

# GIRL IN HYACINTH BLUE



SUSAN VREELAND

ROSETTABOOKS™

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# **Girl in Hyacinth Blue**

Susan Vreeland

# Copyright

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*Girl in Hyacinth Blue*

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For

Scott Godfrey, D.O.,

and

Peter Falk, M.D.

## Acknowledgment

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Thou still unravished bride of quietness  
Thou foster-child of Silence and slow Time...  
Thou, silent form! dost tease us out of thought  
As doth eternity.

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John Keats

## Love Enough

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Cornelius Engelbrecht invented himself. Let me emphasize, straight away, that he isn't what you would call a friend, but I know him enough to say that he did purposely design himself as a single, modest dresser in receding colors, mathematics teacher, sponsor of the chess club, a mild mannered acquaintance to all rather than a friend to any, a person anxious to become invisible. However, that exterior blandness masked a burning center, and for some reason that became clear to me only later, Cornelius Engelbrecht revealed to me the secret obsession that lay beneath his orderly, controlled design.

It was after Dean Merrill's funeral that I began to see Cornelius's unmasked heart. We'd all felt the shock of Merrill's sudden death, a loss that thrust us into a temporary intimacy uncommon in the faculty lunchroom of our small private boys' academy, but it wasn't shock or Cornelius's head start in drinking that snowy afternoon in Penn's Den where we'd gone after the funeral that made him forsake his strategy of obscurity. Someone at the table remarked about Merrill's cryptic last words, "love enough," words that now sting *me* as much as any indictment of my complicity or encouragement, but they didn't then. We began talking of last words of famous people and of our dead relatives, and Cornelius dipped his head and fastened his gaze on his dark beer. I only noticed because chance had placed us next to each other at the table.

He spoke to his beer rather than to any of us. "An eye like a blue pearl," was what my father said. And then he died. During a winter's first snowfall, just like this."

Cornelius had a face I'd always associated with Piero della Francesca's portrait of the Duke of Urbino. It was the shape of his nose, narrow but extremely high-bridged, providing a bend for glasses he did not wear. He seemed a man distracted by a mystery or preoccupied by an intellectual or moral dilemma so consuming that it made him feel superior, above those of whom whose concerns were tires for the car or a child's flu. Whenever our talk moved toward the mundane, he became distant, as though he were mulling over something far more weighty which made his cool smiles patronizing.

"Eye like a blue pearl? What's that mean?" I asked.

He studied my face as if measuring me against some private criteria. "I can't explain it to Richard, but I might show you."

In fact, he insisted that I come to his home that evening, which was entirely out of character. I'd never seen him insist on anything. It would call attention to himself. I think Merrill's "love enough" had somehow stirred him, or else he thought it might stir me. As I say, why he picked me I couldn't tell, unless it was simply that I was the only artist or a teacher he knew.

He took me down a hallway into a spacious study piled with books, the door curiously locked even though he lived alone. Closed off, the room was chilly so he lit a fire. "I don't usually have guests," he explained, and directed me to sit in the one easy chair, plum-colored leather, high-backed and expensive, next to the fireplace and opposite a painting. A most extraordinary painting in which a young girl wearing a short blue smock over a rust-colored skirt sat in profile at a table by an open window.

"My God," I said. It must have been what he'd wanted to hear, for it unleashed a string of directives, delivered at high pitch.

"Look. Look at her eye. Like a pearl. Pearls were favorite items of Vermeer. The longing in her expression. And look at that Delft light spilling onto her forehead from the window." He took out his handkerchief and, careful not to touch the painting, wiped the frame, though I saw no dust at all. "See here," he said, "the grace of her hand, idle, palm up. How he consecrated a single moment in that hand. But more than that—"

"Remarkable," I said. "Certainly done in the style of Vermeer. A beguiling imitation."

Cornelius placed his hands on the arm of the chair and leaned toward me until I felt his

breath on my forehead. "It is a Vermeer," he whispered.

~~I sputtered at the thought, the absurdity, his belief. "There were many done in the style of Vermeer, and of Rembrandt, School of Rubens, and the like. The art world is full of copyists"~~

"It is a Vermeer," he said again. The solemnity of his tone drew my eyes from the painting to him. He appeared to be biting the inside of his cheek. "You don't think so?" he asked, his hand going up to cover his heart.

"It's just that there are so few." I hated to disillusion the man.

"Yes, surely, very few. Very few. He did at the most forty canvases. And only a matter of thirty to thirty-five are located. *Welk een schat! En waar is dat alles gebleven?*"

"What's that?"

"Just the lament of some Dutch art historian. Where has such a treasure gone, or some such thing." He turned to pour us both a brandy. "So why could this not be? It's his same window opening inward at the left that he used so often, the same splash of pale yellow light. Take a look at the figures in the tapestry on the table. Same as in nine other paintings. Same Spanish chair with lion's head finials that he used in eleven canvases, same brass studs in the leather. Same black and white tiles placed diagonally on the floor."

"Subject matter alone does not prove authenticity."

"Granted, but I take you to be a man of keen observation. You are an artist, Richard. Surely you can see that the floor suffers the same distortion of tiles he had in his earlier work, for example, *The Music Lesson*, roughly dated 1662 to '64, or *Girl with the Wineglass*, 1660."

I never would have guessed he knew all this. He reeled it off like a textbook. Well, so could I. "That can likewise prove it was done by an inferior imitator, or by Van Mieris, or by Hooch. They all did tile floors. Holland was paved with tile."

"Yes, yes, I know. Even George III thought *The Music Lesson* was a Van Mieris when he bought it, but even a king can't make it so. It's a Vermeer." He whispered the name.

I hardly knew what to say. It was too implausible.

He cleared off books and papers from the corner of his large oak desk, propped himself there and leaned toward me. "I can see you still doubt. Study, if you will, the varying depths of field. Take a look at the sewing basket placed forward on the table, as he often did, by the way, almost as an obstruction between the viewer and the figure. Its weave is diffused slightly out of focus, yet the girl's face is sharply in focus. Look at the lace edge of her cap. Absolutely precise to a pinprick right there at her temple. And now look at the glass of milk. Soft-edged, and the map on the wall only a suggestion. Agreed?"

I nodded, more out of regard for his urgency than in accord.

"Well, then, he did the same in *The Lacemaker*, 1669. Which leads me to surmise this was done between 1665 and 1668."

I felt his eyes boring into me as I examined the painting. "You've amassed a great deal of information. Is there a signature?"

"No, no signature. But that was not unusual. He often failed to sign his work. Besides, he had at least seven styles of signature. For Vermeer, signatures are not definite evidence. Technique is. Look at the direction of the brush's stroke, those tiny grooves of the brush hairs. They have their lighted and their shaded side. Look elsewhere. You'll find overlapping layers of paint no thicker than silk thread that give a minute difference in shade. That's what makes it a Vermeer."

I walked toward the painting, took off my glasses to see that close, and it was as he had said. If I moved my head to the right or left, certain brush strokes subtly changed their tints. How difficult it was to achieve that. In other places the surface was so smooth the color must have floated onto the canvas. I suddenly found myself breathing fast. "Haven't you had it appraised? I know an art history professor who could come and have a look."

"No, no. I prefer it not be known. Security risks. I just wanted you to see it, because you



can appreciate it. Don't tell a soul, Richard."

~~"But if it were validated by authorities... why, the value would be astronomical. A newly discovered Vermeer—it would rock the art world."~~

"I don't *want* to rock the art world." The blood vessel in his temple pulsed, whether of conviction of the painting's authenticity or something else, I didn't know.

"Forgive my indelicacy, but how did you obtain it?"

He fixed on me a stony look. "My father, who always had a quick eye for fine art, picked it up, let us say, at an advantageous moment."

"An estate sale or an auction? Then there'd be papers."

"No. No Vermeer has been auctioned since World War I. Let's just say it was privately obtained. By my father, who gave it to me when he died." The line of his jaw hardened. "So there are no records, if that's what you're thinking. And no bill of sale." His voice had a quiet defiance.

"The provenance?"

"There are several possibilities. Most of Vermeer's work passed through the hands of one Pieter Claesz van Ruijven, son of a wealthy Delft brewer. I believe this one did not. When Vermeer died, he left his wife with eleven children and a drawerful of debts. Five hundred guilders for groceries. Another sum for woolens for which the merchant Jannetje Stever seizes twenty-six paintings. Later they were negotiated back to the widow, but only twenty-one of them were auctioned in the settling of his estate. Who got the other five? Artists or dealers in the Guild of St. Luke? Neighbors? Family? This could be one. And of those twenty-one, only sixteen have been identified. Where did the others go? A possibility there too. Also a baker, Hendrick van Buyten, held two as collateral against a bread bill of 617 guilders. Some think van Buyten had even obtained a couple others earlier."

I had to be careful not to be taken in. Just because Cornelius knew facts about Vermeer didn't make his painting one.

"Later, it could have been sold as a de Hooch, whose work was more marketable at that time. Or it could have been thrown in as extra *puyk*, a giveaway item in the sale of a collection of de Hooches or Van der Werffs, or it could have been in the estate sale of Piet Tjammens in Groningen."

He was beyond me now. What sort of person knew that kind of detail?

"Documents report only 'an auction of curious paintings by important masters such as van der Meer that had been kept far away from the capital.' There are plenty of possibilities. All this spilled out of him in a flood. A math teacher! Unbelievable.

But the question of how Cornelius's father obtained the painting, he deftly avoided. I did not know him well enough to press further without being pushy. Not knowing this which he so carefully kept private, I could not believe it to be genuine. I finished the brandy and extricated myself, politely enough, thinking, so what if it isn't a Vermeer? The painting is exquisite. Let the fellow enjoy it.

His father. Presumably the same name. Engelbrecht. German.

Why was it so vital that I concur? Some great thing must be hanging in the balance.

I drove home, trying to put it all out of my mind, yet the face of the girl remained.

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Merrill's funeral the day before had made Cornelius thoughtful. Not of Merrill particularly. Of the unpredictableness of one's end, and what remains unpardoned. And of his father. Snow had blanketed his father's coffin too—specks at first, then connecting, then piling up until the coffin became a white puffy loaf. That jowl-faced minister saying, "One must take notice of the measure of a man" was the only thing said during Merrill's service that he remembered.

Cornelius had to admit on his father's behalf that Otto Engelbrecht was a dutiful father, often stern and then suddenly tender during Cornelius's childhood in Duisburg, near the

Dutch border. On this lonely Sunday afternoon with snow still falling gently, Cornelius ~~reading in his big leather chair, looked up from the page and tried to recall his earlier~~ memory of his father. It may have been his father giving him the little wooden windmill brought back from Holland. It had painted blue blades that turned and a little red door with one hinge missing that opened to reveal a tiny wooden family inside.

He remembered how his father had spent Sunday afternoons with him, the only child— took him to the Düsseldorf Zoo, gave him trumpet lessons himself, pulled him in a sleigh through the neighborhood, and when Cornelius suffered from the cold, how his father enfolded Cornelius's small hand in his and drew it into his pocket. He taught him chess strategies and made him memorize them, explained in a Dutch museum the reason for Van Gogh's tortured skies, the genius of Rembrandt's faces, and when they moved to America, as a result of his father's credo to seize advantageous moments, he took him to see the Yankees at Yankee Stadium. These facts Cornelius saw now as only the good intentions of a patched-up life.

Later, in Philadelphia, he was embarrassed by his father's hovering nervousness whenever he brought home a school friend, and understood only vaguely his father's dark command, "When they ask, tell them we are Swiss, and don't say another word." By the time he brought home his friends from college, his father had moved the painting into the study and installed a lock, secreting it with a niggard's glee. His father's self-satisfied posture whenever he looked at the painting—hands clasped behind his back, rocking on his toes, then heels—became, for a time, a source of nausea to him.

After his mother died, his father, retired and restless, took over tending her garden. Cornelius remembered now the ardent slope of his shoulders as he stooped to eradicate any deviant weed sprouting between rows of cauliflower and cabbage. Did he have to be so relentless? Couldn't he just let one grow, and say *I don't know how it slipped through?* Joyful he planted, watered, gave away grocery sacks of vegetables to neighbors.

"Such wonderful tomatoes," one woman marveled.

"You can't get a decent tomato in the supermarket these days." Smiling, he heaped more into her sack.

"We had a victory garden like this during the war," she said, and Cornelius saw him flinch.

Was that his father's Luger, grown huge in his mind, cracking down on a woman's hair as she reached for a bun as she was hurried from her kitchen?

The line between memory and imagination was muddled by years of intense rumination, of horrified reading, one book after another devoured with carnivorous urgency—historical personal accounts, diaries, documents, war novels—and Cornelius could not be sure now what parts he'd read, what parts he'd overheard his father, Lieutenant Otto Engelbrecht, telling Uncle Friederich about the Raid of the Two Thousand, what became known in academics as Black Thursday, August 6, 1942.

From dark to midnight, they dragged them out of their houses, the raid ordered, historians said, because too few Jews called-up for deportation were reporting at the station, and the train to Westerbork had to be filled. By mid-August they moved to South Amsterdam, a more prosperous area. In September, they were still at it, carting them off to Zentralstelle on van Scheltema Square.

*Just like the assembly line at the Duisburg plant.* From somewhere, his father's voice.

The rest was a tangle of the printed and the spoken word, enlarged by the workings of his imagination. He played in his mind again the Duisburg memory of creeping back downstairs after bedtime and overhearing his father telling Uncle Friederich the story he, a ten-year-old, didn't understand then. This time he staged it as though his father, after too much Scotch, and bloated by a checkmate following too many losses to Friederich, told his brother when he gathered family circles it was still safe to speak, "You've got to see opportunities and seize them on the spot. That's how it's done. Or, if a quick move isn't expedient, make a plan. Like this."

painting. When my aide spotted a silver tea set in some Jew's dining room, he made a move to bag it. Wrong time. I had to stop him. Property of the Führer."

Cornelius had read of that, the Puls van following the raids the next day, street by street to cart away ownerless Jewish possessions for the Hausraterfassung, the Department for the Appropriation of Household Effects.

"That's when I saw that painting, behind his head. All blues and yellows and reddish brown, as translucent as lacquer. It had to be a Dutch master. Just then a private found a little kid covered with tablecloths behind some dishes in a sideboard cabinet. We'd almost missed him. My aide glared at me, full of accusation that I could slip like that and be distracted. With any excuse, the painting, for example, or my reprimand, he might even have reported it."

What always rang in his mind with the crash of dishes, Cornelius would never now be sure was memory or his own swollen imagination: "So I shoved my boot up the Jew-boy's dirty ass. But I took care to note the house number."

What had happened next wasn't difficult to piece together. As soon as they delivered the quota, at 1:00 or 2:00 a.m., while other Jews still lay frozen in their hiding places and when the streets were dead quiet, his father went back. The painting was still there, hanging in spite of Decree 58/42, reported in several histories: All Jewish art collections had to be deposited with Lippmann and Rosenthal, a holding company. But this was not a collection, only a single painting, blatantly displayed, or ignorantly. What could his father have thought? That therefore it deserved to be taken? And then would come his father's voice resounding somehow through the years, "By the time I got there, the tea set was already gone."

Going over the same visions he thought his father had, hoped his father had, kept Cornelius awake at night, filled his dreams with the orgy of plunder, mothers not chosen to line up to die, pain not linked to sin, smoke drifting across fences and coating windows of Christian homes, children's teeth like burnt pearls. Driven by imagination, he read like a zealot on two subjects: Dutch art and the German occupation of the Netherlands. Only one gave him pleasure. Only one might dissolve the image of his father's hat and boots and Luge.

Compelled by his need to know, Cornelius traveled to Amsterdam one summer. He avoided Van Scheltema Square, went straight to the Rijksmuseum, examined breathlessly Vermeer's works, and in one delicious afternoon, convinced himself of the authenticity of his family's prize by seeing layers of thin paint applied in grooved brush strokes creating light and shadow on the blue sleeve of a lady reading a letter, just like those on the sleeve of his sewing girl. A few days later he went to The Hague. At the Royal Cabinet of Paintings in the Mauritshuis, he saw points of brilliant pink-white light at the corners of the opened mouth and in the eyes of Vermeer's girl in a red feathered hat, the same as on his sewing girl. In the musty municipal archives of Delft, Amsterdam, Leiden and Groningen he pored over old documents and accounts of estate sales. He found only possibilities, no undeniable evidence. Still, the evidence was in the museums—the similarities were undeniable. He flew home with hoarding conviction like a stolen jewel.

"It is. It is," he told his father.

Then came the slow smile that cracked his father's face. "I knew it had to be."

Together they went over every square inch of the painting, seduced anew by its charm, yet the rapture was insufficient to drown out the truth Cornelius could no longer deny: If the painting were real, so was the atrocity of his father's looting. He'd had no other way to obtain it. Now with Friederich and his mother gone, only two in the whole world knew, and that, together with the twin images in their dreams, bound them willingly or not into double kinship.

He started to tell someone else once, his onetime wife who had laughed when he said it was a Vermeer. Laughed, and asked how his father got it, and he couldn't say, and his laughter jangled in his ears long afterward. She claimed he turned cold to her after that, and

within a year she left, saying he loved things rather than people. The possible truth of the accusation haunted him with all the rest.

After his father's stroke, when the money from such a painting would set him up finely in a rest home, Cornelius agonized. Even an inquiry to a dealer might bring Israeli agents to his father's door with guns and extradition papers efficiently negotiated by the international operating Jewish Documentation Center, and a one-way plane ticket to Jerusalem, courtesy of the Mossad. More than a thousand had been hunted down so far, and not just Reichskommissars or SS Commandants either, so Cornelius moved back home to care for him.

Finally, when there would be no more afternoons of wheeling him, freshly bathed and shaven, out to the sun of the garden, when pain clutched through the drugs, his father murmured fragments, in German, the language he'd left behind. In a room soured by the smell of dying, a smell Cornelius knew his father could recognize, Otto whispered, "Bring the painting in."

When they both knew the end was close, Cornelius heard, faintly, "I only joined because of the opportunity to make lifelong friendships with people on the rise."

Cornelius sniggered, then spooned crushed ice between his father's parched lips.

"I only saw the trains. That's all I knew."

He wiped with a tissue a dribble inching down his father's chin, and waited for his father's breath, suspended in indecision, to come again.

"No more than forwarding agents. Sending them from one address to another. What happened at the other end was none of my business."

Right. Of course. *This way for the trains, please. Careful, madam. Watch your step.* Cool. Cornelius watched a pain worm across his father's forehead. How had he deserved to live so long?

"The thought of opposing or evading orders never entered my head."

Precisely.

Like a moulting snake, Cornelius thought, his father made pathetic efforts to shed the skin of sin in order to get down to the marrow of his innocence in time. But on the last morning with opaque gray snow fog closing in, came the truth of his grief: "I never reached a high rank."

That allowed Cornelius to bury him inexpensively. Without notice. It wasn't a cruel thing he told himself. Call it a memorial act, aimed at cheating the world of its triumph by ignominy, but by its very privacy, it failed. He did his best, that is, while his father was still living, did what he could, what he could pry out of himself. Nobody could say he didn't. Alone in this same study, sitting in his father's leather chair that struck him now as being the color of a bruise, he'd read the will. He'd forced his eyes to register each line and not scan down the page to see what he knew he'd see, that "a painting of a young girl sewing at a window" was his.

Now, for good or ill, there it hung. He felt its presence whenever he came into the room.

On this silent Sunday afternoon, years after his father's quiet burial, and the day after Merrill's, Cornelius sat in the same study, his now, reading Eichmann's trial records and drinking rum and coffee. Outside his window snow was flattening what had been his father's garden, and across the city it was pressing down on the new grave of Dean Merrill and the small boy's wooden sacrifice. Inside, he looked up, saw the life in the girl's eyes, and wished—no, longed for someone, Richard, anyone to enjoy the painting with him. No, not just anyone. Richard was safe. He knew art but not art dealers. That old wild need rumbled up from some molten place within, that need to say, "Look at this stupendous achievement. Look at this Vermeer. Pay attention on your knees to greatness."

At least he'd had that with his father. Once, years earlier, his father had called him long distance when he discovered what he thought was a brush hair left in a mullion of the window. That hair, from Vermeer's own brush, ah! He should have shown it to Richard. T

dissolve his doubt. Once he believed, Richard would have the passion to enjoy it like his father had.

His eyes fell to the page and stuck on a line said by Eichmann's judge: "*The process of extermination was a single, all embracing operation, and cannot be divided into individual deeds*". No. He didn't agree. He thought of the nameless, graveless little boy kicked out the door who may have played with a wooden toy his last free morning in the world.

Did the toy windmill get appropriated too? A souvenir from some hapless Jewish home taken at an advantageous moment in spite of its missing hinge? He imagined his father encased in a glass booth, being interrogated: "*And did you not remove this windmill from this house at 72 Rijnstraat after breaking in on the night of 3 September, 1942?*" His own thirty-first birthday.

Willed or not, the painting didn't belong to him.

It would be doing penance for his father if he himself wouldn't enjoy it more. He tore the newspaper into strips, fanned them out and crumpled them over the grate. Then the kindling crosswise, then the quartered logs. The fireplace opening was barely wide enough. He was grateful it wasn't a large painting; it would be a shame to do it injury with a razor.

He stood up to lift the painting off the wall. This one last afternoon, he would allow himself a luxury he'd never permitted himself before: He touched her cheek. A quiver ran through his body as the age cracks passed beneath the pads of his fingertips. He stroked her neck and was surprised he could not grasp the tie string hanging from her cap. And then her shoulder, and he was astonished he could not feel its roundness. She hardly had breasts. He moistened his lips suddenly gone dry, and touched there too, more delicately, two fingers only, and felt himself give in to a great wave of embarrassed and awkward pity, as when one glances in a hospital doorway at a person partially naked.

Where her skirt gathered, he felt the grooves left by Jan's brush. Jan. Johannes. No. Jan. The familiar name the only appropriate one for a moment like this. Jan's brush. He thought perhaps his fingers were too rough to feel Jan's mastery. He went to the bathroom, shaved with a new razor, dried his face carefully, and, back in his study leaning toward the wall, he placed his cheek next to her dress. The shock of its coldness knifed through him.

He had no right to this.

He laid the painting on the carpet and lit the fire. Kneeling, waiting for the flames to catch, he imagined them creeping toward the pale blue pearl of her eye. The quiet intensity of her longing stilled his hand a moment more.

If he turned the painting over, maybe he could do it.

Such an act of selfishness, he thought, to destroy for personal peace what rightly belonged to the world at large, a piece of the mosaic of the world's fine art. That would be an act equally cruel as any of his father's.

No. Nothing would be. Not just his father's looting—the safe job of thievery behind the battle lines—not just his father's routing them out, but the whole connected web. In Eichmann's trial record, he'd read, "*The legal responsibility of those who deliver the victim to his death is, in our eyes, no less than that of those who kill the victim,*" and he'd agreed.

Now, waiting for the fullness of the flame, it occurred to him, if the painting wasn't authentically a Vermeer—after all, he had no solid proof—he could do it, couldn't he? He could burn the thing, put the whole sorry business to rest so as not to keep his nerves raw.

Yet if it weren't genuine, the enormity of the crime shrank. Why not enjoy the painting? It was still exquisite. He looked again at her honey-colored profile, as yet unmarked by cruelty or wisdom. The throat moist with warmth from sunlight pouring into the room. The waxen idleness of her hand. So exquisite it had to be a Vermeer. He'd staked his solitude on it. He felt the injustice, looking at the girl, that she would never be known as a creation of a Vermeer. He had to get Richard to admit that it was a Vermeer, and then he'd do it another day. A promise.

In spite of his paintings, Vermeer was among the dead. And his father, and the boy Cornelius's life, like theirs, like Merrill's, was measured. He wouldn't live forever. He had to know that his years of narrow, lonely anxiety had been required. He had put himself together so carefully: allowing himself no close friends with whom it would be natural to invite to his house; teaching math, which he liked less, rather than history because of what he'd be forced to discuss; taking care to behave identically to people of all races and religions; suppressing anything in himself that might be construed as cruel or rigid or *German*—and now this boiling need threatening to crack the eggshell of his scrupulously constructed self. The one thing he craved, to be believed, struck at odds with the thing he most feared, to be linked by blood with his century's supreme cruelty. He'd have to risk exposure for the pure pleasure of delighting with another, now that his father was gone, in the luminescence of her eye. To delight for a day, and then to free himself. A promise.

But Richard still did not believe. He had left the night before saying, "Whether it's an authentic Vermeer or not, it is a marvelous painting." *Marvelous painting, marvelous painting.* That was not enough. There were hundreds of marvelous paintings in this city. There was a *Vermeer*. Nothing less from Richard would satisfy. He had to find some authentic reason for living as he had. The possibility of illegitimacy of what he'd suffered for was like a voice that had the power to waken him from a dream, but the dream gripped hard, as it does to an awakened, crying child, and he would not give it up.

Richard had admired the work. He was, perhaps, only a brush hair's breadth away from believing. The relief from sharing with one person who did not laugh was intoxicating. When he didn't do it years ago, he couldn't say. He'd wasted years in a miser's clutch, protecting a father who had protected no one. He wanted more. For the first time, he imagined himself telling it all, the history and his father's part of it, so Richard would believe, telling it with burning eyes right there in front of the painting and he would not die. He would not die from shame.

He kept repeating it—*I will not die*—while the flames burnt down to coals.

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The painting bound me to Cornelius with a curious tie, compelling but misbegotten, so that when I saw him mornings at the faculty mail room, the thought of that strange, secretive evening and his perverse insistence troubled me still. I felt I'd been plucked by the sleeve and commanded to follow him into a dangerous sea of judgment that could rise up against me as well.

We kept a coded language. One day I asked, not to goad him, but strictly as an aesthetic issue, "Would you enjoy it any less if you were to learn it wasn't authentic?"

"But it is."

"Yes, but just supposing it weren't?"

"I don't have to think about that. I know."

His bloated sureness irritated me.

I had the distinct impression that he was not at home in the world, and I knew it had to do with that painting. I did a bit of reading, talked to my art historian friend, and one Friday afternoon in the parking lot at school I asked him, "Did you know that a Dutch painter named Van Meergeren forged some Vermeers in the 1930's?" He froze there by his car. "So real that he had the art critics and curators believing him?"

"Yes, I was aware of that." Cornelius straightened up stiffly.

"And you know how they found out? He sold a few to that Nazi, Goering, and the Dutch government arrested him for treason—collaborating with the enemy, letting Dutch masterpieces leak out of Holland into the hands of the Reichstag. And so he confessed."

Cornelius's eyes darted back to his car where his hand trembled trying to find the keyhole. In that quiver I knew I had inadvertently stumbled onto something. Maybe he knew it was

only a Van Meegeren all along, and was trying to make a dupe of me, or sell it to me for an exorbitant price. A friend might let it pass, but we were only colleagues, committed, both of us, the mathematician and the artist, to truth. "I'd like to see it again, if you wouldn't mind," I said.

"Whenever you'd like," he said, all cordiality, and made a move to get into his car.

"How about now?"

He stood still a moment, gathering himself, it seemed to me. "No time like the present."

In the daylight the painting was even more magnificent than I remembered it. I sank into the chair in a trance. The luster of the glass of milk shining like the surface of a pearl made me believe—this was no copyist's art—but Cornelius's puffed-up manner the weeks before made me obstinate.

Yet now he had none of that smugness. There was only the intense pleasure of the painting. Lovingly he pored over its surface with an intimacy I hadn't noticed before in his flood of facts. If ever a man loved a work of art, it was Cornelius. His face shone with the adoration of a pilgrim for the icon of his God.

"I'd like to believe. It's not that I want to kill your own belief. But there's still one huge question."

"Which is?"

"Cornelius, you and I are teachers. Our fathers weren't millionaires. Unless you tell me how he obtained it, I don't see how—"

The radiance drained from his face.

I let the suggestion lie there and took a sip of the beer he'd brought me. He finished his one long, thoughtful draft, and held on to the bottle after he'd set it down, as if to anchor himself. I waited.

"I grew up in Duisburg, near the Dutch border..." he began, keeping his gaze riveted on the young girl while he spoke of his childhood, as though ingesting strength from her calm.

"And here, after sweating through a high school history class, I asked in spite of Mother's solemn warning never to ask, 'What did you do in the war, Dad?' 'Worked in Amsterdam' was all he said. Just like it was a job. 'Yes, but what did you do?' I asked. 'I have a right to know.' His body stopped all motion even out to his fingertips, as if he were feeling the first tremors of an earthquake. 'Took them to the trains,' he said."

Cornelius turned to me then.

"He took me to Yankee Stadium. Kept my hand warm in his own pocket. Planted daffodils for my mother. If I could have wept, if he had not trained it out of me... after that, he never was the same to me."

Cornelius's eyes, when he told me of the boy in the cabinet, became glazed like melted glass, and there was a hardness to his voice when he told of the missing tea set. When he said he'd tried to burn the painting, his whole body shook, and he slumped down at his desk spent.

Worse, a hundred times worse than I'd thought. That he had tried to destroy it, I could hardly believe. That he thought such an act might atone sickened me. I did not, I was sorry to learn, find in myself any generosity or charitableness for this man in spite of his suffering.

Clutching the edge of his desk with both hands, he leaned toward me, his forehead against the torture of grooves above that hook of a nose. "You won't tell, will you, the others at school? You see, now that you... now that one person in the world sees that it's authentic, it's a worthwhile, don't you think?"

His upper lip twitched in a repulsive way as though tugged by a thread. It became clear to me then why he picked me. He thought an artist might excuse, out of awe for the work, and if I excused, the painting could live.

"What happened to the boy?"

He stammered a moment, unable to put into words what we both knew.

“You know what they say, Cornelius. One good burning deserves another.”

~~I left him hunched there, took another look at the painting I knew would be my last, and~~  
could not get out of there fast enough. Poor fool, ruining his life for a piece of cloth smeared  
with mineral paste, for a fake, I had to tell myself, a mere curiosity.

With that to do ahead of him now, how he'd face me, how I'd face him Monday morning,  
I didn't know.



# A Night Different From All Other Nights

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The day before, Hannah Vredenburg and her younger brother Tobias watched their father lead his partner's pigeons go, back to their home in Antwerp. One by one, waiting between each for safety, he released them from the attic coop when the early morning was still foggy so no passing officer might see and note the house number. The decree against Amsterdam Jews keeping pigeons—their own or somebody else's—was eight months old, and Hannah knew it was getting too dangerous to disobey. Surrendering them this late at the German police station, as the decree had ordered, would result in repercussions.

“Quickly, Hannah, before Tobias comes up,” her father had said, and handed her the paper and pencil in hands trembling too much to write. “Here, write this. Write small.” It was the message to be placed in the tiny canister of his partner's last bird. “Kill my pigeons,” he whispered, pausing between sentences. “I can't expect you to feed them for the duration. Don't endanger yourself and don't release them, but let them eat their fill first. Leo with the purple-edged wings likes lentils best. Henriette, the blue-barred female, likes to have her head rubbed. This will be the last message until it's over, God willing. We are well. May you be safe.”

That last! Even as she squeezed those last four words onto the little paper, Hannah felt a frantic fluttering against the inside of her rib cage.

“Do I sign your name?”

“No.”

She folded the paper just as Tobias came up the ladder in his pajamas.

One by one Father scooped up his partner's pigeons, held them gently so Tobias could stroke them one last time, cupped his hands under their breasts and swung his arms upward to launch them into the air. She handed Father the folded message which he slipped into the canister of the last bird. She watched him kiss the back of the bird's head, a small moment with closed eyes, and then he flung the last pigeon skyward.

She watched that last free flapping of wings as the bird rose over the peaked roofs to her home in Antwerp. Escape that was no escape. Antwerp, Amsterdam—what difference did it make?

The next day, coming home from school, she saw Henriette, Leo and their two others flying under the gable and peck around the roof trying to get into their own home coop. She felt her breath leak out and leave only blackness: The message got there too late. Her father's partner had already released her family's own pigeons. She hurried inside, up the ladder stairs and led them in the coop. Their messages told of the German takeover of the diamond trade in Antwerp. A chill spread over her fingers and up her throat as she removed the canisters. She knew at once what must be done. It was only a matter of time. How long before Tobias would realize it too?

That night she stood on the ladder looking into the attic coop while her father, crosslegged on the coop floor, crooned to his birds, and to Tobias. “Leo. Leo. Such a bird. A bird that could carry a two-carat stone in his canister and never feel the weight. Remember that faithfulness, Toby.”

She cried then, holding tight to the top rung of the ladder so she wouldn't make a sound. Father's words might tell Tobias what had to be done. He wouldn't be told to remember Leo if Leo could live. She watched Tobias search Father's face a moment. Then he went back to stroking the gray breast feathers of the pigeons, feeding them barley out of his palm. But he didn't giggle as he usually did when Leo's rose-colored toes tickled his arm. She crept back downstairs.

It was awful they couldn't just be freed. That would be fitting to do on Passover, but they'd be bewildered by freedom, she thought, frightened of the prospects of finding a speck of food in South Amsterdam. They'd only peck around the gable of the house to get back in

the coop. It would make it obvious that this was the house where they belonged.

The next morning at breakfast, she asked, "Will it be today?"

"Soon." Father gently placed his big palm on the back of her head for a moment.

The whole house waited, breathless, while Passover approached, the night different from all other nights. Mother and Grandmother Hilde had been cleaning kitchen cabinets, the pantry, the oven, the icebox, and now were cleaning shelves in the sideboard and putting away the silver tea set in order to make room on the top for the Passover china. Hannah stood looking at the painting above the sideboard. It was of a girl her own age looking out a window while sewing. The way she leaned forward, intent on something, and the longing in her eyes cast a spell over her every time she looked. The girl wasn't working, at least not at that moment. Her hands were lax, the buttons on the table like flat pearls yet to be sewn on because what was going on in her mind was more important. Hannah understood that.

It was on an excursion with Father, just the two of them, a couple years earlier that he bought the painting—1940, just before her eleventh birthday. He'd been going to meetings of the *Comite voor Joodsche Vluchtelingen*, Jewish refugees from Germany, in the Rotterdam Casino next to the Diamond Exchange and had taken her to an auction where families had donated paintings, vases, jewelry and Oriental rugs to be bid on by other families as a means to raise money for refugee support. It was essential, he'd said, that the government not bear the expense of the Jewish poor. When this painting came up for bid, she gasped. The face of the girl in the painting almost glowed, her blue eyes, cheeks, the corners of her mouth all bright and glossy, the light coming right at her across the space between them. She seemed more real than the people in the room.

When Father cast a bid, Hannah sucked in her breath, astonished. He bid again. He grasped her hand when the bidding got above two hundred guilders; she squeezed his back when it passed three hundred. The higher the bids, the tighter she squeezed until, when he cast the bid that bought it, she cried, "Papa!" and didn't let go his hand all the way home. Father buying it seemed to honor her in a way that made her feel worthy.

The moment they walked in with the painting, while it was still wrapped, Mother straightened up and looked from her to Father as if she could tell something significant had happened. Hannah remembered feeling light-headed as she walked through the room choosing a place, until she settled on the dining room above the sideboard. She unwrapped it and held it up. "See Mamela, how lovely?" Sitting bolt upright across from it at the dining table, just where she was sitting now, she was the last to go to bed that night.

Tobias came in through the front vestibule. "Hannah, isn't this interesting?" He had in his hand a new spring leaf. "On this edge there are twenty four spikes but only twenty two on this," he said. "Why?"

At nine years old, Tobias was full of questions. He loved spider webs and the sound of crickets, kept moth and beetle collections, a small green turtle, a rabbit named Elijah, a notebook where he drew his observations from nature. In his mind, the four years between them made her ultimately knowledgeable, but she never knew what to say. She couldn't answer his passion with hers. "I don't know, Toby. Some things are different, I suppose."

Just then Mother asked him to clean the coop of *hametz*, which meant all barley, peas, lentils, any grain that would leaven when moist. Ridding the house of leavening was an act of remembrance, for Passover. Mother gave him only a couple dried potato peelings as alternative food for the birds since she used those in soup nowadays.

In the momentary silence, hearing only the coos of the pigeons echoing down the open a vent and her mother's damp cloth whooshing across a shelf, Hannah watched bewilderedly descend on Toby's face. He stared at the peelings in his hand, then looked up at her.

"What are they going to eat tomorrow?" he asked.

It was another question she couldn't answer.

His eyes darkened, his smooth forehead furrowed, and for a moment she imagined him

impossibly, as an old man. He knows it's only a token, she thought. If he didn't want to see them suffer, it would have to be done quickly. She saw confusion weight his shoulders and slick over his eyes. She reached out to put her arm around him. He drew away. Sobbing, he flung himself down the hallway and clambered up the ladder to the attic coop. She felt some nameless thing clutch at her heart.

As soon as he left, Hilde said to Mother, "It's terrible to make a child cry so." Whenever someone left the room, Hilde always had something to say about the person. Hilde drummed her fingernails on the sideboard for emphasis. "Let Hannah clean the coop."

"He loves those birds, Hilde. Let him be with them. Let him grieve. This year he can understand the Passover story."

Mother fairly attacked the sideboard shelves. In fact, she seemed to scrub everything more ferociously this year. Unbelievable that somehow she continued to clean.

Sputtering, Hilde swung around at Hannah. "Why don't you help your mother?"

Hannah shrugged and dangled a crumple of paper on a string in front of Toby's cat. The boiling of the silverware, the cleaning of the kitchen, the cooking, none of it interested her now.

"That's not an answer."

"I don't want to."

"Want to, she says. What's to want? You just do."

"Everybody does a little, Hannah," her mother said. "Won't you help boil the utensils?"

"Everybody works," Hilde said. "That's what life is. Work and a little play and a lot of prayer. Your great-grandmother Etty worked on the drivewheel you know. Walked the crank in a circle for thirty years until she wore a groove in the floor to power her husband's polishing scaife. She worked without a complaint until 1867 when she was—"

"Replaced by a horse. I know. You told me the last time you came."

"Well? Helping your mother is nothing compared to that. You want to be married, don't you? You've got to learn how to do these things. Or do you want to end up an old man working in a sweatshop? Edith tells me you don't do your lessons either. That you don't like school. Unthinkable. You want to go back to the crank?"

Hannah shrugged again. It might not be so bad. If nobody pestered her.

"What do you think we've worked hard all these years for, so you can become a cigar maker? A peddler? That's what happens, you know, to Jews who don't work hard."

Hannah looked at Hilde's gray wool bedroom scuffs aimed at her like two tailless rats.

"First generation your father is, to be a diamond merchant and not a polisher. That doesn't mean something to you?"

Out of the corner of her eye Hannah saw her mother cringe. "Will you at least go to the grocer for the parsley and the egg?" Mother asked. "Sal Meyer is saving a shank bone for me. It's a lovely day out. The lime trees along Scheldestraat must have new spring leaves by now. Brush your hair and go."

Without a word Hannah put on her unraveling maroon sweater with the stiff new star, but she moved so slowly after Mother gave her the money that Hilde raised up in righteous outrage, her glare passing from Hannah to Mother and back again. For a second, she dared glare back before she stepped into the vestibule and left the door open a crack to listen.

Hilde waited only a few seconds. "That girl! She never works. She never talks. Can't you get her to talk?"

"How to make her talk. Tell me. I'm sure you know."

"She has no interests. No friends. Last night I asked what she'd been doing this winter and she said 'nothing.' Does she even think?"

"Hilde, don't be cruel. We may never know what she's thinking, but surely she does."

"You should get her to participate."

"You think because I am her mother I can remake her? You're her grandmother. You have

a try. She is what she is.”

“Lazy and apathetic.”

---

“I suppose when you were her age you never felt like you just wanted to sit and think. You think I don’t already ask myself before sleep mercifully takes me what I did or didn’t do that made her this way? What I failed to say to her at one unknown, privately crucial day? Tell me, Hilde, how haven’t I loved enough? Tell me.”

Hannah couldn’t breathe. She peeled paint off the woodwork around the inner door.

“All I know, Edith, is that you’ve got to do something or she won’t have the strength. Why do you let her be so sullen?”

“Let her? You think I don’t worry, every single night, that she doesn’t want anything enough? You think I don’t know what that means now?”

Hannah turned to go and closed the outer door loud enough for them to hear. She didn’t care.

It wasn’t true. She did want things. That is, she wanted to want things, even to love things as much as Toby loved every living thing. Only she couldn’t say what. It was too impossible now. Wanting anything seemed crazy.

And she did have a friend. Marie.

Marie passed notes to her in school all last year. The last note was that Marie could not go walking with her after school that day because she had to tend her baby brother, but the day after they didn’t either, or ever did again. Now they were in different schools, and once when she saw Marie on a street outside the River Quarter, Marie pretended she didn’t recognize her. Now Hannah never left the River Quarter just so she wouldn’t see her and have to repeat the moment. She did too care about some things.

At least Mother stood up for her. A little. Except when she said that about what *made her this way*. As if something wasn’t right with her. What was missing?

She let out a long, deep sigh. She needed to blow her nose but had no handkerchief with her so she just sniffed and wiped with her hand.

The lime trees did have new leaves that were just unfurling. What for? she thought. She kicked a pebble on the sidewalk, and then saw two German officers coming the opposite way. For a moment the whole world stopped except the pebble that clattered on toward one tall black boot. Her heart turned to ice. A wetness moistened her underpants. Talking loudly, the men didn’t seem to notice the pebble, or even her. They made no move to accommodate her on the narrow sidewalk. At the last second she stepped off the curb to let them pass, and twisted her ankle.

Things were happening. Bigger than preparations for Passover. Beyond the candle glow there were things. There were things. Nothing was the same. Hilde acted as if it was Great-grandmother ETTY’s time.

But Father didn’t. He knew. Maybe that was why he was softer with her. She knew she exasperated him when she didn’t do her lessons, but by Sabbath afternoon, he had forgotten. He took long walks with her, leaving Toby and his talkativeness at home, along the canals of the River Quarter, buying her a pickle from the wooden vat at the corner of Vrijheidslaan and Vechtstraat, or to Koco’s ice cream parlor. Or he’d take her to Sunday concerts at Plantage Middelaaan, or to the Rijksmuseum. And, that one wonderful day, to the auction. Walking along, he would ask her about her schoolmates, her lessons, to try to get her to talk. She tried to tell him about Marie once, but she couldn’t speak the words. He always seemed so tired afterward, letting his shoes fall to the floor in the bedroom, saying, she heard once, “Maybe a little progress, Edith.”

Now it became clear to her what made her love the girl in the painting. It was her quietness. A painting, after all, can’t speak. Yet she felt this girl, sitting inside a room but looking out, was probably quiet by nature, like she was. But that didn’t mean that the girl didn’t want anything, like Mother said about her. Her face told her she probably wanted

something so deep or so remote that she never dared breathe it but was thinking about there by the window. And not only wanted. She was capable of doing some great wild loving thing. Yes, oh yes.

Hannah lingered doing the errands, not wanting to go right home. In the grocers' shop there were queues all the way out to the streets even though less was displayed than last week. After four shops, she stepped out into the boulevard again.

Then she saw them.

Another family of yellow stars carrying suitcases was being herded down the middle of Scheldestraat.

To Westerbork. That place.

Why them? she wondered.

As they passed, for the flash of a second a little boy looked at her with frightened eyes. She dipped her head and walked on. A pain shot through her chest. Ignoring it seemed the same kind of betrayal as Marie's. She turned onto Rijnstraat and hurried home so fast she had a side ache.

She accidentally let the door slam when she came in. "No parsley, so I got celery, but no egg anywhere."

"No egg? Did you go to Ivansteen's?" Mother asked.

"And to three places on Scheldestraat."

"What'll we do? And those poor homeless refugees coming and not even a full Sedel plate."

"It won't matter. In a matter of time, it won't matter at all."

"Hannah! Never say that. Don't let me ever hear you say that."

"What happened?" Hilde took the shank bone from her hands to examine it. "What happened out there on the street?"

Hannah slapped the celery onto the sink counter and turned to leave. "Nothing, Oma."

Hilde followed her. "What did you see out there?"

"Nothing. Just children jumping off porches holding open umbrellas. Playing parachutes. They do it whenever they hear planes. Haven't you noticed?"

She watched Hilde and Mother look at each other in puzzlement. No, of course they hadn't.

That evening with the house darkened, after her parents hid ten pieces of *hametz* around the house, Tobias did the ritual final search for *hametz* by candlelight. Using a feather, he brushed the crumbs into a wooden spoon with a seriousness Hannah couldn't remember from past years when it was more of a game.

"Where'd you get the feather, Toby?" Hannah asked.

"It's Leo's." He held it up and twirled it. "Look how it's purple on the edge. And wider on one side than the other. It came out in my hand as I was holding him. I didn't mean to."

No. He could never do the birds harm.

Father put the crumbs, the feather and the spoon into a paper bag to be burned the next morning. After Toby went to bed, when she thought he'd be asleep, she drew back the curtain that divided their bedroom and looked at him awhile. The boy in the street had the same curly hair as Toby. Bending to pull the blanket over him, she breathed the musty, innocent smell of rabbit and crayon and pigeon.

Before breakfast the whole family gathered on the porch, and Father struck a match and touched it to the edge of the bag.

"Two places, Sol," Hilde said. "To give it a good burning."

Hannah watched the black edge creep sideways across the bag, like the front line of an army, she thought, bringing a small wall of orange flame behind it until it touched the other black edge advancing to meet it. The Red Sea closing in instead of parting. Eventually the wooden spoon was a burnt bone of dying cinder on the bricks of the porch. Hannah stamped

it out.

~~In the afternoon Father went walking with Toby, Hannah didn't know where, but she knew they'd end up at the Rotterdam Cafe in order to bring home for Seder dinner two of the refugee families who were living upstairs.~~

Except for the slow rhythmic crunch-crunch of Mother chopping nuts for the *charoseth*, and the coos of the pigeons echoing down the open air vent, the house was quiet. With everything nearly ready for the holiday at sundown, it seemed to Hannah that the rooms breathed expectation, as before a death, or a birth. She thought about that for a while, feeling it settle as she sat sideways in her father's chair at the dining table, fingering idly the scalloped edge of the white tablecloth.

Hilde wedged two candles in the silver candlesticks, arranged the Delftware basin and pitcher on the sideboard for washing the hands, dug a dust rag one last time into the sideboard carving and flicked it along the lower edge of the picture frame.

"You know what she's looking at out the window, don't you?" Hilde said. "Her future husband."

Naturally she'd think that, Hannah said to herself.

"What do *you* think?" Mother asked from the kitchen doorway.

"Pigeons. Just pigeons," Hannah said.

"Pigeons? What do you mean by that?" Hilde said.

"I mean it doesn't matter what she's looking at. Or what she's doing, or not doing." She looked Hilde dead in the eye. "It only matters that she's thinking."

"Is that why you like her?" Mother asked in surprise.

"And because I know her."

Hannah stood up, went down the hallway and up the attic ladder. Leo was closest, dozing. She grabbed him first, and in a frenzied flapping of wings, twisted his neck until its tightness released under her fingers. Squawks of the others rang in her ears. She lunged to catch Henriette and skinned her knee. Two, three, four, each time that same soft popping underneath the feathers.

She came down the hallway staring straight ahead. Her hands trembled so much Mother noticed. Hannah looked down too and saw a wisp of feather underneath the nail of her forefinger, the smallest bit of gray breast down. She flicked it away. Mother and Hilde gaped at her, apparently unable to move. Hilde's lips pinched into a purple wound.

"Go wash your hands," Mother murmured.

Hannah turned, caught her foot on the hall runner, and lunged into the bathroom. She heard her mother's voice. "This is one time, in your son's home, you will say nothing, Hilde. Nothing." Hannah turned on the water. She didn't want to hear what would come next. She washed up to her elbows, and her skinned knee. After a while she slipped into her room and lay on her bed. When she heard through the air vent Mother sweeping the coop, she felt a trickle of moisture creep toward her temple. She waited for the chop-chop of the *charoseth*. Then she changed her dress and gave her hair a good brushing.

When Father and Toby came in, she couldn't look directly at them. The two German families were awkward, not knowing where to put themselves. A boy younger than Toby stood wordless and clinging to his father. Mother had Toby introduce each guest to Hilde, had him pass out the Haggadahs, had him bring the white *kittel* to his father to put on. She had him arrange on the Seder plate the celery, the shank bone, the *charoseth*, a withered root of horseradish and a small peeled potato carved narrower at one end to look like an egg, and then she asked him to watch on the porch for sunset in the western sky. All this, Hannah knew, so he wouldn't think to take the little German boy upstairs to show him the birds.

Mother rummaged in the sideboard and brought out the old Delftware candlesticks. "Here," she said to Hannah. "These were your great-grandmother Etty's, but tonight and forever, they'll be yours. Wash them and put them on the table."

And Hannah did.

~~“Sunset’s coming,” Toby announced from the porch. “The sky’s all goldy.”~~

Her mother struck a match and held it to an old candle stub until a flame rose, touched to the two tapers in the silver candlesticks and handed it to Hannah. She did the same with hers. Watching her candlelight illuminate the girl in the painting, she knew why this night was different from all other nights. Real living had begun.

Walking with his wife Digna along the narrow canal, Laurens van Luyken kept a discreet distance behind the young lovers, as if to give them privacy, but he watched their every move. Just beyond his neighbor's oxcart, he saw his daughter lean, unnecessarily, on the young man's arm.

The autumn air blew crisply and Digna drew close her cape. Laurens usually found winter invigorating, but this afternoon it made him feel as though a wall of gray sea were thundering toward him against which he had to brace himself. The breeze was crisp, the fallen leaves were crisp, everything was crisp. Johanna's voice was crisp earlier that day when she told him, "Papa, Fritz asked me to marry him, and I told him yes." Just like that. No prelude. No delicacy. Not even a nod to tradition. As if fathers needn't even be asked anymore to give up their daughters to someone else's love. Was this the way Amsterdammers did things? herald of how life would be in the new century?

"We should give them a fine gift," Digna said, taking Laurens' arm just like Johanna had done with Fritz. "Something of ours she's always loved and will always keep."

"Does that mean you're agreeing to this?"

"He's a good fellow. And handsome." He caught her playful smile. "Erasmus says if you must be hanged let it be on a fair gallows."

"Gallows weren't intended for the young and innocent."

Up ahead their dog, Dirk, trotted right in Johanna's way so that she almost stumbled, and then Fritz said something that made her laugh. Laurens watched her press herself against the man and kiss him lightly on his ear. Dirk barked what Laurens knew was an admonition. Laurens found a perverse pleasure in noting that Dirk did not take too keenly to the attentions Johanna was paying to this odd-smelling interloper in leather shoes instead of good, solid *klompen*, clearly not a resident of Vreeland. He was amused when Dirk, trembling with suspicion, had growled something obviously insulting at Fritz when he arrived by coach at noon.

"Look at her, Laurens. Radiant."

Instead, he glanced sideways at his wife. The happiness had traveled: His daughter's wild dewy bliss had freshened every pore in Digna's familiar face.

"What could we give them?" she asked, a pleasant urgency in her voice.

"A broom and a butter churn?"

"We could give them the *Digna Louise*."

"No. Fritz has an old smack boat. He told me he took it out last week to the Zuider Zee and nearly froze. No one in his right mind, outside fishermen, would go sailing there after September."

Their neighbors' skiffs were lined up stem to stern where the canal joined Loosdrechtschans Plassen. Laurens remembered how as a young girl Johanna called them wishbone boats, for the graceful shape of their prows. He wondered if she told Fritz that just now as they passed the skiffs along the bank.

Johanna and Fritz turned at Ruyter's mustard mill to walk the lakeshore wagon road, and he looked back for Laurens and Digna to follow. Something of their expectancy, the feeling that they were sailing forth into an adventure in an untried craft, awakened in Laurens a vague competitive warmth, and he slipped his arm around his wife's supple waist. "You cold?" he asked, half hoping that she was.

"I could give her my mother's opal ring, but that's not very much. And it should be something from both of us. For both of them."

To Laurens, everything about the couple ahead bore the conspicuous marks of euphoria. Too soon blooming, he thought, too soon coming in to seed. They had not suffered long winter evenings of soulful contemplation, but were careening ahead as if it were already tulip



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