Close-Up

Esther Verhoef

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Extract

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It made everything easier, knowing each other so well. It meant that she cooperated without realising, making it intimate, almost safe.

Preparations took three months. First I examined the plan from every angle, trying to visualise it for myself. Once I was sure it was feasible, it was no longer a vague idea, but became part of me. It was a wonderful project, right from the preliminary phase, which consisted of talking to her and the people around us, to acquiring the equipment I needed.

Admittedly, I didn't need much. She herself gave me the idea.

Edith couldn't cope with having her sleep disturbed; next morning her eyes were always puffy and red. And while she was much more than just a pretty face, what mattered most to her was looking good. If you ask me she always did, whether she was all dolled up stealing the show at a reception or fresh out of bed, apologising for her scruffy appearance as she made me a cup of tea, still in her bathrobe. Sleeping pills were the only way she could avoid being woken up repeatedly by things that went bump in the night.

I was looking forward to it. I felt like a kid queuing up for the rollercoaster; one step at a time, closer and closer. The mounting excitement, which reached its climax on the evening when everything fell perfectly into place like the pieces of a jigsaw.

We'd finished a bottle of wine together and talked about things

that fascinated us. Art, and artists who made the impenetrable and incomprehensible world of imagination and emotion tangible for the general public. Painters, sculptors, writers and musicians. She was very relaxed and leaned against me. More than once she said she felt at ease with me, trusted me completely. She was already drifting away – the drug was working remarkably fast.

I hugged her and said she should take a quick bath. She was tired, it had all got too much for her, and after a refreshing bath and a good night's sleep she'd have a less gloomy outlook. She was bound to feel better in the morning.

I helped her to the bathroom, sat her on the toilet and pushed her body, which was already going limp, to one side, so it could rest against the wall. Then I took the latex gloves out of my trouser pocket and pulled them on. She didn't even notice, her eyes were closed and her breathing was shallow. I turned on the taps. Hot and cold. I put the plug in and waited. The water slowly filled the tub, an enormous bath designed to take two or three people. I opened a cupboard, found some bath oil and poured a little into the water. Then I put the bottle back. To kill time I looked at myself in the mirror behind the washbasins, which took up the whole wall, and smirked at my reflection. In the background Edith slumped against the tiled wall like a collapsed mannequin. She may have mumbled something, I can't remember. I was too full of myself, of the whole plan.

While the bath was filling up, my eye fell on the razor in its case. Not the disposable kind, but a handmade cutthroat razor, the sort you sometimes see in Italian barber shops, extremely sharp. My heart skipped a beat, such was the feeling the sharp razor awakened in me and the ideas – new ideas – that occurred to me. Then

I shook my head. No. Stick to the plan. No improvisations. There's always a next time.

Not for Edith, though.

1

'For God's sake, Margot, *pink*?'

I look up at Anne and then around me as if I'm seeing my new living room for the first time. Pink, indeed. And that's not all: red, purple, lilac. Each wall a different colour.

I'm amazed she can be so unobservant. Pink shouldn't come as a surprise. Or red, or purple. My hands, clothes and hair have been covered in brightly-coloured blobs for weeks.

'I like it,' I say – quite unnecessarily, since everyone who's here lugging the heavy boxes and packages inside knows that no one can be held responsible for the colour scheme except me.

The flat was grey when I found it – grimy almost. It had put off lots of buyers, but not me. It reminded me vividly of my great-aunt's house, which I visited regularly when I was young. This immediately made it feel personal, and it gave me an indefinable sense of luxury, as well as safety and security.

My great-aunt used to live nearby, in the same kind of old mansion in the centre of town and within walking distance of the cathedral and the historic fish market. Not because it was trendy or close to bars, restaurants and shops, but because she had been born and had grown up there and knew no better,

To a child's eyes her house looked like a museum or a temple. Reluctantly I stepped inside, holding my mother's hand, addressed her as 'Mrs' and fell silent, overawed by the high ceilings with their chandeliers, and the creaking stairs, and paintings so

dark it was difficult to make out what was depicted in them. For the duration of the visit, I would stare at all the extraordinary objects, like the shiny organ that I was dying to play but was never allowed to touch. Time seemed to have stopped somewhere in the 1920s or 30s and as a child I was fascinated by what I saw, smelled, heard, discovered and absorbed as I sat, on my best behaviour, on the sofa, knees together and a lukewarm glass of orange squash miles away from me on the elegant walnut coffee table.

An old woman used to live in my new flat, too. I never met her. She had already been moved to an old people's home when her flat was emptied and put up for sale by her children.

I did, though, get to know her a little by cleaning every nook and surface in this two-room flat. I vacuumed up the spider's webs that had been gathering dust behind the radiators, used ammonia to scrub the greasy tops of the kitchen units. And I painted bright colours over the yellowy walls of the living room. The old carpeting was still down when I collected the keys, beige bouclé stretched over boards, worn in various places but like new in others. Underneath was a wonderful untreated wooden floor, which I sanded but otherwise left well alone. I hid the brown marble mantelpiece with its dramatic brown and white patterns behind silver-painted MDF. And every day, regardless of whether it was raining, I opened the windows and polished and scrubbed and painted and glossed till the smell of wax polish, cigarette smoke and wool gave way to the smell of a new, fresh start: paint, turpentine and detergent.

'Well,' mumbles Dick. 'It wouldn't be my choice of colour, either, at least not for a living room. More like a teenager's bedroom.' Out of Anne's field of vision he gives me a great big wink. 'But then our Margot has always been one-of-a-kind.'

I put on an awkward grin and set the box of kitchen utensils

on the draining board in the narrow kitchen. Next to the sink are bottles of chlorine and turpentine and thick brushes wrapped in aluminium foil. There are still paint marks on the speckled work top.

As I remove plates and mugs from their wrapping paper and stack them in the kitchen cupboards, I see the blue corrugated roof of Dick's van below. It is parked with two wheels on the pavement. The open sliding door gives a view of the contents: boxes, a rolled-up carpet, wicker chairs, and an old white electric fan. My stuff. On the side of the van it says in white stick-on lettering DICK HEIJNE ROOFING AND PLUMBING WORK. My brother, four years older than me, used to be a total pest, but as the years have gone by he's increasingly proved a beacon of light and warmth in cold, dark times.

Very dark times.

Somewhere deep inside I feel a pang, like something is contracting violently. It's the kind of pain you can't put your finger on, can't have surgically removed or treat with medicine – and there's no end to it.

I take a deep breath and go into the living room. Anne, arms folded, is looking around her. 'You know what: the longer I look at it, the less awful it gets. Maybe it's just a question of getting used to it.'

'It was time for some colour,' I respond without much enthusiasm. I can still feel the knot in my stomach.

Jan deposits a box on the wooden floor with a thud. 'You have a ridiculous number of books!'

Without a word, I follow him into the narrow stairwell and down the stairs. It is dimly lit and there are dirty smudges along the wall. The worn wooden steps creak under our weight. I slide my hand over the smooth walnut banister and realise that thou-

sands of people have touched this old wood before me. People who, long before I was born, lived out their lives in this place, filled with family, work, worries and happiness, but who died ages ago.

Downstairs in the hall there are metal letterboxes hanging from the wall, some with names on, others without. I'm one of the latter: there's been no time to get a name card made yet and maybe I won't ever bother. I've not met the other residents yet – the house is divided into eight flats – though I have listened to them during the hours spent painting and cleaning. Their music, their footsteps in the stairwell and their arguments.

'Can you take this?' Jan thrusts me a red cashmere floor cushion that I bought last week at the market. I grab it with both hands and bend down to catch a candlestick wrapped in newspaper that is about to fall out of the van. Then I tilt my head right back. A uniformly grey sky hangs over the city, colourless and opaque. The weather has never reflected my state of mind as well as now.

In the living room Dick gets down off the beer crate he's using as a ladder. Hands on hips, he inspects the baroque mirror over the mantelpiece as if it were a work of art. The thing is tilting perilously forward. He climbs back onto the crate in annoyance, takes the mirror back off the wall with a great deal of fuss, and starts fiddling with the nylon cord. With the frame balanced on the toes of his trainers, he casts a fleeting glance at his watch. 'I hope we can wrap things up before five. I've got a customer this evening. A repair job.'

'Just as long as everything's upstairs,' I reply. 'I can handle the rest by myself.'

Jan comes in with two boxes piled on top of each other. All I can see are his fingers and legs. 'Where does this go?'

'The kitchen, please.'

Anne shoves a mug of coffee into my hands and flops onto the sofa. I sit down beside her and light up a cigarette. What yesterday looked like a lavish showroom has been reduced by the four people walking around in it and the piles of boxes to the thirty square yards it actually measures. Yet it still doesn't look small, and certainly not poky, thanks to the high ceiling and the large sash windows. The living room looks out onto the rear garden. In the adjacent gardens there are huge trees and their leaves, already fading into autumnal colours, largely hide the other houses from view. When I lie on the sofa and look outside I can easily imagine I'm living in the woods instead of the centre of town.

Dick and Jan join us for coffee, sitting cross-legged against the mantelpiece.

'I've connected the washing machine and dryer, and checked your pipes,' observes Dick. 'It all looks in reasonable condition, although I bet your water pressure isn't very high with that old-fashioned pipework. If it's a problem, be sure to let me know, OK? If that's the case we'll have to set a day aside.'

I nod and take a sip of my coffee. Anne has forgotten to put milk in it, but I feel too unsteady on my feet to get up. My muscles are aching from the heavy carrying and traipsing up and down stairs.

'I'll drop by in the week with another tap,' Dick continues. 'That thing in the bathroom is out of the Stone Age. I think we've got a ceramic tap lying about in the store somewhere that was left over from an order.'

'Thanks,' I say.

I've been alone again for a few hours when I notice that dusk is starting to fall. I stand on the sofa and turn the light on, a chandelier with red, purple and transparent cones. When I bought it

I thought it was incredibly exotic and warm, but now the light from the six bulbs is pretty harsh. I stand on tiptoe and unscrew a couple of them. It makes a difference, but not much. The flat doesn't feel like me at all yet, there's an obtrusive smell of paint and every step I take echoes off the bare walls. Restlessly I walk to the kitchen. There's nothing in the fridge but a tin of evaporated milk. I could go to one of those little restaurants in the area, there are enough of them, but I don't like the prospect of having to sit alone at a table. A Chinese takeaway, then? Call a pizza delivery service?

I stare out of the window, my hands resting on the sill. The lamps along the narrow canal cast a soft orange glow and puddles of rainwater gleam on the cobbles. Across the canal warm light streams from the windows over the paving stones of the street and the parked cars. People are moving about in the windows. Scooters and a few cars with their lights on are crossing the small drawbridge that links the old town with the wide road to the station.

I should be feeling great. Happy even, liberated perhaps. It's over. I've got my own place. Not some stopgap chalet in a messy holiday park, not some dead-end flat on a new estate, but a beautiful, authentic place in the provincial capital of Brabant, bubbling with life twenty-four hours a day.

Except I'm not bubbling.