The country was so flat its inhabitants had four different words for *horizon.* Its sunlight was watery, full of tumbling clouds. Canals cut across a vast wet chaos of tidal mud, connecting tidy red-brick towns with straight streets, secure and well-ordered behind walls. The houses were all alike behind their stepped facades, high windows set in pairs letting through pale light on rooms scrubbed and spotless. The people who lived in the rooms were industrious, pious, and preoccupied with money.

A fantasist might decide that they were therefore dull, smug and inherently unromantic, the sort of people among whom the Hero might be born, but against whom he would certainly rebel, and from whom he would ultimately escape to follow his dreams.

Nothing could have been further from the truth. The people who lived in the houses above the placid mud flats had fought like demons against their oppressors, and were now in the midst of a philosophical and artistic flowering of such magnificence that their names would be written in gold in all the arts.

Still, they had to make a living. And making a living is a hard, dirty and desperate business.

The weaver's son and the draper's son sat at a small table. They had been passing back and forth a pipe of tobacco slightly adulterated with hemp, and, now that it was smoked out, were attempting to keep the buzz going with two pots of beer. It wasn't proving successful. The weaver's son, thin and threadbare, was nervously eyeing his guest and trying to summon the courage to make a business proposition. The draper's son, reasonably well-fed and dressed, seemed in a complacent mood.

"So you learned a thing or two about lenses in Amsterdam, eh?" said the weaver's son.

"I'd have gone blind if I hadn't," replied the draper's son, belching gently. "Counting threads on brocade? You can't do it without a magnifying glass."

"I had this idea," said the weaver's son. "Involving lenses, see. Have you looked at de Hooch's paintings lately? He's using a *camera obscura* for his interiors. They're the greatest thing—"

"You know my Latin's no good," said the draper's son. "What's a *camera obscura*, anyway?"

"All the words mean is *dark room,"* explained the weaver's son. "It's a trick device, a box with two lenses and a focusing tube. The Italians invented it. Solves all problems of perspective drawing! You don't have to do any math, no calculations to get correct angles of view. It captures an image and throws a little picture of it on your canvas, and all you have to do is trace over it. It's like magic!"

"And you want me to loan you the money for one?" asked the draper's son, looking severe.

"No! I just thought, er, if you knew about lenses, you might want to help me make one," said the weaver's son, flushing. "And then I'd cut you in for a share of the paintings I sell afterward."

"But your stuff doesn't sell," said the draper's son.

"But it would sell, if I had a *camera obscura!* See, that's my problem, getting perspective right," argued the weaver's son. "That was the problem with my *Procuress.* I'm no good with math."

"That's certainly true."

"But the device would solve all that. I've got a whole new line of work planned: no more Bible scenes. I'm going to do ladies and soldiers in rooms, like de Hooch and Metsu are doing. The emblem stuff with hidden meanings, that people can puzzle over. That's what everyone wants, and it's selling like crazy now," said the weaver's son.

The draper's son sighed and drained his beer.

"Look, Jan," he said. "Your father died broke. He made good silk cloth, he ran a pretty decent inn; if he'd stayed out of the art business he'd have done all right for himself. Our fathers were friends, so I'm giving you advice for nothing: you won't make a living by painting. I know it's what you've always wanted to do, and I'm not saying you're not good—but the others are better, and there are a lot of them. And you're not very original, you know."

The weaver's son scowled. He was on the point of telling the draper's son to go to Hell when a shadow fell across their table.

"I'm very sorry to interrupt, *Mynheeren,"* said the woman. They looked up at her. The weaver's son stared, struck by the image she presented, the way the light from the window fell on her white coif, glittered along the line of brass beads on her sleeve, the way the layered shadows modeled her serene face.

"What do you want?" asked the draper's son. She didn't look like a whore; she looked like any one of the thousand respectable young matrons who were even now peeling apples in a thousand kitchens. What, then, was she doing in the common-room of a shabby inn on the market square?

"Well, I couldn't help but overhear that you two young gentlemen were talking about making a *camera obscura.* And, you know, I said to myself, isn't that the strangest coincidence! Really, when a coincidence this remarkable occurs it's got to be the work of God or the holy angels, at least that was what my mother used to say, so then I said to myself, whether it's quite polite or not, I'll just have to go over there and introduce myself! Elisabeth van Drouten, gentlemen, how do you do?"

And she drew up a three-legged stool, and sat, and thumped her covered basket down on the table. Looking from one to the other of the men, she whisked off the cover. There, nestled in a linen kerchief, were a handful of objects that shone like big water-drops, crystal-clear, domed, gleaming.

"Lenses!" cried Mevrouw van Drouten triumphantly. "What do you think of that?"

The two gentlemen blinked at them like owls, and the draper's son reached into the basket and held one up to the light.

"Nice lenses," he admitted. "Are you selling them?"

"Not exactly," said Mevrouw van Drouten. "It's a long story. There's a friend of my family's in Amsterdam, actually that's where I'm from, you could probably tell from my accent, yes? Well, anyway, he grinds lenses, this friend of mine. And because he got in trouble with his family—and then later on the Jews kicked him out of their synagogue for something, I'm not sure what it was all about, but anyway, bang, there went poor Spinoza's inheritance. So we were trying to help him out by selling some of his lenses, you see?

"So last time I was here in Delft visiting my auntie, which was, let's see, I guess it was five years ago now, I brought some lenses to see if I could sell them, which I did when I was at my cousin's tavern to this nice man who was maybe a little drunk at the time, and I understood him to say he was a painter and wanted them for optical effects. Fabritius, that was his name!"

The two men grunted. In a gesture that had become involuntary for citizens of their town, they both turned to the northeast and raised their beers in salute. The woman watched them, her brows knitted.

"He died in the explosion," the weaver's son explained.

"Yes, the 'Delft Thunderclap', we called it," said Mevrouw van Drouten, nodding her head. "When your city powder magazine went blooie! Awful tragedy. And that's what my cousin said, when I went back to her tavern yesterday. That poor Fabritius had been so drunk that he left the packet of lenses on the table, and he never came back to get them because the explosion happened the next day. So she kept them until she saw me again. And I said, 'What am I supposed to do with them now? He paid for them, so I don't feel right keeping them,' and she said, 'Well, Elisabeth, why don't you find some other painters to give them to?' And I said, 'Where would I find some other painters?' and she said, 'Try that inn over in the Market Square,' so I came straight over, and here you are, fellow artists I guess, eh? Maybe you knew Fabritius?"

"I did," said the weaver's son. "He was a genius."

"Well then! I'm sure he'd want you to have these, wouldn't he?"

The weaver's son reached into the basket and the lenses rattled, clicked softly as he drew one out. He peered at the tiny rainbowed point of light it threw. It magnified wildly the lines of his palm, the yellow hairs on the back of his hand. He held it up to the window and saw his thumbprint become a vast swirl etched in silver. The draper's son held his lens up beside it.

"Ooh!" Mevrouw van Drouten clasped her hands in pleasure. "I wish I could capture this moment, somehow. Can't help thinking it's portentous, in a way I can't explain. Fabritius's ghost is probably smiling down from heaven at you two fine young fellows. Now you can build your *camera obscura,* eh? And maybe find one or two other uses for the lenses."

"Are you sure you want to give them away?" said the draper's son, a little vaguely because he was still entranced by the play of rainbows across crystal. The buzz from the hemp hadn't quite vanished.

"Quite sure," said Mevrouw van Drouten cheerfully. She spilled the remaining lenses out on the table and stood, tucking her empty basket under her arm. "There. Much as I'd love to stay and chat, I've got a boat to catch. Mynheer van Leeuwenhoek, Mynheer Vermeer, may God keep you both."

Then she was gone, as suddenly and inexplicably as she'd arrived. The weaver's son tore his gaze away from the liquid contours of the piled lenses and looked around. The light still streamed in, clear and soft, but the room was empty save for a drunk snoring on a bench in the corner.

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In the twenty-fourth century, it was unanimously conceded by art authorities that Jan Vermeer was the greatest painter who had ever lived.

The other Dutch masters had long since been dismissed from popular taste. Rembrandt didn't suit because his work was too muddy, too dark, too full of soldiers and too *big*, and who wanted to look at Bible pictures anyway in an enlightened age? To say nothing of the fact that his brush strokes were sloppy. Franz Hals painted too many dirty-looking, grimacing people, and his brush strokes were even sloppier. The whole range of still life paintings of food were out: too many animal or fish corpses, too many bottles of alcohol. Then too, a preoccupation with food might lead the viewer to obesity, which was immoral, after all!

Had they known of their demotion, the old gentlemen of Amsterdam and Utrecht might not have felt too badly; for by the twenty-fourth century, the whole of Medieval art had been condemned for its religious content, as had the works of the masters of the Italian Renaissance. The French Impressionists were considered incoherent and sleazy, the Spanish morbid, the Germans degenerate, and the Americans frivolous. Almost nothing from the twentieth or twenty-first centuries was acceptable. Primitive art was grudgingly accepted as politically correct, as long as it didn't deal in objectionable subjects like sex, religion, war, or animal abuse, but the sad fact was that it generally did, so there wasn't a lot of it on view.

But who could find fault with the paintings of Jan Vermeer?

It was true he'd done a couple of religious paintings in his youth, before his style had become established, and the subject matter of his *Procuress* was forbidden, but it too was atypical of the larger body of his work. And his *Diana and her Companions* was enthusiastically accepted by the Ephesian Church as proof that Vermeer had been a secret initiate of the Goddess, and since the Ephesians were about the only faith left with political power or indeed much of a following, the painting was allowed to remain in catalogs.

There was, of course, the glaring problem of the *Servant Pouring Milk.* But, since Vermeer's original canvases hadn't been seen in years due to their advanced state of deterioration, it was no more than the work of a few keystrokes to delete the mousetrap from the painting's background and, more important, alter the stream of proscribed dairy product so it was no longer white, in order that the painting might henceforth be referred to as *Girl Pouring Water.* This would avoid any reference to the vicious exploitation of cows.

Those objections having been put aside, Vermeer was universally loved.

He glorified science—look at his *Astronomer* and *Surveyor!* He was obviously in favor of feminism, or why would he have depicted so many quiet, dignified women engaged in reading and writing letters? There were, to be sure, a couple of paintings of women drinking with cavaliers, but everyone was decorously clad and upright, and anyway the titles had been changed to things like *Girl with Glass of Apple Juice* or *Couple Drinking Lemonade.* He valued humble domestic virtues, it was clear, but refrained from cluttering up his paintings with children, as his contemporary de Hoogh had done. All in all his morality, as perceived by his post-postmodern admirers, suited the twenty-fourth century perfectly.

They liked the fact that his paintings looked real, too. The near-photographic treatment of a subject was now considered the ultimate in good taste. An orange should look like an orange! The eventual backlash against Modern Art had been so extreme as to relegate Picasso and Pollock to museum basements. Maxfield Parrish and the brothers Hildebrandt might have been popular, had they not unfortunately specialized in fantasy (read *demonic)* themes, and David painted too many naked dead people. So, with the exception of a few landscape painters and the flower paintings of DeLongpre, Vermeer was pretty much the undisputed ruler of popular art.

Having been dead nearly seven centuries, however, it is unlikely he cared.

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THE ROOM UPSTAIRS, 1661

The *camera obscura* had worked, after a fashion. The image hadn't been especially bright, muzzily like a stained-glass window out of focus, but Jan had been able to sharpen it up by sealing all the gaps in the cabinet with pieces of black felt. All he had to do then was set up the picture: so he tried a variation on a popular piece by Maes, *The Lazy Maid.*

Catharina obligingly posed at the table, pretending to sleep. Above her, Jan hung the old painting of Cupid from the stock his father had been unable to sell. Beside her was the view through to the room where the dog posed with simpleton Willem, both of them apparently fascinated by circling flies. Jan had laid their one Turkey carpet on the table, and carefully set out the symbolic objects that would give the painting its disguised meaning, to be deciphered by the viewer: the jug and wineglass to imply drunkenness, the bowl of fruit to suggest the sin of Eve, the egg to symbolize lust.

"Why don't these things ever have anything good to say about ladies?" Catharina complained.

"Damned if I know," Jan told her, adjusting her right arm so she was resting her head on her hand. "But it's what the customers want. Hold it like that, see? That symbolizes sloth."

"Oh, yes, I know all about sloth," she retorted, without opening her eyes. "I'm a real woman of leisure, aren't I?"

"Mama, the baby's awake," little Maria informed them cautiously, edging into the room.

"See if you can rock her back to sleep, then."

"But she's really awake," Maria insisted, wringing her hands.

"Then give her a toy or something! Just don't let her cry."

"All right." Maria left the room. Catharina opened one eye and glared at Jan.

"If she starts crying, I'll run like a fountain, and that'll ruin this gown, and it's my best one! Unless you can get me a pair of sponges in a hurry," she said.

"I'll be as fast as I can." Jan retreated into the black cabinet with his palette.

Working quickly, despite the panicky realization that he'd installed the cabinet too far away from the light of the window, he roughed out everything he could see in a few wide swipes of the brush, applying the pale paint thinly. The main thing here was to get the perspective nailed down. Afterward there would be plenty of time to lavish on color and detail …

A thin wailing floated into the room. He saw the reflected image of Catharina sit upright, saw her eyes

snap open, saw her clutch at her bodice.

"Jan, I've got to go," she said, and fled from the sight of the lens.

Six weeks later, he sat at the easel and contemplated his *Girl Asleep* sadly.

It hadn't worked. The perspective was correct, certainly, the *camera obscura* had done its job there; but left to himself he hadn't been able to nail down the direction from which the light ought to be coming. Was it strong sunset light coming through a nonexistent window? Firelight? Was it in front of the table or to one side? What was lighting the room beyond, where he'd finally settled for painting out Willem and the dog?

Growling to himself, he took a bit of lead-tin yellow on his brush and picked out a pattern of brass tackheads on the back of the chair. Halfway through the job he stopped and considered it. No, because if the light was falling *on* the table—

"Papa?" Maria came up to him.

"You're standing in my light, baby," he told her, gently nudging her to one side.

"I'm sorry, Papa. There's a lady to see you."

He came instantly alert, started to sweat. "Is it about a bill?"

"No, Papa, I asked." Maria raised her little pinched face to his. "Because then I would have said you were out. But she wants to buy something. That would be a good thing, wouldn't it? So I told her she could come up."

"But—" Jan looked up in panic as Mevrouw van Drouten swept into the room, basket over her arm.

"Good-day, Mynheer!" she cried gaily. "I see you remember me. So this is where you work, eh? And there's the *camera obscura!* Yes, that's a nice big one, but are you sure you don't want to move it closer to the windows?" She came straight to his shoulder and bent to look at the painting. "Yes, you definitely want to move it over. The light didn't work out at all in this one, did it? Nice painting, though."

"Thank you—but—" He rose clumsily, wiping his brush with a rag. "If you've come to buy, I'm afraid this one is already sold. I've got to deliver it to the baker. I have a lot of other fine paintings by other artists, though, and they're for sale! Would you perhaps like to see—?"

"No, no." Mevrouw van Drouten held up her hand. "I had a commission in mind, if you want to know."

"Certainly, Mevrouw," Jan exclaimed. "Can I offer you—" he halted, mortified to realize he was unable to offer her anything but bread and butter.

"That's all right," she told him. "I didn't come here to eat." She reached into her basket—it was an immense basket this time—and brought out a small paper parcel. Turning with a smile, she offered it to Maria. "There you go: spekulaas with almonds! Baked this morning. You run along and share them with the little brothers and sisters, yes? Papa and I have to talk in quiet."

"Thank you," said Maria, wide-eyed. She exited and, with some effort as she clutched the parcel, pulled the door shut after her. If the big lady wanted privacy, Maria would make sure she had it, so long as she bought something. A painting sold meant Mama and Papa not shouting at each other, and no dirty looks from the grocer.

Mevrouw van Drouten pulled up a chair. She paused a moment to smile at the little carved lion heads on its back rest. Seating herself, she crossed her arms and leaned forward.

"This commission of mine is a bit unusual, dear sir. My late husband was an alchemist—well, actually, he kept a lodging-house, but alchemy was his hobby, you see? Always fussing with stinky stuff in a back room, blowing off his eyebrows with small explosions now and then, breaking pots and bottles every time. Geraert, I told him, you'll put an eye out one of these days! And of course he never made any gold. About all he ever came up with was a kind of invisible ink, except that it's no good as ink, because it's too thick. Well, he poisoned himself at last, wasn't trying to commit suicide so far as we could tell but he was still just as dead, there you are, and left me with nothing but the house and a book full of cryptic scribbling and that one formula for invisible ink, only it's more of an invisible paste, and what good's that to a spy, I said to myself?"

"I'm so sorry, Mevrouw," said Jan, feeling his head spin at her relentless flow of words.

"Oh, that's all right. I'm containing my grief. The thing is, I figured out a use for the invisible stuff." She leaned back and, from under the cloth, drew out another parcel. This one was a flat rectangle, about the size of a thin account book. It was tightly wrapped in black felt and fastened with string. Holding it up for Jan to see, she said: "This is a little canvas that's been coated in it."

She set it on the table and reached into the basket again, drawing out a small covered pot and a brush. "This is the reagent. If the ink was worth a damn as ink, this would make hidden messages appear when you brushed it on. I think we can do something better, though."

"What are you talking about?" Jan asked, wondering if she were a little crazy. "And what has this got to do with me?"

"You've got a *camera obscura*, that's what it's got to do with you, and you're a painter, besides. You've got flint but no steel. I've got steel but no flint. If the two of us got together over some tinder, though, I'll

bet we could make a nice little fire," said Mevrouw van Drouten. "I'll show you. You go stand in front of the cabinet and put your hand over the lens, eh? Nice and tight, so it's pitch black inside."

Mystified, Jan obeyed nonetheless, cupping the palm of his hand over the focusing tube. Mevrouw van Drouten moved rapidly to the cabinet, carrying what she'd brought, and stepped inside and closed the door.

"Oh, my, this is nice and dark! You did a good job. We'll need to seal it up a little more, that's all. Now, what I'm doing is unwrapping my little canvas …" He heard a rustling and thumping from inside the cabinet. "Here's where you put your pictures, obviously. Very good. Now, Mynheer, keep your hand on the tube but back away at arm's length, yes? And when I give the signal, drop your hand, but stand perfectly still there."

"What'll happen?"

"Well, eventually, guilders will rain out of the sky on us. No, that's just my little joke! Are you ready? Now!"

Jan dropped his hand. Nothing happened. He was relieved.

"Don't move," Mevrouw van Drouten admonished him in a muffled voice. "Just stay like that. I'm counting to sixty. Wait."

When a minute had passed, she said: "Now, quickly, put your hand back."

He obeyed. He heard more bustling and thumping from within the cabinet, and a gentle splashing; then the room filled with an acrid smell that made his throat contract. He heard Mevrouw van Drouten sneeze.

"Whew! Nasty stuff. We'll want to open the windows after this. Oh, but, yes! Here we go! Just a minute more. You should make a cap for the tube so you don't have to keep doing that with the hand, you know, maybe out of a sheet of lead? And lined with more of the black felt. Oh, hurray! Here, my friend, now you'll see I'm not at all mad."

Mevrouw van Drouten emerged smiling from the cabinet in a blast of chemical fume, waving her little canvas. She thrust it at him. "Looky!"

It was a moment before Jan realized what he was seeing.

The canvas appeared to have been primed with a pale gray undercoat. On it, rendered in various grays ranging from silvery to charcoal, was the portrait of a man. He was staring out at the viewer with a doubtful expression. Behind his right shoulder was a wall, with a corner of a painting in its frame, the naked leg of Cupid just visible—

"Jesus God!" Jan shouted, having recognized himself at last.

"The stuff on the canvas reacts to light, you see?" chortled Mevrouw van Drouten. "The way words drawn in lemon juice react to a flatiron! You just slap it on a canvas, expose it to light—*and the picture draws itself!*

"At least, it does as soon as you brush on a coat of reagent," she added, sneezing again.

Jan held the picture close, wrinkling his nose at the smell but unable to look away from it. Every detail, perfect and exact, as though—

"As though God Himself had painted it, yes?" said Mevrouw van Drouten, watching his face. "We can make a lot of money out of this, my friend, wouldn't you say?"

"I haven't got a guilder to invest," said Jan reluctantly.

"Who needs to invest? We want to keep this a secret, yes? Or we'll have Saint Luke's Guild bringing a lawsuit against us on behalf of painters everywhere," said Mevrouw van Drouten. Jan, pacing back and forth with the portrait, only half heard her.

"Not only the problems of perspective solved," he said, "but the lighting problems too! God in Heaven, look at it! It's the perfect study for a portrait. You could take as long as you needed with this—wouldn't matter if your model had to get up to feed the baby, wouldn't matter if you lost the daylight! It's all laid out before you, permanent!" He turned to look at her in awe. She smiled at him and, from the seemingly-bottomless basket, drew forth a bottle of wine.

"Shall we drink to our partnership?"

Over a convivial couple of glasses, they worked out the details of their arrangement. Mevrouw van Drouten would mix the secret formula herself, and purchase and prepare the canvases. She would have them delivered, along with a supply of the reagent, to Jan, who would capture images on them and then complete the paintings. He would return the finished canvases to her and receive half the proceeds when she found a buyer.

There were complications, of course. The images would only appear if the canvas received limited, focused exposure to light, which was why the *camera obscura* was necessary. Take a prepared canvas out of its wrapping in an open room and all it would show, when the reagent was brushed on, would be a uniform dark surface. The reagent was poisonous, the fumes mustn't be inhaled for long, so it was a good idea not to take more than one image a day, and best to leave a window open. The cabinet must be moved to the corner under the windows, to take the most advantage of daylight, but every crack and sliver of light visible inside must be covered over. Also, the images weren't truly permanent; left in the

air they would fade to nothing, so it was vital that he begin painting over them as soon as he could after the images developed.

Because it was a secret formula, no one was to know about the use to which the *camera obscura* was being put. This meant that Jan must take no pupils, and entertain few guests. Poor as he was, this wasn't much of a problem.

And Mevrouw van Drouten would decide what was painted.

"I know what the public likes," Jan protested.

"I'm sure you do, my friend. But I have a particular customer in mind, you see, and I know his tastes! A rich old doctor in Amsterdam, a collector in fact, but he's very particular about what he buys. No religious scenes, for example—he's a bit of an atheist," Mevrouw van Drouten explained. "Likes pretty girls but in a nice way, you know what I mean? No boobs sticking out, no whores. Likes scholarly stuff. By the way, how's your friend van Leeuwenhoek? Seen him lately?"

"Not much," said Jan, feeling uncomfortable. "We move in different circles nowadays. The friendship was more between our fathers, really. But he took a lot of those lenses you gave us. I think he's fooling around with lens-grinding himself, now, as a hobby."

"How nice," said Mevrouw van Drouten.

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"HEARST NEWS SERVICES UPDATE!" cried the bright electronic voice, as, in a million wells of dark air below holoprojectors, a million clouds of light formed and focused into the image of a reporter. She smiled and told the world:

"Really important discovery! Look! Old paintings by Vermeer found!"

She vanished, and in her place appeared a five-second clip of footage showing first the entrance to a salt mine somewhere, then a bemused-looking miner poking his torch into what was evidently the newly-made entrance to a previously-hidden cave, and a closer shot of rows of flat stacked bundles.

The footage ended abruptly and the woman reappeared. "Some old salt mine in Europe! How'd they get there? Maybe it was Hitler! Who's Vermeer? He painted this!"

Behind her appeared an enlargement of the *Girl Pouring Water*. In a million homes and public gathering places, viewers grunted in recognition.

"See? So this is really important. Lots of paintings found that *nobody knew about!"* The woman's eyes widened significantly. "Experts speak!"

Another clip of footage appeared, showing a man in a white lab coat saying: "They're real Vermeers, all right—"

The footage ended. The woman reappeared, crying: "Buried treasure for the art world!" Then she vanished, briefly replaced by the logo of Hearst News Services before it too vanished, leaving viewers blinking at the darkness.

This had been an extraordinarily long and in-depth piece of coverage; but, of course, it wasn't every day that lost masterpieces were found. This was big news. The art world of the twenty-fourth century, what there was of it, was all agog. Even the ordinary citizens were impressed. On the public transports, many a commuter turned hesitantly to his or her fellow passenger and ventured some remark like:

"Isn't that something, about those lost paintings?"

And the fellow passenger, instead of shrinking away and ringing for a Public Health Monitor, would actually nod in agreement and might even venture to reply something like:

"Really amazing!"

Even the transport's assigned Public Health Monitor, watching them narrowly, would silently agree: this was really amazing.

The world's moneyed elite had much more to say about it, of course, because they knew more big words.

"How much?" Catchpenny barked into his communicator.

"They'll be auctioned," replied Ealing. "But it'll run into the billions, I can tell you that right now. You've got until autumn to raise the money."

"This autumn? I thought there'd be lawsuits! Don't tell me the Bohemians have settled ownership that fast."

"Actually, they have. There was documentation with them. The whole collection was taken from some old family by Goering's art people. Just stolen; no money changed hands. There's a living descendant with proof. All the Bohemians are doing is fining her for back inheritance taxes."

"But what about verification? They might be more, what was the man's name? Van Meegerens?

Forgeries."

"They're in the labs. Five have already been pronounced authentic. X-rays, all the chemical tests. The rest are expected to pass too. Seventy canvases, Catchpenny!"

Catchpenny caught his breath. "There isn't that much money in the world." But he felt gleeful, lightheaded.

"I've already made your bid for the print rights. Sell your house."

"Yes!" Catchpenny ordered up a list of realtors' commcodes and eye-circled three of them. "Find out who else is bidding, and make the usual arrangements."

"That will run into money too," said Ealing cautiously, after a momentary pause during which she had ordered up a private list of commcodes for certain persons who did necessary, if unsavory, things at a price.

"Doesn't matter!"

"Agreed." Ealing signed out. The less discussion now, the better.

One week later, Hearst News Services featured a ten-second newsdab mentioning that exclusive print rights for the new Vermeers had gone to a prestigious gallery in London, but did not mention the name.

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THE KITCHEN, 1665

"It's wonderful," said Mevrouw van Drouten. "But I can only give you a hundred guilders for it."

"But it's worth more than that!" Catharina cried. "Look at all the detail!" She tilted *The Lens Grinder* forward. "You know how long it took to set up that scene? We had to borrow all the lens-grinding tools. My poor brother had to be dressed and made to sit still, which is miserably hard, let me tell you. And it's a big canvas!"

"My dear, I know. I think it's worth a couple of hundred at least, but what can I do?" Mevrouw van Drouten opened her wide blue eyes in a frank stare. "It's not my money. The Doctor gives me a hundred and tells me to bring home a painting. It's not my fault he's a wretched old miser. At least he buys from

you, eh? Cash instead of trade to the grocer."

Catharina, knowing she was defeated, pursed her lips and set *The Lens Grinder* on a piece of sacking, preparing to wrap it for transport. A dismal screaming erupted from the next room, and a tempest burst in at knee level: fat Beatrix running from little Jan, clutching a mug of soapy water that slopped as she fled.

"I want bubbles," little Jan was roaring. Now in close pursuit came Maria, burdened by the infant she lugged in its long gown, too late to prevent Jan from slipping in the spill and falling flat, really roaring now.

"Oh, look what you did—" she wailed, and her eyes widened in horror as she saw the adults. "Mama's *working,"* she told the little ones, grabbing Jan by the back of his skirts with one fist and bending double as she strained to haul him backward out of the room. Catharina turned a basilisk stare on Beatrix, who gulped and exited swiftly. Maria paused in her dragging to smile frantically at van Drouten.

"How nice to see you again, Mevrouw," she panted. "Wasn't that a nice picture Daddy did this time? I knew you'd like it, and we really need the money—"

"Jannekin, get up this instant," said Catharina, and the little boy left off yelling and scrambled out of the room on hands and knees.

"I must be going, please excuse me," said Maria in an attempt at adult gentility, and curtsied, nearly dropping the baby. "I'm sorry, Mama, but he wanted to drink the bubble stuff and—"

"Not now," said Catharina.

"Yes, Mama. God go with you, Mevrouw van Drouten."

Mevrouw van Drouten bit her lip.

"I'll tell you what," she said to Catharina. "I'll give you a hundred and fifty for it, if you'll throw in this little one for fifty." She held up a head-and-shoulders portrait of Maria. Catharina glanced at it.

"Done," she said at once. It had been nothing more than a test shot on a cloudy day, to see if there was enough light for a serious portrait. Maria had obligingly donned the yellow bodice and posed with a loaf of bread, offering it out to the viewer with an eager expression on her little pale face. There hadn't been enough light, so the shot hadn't really worked, but Jan had gone ahead and wasted paint and time on it anyway: ghost child smiling hopefully in a dark room. Catharina took the little canvas and tossed it down on the larger one, nesting it behind the wooden stretchers, and tied the sacking over them with string knotted tight.

"And here," van Drouten said, remembering the paper parcel and drawing it forth from her basket.

"Here's a dozen almond biscuits, enough for two each, eh? So they don't fight over them."

"You must have had children of your own," said Catharina.

"Hundreds," said van Drouten absently. "I'd like to buy more of the pictures, you know. I love them. If the Doctor gave me a bigger budget, I'd take everything Jan cranked out."

"He's an old fool, your Doctor," Catharina said. Mevrouw van Drouten shrugged.

"Maybe, but he knows what he likes, and he has money," she replied.

"And that's what counts," said Catharina, smiling as van Drouten opened her purse.

In the studio upstairs, Jan paced and wondered if Catharina was presenting his complaints as he'd asked her to do.

For the first year or so, he'd enjoyed the work: the endless experiments with lighting, the race to capture the evanescent gray images in color by painting directly over them, the thrill of seeing perspective effortlessly perfect on canvas after canvas. Canvas after canvas after canvas …

But the novelty wore off, especially with the limit in his choice of subjects. All Mevrouw van Drouten's client wanted to see was the same subject, repeated in endless variation: a calm woman standing under a window, doing something industrious. Sometimes even that subject failed to please. The painting of Catharina's sister pouring milk in the kitchen, what had been wrong with that? But van Drouten had shaken her head regretfully, said it was fine but declined to buy. Likewise the painting of Maria with the lute. And why did everything have to be in tones of ultramarine blue and yellow?

Though van Drouten had explained about that: it seemed her client, the mysterious Doctor, had a lot of his furniture upholstered in blue and yellow, and so he wanted paintings hanging in his rooms to match. Jan hadn't mixed a good warm red in years now. It was all he could do to sneak a few terracotta jugs into a background.

He got occasional relief when the Doctor decided to order what Mevrouw van Drouten referred to as a *scientific* picture, which involved a man under a window with the trappings of a particular field of study. Even though it meant coaxing Willem into costume and persuading him to sit still, and then rushing to catch the shot before he broke the tools in his hands, at least it was different. Even so, Jan could not for the life of him understand why Mevrouw van Drouten had passed on the *Surveyor,* or the *Astronomer.* But she had; again, that regretful head-shake, and the inexplicable remark that some paintings had to make it into the history-books.

He bit his nails, now, looking at his half-finished work ranged around the room. There were the two studies of *Girl Wearing a Turban,* the lighting dummy he'd set up with Maria in costume and the real

painting, for which he'd used pretty Isabella from next door. Catharina wearing the blue bodice and slicing bread: Catharina wearing the yellow bodice and picking out tunes on the virginal. Catharina waving angrily at a moth, in the tatty jacket with its once-elegant fur …

He heard the relentlessly pleasant voice flowing out into the street, bidding Catharina Good-day at last, and he stepped swiftly to the door of his studio. He listened for the slam of the front door before emerging onto the landing, and as Catharina mounted toward him he demanded:

"Well? What did she say?"

Catharina looked him in the eye, and he looked away.

"You didn't tell her," he muttered.

"No, I didn't tell her! For the love of God, Jan, what am I supposed to do?" she cried. "Do you want to eat? Do you want your children to eat? It's the only money we've got coming in, and you want to lose even that much because you're *bored?* Lord Jesus!"

"It isn't that it's boring," he shouted back. "My art's been killed, do you understand at all? She gave me an eye that could see like God and then shut me up in a room where there was nothing, almost nothing to look at, so the gift is useless! It's wrecked my soul!"

"Then go dig ditches for a living," Catharina told him. "Better still, send me out to dig ditches, eh? With the girls? And you can paint whatever your heart desires, then. Get your womenfolk earning your bread and waiting on you hand and foot, just so long as your painting goes well. Who needs a rich patron? Not us."

She said it wearily, almost without bitterness nowadays, and turned away and went back down the stairs.

"It isn't art," he shouted after her.

"I know that," she replied. "But it's money."

He drew breath to shout a retort, and went into a coughing fit instead. That was another problem with the damned picture-business; the fumes from the magic developing fluid were eating into his lungs. He retreated into his studio and collapsed into one of the lion-headed chairs, staring at the *camera obscura* with loathing.

But he could never really manage to loathe the canvases, dull as they were. Within the hour he was on his feet again, back at the easel, clouding the lead-tin yellow with white and making the fall of sunlight ever more softly luminous, ever more subtly the light of Eden before sin arose in the garden to ruin everything

… and pale Maria, backlit by yesterday's sun, stood in yesterday's room and offered for inspection the white apple, her young face solemn. The long pared curl of peel at her foot suggested the Old Serpent, trampled and crushed at last perhaps, the secret allegory doubled upon itself, sin and redemption in one …

The sigh of the brush became the only sound, drowned out bells that marked the passing hours. He didn't need food. He didn't need drink. All he really needed was this room, wasn't that so?

And the light.

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"Calvin Sharpey for Hearst News Services!" cried that celebrity, striking a pose for the kameramen. He flashed the brightest of smiles, waved his microphone (it was a dummy, ceremonial and functionless as a scepter, studded with rhinestones; kameramen had been picking up both image and audio for generations now) at the woman beside him, and went on:

"Look! Hearst 'sclusive interview! This is the lady who owns the old paintings! Auction today! Liz van Drouten, what do you think?"

"Well, I hope that some of them will go to museums here in Euro—"

"Hearst News Services making a bid for holomuseum rights!" Calvin announced. "Hoping to bring the art of Jim Vermeer to you, the public!"

"Jan Vermeer," said the woman, quietly, but the cyber-enhanced kameramen Heard her.

"So! Wasn't it really amazing about your ancestors having all these in some castle or something? And nobody knew? It sure was different back then!"

"Yes, it was," van Drouten agreed.

"Think maybe Jim was a friend of your family? Maybe hiding from Hitler?"

"No," van Drouten explained, "You're getting your history mixed up, my dear. Jan Vermeer and Hitler lived two centuries apart."

"Wow! That is *so* much old stuff!" Calvin winked knowingly at the kameramen. He sang a snatch of that week's popular tune: "Can't get it into my *pooor little heaaad!* Pretty but dumb, folks, what can I tell

you? Here's another look at the paintings on auction today!"

The kameramen relaxed, turning away as the prerecorded montage of paintings ran. Calvin Sharpey dropped his flashy smile and shouted for a glass of water, ignoring van Drouten, who remained on her mark. She merely adjusted the drape of the gray gown that had been cut to make her look as dull as possible, a nonentity the audience would forget thirty seconds after her interview had ended, especially when contrasted with Calvin Sharpey's rhinestones.

Now the montage was ending, to judge from the way the kameramen stiffened and swung their blank avid faces back to center stage. Immediately *on* again, Calvin Sharpey grabbed the pasteboard sheet his PA handed him. He held it up—it was a color copy of the *Girl with Pearl Earring*, with the face cut away to an oval hole—and thrust his face through, mugging as the kameramen focused on him again.

"Welcome baa—aack!" he said. "It's Calvin Sharpey! Weren't those paintings really something?"

In a high, dark, and distant room, someone stopped pacing and regarded the floating image of Calvin Sharpey's magnified smirk.

"Fire that dumb son of a bitch," said a cold soft voice.

"Right away, Mr. Hearst," said somebody else, running to a communications console, and, five minutes later on the other side of the globe, van Drouten watched with interest as Calvin Sharpey was hustled off between two men in gray suits, protesting loudly, but the kameramen had done with him, and with her too; they were turning away, closing like glassy-eyed wolves to See the media event of the year: the auction of the lost Vermeers.

Unnecessary now, van Drouten faded into the sidelines, unnoticed behind the kameramen and the security forces. To be perfectly honest, she had no mystic powers of invisibility whatsoever: just fifteen centuries' worth of experience at letting mortals see only what she intended them to see. Liz van Drouten had been an interesting role, but there wasn't much left of her. Two or three publicity shots, perhaps, before she could drop from sight, and a brief post-auction interview, when she would mention that she had decided to donate to charity whatever fabulous sum the auction had raised.

This was a lie, of course. All the proceeds were going straight into the coffers of her masters in the Company, and seven centuries of careful planning would pay off at last. But the words *charity* and *donation* tended to deflect an audience's interest.

Van Drouten sighed, looking out over the faces of the crowd that waited to bid. Some watched the podium with fixed stares, willing the clock to speed up; some whispered together behind their bidding fans, or peered around at the competition to assess them. To a man and woman, they might have stepped out of one of Daumier's engravings, might have been models for Rapacity personified, Desire, Obsession, whole-hearted Need. Van Drouten thought they were sad, and rather endearing. But then, she had always

liked mortals and their passions.

There were so few passions left in this day and age.

So she savored the murmur that ran through the crowd, the audible pounding of seventy mortal hearts, the hissed or caught breath as the Auctioneer stepped up to the podium at last. Intent as lovers, the kameramen dove close, Saw his rising hammer and Heard him as he drew breath and said:

"Ladies and gentlemen! May I draw your attention to Lot Number One?"

And it lit on the black screen behind him, the projected image of Vermeer's *Girl with Peeled Apple.* Van Drouten smiled involuntarily: there was young Maria again, greeting her across the dead centuries.

"Jan Vermeer's original oil on canvas, signed, circa 1668. Includes all rights of reproduction worldwide. Bidding starts at twenty-two million pounds, ladies and gentlemen, twenty-two million—"

Before he could even repeat the phrase, bidding paddles had sprung up like flat flowers in a garden of greed.

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THE PATH TO THE TOMB, 1673

"See?" Mevrouw van Drouten was telling him gleefully, pointing to the easel. "You don't even have to think any more. All you have to do is paint them in!"

He tried to reply but the words stuck in his dry mouth. He could only moan in horror at the endless line of little gray canvases stretching to the horizon, as many as the days of his life; and they were numbered. He couldn't breathe.

"See?" Mevrouw van Drouten put a brush in his hand, a house-painter's brush of all things. "All the spaces marked with a One you paint in blue. All the spaces marked with a Two, you paint in yellow. What could be easier? And look, here, the paint is already mixed for you. But you have to crank them out quickly, or you'll lose the light!"

And with revulsion he felt himself drawn to the canvases, because she was right: he only had so much time before he lost the light. He slapped on the thin color over the meaningless black and white images, and Mevrouw van Drouten watched, grinning, but looked constantly over at the clock, the enormous clock, saying: "Not much time. Not much time," but somehow he could never paint fast enough, and

meanwhile the house was getting shabbier and more bare, the children thinner, his cough was getting worse, and Catharina was staring at him, crying "Soup!"

"… nice soup the lady next door sent, won't you even try?"

"I don't have time, I'll lose the light!" he told her, but she slipped the spoon into his mouth and he realized with a start that he was in bed. Catharina was leaning over him, looking sadly into his eyes. She gave him another spoonful of soup and felt his forehead, felt his stubbled cheeks. Her palm was cool.

"The fever broke, anyway. Did you think you were painting again?" she asked, and gave him another spoonful of soup before he could reply.

"Has she been here?" he demanded, wheezing.

"Who?"

"Mevrouw van Drouten!"

"No, she hasn't. Don't worry, Jan. We can get by the next month or two, if we don't see her."

He lay still a moment, thinking that over, as she fed him soup. "You sold some of the stock," he guessed, noting the bare places on the walls. "You found another buyer!"

She smiled at him, and rubbed her eyes with her free hand. With the light full on her face, as it was, he was struck by how much silver was in her hair, and felt a pang at what she'd endured with him. And still another baby on the way, Jesus God … If only they hadn't loved each other.

"A gentleman came to see your stuff," Catharina told him, determinedly cheerful. "I explained we didn't have anything of yours for sale right now, you know, I played up how fast your stuff sells, and I think I've almost got him talked into commissioning something. And he did buy a couple of the old canvases. So, you see? You don't have to depend on the little witch-paintings. You're good enough to paint your own work too."

"As long as it sells."

"It'll sell, my heart."

He pushed himself up on the pillows, took the soup from her in his shaky hands and tilted the bowl to drink. Handing it back to her, he gasped: "If I can talk him into an allegory—say a nice big canvas, maybe three or four figures on it, eh, that we can get a good price for? Maybe a heroic theme!—Lord God, if only I can stretch my muscles for a little with some reds and violets, won't that be something?"

"I had an idea about going to the priests, too," Catharina told him seriously. "They've got the money for paintings, and they know what's good."

"That's right, they do." He turned and considered his studio. "Can we afford a good sized canvas? Or even paper and charcoal. I'll get ideas, Catsi, I want to be able to block out a study."

"I'll see what I can do," she said, and bent to kiss him. "You sleep some more, now. Think about your allegory. We'll manage this somehow."

Jan lay still listening to her descend the stairs, and tried to close his eyes and sleep again; but the light in the room was too strong. He looked at the beautifully empty spots where the old paintings had been, and his eye filled them with new canvases. Should he rework *Diana and her Nymphs?* With each figure in a different-colored gown, pink, green, purple! Or something else classical, one of the Muses maybe? Pull out all the stops, lots of little emblematic detail, a painting the viewer could mull over for hours! Or a religious one the priests would be sure to like, yes, say a risen Christ with a robe scarlet as the blood of martyrs …

He glanced over at the cabinet resentfully, the black void that had swallowed up so much of his strength, so much of his time. What a devil's bargain! And what a paradox, to spend his days in darkness to preserve the light.

When the idea hit him, it seemed to shake him physically, it was so powerful. He gaped at the blank wall, seeing the allegory there in all its detail. It wasn't *Diana and her Nymphs* he'd rework, no. Another allegory entirely. It would be his revenge.

Sliding his skinny legs from under the blanket, he staggered upright and found a stick of charcoal. He lurched across the room and braced himself at the wall, blocking in the cartoon in a few quick swipes on the plaster, just far enough to see that his initial instinct for the composition had been correct. The charcoal dust was making him choke; but everything made him choke these days. Dropping the charcoal, he wiped his hands on his nightshirt and looked around for his breeches. This couldn't wait. He needed pen and ink.

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Van Drouten walked through the echoing rooms of the old house in the Herengracht, that had been her home for nearly a thousand years. She had run the Company operation out of it, in one mortal disguise or other, since 1434, and every room was furnished with memories.

Here was the parlor where Spinoza had embraced her, before leaving for Rijnsburg; in this chamber, she

still had the chair in which Rembrandt had sat when he'd come to supper. Upstairs was the bed in which Casanova, nasty fellow, had romped with her mortal maid. The kitchen had long since been modernized, but still around the baseboard ran the painted tiles at which van Gogh had stared unseeing, gaunt young man with such good intentions, while he'd wolfed down the hot meal she'd offered him along with advice: that he might serve God best by painting His light.

And here was the broom closet hiding the so-narrow passage leading up to the attic rooms where she'd sheltered so many Jewish children from the Nazis, too many to count as they'd been smuggled through, but she could still summon each little frightened face before her mind's eye.

It was a quiet house, now, in this last age of the world, and her work was nearly over. There were only a handful of Company operatives left on duty in Amsterdam, where once they had come and gone like bees in a hive. Van Drouten sighed as she climbed the stair to her room. She had always liked a noisy house. She liked life. Some immortals grew weary and sick of humanity after a few millennia, but she never had.

Her private quarters, at least, were still comfortable and cluttered. She edged past centuries' worth of souvenirs on her way to the clothes closet, where she slipped out of her gray gown. This time she remembered to take off the little cloisonné pin before she hung it up, the emblem of a clock face without hands, and when she had slipped into denim coveralls she refastened it on the front pocket.

The pin was not a favorite piece of jewelry. Its supposed intent was to honor those who had the job of traveling through time, effectively defeating time's ravages; that was why the clock had no hands. Company policy, however, had recently tightened to require all operatives of her class to wear the badge at all times, to enable them to be readily identified by Company security techs on Company property.

Van Drouten avoided her own gaze in the mirror, steadfastly refusing to think as she made certain the pin was securely fastened and visible. There were just things you couldn't think about. Hadn't that always been so? The brevity of mortal life, for example. You had to keep yourself distracted from the sad things. You had to have an escape.

She glimpsed over her shoulder the painting in its alcove, and turned to regard it with a certain pleasurable nostalgia. It had cost her a lot, good hard cash out of her own household budget, because the Company had abandoned Vermeer once they'd got what they wanted; but she had never been sorry she'd spent the money. The picture gave her an escape, always. For a little while.

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THE EMPTY ROOM, 1675

Catharina, red-eyed with weeping and a little drunk, had looked up at her as she'd stepped into the chilly parlor.

"You're out of luck, my dear," she'd told van Drouten. "No more paintings for your damned cheap doctor. Jan's dead."

"I heard," she said, as gently as she could. "I am so sorry. How are the children?"

"Scared. They're at Maria's."

"They'll be all right, I'm certain," said van Drouten, wishing she could say more. Clearing her throat, she continued: "That was van Leeuwenhoek I passed outside, wasn't it? The microscopist? Was he able to help you at all?"

"Oh, no." Catharina gave a sour laugh. "Respectable Mynheer van Leeuwenhoek is going to be appointed executor of the estate, if you must know. He's only interested in seeing that all the debts get paid. So if you're looking for a bargain, you'd better hurry. They're coming in to do the inventory this afternoon. And you'd better pay cash!"

"I have cash," said van Drouten, hefting the small chest she'd brought. Catharina looked at her sidelong.

"How much?"

"Seven hundred guilders."

Catharina put her hands to her face. "Jesus God," she said. "All right; come on upstairs with me now, quick! I'll show you something.

"Maybe you'll think it's funny," she continued, as they hurried together up the echoing stair. "It was his little joke, you see? Maybe you'll want it. Maybe you'll be angry. I don't give a damn either way any more, to tell you the truth, but it'll be yours for seven hundred guilders. Here."

She pushed open a door and van Drouten followed her into the studio. It had the reek of a sickroom and was bone-chilling cold, and canvases were stacked against the walls. The easel was bare; the paints were nowhere to be seen, and the sheets and blanket had already been stripped from the narrow cot. There was no sign of the *camera obscura.*

"Looking for the magic cabinet?" Catharina grunted, rummaging through the stacks. "You're too late for that; we sold it a year ago. Even a dying man has to eat, eh? Here. Look at this." She pulled out a painting, held it up with a defiant smile. "It's called *The Visit of the Holy Women to the Tomb of Christ."*

Van Drouten caught her breath.

"Oh, it's wonderful! How clever!"

"But your pissy doctor won't want it, will he?" Catharina said fiercely. "Not enough blue and yellow!"

"This isn't for him," said van Drouten. "This is for me. I liked Jan, Catharina. I liked you both."

"Then much good may this do you," Catharina replied, and tossed it at her. Van Drouten dropped the chest, putting up both hands to seize the painting. The chest burst open when it hit the floor, and guilders flooded out in a torrent of bright coin, ran and rolled into the four corners of the room.

Catharina, looking down at it, just laughed and shook her head.

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In the street outside, late-night traffic roared and hissed along, and far up the pinpoint satellites orbited against the stars; but within the alcove van Drouten regarded a spring morning in ancient Jerusalem, in a place of silver olive trees and white lilies, and green grass beaded with dew. Mortals, and God, could make such places; a cyborg couldn't. A cyborg could only preserve them. Van Drouten blinked back tears as she sank into the picture, escaped her immortal life and its immortal terrors for a moment...

There were the three women. Little Maria was at the left, peeping from the angle of the olive tree, her face bright with anticipation; Catharina was in the center of the canvas, her hands lifted in elaborate astonishment, her face haggard with bitter experience. There was the tomb of Christ, but it was not a stone rolled back that disclosed the interior. It was a cabinet door standing wide, hinges and all, with a lens-tube in its center.

And the third woman, van Drouten herself, was highlighted against the sooty blackness of the tomb's walls. She smiled out at the viewer and offered forth in her hands the linen cloth on which the miracle was printed, in tones of gray and black: the trick, the joke, the alchemical cheat, the negative image of the man. It wasn't art; but there on the treated cloth his light had been captured for all time, a bargain at thirty pieces of good hard silver.

The End