

Sample Translation

Suezkade

(Suezkade)

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From whichever direction you approach the Descartes – Kijkduin, Javastraat or Vredespaleis – you first see the pointed towers of irregular heights with red chequer-board false shutters.

Closer up the solid, richly ornamented gate at the entrance stands out, giving onto the quadrangle. In a niche, deeply recessed, full length, the figure of the thinker Descartes.

Almost a century old, the vivid red of its tall, tight brick walls, the chalk white of the outbuildings and the green of the lawns and trees make it look more like an eighteenth-century summer palace than a secondary school.

It is at that school...

PART I

Chapter One

The sky over the Laan van Meerdervoort grew darker and the wind smelled of the rain that was starting to fall. Marc Cordesius had a sense of anticipation and well-being that he had not felt for a long time. In the closed world under his red umbrella – a gift from the fashion house on the boulevard where he had bought his suit – his stride was light and buoyant as he made his way to his first day at the Descartes. The thought that today marked the start of his career in social provision briefly flustered him. He stood still for a moment.

A week earlier Marc had received his timetable by post. The twelve hours a week that he would give lessons had been spread over the five working days at his own special request. Had it been up to Marc he would have taught on Saturdays and Sundays as well. The man in charge of timetabling, a military engineer made redundant by cuts in the armed forces, had looked at him quizzically over his martial moustache.

‘But my dear chap, I could fit those few lessons of yours into three days, into two in fact come to that, without any trouble at all. That would give you a wealth

of free time, three days to be precise. You actually have the right to demand a minimum of two days off with this number of teaching hours. Unions have fought for that.’ Marc had asked him in friendly tones to arrange his timetable so that his lessons fell in the first and seventh hours.

He was afraid of the silence in the high-ceilinged rooms of his house. In a day’s teaching with two consecutive lessons on the timetable he would be free to go home by ten. With a timetable like the one he had requested he could relax and look forward to the seventh hour at the end of the day, which finished at three in the afternoon. In the meantime he could keep up with school life, mark homework, experience all the different facets of the school, read a book, have a chance to record anything that was worth noting down.

He walked on slowly. He had missed Grandma Koekoek more than ever this morning. They would have breakfasted together at the big table in the living room. She would have folded the white tablecloth double for their half. There was room for at least another six people. Grandma would have said: ‘That I’ve lived to see this.’ And he would have answered: ‘I’m not even dreading it.’ And she: ‘Why should you dread it? You know your subject. You look good. Nothing can go wrong.’ Grandma would have given him good advice, and at the end of the school day he could have told her about his experiences.

Steam rose from the street. He was advancing into a misty world. The Laan van Meerdervoort was a dark lake on which he could make out the silhouette of a girl in a red patent-leather coat with a hood and red boots. A school bag on her back, she jumped over puddles, skipped around a heap of paving stones marked off with red and white tape where the pavement had been broken up in places.

It occurred to him that she might be a pupil at the Descartes, on the way to school like he was. If so the girl had made a mistake. Only the staff were expected today. Tomorrow the pupils would be handed their timetables and the next day lessons would begin.

Marc held back, followed at a distance, humbled, intrigued by her playful, amusing behaviour, her delicate figure.

She seemed unconcerned by either the rain or her surroundings. She was utterly self-absorbed, lifted her face to drink up the rain, spun round on one foot, must surely have seen him. The girl danced, jumped, moved her head and shoulders gracefully, was rather like a fragile, elegant Italian greyhound, visibly enjoying the rain that was falling more thickly now and at double the rate.

He drew closer. Still a child? No, no longer entirely a child. More of an ambiguous being, who had turned up out of nowhere. A near-adult, still with some vestiges of childhood.

The rain did not ease off. The red-and-white shutters on the towers high in the sky were invisible. The girl pulled her hood, raised by the wind, tighter around her head. Where was she going? She seemed to slow down, so that he found himself closer to her, slowed down himself, not wanting to draw level with her as yet, to catch up.

He had left home in good time, there was no need to hurry.

She stood still, seemed to be thinking. He stopped too and displayed an interest in the cars emerging from the dense rain with their bright headlamps. She walked on again resolutely, resumed her jumping and skipping, although it was now more restrained. Its character had clearly altered. In the middle of a puddle she stopped, bent down to rinse the splodges of mud off her boots. For an instant she turned her face towards him.

He could see the front gate of the Descartes across the street. In half an hour the first plenary meeting would begin.

She bent lower to look into the reflecting water. Rapid trickles ran down her shiny red coat. Marc tapped an empty plastic bottle with his foot. The flat, rattling sound was drowned out by the rain and the tinkling of a tram in the Zoutmanstraat. The bottle submerged itself in a puddle.

She kicked it and looked at him, half amused, kicked rebelliously, exuberantly, one more time. He walked over to stand beside her to cross.

She had beautiful full lips that fitted together in a perfect line and when she smiled they curled up at the edges. A girl of eastern, southern origins.

They waited for the stream of cars to pass. He held his umbrella over the girl, touched her arm as they walked across. She laughed a sing-song laugh, urged him to hurry to the other side, took hold of his arm.

As they were about to go through the gate she stopped, under the eye of Descartes. She looked up and the top of her hood fell over her narrow face. A comical girl. Was she pretty? No, but you could only say that after thinking about it first. And by then you knew you would surrender to her. That dark dot? A beauty mark below her left eye, almost a tear.

‘You’re going to the Descartes?’ she asked.

‘Yes, just like you.’

‘Then we’ll go in together.’

In the quadrangle she grabbed his arm again, pulled him to one side, led the young teacher around a deep puddle, turned her impish, gleaming wet face towards him.

He said: ‘Pupils aren’t due in school till tomorrow, are they?’ He could still feel the tight grip of her small hand.

‘The school sent the wrong books. I’m going to change them.’

Marc told her it was his first day as a teacher and he introduced himself. Her name was Najoua, Najoua Azahaf and she was just starting secondary school.

‘Perhaps you’ll be in my class.’

‘I hope so,’ she said.

It was pleasant to enter the school talking with her. She reported to the concierge, who directed her to a classroom on the first floor. Marc was given a key, for which he was asked to sign a simple ruled exercise book. The concierge said he must hand the key back when he left. Marc felt that rather went without saying. He asked whether the key fitted all the classrooms.

The concierge nodded and then added as a joke:

‘Even the ones in the prefab.’

‘Am I going to be teaching in there?’

The concierge waved the notion aside defensively.

‘I hope not, for your sake.’ The telephone rang. The concierge answered it, closing the hatch as he did so.

Chapter Two

In the high-ceilinged entrance hall hands were shaken and holidays recalled. What a marvellous country France was! Just take those delicacies at the butcher’s on Sunday mornings, laid out so temptingly on the counter, the stuffed tomatoes and those little pasties made of crisp puff pastry filled with creamy ragout. What were they called again? Marc came to the rescue. *Bouchées à la reine*.

A circle formed around Marc, the newly appointed French teacher.

He met Jos Nelek, the deputy head in charge of the first year, and art teacher Aad Vierwind, who was wearing a blue workman’s smock covered in paint smears, and Gijs Morrenhof, the physics teacher, a man with white eyelashes, who gave him such a weak handshake that for a moment he felt as if he were touching a mollusc, and Henk Imanse who taught English.

Where had Wim Egbers got to? On the way to the Descartes for his interview he had come upon Wim Egbers in Café De Zon on the Van Speykstraat, not far from the school. Wim had been the only guest in that gloomy bar at the time. And what a guest he was. He had a baseball cap on, sunglasses, and a jacket with a fire-spouting dragon on the back. His hair was long and unwashed and held in a ponytail with an elastic band. But his fingers had neatly manicured nails, an odd contrast to his badly shaven face, greasy hair and grubby shirt. And he was accompanied by a likeable, well-groomed dog. An Afghan hound. Egbers had commented on Marc’s suit, recently purchased in Paris, ‘Very dandyish. You’d never find anything like that anywhere in The Hague, even on the Noordeinde,’

and so they had got talking. Wim turned out to be a lover of French literature, the De Goncourt brothers especially, whose *Journal* he regarded as one of the most beautiful works of world literature, and he had even visited their country house several times on the outer reaches of the Boulevard de Montmorency where they once had their salon. When Marc told him he had bought his suit on that same boulevard and was now on his way to the Descartes Grammar School for an interview, Wim had given the barman a long look before taking off his sunglasses and turning to face Marc: ‘I’m sure you’ll get the job.’ And he added: ‘You’re the type who’ll make it.’ It would amaze him if things turned out any other way. He was confident in his assertion. ‘You’re going to make it.’

‘But I don’t have any qualifications and I’ve never stood in front of a class before.’

In reply Wim’s left hand began to move across the bar. A snake, squirming away, coming back. By the time Marc left, Wim Egbers had admitted to being a history teacher at the Descartes.

The entrance hall filled up; ponchos and raincoats were hung in the staff cloakroom opposite the rows of pigeon-holes, in the dimly lit passage between the hall and the staff room. Then they abandoned themselves to handshaking all round. No one was left out of the warm-hearted welcome.

Marc shook hands with Kees Herkenrath, the German teacher, who was waiting patiently. He kept letting others go first, saying: ‘I have the time.’ Eventually he stood in front of Marc in a quiet moment, cleared his throat, solemnly welcomed him to the Descartes in his soft voice, then bent over towards Marc so that no one could hear: ‘Should any unforeseen problems arise – classes can be unruly for a beginner – don’t hesitate to come to me.’ He had already seen from the timetable that they would be spending many hours teaching in adjacent classrooms.

Marc thanked him.

Herkenrath added that the school was a pleasant place to work and then immediately stepped aside to make room for someone else. The hall quickly

emptied. In a few minutes the plenary meeting would begin in the staff room. Marc heard footsteps near the entrance. It was Wim Egbers arriving at school, on the dot of eleven, wet from the rain, with his dripping baseball cap pulled down over his eyes, so that he failed to notice Marc's raised hand. Wim slipped away into the corridor.

The school bell sounded.

Wim reached the staff room just ahead of Marc. All the chairs were taken. Marc looked around, feeling slightly awkward. He ought to have come in earlier to get himself a good seat at the front. Egbers, still wearing his baseball cap, beckoned him over. There were still two empty seats behind the back row, between the two plant containers. The pair of them sat down side by side. Marc shook his hand.

The deputy heads had installed themselves at the long table on the podium. The concierge moved two palms over to either side of the lectern next to the table. They were intended to set off the rostrum.

The headmaster consulted his deputies, casting a glance at the clock above the door. Across the table from him, at a small desk, sat Stef de Labadie. He was the minutes secretary for the plenary meeting. Egbers whispered in Marc's ear:

'Whoever takes the minutes will be a deputy head one day.'

Stef furtively scanned the rows.

The headmaster was now about to walk over to stand at the lectern. Marc thought: A lot of intellect has gathered in this room. The debates will be passionate and conducted fairly. A sense of elation took hold of Marc Cordesius, who imagined himself safe among all these colleagues, while outside the rain continued to fall and a deep gloom prevailed.

At that point in Marc's train of thought De Labadie stood up, reached the headmaster in two strides and whispered something in his ear, glancing very briefly in the direction of the two plants at the back of the room as he did so.

Stef de Labadie. Marc had not yet come to terms with the fact that he would have to put up with him in his life again. After the meeting with Wim Egbers he had walked into the school building on the Laan van Meerdervoort, adjusted to the relative darkness in the entrance hall after the glare outside, noticed the concierge's lighted cubicle with its closed hatch, heard the school bell and the beginnings of foot-stomping above him. The first pupils had appeared on the top steps of the wide, wrought iron staircase; directly behind him a classroom door was thrown open and yet more noise poured in fits and starts into the spacious hall. Two teachers, carrying shoulder bags bursting with books and bundles of homework assignments, walked up to each other, exchanged friendly slaps on the back, looked at Marc for a moment and walked away side by side down a dark corridor. Pupils thundered past Marc. Two stopped in surprise and stared at him. He anticipated mocking laughter. Both boys walked on; there had been no mocking laughter. He too was surprised. By their sheer youthfulness.

Marc had decided to position himself a bit more to one side, out of the way, in the corner under the stairs next to the statue gallery. He immediately recognized Diderot's full face, the angular, mocking look of Voltaire. Here and there he could just make out an inscription and he ran his hand over the black marble of the plinths on which d'Alembert and Rousseau stood. Each was a philosopher of the Enlightenment who had drawn upon the work of Descartes to a greater or lesser extent. At that moment he had heard his name. 'Marc Cordesius, bienvenu to the Descartes.'

Surprised and a little annoyed (who had the right simply to call him by his name here? Wim Egbers had earned that right, but he was probably still in the bar) he looked round but was unable at first to identify the speaker since a new group of children was blocking his view. The voice had sounded vaguely familiar but he could not place it. 'Marc, my dear chap...' The familiar tone was unpleasant. Who could possibly know him here?

A slim man in a blazer with gold-coloured buttons and a students' union badge and grey, sharply pressed trousers came towards him with his hand out. 'Très

biennu!’ The teeth in the smiling face were very white, the skin gleamed as if rubbed with grease and the animated eyes were trying to make out what was going on beside and behind him as well.

Marc had always found it hard to look at Stef for very long and now too he turned his eyes to the floor. So surprising, so strange in fact, to come upon Stef de Labadie here, his old schoolboy friend with the mildly coercive voice, and not to recognize him immediately.

He looked up again at the perpetually flushed face, whose memory he had suppressed all these years. On a few occasions, when he had finally fallen asleep and was pursued by nightmares, De Labadie had appeared, a visitation that left Marc with a painful feeling the following morning. Stef de Labadie stood in the hall of the Descartes and the red light of a sunbeam fell across his already balding head.

Marc had seriously considered abandoning the interview and taking to his heels with a vaguely apologetic gesture. He would go straight to the bar to tell Wim Egbers of his decision. Wim had some right to be told, but it was precisely that thought that dissuaded him from such a hasty move.

Marc had shaken the outstretched hand and Stef stepped back and took stock of him. ‘Yes, the two of us here. You weren’t expecting that, were you? I teach French at the Descartes.’

Chapter Three

Headmaster Pilger listened, without nodding, simply listened, and when Stef had gone back to his desk he made a brief note. He did not consult his colleagues.

De Labadie gazed out across the rows of teachers. He had started something and was waiting to see what would follow. Rafaël Pilger again glanced at the clock. It was seven minutes past eleven. Now he did consult briefly with the deputy heads to his left and right, seven in total, who all nodded vehemently.

Marc looked at Kees Herkenrath’s back.

Keeping his eyes on the papers in front of him, Rafaël asked his colleague Egbers to remove his baseball cap.

A dark, subdued mumble rose and heads turned. In a slow-motion gesture Wim Egbers removed his cap and laid it on the window sill behind Marc. At that point the art teacher Aad Vierwind stood up. He wormed his way between the rows until he reached the empty space between the audience and the podium. He had a gaunt, aquiline face and deep-set eyes. Loudly, too loudly for the relatively small room he called out:

‘Point of order, mister chairman.’

With an almost imperceptible nod of his head the headmaster assented. Vierwind looked around, put his hands in his jacket pockets, seemed to be assessing each face in turn. He presumed to speak for a large proportion of those present in saying that the plenary meeting now wished to be rid of this problem once and for all. It was an absolute disgrace that every meeting began with precisely this same incident. Egbers ought to be refused entry to the room in future if he was not civilized enough to remove his baseball cap. ‘We don’t tolerate pupils wearing garb like that either.’ He asked for a show of hands.

It was granted.

‘Who’s in favour?’ the headmaster asked. A forest of hands went up. Everyone looked around out of curiosity. It was quite important to know who thought differently. De Labadie stood to count the votes for the minutes. Marc had not raised his hand.

‘And who’s against?’ Only Egbers’ hand went up.

‘Who’s abstaining?’ All heads were turned towards Marc Cordesius and Wim Egbers, the one remarkably well dressed, the other remarkably scruffy. A curious pair, sitting slightly apart from the rest, between the narrow leaves that ascended steeply out of the pots of sansevierias, called ladies’ tongues.

Marc did not want to attack Wim in public, but neither did he have any desire to abstain; that would suggest he had no opinion at all on the matter.

Marc thought about his interview with the headmaster. He had been asked whether he would like to say something about the man after whom the school was named. He was completely free to take the topic in any direction he liked. Marc began by saying: ‘Descartes believed mankind to be extremely sensitive to the intuitive. That’s not the first thing that comes to mind when you think of Descartes. He was a thinker who believed intuition was located in the pineal gland in the brain, the very spot, incidentally, that houses human passions. Giving such a precise location makes Descartes seem like a child of his time, yet the most recent research suggests that his ideas on the subject do in fact stand up.’ Rafaël had interrupted his little speech at that point to pose a completely different question, but Marc had still found an opportunity to express his surprise at the absence of Condorcet from the sculpture gallery. The headmaster responded with the knowing remark that Condorcet had been considerably less influential than a Rousseau or a Voltaire.

Now Marc requested the floor.

‘Do you want to offer a motivation for your vote?’ the headmaster asked.

‘If that’s the official term, then yes.’

‘The row of statues in the entrance hall, mister chairman, is most impressive, but it’s a shame Condorcet is missing. I touched upon this in my interview and you, headmaster, remarked that Condorcet was less influential than Voltaire. I don’t agree. In many respects Condorcet went further than the author of *Candide*. He argued for the abolition of slavery, had friends among the negroes and mulattos of Santo Domingo, receiving them at his house in Paris and debating with them on equal terms. As a thinker he was more important than Voltaire, ethically he was more principled. All philosophers have fought for intuition and for freedom. Of course I haven’t as yet had any experience of the practices of the school. So it’s hard for me to cast a vote at this stage.’

‘Thank you for your contribution,’ said the headmaster. ‘You can cast a blank vote. That will resolve your problem.’

‘Can’t I abstain? I’d prefer to listen. I’m not ready to vote yet.’

The art teacher, who was still standing near the podium, asked for the floor. He said he had listened to the new teacher with admiration but wondered whether the statutes permitted abstentions. He then returned to his seat.

The headmaster called upon De Labadie, who gave the official result of the unforeseen vote. One vote had not been cast even though the holder was present.

Kees Herkenrath, the rather engaging German teacher, had meanwhile risen to his feet.

‘A point of order, mister chairman.’

‘The plenary meeting was supposed to begin at eleven,’ the head reminded everyone without smiling, ‘and in a sense it has yet to get underway.’

‘Is this necessary?’ Kees wondered. He turned round, pointed to Egbers, then to headmaster Pilger. Couldn’t this personal matter be resolved in a conversation between the headmaster and the individual concerned? The vote had left him with a bitter taste in his mouth and in retrospect he regretted not having voted against the motion. He would like this remark to be included in the minutes.

‘I thank you.’ While Kees was speaking the headmaster had leafed through his papers and he was now walking over to stand at the lectern.

As he did so, Wim Egbers whispered that Kees’ remarks could never count on much of a reception. He often had bright ideas, but a person who couldn’t keep order in class didn’t count.

Rafaël Pilger gestured with his long hands, from time to time lightly brushing a palm frond with his arm, not once looking out across the room. He put his case clearly, quoted Spinoza, but he was a far from enthusiastic speaker. With his lanky, nonchalant posture, unconsciously so no doubt, he somehow managed to give the impression he was the only person in the room.

The headmaster announced with deep regret that there had been no increase in the number of applicants, in contrast to the national trend. They might still be feeling the effects of what had happened last year. He appealed for the maximum possible effort.

Marc tried to focus on the speech, had difficulty following the story, in which lemmings throwing themselves off cliffs had been given a part to play. His thoughts kept wandering, rushing off into the Forest of the school with Little Red Riding Hood, getting lost in the maze of corridors.

A tram lurched across 1813 Square and the gold lettering on the pylons of the Freedom Monument shone. Pedestrians stopped for a moment before climbing the steps, blinking at the beds of dark-blue petunias. A rather elderly man bent down, touched the velvety flowers, sniffed the sweet scent. He plucked a flower, put it between his lips and passionately sucked the calyx dry. It must have been a childhood pleasure that he was unable to resist. He tasted the sweetness on his tongue. You could see him enjoying it.

A breeze caught the foliage of the chestnut trees on the Square. A young mother watched her small son wheeling his own push chair.

At that moment, in that broad daylight, a dark bird descended out of the sky, throwing a shadow over the melodramatic monument, over the Square and the white villas around it, with their East Indies verandas, in this the most elegant district of The Hague. The pedestrians in the dizzying light and heat were barely aware of it, shivered perhaps for an instant in the momentary chill.

A pale-grey car rode silently onto the pedestrian part of the esplanade around the monument. The sort of car that belonged in this area. One of the rear windows opened. From the grey half-light in the car someone called the woman by her name and she turned round, looking away from her child for a moment. A man got out of the car, took her hand, spoke to her softly, clasped her wrist.

‘Hey, my friend.’ The words came from so far away, sounded so affectionate, so warm. The words of a friend. Marc had a sense of enormous gratitude. ‘Hey, Marc, pay attention a moment, eh? Stand up. They want to take another look at you. They can’t get enough of you.’

Marc returned from that other world. He got to his feet, having to lean on Egbers' shoulder for a second. He accidentally grabbed a sharp sansevieria leaf with his other hand and the pain from the lady's tongue brought him to his senses; he stood, his head bowed in humility, shyly apologizing for his dreaminess.

Rafaël, benevolent and feeling pleased with his new teacher, put the best possible face on Marc's behaviour in front of those assembled:

'We understand. Your mind was elsewhere. So many impressions... I was saying good things about you. I'll repeat the last few lines. "In your life up to now you have acquired a broad range of knowledge and although you have no teaching qualifications, the board and the senior members of staff have the utmost confidence in you. Today you have already shown yourself to be...".'

'It wasn't my intention. It just came over me.' All faces were turned towards him and less directly, in an entirely natural way, towards Egbers as well. A soft, hesitant applause arose for the newcomer. He had not made a fool of himself, he had spoken honestly and sensitively and now he felt inexplicably timid, as if he wanted to dissolve into thin air.

The applause faltered, swelled again, stopped. He was still standing up. They did not know how to deal with him. It was Wim Egbers who gently pulled him down.

Chapter Four

Did Marc feel like going with him? Wim Egbers asked when it was over. He didn't much feel like joining the others for lunch.

He added that he would leave the choice up to Marc, who felt tempted to absent himself along with Wim, to walk to the Javastraat with him and eat a crusty roll with mature cheese. There were some pleasant cafés in the Javastraat. He'd often had lunch with Grandma Koekoek there.

De Labadie called to Marc from the corridor. Egbers said: 'Don't worry about me.'

Stef de Labadie was waiting for him next to the pigeon-holes. He told Marc he was to be mentor to 1C. ‘A very big class. We’re being forced to make the classes as large as possible, we’re short of teachers. There are thirty-five in 1C. They’ll have to put some desks and chairs on the podium under the blackboard. From a didactical point of view the situation is far from ideal.’ He then told Marc about the mentorship, which involved home visits. Later in the week he would find a standard list of assessments in his pigeonhole – they had settled on the code CF (Cordesius French) and the letters would be stuck on today. He was to complete the list and hand it back to Stef, who had taken responsibility for this particular task for the time being, after Johan Parre was sacked.

‘Johan Parre?’

‘Haven’t you heard his name before? It was Parre the head was referring to in the first few lines of his speech.’

Stef walked into the staff room and then came back out. ‘The light was still on. Burning away for no reason.’ Everyone was off to lunch now; they could go that way together.

Egbers was nowhere to be seen. Stef and Marc walked along a corridor to the school canteen, with its rows of laid tables. The school had no assembly hall; they had to make a virtue of a necessity. Stef showed Marc in ahead of him. He could smell soup and croquettes. The head said something to Stef de Labadie.

Marc found an empty seat. Art teacher Aad Vierwind came and sat across from him and shook hands with Marc again. He smiled and was friendly but at the same time he appeared to be in a barely controlled bad temper as if he might lash out at any moment. Marc would prefer a different table companion. Soon De Labadie would join them as well.

Vierwind tried to start a conversation. He mentioned Mondrian. Marc made a vaguely despairing gesture in the art teacher’s direction, finding himself unable to respond to what had been said. Not because of the swelling din in the canteen, which was fast filling up, but because he was fighting the temptation to leave the room.

Kees Herkenrath, who gave him an extremely friendly look, had taken a seat diagonally opposite and was waiting for Marc to say something to him. It suddenly seemed to Marc an impossible task to be present at this lunch. He was already getting up, offering his excuses all round, sidestepping the headmaster who was talking with De Labadie, hurrying out of the room into the cool corridor, diving into an alcove in the cloakroom. He had escaped. His flight would have consequences. It was still just about possible for him to return with similar haste and take his place again, to comply with the traditional rites of this community, which he had looked forward to so eagerly.

He heard the door to the canteen shut. A short silence followed; presumably they were saying grace. The voices rose again, slightly more muffled now, in anticipation of the soup that was being doled out.

He stayed there, hiding in his alcove. Would they come looking for him? He walked into a side passage from where, through the fogged-up windows of the canteen, he could see silhouettes of the lunch staff. He inhaled a strong scent of lathyrus, was alone, a little boy in a busy square, behind his pushchair. What a scene. He had shut himself out and was suffering such violent inner turmoil that he found himself gasping for breath.

He had fled. How would he ever get into the normal rhythm of life this way? His flight was just as fantastical as the meeting with the girl who had appeared in front of him from nowhere in the rain. Her appearance was a miracle. He must cling on to that. She had been waiting for him.

Marc Cordesius listened dreamily to the distant rattle of cutlery and breathed a deep sigh. Then he walked out of the school in a trance. Wim Egbers was waiting on the far side of the street, in the sun, on a bench in the tram shelter. Wim was not at all surprised to see him. He had been certain Marc would go with him to eat a sandwich in the Javastraat. They walked side by side, over the hazy, shifting shadows of bushes and trees still dripping with rain. They were being watched. Without knowing it. The Laan van Meerdervoort narrowed. The shops began. They had reached the Javastraat.

Chapter Five

Marc had left the staff room even before the bell rang to be sure of getting to room 106 in time, to give his first ever lesson. A teacher next to him on the stairs mumbled reassuringly:

‘Here we go again.’

Marc did not respond to that remark.

He was eager to begin teaching.

Up on the gallery he happened to look round and saw Rafaël coming into school. He raised his hand to Marc, who was on his way to a class for the first time in his life. A group of children was waiting for him, needed him. He needed them. Rafaël had sensed that perfectly. The leader of the school had no teaching assignments, he implemented policy, attending meetings at school every evening. Marc had been told that the head was never in school before nine, never before lessons began. Today he was here in time to see this young teacher on the way to his first lesson. That was how Marc saw it, that was how it must be, and the thought filled him with huge happiness. He had every right to that interpretation.

Hadn't the headmaster waited for him in the corridor after his little outing with Egbers? Hadn't he requested him in a neutral tone to come with him for a moment? He had led the way. Marc knew why the head wanted to speak to him and felt guilty. It was conceivable he was about to be sacked on the spot.

Rafaël had pressed a button under his desktop. The red light above the door would now be on and no one would disturb them. The headmaster remained on his feet behind his desk and said:

‘We missed you. You obviously didn't have any great expectations of our lunch.’

Marc had considered his response beforehand. There were so many things he could mention. He'd been unable to face sitting with De Labadie, felt alone and abandoned, Wim Egbers was waiting for him outside. He'd been tugged in all

directions. His reaction was so complex, would take too much explaining. It had been a kind of desperation... Fortunately Rafaël had helped him by indicating that he did not expect Marc to explain. He had experienced his absence as unprecedented, and slightly strange, but to be honest no one was under any obligation to attend school lunch. His tone became one of almost fatherly tenderness when he introduced the fact that De Labadie, along with several others, had been worried and had gone around the school looking for him. ‘We heard from the concierge that you’d run out of the building. If anything like this occurs again, just inform me or one of your colleagues. That’ll prevent any commotion, and commotion is the last thing we need at this school at the moment. I regard what has happened as a trivial incident.’ He would inform De Labadie, the chairman of the French department, that the matter had been dealt with. So there would be no need for Marc to offer Stef any further explanation. Marc had shaken Rafaël’s hand and thanked him. The headmaster had brought the conversation to a close and shown him out. Marc turned around to hold out his hand, but the door was already shut and the lamp above the door shone a deep red light on the floor tiles before going out.

Stef had shown him exactly which chapters in the textbooks for the lower school were no longer to be used: the subjunctive and the simple past. Marc had objected. Any stallholder in the Rue Mouffetard would use the subjunctive, and it was impossible to understand a literary text without knowing the simple past tense. The department chairman had stressed that consultation was important at the Descartes, and that everyone had a duty to abide by all agreements made. There was an accepted norm and everyone had to take account of it.

Would he be allowed to have the children learn a poem by heart? Those days were over, De Labadie believed. Marc countered that those days might return. Nothing was certain in this world, he insisted. He wanted his pupils always to be able to call upon lines from Rimbaud, Verlaine, Prévert in times of difficulty. He

believed, he had a belief, that they could offer comfort. They had sustained him in the past.

Marc, on the way to his first lesson, walked down one final interminable corridor. He thought about the past few days, in which he had leafed through his teaching module and run his fingers absent-mindedly across blank exercises and multiple choice questions. He had made an attempt to read the ingenious gibberish of the introductions, but did not have the impression that he had gained a firmer imaginative grasp of teaching as a result.

Class 1C was waiting outside the closed door to room 106 at the end of the corridor. To his regret he had already seen from the list of pupils that Najoua was not in his class.

Chapter Six

Marc unlocked the door to his classroom, turned on the light on yet another dark, rainy morning and said simply:

‘You know your places.’

The words came out completely naturally. You would think he had long been in charge of a classroom, knew every crack of the whip. From all sides he had been warned of the risks of disorder, but he felt very calm.

The pupils had taken their seats according to the provisional floor plan. Four children sat on the podium, facing his own desk.

Yesterday afternoon, after the distribution of the timetables, he had bought a reproduction at the Mauritshaus museum, the portrait Frans Hals had painted of Descartes. He would have it framed and put it in his study next to the picture of his young mother, the prettiest one he had of her. He was not allowed to hang anything on the walls of the classroom. The schoolrooms had to be kept as neutral as possible, since the subjects taught there often changed hourly.

Marc visualized the teachers who had taught in this classroom, at this old school. A procession of witnesses had gone before him. He surveyed the recent past in a flash, saw himself sitting on the terrace of the restaurant where he regularly ate when he was in Paris, the Moulin d’Auteuil on the Place Jean Lorrain, and decided that he had made the right decision. His thoughts shifted to the moment when he spotted a Dutch newspaper supplement on an adjoining table. He had idly leafed through a few pages and a teaching vacancy caught his eye.

The class, so quiet until then, was suddenly excited.

‘Sir! Sir! A new girl!’ All eyes were focused on the open door. There stood Najoua. Marc walked straight over to her, took her hand, led her to his desk. She said:

‘I was put on the list for 1A by mistake. I belong in 1C.’

‘A warm welcome to you. Would you like to introduce yourself to the class?’

‘I’m Najoua Azahaf.’

‘We’re going to work out a place for you.’ Marc asked for a desk and a chair to be fetched and put under the blackboard, almost next to his own. A place of honour. He noted her down in the register and added her name to the provisional floor plan.

Then he looked more closely at the class, let his eyes wander from face to face, silently repeating the names that went with them.

They had all remembered to bring the right books. These children were eager to learn a lot; he would not disappoint them.

‘When are we going to begin?’ a boy asked.

‘First we’re going to listen to the headmaster,’ Marc said, and at almost that very moment Rafaël’s voice sounded through the tannoy. He announced the start of the new school year, expressed the hope that the new pupils would quickly start to feel at home at the Descartes and in a slightly affected tone he asked them to attend to the collection. Yesterday, when the timetable was read out, they had

been asked to bring money. It would be used to pay for water pumps in a village in Mali.

Marc asked Najoua to take the collecting tin round and he watched her move along the rows. She behaved self-consciously and her look turned to one of disapproval if a child had forgotten to bring a donation. At last she arrived back at Marc's desk. He tipped the money out onto the tabletop and together they added it up. She spontaneously counted it a second time. Marc thought: She is very meticulous. More discerningly he thought: Almost excessively so. He could identify with that. He too liked to be excessive. To go one step further. To be different.

Then he asked her to write the total amount collected by class 1C on the board. He gave her a piece of yellow chalk and she wrote the sum on the green board, thumb and index finger squeezed against the chalk.

Najoua was given permission to take the collecting tin with the money to the concierge.

Marc sat at his desk and glanced outside. The Vredespaleis was dimly visible through the foliage and he caught a glimpse of the Scheveningseweg. A girl raised her index finger. She wanted to know which book they would be working from today. But Marc delayed the start of the lesson to preserve the fragile intimacy of the class a little longer.

Najoua came back from the concierge and placed the empty collecting tin on Marc's desk. He started to fold some blank folio sheets in eight to make thirty-six voting slips, which he handed out personally. He gave Najoua her slip last of all and tenderly laid a hand on her head for an instant. It was a deliberate gesture, with a specific intention behind it. He had chosen her and the class must realize that.

He told them they were going to select a form representative. 'Take your time, write down a name, fold up the slip. I'll come and collect them straight away. We're not going to confer.'

Marc collected the slips, unfolded them, keeping a tally on the board. It quickly became clear that almost all the votes had gone to Najoua. From now on she would be responsible for the charity collections, for the class book in which homework and absences were recorded and anything unexpected that might come up.

Chapter Seven

This first lesson.

So Wim Egbers had been right. He was the type who would make it. Wim was a good judge of people.

Marc still could not get down to teaching. Too incredulous. Below and above and next to him were classes. Somewhere they were singing happy birthday. A door slammed shut in a draught. He heard Kees Herkenrath clearing his throat, heard hubbub in Kees' class.

'Sir, you could get into a fashion magazine dressed like that,' ventured a girl at the front.

'But so could you! We'll be photographed together.'

And at that he asked the class:

'Ça va?'

Only a few responded. Probably those who had been held back a year.

He repeated the question.

'Ça va? Now all of you together.'

'Ça va, monsieur?'

'And now... Very quietly, as quietly as you can, almost inaudibly.'

'Ça va, monsieur?' They whispered, in chorus, the whole class a gentle murmur.

'And now as loudly as you can!'

'Ça va, monsieur!' They shrieked.

‘Ça va bien. Et vous? Even louder!’

‘Ça-va-monsieur!’ They screamed at the tops of their lungs, then burst into liberating laughter. Release. Applause.

He signalled to them to be quiet, as quiet as possible. He wanted to hear nothing at all. You should be able to hear a pin drop.

It was deathly silent. In that perfect silence the classroom door opened and Jos Nelek stood on the threshold. He was the oldest member of staff at the school, in his mid-fifties, a former gym teacher who had made it to deputy head. According to Egbers it had gained him the nickname oddball.

‘Very good,’ he said, more or less to himself. ‘The girl’s found a place. Very good.’ He looked at the class with satisfaction. Then to Marc: ‘I won’t disturb you any longer,’ and he closed the door behind him.

Marc acted on impulse and went after him, called out to him in the corridor.

‘Why did you come in unannounced? You could knock, couldn’t you? I’m engaged with the class and you interrupt that.’

The oddball was perplexed for a moment, defended himself, had merely wanted to ensure the girl had managed to find a place in the overcrowded classroom. The custom of entering without knocking had crept in over time. No one had ever commented on it before. It was partly a way of quickly testing the atmosphere in the classroom. He complimented Marc and repeated his compliments. He flattered, trying to get into Marc’s good books.

Marc returned to his class, walked between the desks on the podium. Then unexpectedly:

‘Ça va, Najoua?’

‘Ça va bien, monsieur.’

Marc walked between the rows, looked at a boy: ‘Et toi, ça va?’

‘Ça va bien, monsieur.’

Marc stepped up the pace.

‘Et toi? Et toi?’ At a faster and faster tempo, the children trying to follow, with looks of the utmost concentration. He added a new element to the game. No one was to make any more mistakes.

‘Et toi?’

The class became increasingly excited, grew breathless.

‘Ouf, on s’arrête.’

There was a knock at the door.

‘Come in,’ Marc called out.

It was Fineke Regenboog, a member of the school board. He had met her during his interview. She asked to sit in on the rest of the lesson to sample the atmosphere. He offered her a chair but she preferred to stand. Marc repeated part of his lesson, practiced the responses in unison again. He involved her in the class.

‘Ça va, madame?’

‘Ça va très bien, monsieur.’

He wrote out the conjugation of the verb ‘aller’ on the board. The children were to copy the conjugation into their exercise books. He quickly took them through the whole verb again in unison and individually.

He went over to sit on his desk, surveyed the class, glanced outside for a moment. Outside the wind was rising. He would very much like to have his own classroom. He would decorate the walls with enlarged photographs of the De Goncourt salon, which looked out on the Promenade de Longchamps in the Bois de Boulogne where Proust’s Odette de Crécy sauntered in her white gloves under flowering chestnut trees. He breathed the scent of red chestnut blossom, heard Debussy’s *Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune*, could visualize the De Goncourt country house. The composer he so greatly admired was among the regular guests at their salon. For a few moments he was completely absorbed in what he could see before him. Marc looked around the classroom. Fineke was standing against the wall. She smiled and her bright red lips parted slightly. She had glossy dark hair with a central parting.

There were another seven minutes left before the bell. Should he let the class work individually? That seemed wrong. The children might feel deprived. That was how he saw it. The whole hour must be used to the full.

‘Will you tell us a story?’ asked the girl who had admired his clothes. The class backed her up. First he gave them their homework. Najoua wrote the assignments for the next lesson very meticulously in the class book.

Marc had no idea what story he was going to tell them but he launched into the tale of a prince who had lost his kingdom. He travelled all over the world, finally arrived in paradise but even there no one knew anything about his kingdom. Then he descended into the depths of the ocean and met a big fish whose sharp fins were like the wings of an aeroplane... The fish went ahead of him, nimbly, efficiently, but was slow and kept looking round. They entered a deep fold in the seabed and came upon a barred window. Behind it sat the princess, lost in thought, brushing her hair. She was waiting to be freed by the prince.

The bell rang. Marc had no idea how the story should go from there. Afterwards Fineke came up to him, congratulated him on the lesson. ‘And you’re quite right. The -s in Nyons is sounded. My husband and I spent our holidays there for many years. A delightful place. The scent of lavender. We talked about that -s for a long time after your interview.’