in her own unique way, and writes her opinion in a compelling and witty way.'
Anna Enquist

Sample translation of Marja Pruis' *Huiswerk* (2023) [Homework] Chapters 1-3, Part 1 (pp. 13 – 22), by Antoinette Fawcett.

‘Mrs Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself.
For Lucy had her work cut out for her.’
Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*

1

My hairdresser is addressing me.

'I feel I've been violated by eight Indians,' he says, twisting my hair into a knot with his firm hands.

His assistant has unexpectedly skedaddled. I'd already spotted he wasn't there, shuffling around in the background. Soon after being promoted from shampooing and blow-drying to colouring, he breezed off and left Mascini for a competitor, taking a few regular clients with him. Incidentally, he doesn't come from India, as Mascini persists in thinking, but just from England.

'It's a betrayal, Clara.'

Mascini has rather strong ideas and emotions. He once bit someone so hard that his victim had to go to A&E. About how you should handle dogs, he says the following: you should enter a room first, and only then let the dog in. Otherwise who's the boss? Not that I've got a dog, but he has.

When his dog wouldn't stop barking because it was so happy they were going to the beach, he halted his car by the side of the road and told it in no uncertain terms that they'd turn right round and go home if it didn't stop at once. Once, in primary school, everyone was allowed to bring their nicest toys to school with them. He took his Barbie doll with him, and all the little clothes his mother had knitted her, against his mum's advice.

'It *was* my nicest toy!' he shouts out, as if I might also have found this unwise.

I've got no choice except to listen to him, because I'm sitting on a chair with my back to the wall. The dye has to penetrate my hair for at least three quarters of an hour. I always bring a book with me, but actually I listen to him for forty-five minutes and the book stays on my lap. I like listening to him.

Why the topic of Rose came up, I don't know anymore. He thinks I should sack her. I probably thought I should tell him something too. And it's certainly not a coincidence that I presented it as something semi-scandalous to feed him with. Although I couldn't really see the scandal in someone reacting to my advert for a cleaner on Helpling's website – an official agency – and me intending to pay them above-board but having it made clear to me the first time she crossed the threshold that she'd rather be paid cash-in-hand.

'It's better for me, you know,' she said.

I can hear her saying it, with that unique accent and diction, as if she were pushing the words out of her mouth. There's a cheerful vigour behind everything she says.

I instantly found her attractive, let's not beat about the bush. That sometimes happens. Though when I think about this a little longer: not very often. After all, you've got to get accustomed to most people. You have to see them smile a few times to perceive something pleasant in their appearance, you have to learn to understand why they make so much noise when they come up the stairs, you've got to grasp how their hair works.

I don't grasp much about Rose, but enough to keep looking and listening. To go into a bit more detail about her hair: she surprises me each time by the way she's twisted it into braids on her head, or has combed it all out into an enormous bush, or wrapped it all up in a sea-green cloth. When she comes upstairs and I see yet another Rose coming in, my cry of surprise always makes her laugh.

At first, if I couldn't stop myself from letting her know how beautiful I thought her hair looked, I still said it in English, but she really wants to learn to speak Dutch. Of course, I want to help her.

'You pass the test again every week,' Mascini says.

The way he says this it's like a path full of booby-traps has been set out for me. I don't really like looking at my life this way, or at how I deal with things. That would mean I'm a sucker, or a trusting soul, to put it a little more kindly. Someone who is off their guard. But I don't want to be like that either, always on guard. I want to trust my instincts. And I instinctively opened my heart to Rose, to her hair, her flip-flops parked by the door, her swift way of walking.

This sounds might sound a bit ridiculous now, but I also like the way she smells. Spicy and heavy.

Mascini: 'She knew right from the start what kind of person she was dealing with.'

I'm afraid I do take pleasure in the fact that people think I'm too good for this world.

There are usually other clients too, women of my age, who don't want to admit they're going grey. They wear costly shoes, ugly with expensiveness, and clothes whose cut betrays their class. They talk loudly. This is a salon in a good area, in the heart of Amsterdam. The street isn't what it used to be, Mascini often tells me. There's always a 'you know what happened yesterday?', when he was on the phone with someone from the city council. He literally performs a dialogue with some 'idiot' or another who can't get into their head what state the city in general, and this street in particular, has ended up in. It has something to do with sub-letting, buying up, pulling down, downright flaunting of wealth. And to cap it all, the bridge is indefinitely closed, which means there's no pedestrian route now. People can't find his business anymore.

I listen. His agitation has a hypnotizing effect on me. He says he doesn't dye his own hair, but I have my doubts. It makes no odds. We're all minor imposters, when it comes to it.

But this is what he says about Rose. I think I just like dropping her name into conversation in passing. It's a tale about nothing in which I can star as the well-meaning citizen who thinks she should give holiday money to her employees, on top of everything else.

'Do you want to come again?' I asked her. 'In two weeks' time?'

She nodded happily. She was standing by the steps leading downstairs, a bucket at her feet, wet cleaning cloths in her hand.

'But not with Helpling, please,' she said.

She looked at me as if she was wondering whether I'd understood her correctly. And that was when she said in English that it was better for her. It was as if she was weighing something imaginary with her free hand. Coins, perhaps. Plain and simple coins.

'Whatever's best for you,' I said.

Not tractably, but matter-of-factly. Who am I to judge this for her?

For a moment Mascini stops cleaning the washbasins and throwing away wipes. He does everything with such unbridled passion. I love it when he washes my hair. He grabs it hard, as if he's tugging my hair, forces my head into the washbasin, and fiercely kneads my skull. I can feel the shivers of pleasure right down to my ugly, expensive sneakers. But now he's standing still right in front of me, the blood-red bead necklace he inherited from his mother glittering in his open collar.

I fiddle with the cover of my book.

Mascini says, and, let it be noted, he has a loud voice: ‘By telling you she’d rather be paid cash-in-hand, she’s shown you two things: A: she can’t be trusted; and B: she came to your house under false pretences.’

But what I think is this: I’m not someone who sees enemies everywhere. And I’m proud to be thinking this.

2

There's a story in the paper about someone who helped a refugee find his feet here, for five whole years. It was a boy from Afghanistan whose resilience and indestructible optimism impressed the woman who protected him. I really think I can feel my heart break as I read the story, because, you know, it throws such an unexpected light on someone's actions and behaviour. On someone full of enthusiasm who thinks they can just cycle to Paris, but who gets picked up by the police the first time they stop for a break. I see people going by every day, in this neighbourhood, or see them standing on the ferryboat, people who give me the impression of having gone astray. Lost souls.

'Not everyone is destitute,' Hartog says.

'He's an exile. He has to fend for himself,' I say. The word 'exile' sounds pleasantly old-fashioned to me.

'Look at it like this: that boy fled from war and misery. You think it's over-controlled here, but for him it's paradise itself. You diminish him by simply seeing him as a pitiful little creature.'

I think newspapers aren't made for people like me. That may sound strange for someone who tries not to ignore what's happening in the world, but I've noticed that the more attention a news item demands, and the bigger its headlines, the less I see it. My eyes slide past, past the pollution, the climate, dictatorships, epidemics.

I know that's the case because I read the paper every day.

When something does shake me, it's a report in a tucked-away corner, on the back of the economy page, where it says that our biggest agricultural bank, the Rabobank, supports farmers without this leading to over-fertilization problems. Or a dull filler that could be pieced together by interns: about sex, which people have become scared of, or children that can no longer be controlled. I linger on individual phrases, a photo.

I don't trust myself. Am I the sort of person who could protect others, at the risk of something happening to herself?

I can't even remember which country Rose comes from. I do know that her face lights up when I speak French to her. Although I should immediately add that not much is needed to make her face light up.

'*Shall I make you tea?*'

'*Yes!*'

And once again the sun fills the room with its broad beams of light.

3

One of the miraculous things about life is that your own life can be perfectly pleasant, even though you understand exactly how the world is. You just take good care of yourself, don't spend all day tearing your hair out.

I'm inadequate, especially with regard to the people I love. I do all I can, I know, but I have my little island too. Everything grows there, free from care.

I sometimes fight about this with Cosmo and Lynn. Cosmo is my son, let's not make it more complicated than it is. Lynn is my daughter. I can't tell this story without including them, they're always there, if not in the flesh, then in my head.

'Fight' is a bit of an exaggeration. There's outrage when I tell them I don't lie awake at night worrying about the Climate Agreement, whether it's been broken. I can't even find the words for my own worries, what they're exactly about. Other things keep me awake, although I daren't tell them what they are.

I have the good fortune of working in a place where people care deeply about the world and can even inform people about it, on paper. I'm allowed to take care of the cosy corner. I like it, this *Umwelt*. It gives weight to what I do.

The colleague who sits opposite me types very forcefully, and very much. He asks if I've sent an email yet to such-and-such a person. I think about the boy I used to sit beside in the library, day after day, ever since I could read. Who I used to cycle home with, all the way along the secondary road, or by the back roads, past the meadows, crying with laughter. The buddy you can do anything with and who you always hope to rediscover.

My workplace gives me the opportunity to take the floor now and then, to sermonize a little and mention a good deed. When I've been gazing for too long at a photo in the paper, for example, about an enormous group of recent refugees, awaiting their fate on an Italian beach somewhere. There they sit, poor lambs, with nothing, no belongings, no phone, no smile for the photo. And they're so young. Where have they come

from? What do they think they'll find here? I realize that sentimentality comes too easily to me, but I can't stop myself thinking about their mothers.

And then I suddenly say at an editorial meeting that we should have a real-time counter, showing the number of people drowned at sea, again, the same sea where we'll soon be snorkelling. And what happens then is this: people think it's a good idea, but nothing really comes of it, or at least only in a weakened form. Words, not numbers.

The disadvantage of words is that you have to let them get through to you. It's so easy to skim past important matters when you're reading. That's also the contradictory element in how I'm writing now. In my heart of hearts I do know what I'm writing about, but I hope no one can perceive it.

To the outside world I'm someone who knows how to handle things. A former colleague sees a kindred spirit in me. Or something like that. At any rate, he wants us to have a coffee together. In theory, I can't get enough invites like that, but in practice I baulk at them.

Here I am, then, coffee, cookie, early on a Wednesday morning.

He turns out actually to be a poet, which doesn't surprise me. I'm surrounded by people who are actually something else. But he has already had a collection published, a couple of years ago. He's thinking about mixing old work with new work in the next collection so he won't draw too much attention to himself from the critics.

'Don't do it,' I proclaim, crumbs on my lips. 'You shouldn't hide your work.'

I don't say that you could just as well hide your writing inside a cauliflower and place it at the bottom of a rotting pile. That to find it, you have to persevere. That that's best.

Chapters 9-10, Part 2 (pp. 121– 134)

9

She's twenty-three years old, would you believe it? When I was twenty-three I didn't even know what a red pepper was. I read the classics, novels by Couperus. Assume that you know very little and won't know much until you learn how to see. That's my lesson of the day for the intern. Don't write about what you know, but what you see.

I don't tell her how difficult that is.

On the way to work I thought up a few life scenarios for her. She could be a librarian, or a teacher, or a writer. She could combine all of these by writing a story about a librarian who doesn't like lending books to her library clients. As a teacher she would grow into a living legend, someone who puts old heads on young shoulders.

She pulls her sleeves over her hands, puts a hand on a leg and then on her neck. She's wearing a black wrap cardigan, she pulls it to the side, then down, it's suddenly too short and too tight. She's practising with me the questions she wants to ask an author, all with enormous seriousness. I keep wanting to say *it'll work it out fine*, or *it really doesn't matter*.

'Shall I ask him what book is on his bedside table?'

'Yes,' I say, 'that's always a good question.'

What *I* mustn't forget to make a note of is that I smell quite strongly of liver sausage. When I shift a little inside my neat white blouse the smell wafts out.

We're talking about parents and children, because of a story she has just read by her author. She uses the word 'heart-breaking', scratches her neck, tugs at her cardigan. I think about Lynn, who I've always been scared of, all my life, though that isn't the right word exactly. There's no word for how I see her. In your children's eyes you see the same stony gaze you yourself once turned on the world, Natalia Ginzburg says. I'm inclined to replace 'the world' with 'your parents'. I can't resign myself to being, at best, the awkward witness, the person kept in the dark. We recognize that look, Ginzburg says, but are still upset: we know how long the road is that we must take to reach the

point where we can feel compassion.

'So what exactly moved you about it?' I ask the intern.

She's earnest, she'll never say anything you already know.

'I don't really have the words for it,' she says. 'It has something to do with that father doing his level best.'

'Do your parents keep track of you?'

Wide eyes. 'What do you mean?'

I can feel what it's like to be sitting opposite someone. I can ask her everything, she can't ask a thing. I'd like to tell her something, but she won't ask me to do so.

'Nothing special,' I say. 'Do they know what you're up to?'

'Yes,' she says. And then after a little silence. 'I can rely on them.'

'It's always difficult if someone does their best for you,' I say. 'Especially if it's your father or mother.'

'Yes,' she says. 'Sometimes I see my mum looking at me. She's come up with something. She wants to see if I've noticed.'

She says yet again that she can't find a word for it. It's not compassion, but it's something close to that. Our children are other people – that's Ginzburg. They're our children, but they don't belong to us. Our parents aren't other people – that's me again. Perhaps that's the fundamental issue: your parents belong to you. And that this burden really is almost impossible, yes impossible, to bear.

Compassion, that doesn't sound like an attractive final destination. That sounds like the way I sat by my mother's bedside in A&E, when I'd rushed there at breakneck speed in a taxi after I'd been phoned by one of the care workers in the home where she'd ended up living. She had fallen and was in pain, but instead of examining her hip they first had to work through a protocol which caused her even more pain. Instead of me crying out to the clumsy nurse *stop doing that*!, I sat there shuddering beside her bed, my hands over my ears so as not to hear her pain.

'Just go and sit in the corridor,' the nurse said.

I went and sat in the corridor. I don't know how I would have behaved when Hitler invaded our country. I wasn't there yet to sit with my hands over my eyes and ears, waiting in desperation.

I now want to know everything about the intern. Does she live alone? Does she have brothers or sisters? Before I know it, I've actually asked her. She has a brother. She looks pensively into thin air. What did I expect? That she was going to dredge up her

brother's past for me?

'What do you want to do?'

'I don't know.'

She moves her arms through the air a little, as if she's groping for something.

'Are you interested in current affairs?' I ask.

It's Betty Boop sitting opposite me. 'What do you mean?'

'I was just wondering if you're interested in journalism.'

'Oh!' She doesn't smile, looks thoughtful. 'Oh, right.'

She stares at her laptop screen a while. It doesn't matter, I want to say again. Ultimately nothing matters. I hope she understands this, and that she'll still want to keep moving.

I've arranged to meet Cosmo in the city later this afternoon. He's here for just a few days.

'Keep it light,' I hear Lynn say, in my head.

That's some task, keeping things light. Anyway, heaviness only lies in ambush when Cosmo is out of sight. When I'm sitting next to him for a few hours, putting up with the service provided by our capital city's hospitality sector, I think about nothing at all. To such an extent that that's what I start thinking about, i.e. that I'm thinking about nothing and can't say anything either.

He looks good, at least. A white shirt.

'Got it from you,' he says when I compliment him on it. And: 'Did the business with the locks work out?'

I nod. '*Bitterballen*?'

Faith is fear, Hartog would tell the children.

Love is fear, but I don't tell anyone that. When my parents go on holiday I throw myself on my bed. I daren't tell my mother they're going to die, they'll never come back anymore, that's something she doesn't know yet.

'Not so much love, please.'

Cosmo once said something like that to me. When I'd been chasing him up again, calling other parents to ask where everyone was, hanging out of the window to scan the street, ears pricked for the clank of a bicycle approaching. Is that love?

I never thought I'd be able to leave my nest, but the nest vanishes, you don't have to leave it for that. There's a new nest now. It isn't empty. It isn't deserted. I'm there.

'No one just can get inside anymore, truly,' I say. 'There's a metal plate now, so the

cylinder can't be chiselled out in one go. The locksmith said that the only way to break in now would be to ram the façade with a vehicle.'

Cosmo nods. 'Or you'd have to have the key, of course.'

'We've changed the locks. You do have the new key now, right?'

Someone on the other side of the square is waving at me. I know her, to the extent that we're always promising to meet up with each other at some point in the distant future, but as soon as the future comes closer we cancel it. And then we sort out a new date, just as easily, even easier. I like arrangements that are in the distant future. I can almost see them physically ahead of me, like specks in the night you always have to reach for. There are more and more of those specks as you get older and know people longer, it's a form of intimacy to leave it at that, to respect the specks, as if you've ended up on the South Pole together. I think that's exactly it – South Pole sounds friendlier than North Pole. Still some ice, I hope, still not exactly inhabitable, nothing to really warm you up, but exactly the right kind of light to see those little specks, over there in the distance.

Cosmo shifts to another seat. He's feeling hot. I can see he is. I'm always feeling hot too, where are they, those *bitterballen*?

'Are you proud of being Dutch?' he asks.

'Of course,' I say.

I won't let him provoke me. I know Cosmo is ashamed of being Dutch. The reasons vary. Sometimes it's something to do with the television, or the newspaper, or the idea that everyone thinks the same, watches the same things a lifetime long, dawdles in the supermarket queue. My case for the defence uses keywords like 'calmness' and 'irrationality'. If you talk about the Netherlands long enough even the raging farmers and their tractor protests form part of the picture, I notice.

'Gosh,' he says. 'I never say I'm Dutch.'

'What do you say then?'

'That I'm European.'

'That's the future, I think,' I say. And I wonder why I feel personally betrayed by my son. As if by denying his motherland he's also denying his mother. I should learn to see things more politically. My colleague recently spoke to someone-who-should-know, someone who thought we should completely abandon the idea of belonging to a particular country.

I say: 'We have to become world citizens.'

‘Right,’ Cosmo says. ‘And who’ll pay the taxes in that world?’

During the training session that evening I tell my jogging mate, while I’m running, about Cosmo and the lunch. She strokes my arm while she’s running too. I don’t actually know her, never see her, except here, dressed in sports gear, panting. We both find it difficult to chat while we’re running. We can’t do anything except get quickly to the point. She’s divorced, from a husband who did nothing but sit on the couch, and she has a daughter who wants to have her breasts removed.

‘Would you like another relationship?’ I pant. ‘Or would you rather stay alone?’

‘I’d like another husband,’ she pants back.

She has a candid, open face, and talks like that too. A softly pronounced g.

‘I really like life as a couple.’

We’re running down the Buiksloterdijk and she sums up, in huffs and puffs, what life as a couple means to her. ‘Going to the market on Saturday afternoons, and buying nice little titbits. Sitting on the sofa together, watching a nice film or series. Visiting other couples, and then him chatting with the man, and me with the woman. I love that.’

She says it and it really does sound enjoyable.

When I get home after my jogging, aware of my muscles as I climb up the stairs, there’s a couple waiting for me. We eat nice little titbits that my man has made, and I do everything I can to avoid a conversation with the other woman. I’d meant to vacuum clean today, knowing they’d be coming to visit. The dust motes are dancing through the room.

The next day an Indonesian couple comes to tidy everything up. They clean for the woman next door as well. She’s reasonably happy with their work, but not entirely. ‘You do have to guide them.’ She showed me on her phone what they hadn’t cleaned properly. ‘But I do come from quite a cleaning-mad family,’ she said. I could smell her shampoo, something delicate.

‘Do they speak Dutch?’

‘She speaks a little English,’ she said. ‘He’s impossible to understand.’

‘Have they got any children?’

‘Oh, that’s quite a tragedy,’ she says. ‘They’ve got a little girl but they had to leave her behind, with the grandparents.’

‘Right,’ I say.

The house is gleaming. As they leave the premises, weighed down with garbage bags, walking backwards, bowing, Cosmo says: ‘It must have been like that in Batavia.’

I know Cosmo better than anyone. He doesn’t have to say a thing.

10

I have to take my glasses off, otherwise my computer doesn't recognize me. I can hear what kind of mood Hartog is in from the way he throws the paper onto the table. After thirty years I can recognize in the far distance someone I used to study with from the way she bends over to get something out of her car. I wonder why you have to put so much effort into washing your hair regularly, or weighing five kilos more or less. No one ever sees anything different in your appearance than they saw last week, two years ago, even further in the past, tomorrow. Cosmo simply has to take one look at my back when I'm standing in the kitchen to ask me what's the matter.

I once found it a miracle of profundity and thought that you shouldn't reduce the riddle but magnify it. All those ways of saying that the Other is fundamentally unknowable, that would be the true art. For a long time I thought of giving the title *Ambiguity* to anything I wrote. When I let that slip once, as I always let everything slip at some point, a rather dogmatic publisher said: 'Why not *Ambiguous*? That's much better.'

Meanwhile I've come to think: just solve the riddle. Say exactly how it is, or was. Choose a title like *Clarity*. Go on then, call it: *Clear*.

The problem is there are too many riddles. And it's precisely the things that I don't know the why, or what, or how of that stick in my head, without me frantically having to note everything down. I can remember them minute by minute, even though there's so much else in my life that I simply sleep through, forget before whatever it is has even finished. Kingdoms fall, children are born, houses are moved into, films are watched. They're commas, mirages – one yawn and there's something else again. But this gnaws, it's here.

Cosmo is talking to us, telling us how to finalize things with Rose. We're at Lynn's,

in her cramped little house, with a bowl of crisps on the table.

As a parent, are you your children's property? Are you always that, for the whole of your life? Sometimes I think we'll have to go on reassuring them for ever with our lives. Stay on the same sofa, stroke the cats, put lemon and rosemary cake in the oven.

'I'll say this just once,' he says. His voice trembles – repressed emotion, anger. Cosmo lives in a dangerous world, a world in which you have to be on your guard, know where you can and can't walk at night. We all understand that.

'Don't let her come to your house again. That's the most important thing. Let her know you'll bring her the money, and then any contact stops.'

That's what he says, with a barely concealed catch in his voice.

This is what I think, and it comes across as calm and considered: 'I'd rather be wrong in trusting her, than wrongly assume she stole from me.'

Lynn says: 'Yes, clearly.'

Cosmo explodes. 'You don't know what you're saying.'

The way he's talking about her it's as if she's got an organized crime group behind her. This time they've just sneaked cautiously through the house, next time we'll get a sack over our heads, a pistol pressed against the temples. We must make it clear that we won't let ourselves be messed with. That there's nothing left to get, that we're going to settle matters once and for all. There you go, that's the money you're still entitled to.

We've changed the tune of our front door bell. A little friendlier, we thought. Nevertheless, I jump out of my skin when I hear the melody. It's daytime, but a couple of times this week I've heard again that you mustn't just buzz people into your house. Once someone's inside, you won't easily get them to leave. I walk downstairs, down two flights. It's the delivery man, with a box of wine. 'It's heavy, mind,' he says. A friendly young man. 'Shall I bring it upstairs for you?' He puts the box down after one flight, looks around. 'I need to fill in your ID number,' he says.

'I hope I can find it,' I say. Which I mean. I run upstairs, first flight, through the sitting room, second flight, to my study. Fortunately, my passport is exactly where I thought I'd put it last time, in the drawer of my mother's old side table. The drawer where my diary is too, and my Borges notebook. And here I am, panting, in front of the young man, with my passport.

‘Is this the communal staircase?’ he asks, while filling in the details.

‘Yes, something like that,’ I say.

‘You live one floor higher then?’ he asks. ‘Shall I take the box upstairs?’

‘No, that’s okay,’ I say. ‘I’ll leave it here for my husband.’

‘Oh, that’s better,’ he laughs.

It’s not that I’d feel uncomfortable if he went upstairs. I think he’s a nice young man. It’s because again I’m thinking that when people come inside this house, they have no idea about its layout. The person who broke in knew the house, or had been very clearly instructed. Half the time that’s what I think, the other half something different. Something that takes into account both chance and cleverness.

If only you’d had a video camera. How often people say that. I don’t know if I’d dare to look at the images. Then it would really be true: that someone I didn’t know – in the best instance – had sneaked through my house, touched my things, opened my backpack and taken out my purse. My dear little purse, with scratches made by the cat in its soft leather.

I’ve got a new one now, also a Paul Smith, a cheerful one, with greyhounds on it. It’s very beautiful, but it’s nothing like my old one. I want to be again the person I was when I got that purse, the one who was shocked when after just two days there was a deep scratch in the black leather.

28 December, 12:56.

‘*Good afternoon Clara!*

In all honesty I haven’t been able to close my eyes all night and I keep asking myself questions without finding answers. For my part I swear by God as I said yesterday I did not mention it to anyone since the arrival of my daughter is not 100% sure, I kept it secret to my entourage in case it does not work. 2. Since I have been working for you I have never known where the money was and I have never asked myself any questions about it because as I told you I have total confidence in you and Hartog, especially since it was you who gave me the opportunity to earn this money and I don’t even know what the keys to your house are like. I hope that the police can very quickly enlighten us all on what happened, my heart is broken.’

I was struck by the word ‘entourage’ in this message. As if she really was talking about

a gang. If not of thieves, then of people-smugglers.

And that she said, without being asked, that she hadn't known where the money was. She didn't have to say that, and now it sounded like a lie. She must always have seen where the money was. She used to move things around on my desk so she could clean it. The envelope was just sticking out of that antique pen tray on my desk, and later it was in the silver box. I wouldn't have minded if she *had* lifted the lid up, perhaps I'd even have found it normal.

And then, the housekeys. Why did she suddenly start talking about those? I hadn't discussed with her how someone could have got into the house. Had she taken our front door key after all, from the mug with keys in it?

The same day, nineteen minutes later, I reach out to her.

'*Don't worry too much Rose, we'll find out what's happened. I believe you.*'

I'd been flattered by Rose when she first came here. That she'd said to Hartog that she really liked working for me. 'Clara sees what I do.' And that she instantly trusted me.

Fifteen minutes later, her own reaching out.

'*I really hope it and thank you again for the trust.*'

Another striking thing about her message: she mentioned the police. I can't imagine the police are well-disposed towards her, that it would be good news for her if they started investigating this.

I wrote back to her one more time that day, I couldn't stop myself. Repeated it once more: if she was in any kind of trouble, she could tell me. Said I hoped that she trusted me enough to do that.

Chapter 5, Part 3 (pp. 212 – 214)

5

The sea can seem so calm – how calm, you can't imagine. The weather can be so mild, you need to know that – how mild the weather can be, how smooth the sea. What you need to know about your cleaner is that her father said: 'If you can see stars, then the sky isn't cloudy and it won't rain.' You need to know how that gave her peace of mind. That she heard her father say it, that her father sat beside her, sharing his wisdom with her, that she saw his face, heard his voice. That she knew her daughter was safe. That it wouldn't rain, that the sea was calm. That she couldn't swim. That the boat was too small and there were too many of them.

What you need to know is that she tries to speak Dutch. That she has many more houses to clean, that there are babies she takes care of. That she's not just the cleaning lady, but the babysitter too. That she tries to watch children's programmes to learn some words. That she tries to remember which bus will take her where. That she knows your bus route is number 32. *Tweeëndertig*, she can say it in Dutch, she says good morning, she has the sun in her face.

That boat, it had water in it. The weather altered. The sea turned wild. The stars were nowhere to be seen. It wasn't her father sitting beside her, but a different father. He had a little boy with him. What you need to know about your cleaner is that she sees that boy's eyes when she can't sleep. That it was cold and people began to pray, that they prayed harder and harder. There was a light they were heading for, but the light kept moving further away from them.

What you need to know is that it was pitch dark when the boat was being tossed backwards and forwards with every wave. And that they were crying and screaming. That the man steering the boat was bellowing out above it all, that they mustn't move, they had to hang on, they had to put on their lifejackets. And that not everyone had a lifejacket. That the boat got heavier and heavier because of the rain and the waves, that they had to throw things overboard.

What you need to know about your cleaner is that she thought of her daughter. And that she thought this would be the end. But that the boat stayed afloat and they were

picked up, in the early morning. That she didn't know where she was, but she was put on the train to Amsterdam, the capital of Sweden. That she saw all those white people and didn't understand a thing.

What you need to know about your cleaner is that she's exhausted. That she can't concentrate. That she gets on the wrong bus. That she learned how to use a bike, but didn't lock it. That she forgets everything, mislays everything. That she doesn't know how to get anywhere. That she lies awake at night, tossing and turning, can't get to sleep, that she's in pain.

That in order to clean people's homes she has to register with an official agency, but that she doesn't get to keep much of the money she earns. That she goes to the doctor, the council, the Immigration and Naturalization Service. That there are always things they want to know, that she needs evidence, papers she doesn't have. That they want to know when her husband died, when her daughter was born. They want to see things she doesn't have. She can give them no more than her word. She can give you no more than her word. But her name, that's something she owes you.

She's called Bibata.

You say Bibata.

Bíbata, that's how you should say it.

What you need to know about your cleaner is that she wants to ask you something. That she knows it's a lot to ask. She wants to ask if she can come back.

Her name is Bibata.

She isn't brave, but she's honest. She's been lucky. She's looking ahead and trying to sigh less. She knows what she has to do.

Can she come and work for you again?