

**Anne van Amsterdam**

**The wrong woman**

A Novel

Palmslag Publishers

First edition, September 2021  
Second edition, June 2022

Cover design: vandijk ontwerpt, Eindhoven  
Interior design: Palmslag, Groningen  
Cover: painting of Theo Hermans, born 1931

© 2021 Palmslag Publishers | Anne van Amsterdam

[www.palmslag.nl](http://www.palmslag.nl)  
[info@palmslag.nl](mailto:info@palmslag.nl)

All rights reserved.  
No part of this book may be reproduced in any form by print, internet,  
photoprint, microfilm or any other (digital) means without written  
permission from the publisher.

isbn 9789493245082  
nur 301

## **Content**

Prologue 10

### **Day 1**

The day of the cremation 13

Edward 41

### **Day 2**

The next day 69

Agnes 91

Karen 123

The last summer 155

### **Day 3**

The empty house 191

The letters 221

Epilogue 249

# Prologue

When I visited my neighbors Agnes and Peter, I was stunned to hear that their friend Maria had died a few weeks ago. I knew Maria. Years ago, I had first met her at a party at their place. Her charm, round shapes and shrewdness had caught my attention. I felt attracted to her, but to my disappointment, she had just started a romantic relationship with a certain Edward, a charming man she couldn't take her eyes off. Even during our later meetings, it seemed unlikely that I could tear her away from him, let alone seduce her. And now she was dead.

Since she was not so old, I asked Agnes and Peter carefully what had happened. They told me she had had a heart attack, probably due to her overweight. Their answers and especially their expressions about Maria intrigued me. With Agnes I felt empathy and compassion, but Peter seemed critical. Although he did not say this in so many words, he gave the impression that Maria was to blame for her own overweight. I heard him mutter something about stress and obsessive love. Unfortunately, Agnes' angry look prevented me from going into this deeper. I knew women with an obsessive love. Women who try to awaken the desire of a man against better judgement and, with that goal in mind, don't shy away from anything, even if it's at their own expense. You can call it that when women undergo humiliation, cosmetic adjustments, financial problems and depression just to maintain a relationship with their chosen one. However, I couldn't imagine Maria submitting herself to a man in this way.

During our scarce meetings at Agnes and Peter's, I had developed warm feelings for Maria. When she looked at me with her velvet eyes and listened to my stories, I felt special and loved. And in my opinion, she clearly enjoyed my discrete advances. So she became a woman for me on whom I could project my desires and whom I looked forward to seeing at parties at Agnes and Peter's. Now that I would never see her again, I wondered who she really was. All kinds of scenarios about her life went through my head, my imagination was stimulated, I wanted to write about her, but I couldn't get started, I knew too little. I kept thinking about Maria. Even at night she kept me busy.

With some hesitation, after all, I didn't really know them well, I went to Agnes and Peter and told them that I wanted to write a book about Maria because her life and person fascinated me. I asked them to help me with this. To my delight, they were willing to tell me everything about her. Because they suspected that Edward, her partner, and Karen, a colleague of Maria, knew more, they put me in contact with them. They first wanted to talk to me about my intentions and then decide what to do.

After a few exploratory conversations, in which I expressed my interest in Maria, Edward and Karen dropped their initial reluctance and shared with me in detail their grief and intimate and painful experiences with Maria. The things that came to light after her death surprised me, but made them shake their certainties.

As if by itself, shocking events from the past of her friends also came up in our conversations about Maria. Her death had shaken their lives. I realized that I could only give a complete picture of Maria if I showed her within her circle of friends. Without hesitation, her friends gave me permission for this.

Through the intensity of our conversations, I became intertwined with her friends, felt their emotions, knew their deepest thoughts and motives. Gradually, I discovered how each had balanced on the brink of honesty. I got to know Maria.

## The day of the cremation



A small waiting room in a crematorium. It's five minutes to four. Gray light falls through two windows, filtered by a few tall conifers that almost grow against the windows. It's raining, a drizzling rain that won't stop. Inside, the smell of wet raincoats in the adjacent cloakroom. There are five people present. Maria's mother and her son John stare ahead. Opposite them sits Edward, Maria's partner. He's talking softly to Agnes, Maria's friend. Her husband Peter, next to her, is looking at messages on his phone. A young woman is now rushing into the waiting room. She's a colleague of Maria, Karen. She takes off her coat and hangs it with her umbrella on the coat rack. Her black, tight-fitting suit accentuates her slim waist and full breasts. Edward looks pleased to see her, stands up and greets her with a kiss. Agnes and her husband stay sitting, smile, mother and brother frown their faces. Ignoring this, the young woman walks up to them to introduce herself. Just at that moment, it's exactly four o'clock, the funeral director comes in. He's neatly dressed in black and greets each of the present with a professionally sad look. Then he leads them to the small room where Maria is laid out. Arriving at the foot of the coffin, where a large bouquet of white lilies has been placed on behalf of the mother and brother, he makes a slight bow towards the deceased before discreetly withdrawing to the back of the room.

The casket is large. Maria had gained so much weight that she no longer fits in a standard casket. Her dark, curly hair with just a hint of gray frames her full face. Light makeup softens the death mask. She has hardly any wrinkles. There are two deep grooves around her mouth corners. They suggest that her life was not easy. The attendees stand around her casket. Edward leans over her and kisses her forehead. He appears to be moved and says audibly for everyone: "I will never see your beautiful, dark eyes again." Karen sobs. Maria's friend, Agnes, puts an arm around her. The others stare at the dead woman with somber, compassionate glances. She was only 49 years old. She died of heart failure. After a day, she was found on the ground in her kitchen. She had a head wound. Probably she became unwell at night, got out of bed and fainted in her kitchen, hitting her head on the counter. It couldn't be determined whether she was conscious after her fall and suffered. Maybe she would have lived with timely help.

In the medical report she is described as an obese, middle-aged, single woman. A body, social status, gender and age remain of a woman with a brilliant personality. Throughout her life, she has committed herself for each of the attendees and asked for little in return. From a young age, she was surrounded by people who took it for granted that she would be there for them.

The faces of the attendees have become flat and expressionless. No one wants to dwell on what happened that night. The idea that Maria may have still been alive after her fall, conscious and crying out for help in vain, suffering pain, is too gruesome. The self-reproach is suppressed. They couldn't have helped Maria. They weren't there when she fell. A life without Maria looms. Banal thoughts race through their minds. The mother worries about the upcoming Christmas. Who will prepare her Christmas dinner? The brother thinks about his divorce. Maria helped him with the legal side. Will he have to hire a lawyer for it now? Agnes remembers the delicious meals that Maria prepared for them and regrets that their cozy evenings together are forever gone. Edward is more affected than he expected and

certainly more than he wants. Maria was his partner, his financial advisor, helped him with his paperwork, read his desires, provided flowers in his house, cooked for him. Although not his favorite bedmate, he regularly had sex with her. Karen, Maria's colleague, shuts herself off from the loss. She thinks about her new job. She has replaced Maria.

After fifteen minutes, the funeral director asked those in attendance to take a seat. Everyone sat in the first row, with the mother and brother sitting on the left side of the aisle and the others on the right. Music played, *Ave Maria* by Schubert sung by Barbara Bonney. Her lyrical soprano filled the room and demanded everyone's attention. After the final "Ave Maria," the funeral director walked with firm steps to the pulpit. Suddenly, the door at the back of the room opened with a squeak. A group of ten adults came in with young children and teenagers. The mother and brother briefly turned their heads in confusion and then stared straight ahead again. The others looked back in surprise and curiosity at the people who had just entered and continued to stare at them until everyone was seated and the funeral director cleared his throat. "We are gathered here to remember the life of Maria van Klaaveren. May I ask Mr. John van Klaaveren to stand up..." A murmur came from the back rows. A man stood up.

"Is this not the funeral of Maria van Swieten?"

"No, this is the funeral of Maria van Klaaveren," the funeral director replied.

"We are at the wrong woman," the man said, turning to his group.

"Do you know where we should be for Maria van Swieten?" the man asks the funeral director again.

"I suspect you should be in the large hall. Leave through this door, then turn left until you can't go any further. Then turn right and you'll reach the entrance of the large hall." The whole group stands up and walks to the door. A small girl goes back to her seat. She left her teddy bear behind. Her father stays in the doorway waiting. A woman's voice is heard.

"I already thought it was strange that there were so few people here..."

The door closes.

All this time, the funeral director has remained behind the pulpit.

"I apologize for this disruption of the ceremony to remember the life of Maria van Klaaveren. I would now like to ask Mr. John van Klaaveren to come forward."

The brother takes his place behind the pulpit, lays a sheet of paper in front of him, looks at the casket, coughs and slowly begins to read.

"Dear sister,

You were named Maria after Maria in West Side Story. Daddy loved that musical and when his first child was a girl, he wanted her to be named Maria. He often played the music from the film and when "Maria" came on, he would say to you, "Listen, sweetheart, this song is for you."

We were three years apart. You were my big sister and took care of me when mommy went to play tennis or went to the city with a friend. You did puzzles with me and read to me from Donald Duck.

Actually, you would rather read me fairy tales, but I didn't like them. You loved reading. I still see you lying on the couch, completely absorbed in a book. Sometimes we would go outside and play with the other kids in the neighborhood. I was the youngest and you always kept an eye out to make sure I wasn't being bullied. I remember you hitting a neighbor boy who

made me fall on purpose and telling him that he should never do that again. It never happened again.

You had beautiful long hair, almost black, with waves. It reached your waist. All your friends had long hair too, but not as beautiful as yours. Dad would often call you his angel and stroke your hair. I think you were eleven when your hair was cut, very short. Suddenly you had all these small curls around your head. I remember you coming home crying from the hairdresser. There was an outbreak of lice at school and Mommy had told the hairdresser to cut off all your hair, as short as possible. She didn't want lice in the house. You kept crying. When Dad saw you that evening, he was shocked. What happened, he asked. Mom said that you had lice and that's why your hair had to be cut off. Dad stepped back and you ran upstairs, screaming that you didn't have lice. For two days you cried and didn't want to go to school. I felt very sorry for you that you were so sad."

The brother looks up for a moment, his face contorted, as if he is back in the dramatic moment of Maria's great sorrow. The mother doesn't move a muscle, the others look at the brother with wide eyes, shock and indignation written on their faces. He finishes his story.

"You were a kind woman. My children loved you too. You knew exactly what gifts they liked when they were little. And later, you brought books. I can hardly imagine that you are no longer here. And I speak for mommy too, when I say that we find it very sad that you have permanently left our lives.

Dear sister, farewell."

The brother picks up the sheet of paper, folds it small, puts it in his pocket, walks away from the lectern and takes his seat next to his mother. He tries to catch her gaze, but she continues to look straight ahead. Nervously, he plucks a piece of lint off his pants. The others also seem to feel uncomfortable, shifting in their seats. Then everyone jumps up. "Maria" sounds, the song in which Tony sings his love for Maria.

Hardly audible, Edward says to Karen: "Who the hell came up with this?" With slightly raised eyebrows and a hint of sarcasm around her lips, she looks at him sideways. It's clear that she finds his question unnecessary.

After the last "Maria," the funeral director walks back to the pulpit.

"May I ask Mr. Edward de Vries to come forward."

The partner stands up. He is a tall, distinguished man of almost 61 years old with sharp, dark blue eyes under strong eyebrows and a narrow mouth. Unlike many of his peers, he still has a full head of hair. He is clean-shaven, his black suit well-tailored. Behind the pulpit, he takes out a piece of paper with notes and his reading glasses. When he closes his jacket, it is clear that it is tight. He puts on his reading glasses.

"Dear Maria,

The first time we saw each other was in Utrecht, fifteen years ago. The café where I wanted to have a beer was packed because there was a qualifying match for the World Cup football and you were sitting at the only table with an empty chair. When I sat down, there was loud cheering: the Netherlands had scored a goal. I raised my glass to you, you laughed and that's how we started talking. We both turned out not to be football fans. You preferred reading,

you said. On the table, I saw *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*\* lying. I noticed that you were reading it in German. You loved that language and spoke it fluently. That also applied to French and Italian. I told you that I had been learning Italian for a year to understand my beloved Verdi operas and I asked you if you would give me conversation lessons, for pay. That last part didn't matter to you. Money was not important to you... I invited you for a drink and dinner in Italian. You laughed and said you would like that.

We immediately got along well. We both loved the same books and went to the same movies. This also applied to the theater and - what later turned out to be our common hobby - travel. We traveled a lot together, especially in Europe. You had a great organizational talent and meticulously prepared our trips. Whenever possible, you would order tickets for museums and theaters in advance and you would look for the best hotels. Not the most expensive, because neither of us wanted to spend a lot of money on hotels. We preferred to spend that on star restaurants. The delicious dishes we had there, you later made for me. You were a real chef!"

Here Edward pauses for a moment, he sighs, looks at his notes, continues.

"You initially worked at the university, in the Romance languages department. Due to a reorganization, you had to leave. I advised you to study law so that you would have more job opportunities and you were open to that. Thanks to the severance pay you received from the University, you could study full-time. In a record time of three years, you were a lawyer. You were an intelligent woman. And within three months, you had a job at a large insurance company. Soon, you stood out there for your insight into legal problems. You were given larger and larger projects and spent a lot of time on them. Eventually, you were in charge of the department for damage claims. You had become an expert in finance and also helped me regularly with drafting contracts."

Again Edward pauses for a moment, looks at the casket.

"I think few people realized how good you were at your work and how much time you spent to deliver the highest quality. It became normal for you to work overtime. Unfortunately, this came at the cost of your health and also of our time together. You were a very sweet girlfriend and I will miss you very much."

He stammers on the last words. With his head bowed, while he bites his lower lip, he puts the piece of paper with notes in the pocket of his jacket and stores his glasses. With uncertain steps, he walks back to his seat next to Karen. She looks at him with a slight smile and nods her head. Agnes and her husband also nod to him.

---

\* *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* is written by the Austrian author Robert Musil (1880-1942). Because social characteristics (such as gender, age, profession, nationality) "hollow out" the individual, one should best be able to live as "a man without qualities," according to Musil.

Music sounds again. This time it is "*Es ist vollbracht*" from the Johannes-Passion by Bach. After the last notes, the funeral director takes his place behind the pulpit.

"Ladies and gentlemen, family and friends of Maria van Klaaveren, we have now come to the end of the memorial service. If you wish, you may stay for a final farewell. After this, the casket will be closed. In the room opposite the cloakroom, coffee and tea are ready for you. I would like to wish you a good trip home."

Everyone stands up, they all stand around the casket and silently look at the woman lying there. The smell of lilies does not invite them to stay long. Agnes, her husband and Karen are the first to leave, quickly followed by Edward. The mother and brother linger a bit longer.

In the coffee room they meet again. They comment that the coffee and cake taste good, better than they remember from other funeral homes. After this observation, the conversation seems to run out. To break the uncomfortable silence, Agnes starts a conversation with the brother.

"Nice to hear, John, that Maria already loved reading as a child."

"Oh, yes, she loved nothing more. She would go to the library at least twice a week to borrow new books. Her favorite children's books were *Alice in Wonderland* and *Around the World in Eighty Days*. I know that, because she encouraged me to read them too," he grins at the memory, "but I found them too complicated. Maria had no trouble with difficult books. At twelve years old, she read all the books of *Johne Austen\**. I remember dad saying regularly, 'Maria, break away from *Johne Austen*. We are going to eat now.' She was crazy about her stories."

"Let's say, she was fascinated," Agnes responds. "Later, she reread her books in English. She really made a study of it, read biographies of *Johne Austen* and collected photos of the landscapes and houses where her stories were set.

Even the dishes that *Jane Austen* described, she tried to replicate. She wanted to approach the feeling that *Jane Austen* had when writing her novels, she told me."

"She was definitely not a superficial reader,"

Edward agrees, before turning to the brother, who is boredly eating his second slice of cake.

"John, did Maria used to have long hair?" Edward continues.

"Yes, didn't you know? She never told you that?"

Edward suppresses a rising irritation at the accusation he tastes in this question.

"No, we never talked about it. What I wonder is, how is it possible that she would just let her hair be cut off? Knowing Maria, she would have protested even as a child."

"She didn't know it was going to happen. Mommy would often take her to the hairdresser to trim her long hair."

"Am I understanding correctly that you didn't tell her this beforehand?"

Edward now asks the mother who is standing silently next to her son. He looks at her intently.

"No, of course not. She wouldn't have wanted it then."

---

\* *Jane Austen* (1775-1817) is an English writer. Her most famous books are *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Mansfield Park* and *Emma*. In her romantic stories, *Austen* implicitly comments on social inequality.

Her expression is disdainful, as if she can't imagine him asking something so foolish. She takes a sip of her coffee.

"Did she sit in the chair and then the hairdresser started cutting her hair without consulting?"

"Yes, I had previously agreed with him. I had told him to cut a big piece right away, so there was no turning back."

Edward is silent. It is clear from his face that he disapproves of her behavior, even now, so many years later. The mother pays no attention and continues her story.

"There was a lice infestation at school and in Maria's thick, dark, and long hair, you can't see the nits. I knew what would happen. In no time, everyone in the house would have lice. I would have to comb out nits for weeks and wash hair with that nasty lice shampoo. And the worst thing, washing everything at ninety degrees, really everything. I would have to get rid of all my nice clothes."

The mother is quiet for a moment as she remembers the possible disaster. On a more lighthearted note, she continues.

"It was of course a bit of an adjustment for Maria, but that short boy's haircut suited her well. I think she didn't mind it at all in the end. She never talked about it again."

"Girls of that age all want long hair. I think she did mind that her hair was cut off," Agnes said in a hesitant tone.

"You certainly don't have children," the mother responds sharply, "because then you would know that as a parent you have to impose things." Agnes blushes and looks away.

"Edward, you have children. You must agree with what I'm saying," the mother continues.

"I almost never made decisions without consulting my children."

"You see what can go wrong. Your son died from alcohol poisoning?"

Edward stiffens.

"Yes. What I blame myself for is not talking to him about the dangers of alcohol. And more importantly, that he didn't feel pressured by friends to continue drinking when he had had enough," he responds in a soft voice.

His remorseful words slide off the mother.

"How old was he again? Seventeen? And he was allowed to go to a café by himself with friends. Oh no, I remember now. It wasn't a café. He went with friends to a barn where everyone could drink unlimitedly without control. And that was allowed by you... Or were you not able to forbid it? Oh, if you don't start setting boundaries when you're young, it won't work later."

Edward stiffens even more, but now goes on the offensive:

"You couldn't do anything about Maria's obesity either."

"That was an illness. Besides, if anyone should have done something about it, it should have been you."

Her voice sounds bitter.

"You just went out to eat with her, to fancy restaurants, as you just said in your speech, while you saw how overweight she was. It certainly didn't matter to you that she was getting bigger and bigger, panting with every step. Or did you not even see that? Now we both have a dead child."

She doesn't wait for Edward's answer, who now turns pale and looks away, as if he's petrified, and turns to her son.

"John, shall we go? It's getting late and we still have a long way to drive."

"That's fine, mommy."

John addresses the others one more time.

"Thank you all for being here," and shakes everyone's hand as a goodbye. He then follows his mother who is already on her way to the cloakroom to get her coat. The others stay behind silently.

"What a bitch,"

Edward suddenly exclaims, and with growing anger:

"Fucking bitch with her stupid pedagogical talk. If I ever see her again, I'll beat her up."

He clenches his fist, his voice sounds hard.

"No, I'm not going to wait until I see her again. I'm going to her house, I'm going to find her and I'm going to beat the crap out of her, so she can feel what it's like when boundaries are set, fucking bitch."

Agnes takes him by the arm.

"Calm down, Edward, don't let Maria's mother get to you," she tries to calm him down.

Out of the corner of her eye, she sees the woman behind the coffee counter looking at them worriedly, ready to intervene.

"Yes, Agnes is right," her husband supports her.