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If I could say to you, and make it stick,  
A girl in a red hat, a woman in blue  
Reading a letter, a lady weighing gold . . .  
If I could say this to you so you saw,  
And knew, and agreed that this is how it was  
In a lost city across the sea of years,  
I think we should be for one moment happy  
In the great reckoning of those little rooms . . .

—Howard Nemerov, "Vermeer," from *Trying Conclusions: Old and New Poems*

#### Stories Painted on Porcelain

Hobbling home under a mackerel sky, I came upon a group of children. They were tossing their toys in the air, by turns telling a story and acting it too. A play about a pretty girl who was scorned by her two stepsisters. In distress, the child disguised herself to go to a ball. There, the great turnabout: She met a prince who adored her and romanced her. Her happiness eclipsed the plight of her stepsisters, whose ugliness was the cause of high merriment.

I listened without being observed, for the aged are often invisible to the young.

I thought: How like some ancient story this all sounds. Have these children overheard their grandparents revisiting some dusty gossip about me and my kin, and are the little ones turning it into a household tale of magic? Full of fanciful touches: glass slippers, a fairy godmother? Or are the children dressing themselves in some older gospel, which my family saga resembles only by accident?

#### PROLOGUE

#### PROLOGUE

In the lives of children, pumpkins can turn into coaches, mice and rats into human beings. When we grow up, we learn that it's far more common for human beings to turn

into rats.

Nothing in my childhood was charming. What fortune attended our lives was courtesy of jealousy, greed, and murder. And nothing in my childhood was charmed. Or not that I could see at the time. If magic was present, it moved under the skin of the world, beneath the ability of human eyes to

catch sight of it.

Besides, what kind of magic is that, if it can't be seen?

Maybe all gap-toothed crones recognize themselves in children at play. Still, in our time we girls rarely cavorted in the streets! Not hoydens, we!—more like grave novices at an abbey. I can conjure up a very apt proof. I can peer at it as if at a painting, through the rheumy apparatus of the mind . . .

... In a chamber, three girls, sisters of a sort, are bending over a crate. The lid has been set aside, and we are digging in the packing. The top layer is a scatter of pine boughs. Though they've traveled so far, the needles still give off a spice of China, where the shipment originated. We hiss and recoil—ugbb! Dung-colored bugs, from somewhere along the Silk Route, have nested and multiplied while the ship trundled northward across the high road of the sea.

But the bugs don't stop us. We're hoping to find bulbs for planting, for even we girls have caught the fever. We're eager for those oniony hearts that promise the tulip blossoms. Is this is the wrong crate? Under the needles, only a stack of heavy porcelain plates. Each one is wrapped in a

coarse cloth, with more branches laid between. The top plate—the first one—hasn't survived the trip intact. It has shattered in three.

We each take a part. How children love the broken thing! And a puzzle is for the piecing together, especially for the young, who still believe it can be done.

Adult hands begin to remove the rest of the valuable Ming dinner-ware, as if in our impatience for the bulbs we girls have shattered the top plate. We wander aside, into the daylight—paint the daylight of childhood a creamy flaxen color—three girls at a window. The edges of the disk scrape chalkily as we join them. We think the picture on this plate tells a story, but its figures are obscure. Here the blue line is blurred, here it is sharp as a pig's bristle. Is this a story of two people, or three, or four? We study the full effect.

Were I a painter, able to preserve a day of my life in oils and light, this is the picture I would paint: three thoughtful girls with a broken plate. Each piece telling part of a story. In truth, we were ordinary children, no calmer than most. A moment later, we were probably squabbling, sulking over the missing flower bulbs. Noisy as the little ones I observed today. But let me remember what I choose. Put two of the girls in shadow, where they belong, and let light spill over the third. Our tulip, our Clara.

Clara was the prettiest child, but was her life the prettiest tale?

Caspar listens to my recital, but my quavery voice has learned to speak bravely too late to change the story. Let him make of it what he will. Caspar knows how to coax the alpha-

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bet out of an inky quill. He can commit my tale to paper if he wants. Words haven't been my particular strength. What did I see all my life but pictures?^and who ever taught the likes

of me to write?

Now in these shriveled days, when light is not as full as it used to be, the luxury of imported china is long gone. We sip out of clay bowls, and when they crack we throw them on the back heap, to be buried by oak leaves. All green things brown. I hear the youthful story of our family played by children in the streets, and I come home muttering. Caspar reminds me that Clara, our Clara, our Cindergirl, is dead.

He says it to me kindly, requiring this old head to recall the *now*. But old heads are more supple at recalling the past.

There are one or two windows into those far-off days. You have seen them—the windows of canvas that painters work on so we can look through. Though I can't paint it, I can see it. in my heart: a square of linen that can remember an afternoon of relative happiness. Creamy flaxen light, the blue and ivory of porcelain. Girls believing in the promise of blossoms.

It isn't much, but it still makes me catch my breath. Bless the artists who saved these things for us. Don't fault their memory or their choice of subject. Immortality is a chancy thing; it cannot be promised or earned. Perhaps it cannot even be identified for what it is. Indeed, were Cinderling to return from the dead, would she even recognize herself, in any portrait on a wall, in a figure painted on a plate, in any nursery game or fireside story?

## THE OBSCURE CHILD

marketplace

The wind being fierce and the tides unobliging, the ship from Harwich has a slow time of it. Timbers creak, sails snap as the vessel lurches up the brown river to the quay. It arrives later than expected, the bright finish to a cloudy afternoon. The travelers clamber out, eager for water to freshen their mouths. Among them are a strict-stemmed woman and two daughters.

The woman is bad-tempered because she's terrified. The last of her coin has gone to pay the passage. For two days, only the charity of fellow travelers has kept her and her girls from hunger. If you can call it charity—a hard crust of bread, a rind of old cheese to gnaw. And then brought back up as gorge, thanks to the heaving sea. The mother has had to turn her face from it. Shame has a dreadful smell.

So mother and daughters stumble, taking a moment to find their footing on the quay. The sun rolls westward, the light falls lengthwise, the foreigners step into their shadows. The street is splashed with puddles from an earlier cloudburst.

The younger girl leads the older one. They are timid and eager. Are they stepping into a country of tales, wonders the younger girl. Is this new land a place where magic really happens? Not in cloaks of darkness as in England, but in light of day? How is this new world completed?

"Don't gawk, Iris. Don't lose yourself in fancy. And keep up," says the woman. "It won't do to arrive at Grandfather's house after dark. He might bar himself against robbers and rogues, not daring to open the doors and shutters till morning. Ruth, move your lazy limbs for once. Grandfather's house is beyond the marketplace, that much I remember being told. We'll get nearer, we'll ask."

"Mama, Ruth is tired," says the younger daughter, "she hasn't eaten much nor slept well. We're coming as fast as we

can.

"Don't apologize, it wastes your breath. Just mend your ways and watch your tongue," says the mother. "Do you think I don't have enough on my mind?"

"Yes, of course," agrees the younger daughter, by rote, "it's just that Ruth—"

"You're always gnawing the same bone. Let Ruth speak for herself if she wants to complain."

But Ruth won't speak for herself. So they move up the street, along a shallow incline, between step-gabled brick houses. The small windowpanes, still unshuttered at this hour, pick up a late-afternoon shine. The stoops are scrubbed, the streets swept of manure and leaves and dirt. A smell of afternoon baking lifts from hidden kitchen yards. It awakens both hunger and hope. "Pies grow on their roofs

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in this town," the mother says. "That'll mean a welcome for us at Grandfather's. Surely. Surely. Now is the market this way?—for beyond that we'll find his house—or that way?"

"Oh, the market," says a croaky old dame, half hidden in the gloom of a doorway, "what you can buy there, and what you can sell!" The younger daughter screws herself around: Is this the voice of a wise woman, a fairy crone to help them?

"Tell me the way," says the mother, peering.

"You tell your own way," says the dame, and disappears. Nothing there but the shadow of her voice.

"Stingy with directions? Then stingy with charity too?" The mother squares her shoulders. "There's a church steeple. The market must be nearby. Come."

At the end of a lane the marketplace opens before them. The stalls are nested on the edges of a broad square, a church looming over one end and a government house opposite. Houses of prosperous people, shoulder to shoulder. All the buildings stand up straight—not like the slumped timber-framed cottage back in England, back home . . .

—the cottage now abandoned . . . abandoned in a storm of poundings at the shutters, of shouts: "A knife to your throat! You'll swallow my sharp blade. Open up!" . . . Abandoned, as mother and daughters scrambled through a side window, a cudgel splintering the very door—

Screeeee—an airborne alarm. Seagulls make arabesques near the front of the church, being kept from the fish tables by a couple of tired, zealous dogs. The public space is cold

from the ocean wind, but it is lit rosy and golden, from sun on brick and stone. Anything might happen here, thinks the younger girl. Anything! Even, maybe, something good.

The market: near the end of its day. Smelling of tired vegetables, strong fish, smoking embers, earth on the roots of parsnips and cabbages. The habit of hunger is a hard one to master. The girls gasp. They are ravenous.

Fish laid to serry like roofing tiles, glinting in their own oils. Gourds and marrows. Apples, golden, red, green. Turn' bles of grapes, some already jellying in their split skins. Cheeses coated with bone-hard wax, or caught in webbing and dripping whitely—cats sprawl beneath like Ottoman pashas, open-mouthed. "Oh," says the younger sister when the older one has stopped to gape at the abundance. "Mama, a throwaway scrap for us! There must be."

The mother's face draws even more closed than usual. "I won't have us seen to be begging on our first afternoon here," she hisses. "Iris, don't show such hunger in your eyes. Your greed betrays you."

"We haven't eaten a real pasty since England, Mama! When are we going to eat again? Ever?"

"We saw few gestures of charity for us there, and I won't ask for charity here," says the mother. "We are gone from England, Iris, escaped with our lives. You're hungry? Eat the air, drink the light. Food will follow. Hold your chin high and keep your pride."

But Iris's hunger—a new one for her—is for the look of things as much as for the taste of them. Ever since the sudden flight from England . . .

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—running along the shadowed track, panting with pain in the chest, tumbling into a boat in the darkness—running, with the fear of hobgoblins at their heels. Imps, thwarties, grinning like demons, hungry to nip their ankles and sip their blood—

And what if an imp has secreted itself in the Harwich ship and follows like a skulking dog, to pester them in this new land all over again?

To keep from a panic, Iris says to herself- *Look at how things are, look: there, there, there. . . .* We are someplace new, someplace else, safer.

Ruth stops. She is older than Iris, a solid thing, already more than normal adult size, but simple. A pendulum of spit swings out and makes a tassel. Iris reaches and wipes Ruth's mouth. Ruth has a set of shoulders that would grace an ox, but she doesn't have an ox's patience. Her brown eyes blink. She lunges toward the nearest rack of produce, a tray heaped with sun-spotted early pears.

"No, Ruth," says the mother, and pulls her back.

Iris has a sudden notion of how she and her family must look, as stolid Englishers: Englishers in this European other-world, with its close, rich hills of architecture. The lumpy Fisher family, traipsing like oafs on a pilgrimage: —The spiky mother, Margarethe, tugging at her gigantic firstborn. —Ruth, heaving her lungs like a bellows, working up to a wail. —And Iris herself, gaunt and unlovely as a hermit, shrinking into herself as best she can.

The men of the market duck their heads to keep from

## CONFESSIONS OF

### AN UGLY STEPSISTER

watching a woman's woes. The wives of the market, however, stare and don't give any ground. No one offers a bruised apple or a smallish pear to calm Ruth or to make Margarethe's plight easier. The market women tuck their hands in apron pockets to mind their small clutches of coins. There's no habit of charity here, at least not for the ugly foreigner.

Strong Ruth is less pliant than usual. She nearly succeeds in breaking out of her mother's grip. Margarethe, sorely tried, pitches her voice low. "Ruth! God's mercy, that I'm harnessed to such a beast! Give way, you willful thing, or I'll beat you when we get to Grandfather's. In a strange place, and no one to wipe your eyes then, for I'll keep Iris from cozening you!"

Though slow, Ruth is a good daughter. Today, however, hunger rules her. She can't break from Margarethe's hold, but she kicks out and catches the corner of the rickety table on which the pears are piled. The vendor curses and dives, too late. The pears fall and roll in gimpy circles. Other women laugh, but uneasily, afraid that this big little girl will overturn their displays. "Mind your cow!" barks the vendor, scrabbling on her hands and knees.

Margarethe looses a hand toward Ruth's face, but Ruth is twisting too fast. She backs up, away from the stall, against the front wall of a house. Margarethe's slap falls weakly, more sound than sting. She hits Ruth again, harder. Ruth's bleat mounts to a shriek, her head striking the bricks of the house. A ground floor window in the house swings open, just next to Ruth. A treble voice rings out from within. It might be boy's or girl's. It's a word of exclamation—perhaps the

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child has seen Ruth topple the pears? Heads turn in the marketplace, while Ruth twists toward the young voice and Margarethe grabs a firmer hold. Iris finds herself scooping forward, pear-ward, while all eyes are elsewhere. In another moment she too has swiveled her head to look.

She sees a girl, perhaps a dozen years old, maybe a little more? It's hard to tell. The child is half hidden by a cloth hanging in the window, but a shaft of light catches her. The late afternoon light that gilds *The* market stops cold at the sight of half the face of a girl in a starched collar, a smudge of fruit compote upon her cheek.

The girl has hair as fine as winter wheat; in the attention of the sun, it's almost painful to look at. Though too old for such nonsense, she clutches something for comfort or play. Her narrowed eyes, when she peers about the curtain's edge, are seen to be the blue of lapis lazuli or the strongest cornflower. Or like the old enamel that Iris saw once in a chapel ornament, its shine worn off prematurely. But the girl's eyes are cautious, or maybe depthless, as if they've been torn from the inside out by tiny needles and pins.

A woman's voice behind the child, coming from deep inside the house. The market is still. Why are the citizens so transfixed? "Clara?" says the inside voice.

Margarethe clamps Ruth's forearms tightly. The girl in the window cranes, watching Ruth shudder, judging Ruth's nonsense syllables. The girl leans over the windowsill, one curved forefinger at her plump lips. She looks at Ruth as a dog will look at a turtle—closely, without sympathy. "Are you a lost one?" she asks Ruth, and then says to Margarethe,

"Is she a changeling? Let her go if she is; let her go, and let's see what she'll do! Will she fly like a crow?"

"What kind of town is this, that the young address their elders with such nonsense?" cries Margarethe in competent Dutch, and the girl rears back for a moment, but the look of scrutiny doesn't vanish. Curiosity is too great.

Suddenly Ruth reaches up through the open window and takes hold of the girl's plaything—a small wooden windmill, with arms that pivot on a nail. Ruth puts the peg end of it in her mouth, by habit. She sucks as a new calf works at a teat. A dirty chuckle ripples through the crowd. But Ruth is calmed by the distraction, and Margarethe grips Ruth about

the waist.

The blonde girl doesn't object. She leans forward, peering down at Ruth's face almost as if looking in a

mirror. "Thing," says the girl, "oh, thing, get *away from* bere."

The onlookers watch warily. The girl's mother calls— "Clara!" And there is a flurry of action in the room. The girl is yanked back, the window slammed, the curtain closed.

Iris turns. Had they hoped to steal anonymously into this new place, they couldn't have done a worse job. Everyone in the town square is watching.

Margarethe squares her shoulders again and, without saying anything more, leads her daughters through to the other side of the market square. When they reach the far streets, where shadows have already thickened the day into an early dusk, Iris brings out the fruit she has snatched from the pavement. The pears are hard and juiceless. The three travelers munch them down to the pips, and eat the pips as well,

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and throw away the stems after sucking them dry.

The dusk is yielding to dark by the time they find Grandfather's house, in the lee of a city gate. There they learn that he has died a few years ago, and those who live inside are not family and have no obligation to take in the hungry strangers.

## Stories Told TKrough Windows

Anight spent huddled in the piss stink of an alehouse alley. Dogs chase them away at dawn. The mother and daughters brush the mud and straw off their only skirts, and walk toward the marketplace again to advertise for a position. The mother's voice is calculating: by turns brassy, pious.

Whatever works.

"I am Margarethe, Margarethe of the ten Broek family. My grandfather was Pieter ten Broek, who lived in the shadow of the Zijlpoort. A good family! I have come back here hoping to stay with them. But now I learn that he and his wife are dead, and my uncles are also lost though poxes and other whimsies of God. You don't know my face, but you know my grandfather's; he stood tall in this city. To honor his name, I ask you to stand by me, because there's no one left to turn to."

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First, Margarethe makes her plea at the half doors of merchant halls. She'll do needlework in exchange for a clutch of blankets in a shed or byre. She'll do barn labor, just give her food for herself and her ungainly daughters. She'll mind the ill-tempered young, and she'll wring milk from her breasts if fractious infants need it. (Her breasts don't look up to the task.)

The merchants lob wilting lettuces at her.

So Margarethe turns to residential streets. Some of the houses are deafened, shutters like wooden muffs over their window-ears. Margarethe lingers in lanes till maids open up their masters' homes. She chatters with brave familiarity at the girls who come out to wash the stoops.

"Oh, you don't want to know what hardship we leave behind, in the godforsaken muck of an English country village. Bog stench to remember, I'll tell you now! But I was originally from here, one of you—my father left when I was still an infant, to Ely, to Ma, 'h, to teach the foolish English how to drain

their damplands in the way we Hollanders perfected. He taught the trade to my husband, Jack Fisher, who performed it well enough . . . until the high tides of this fall. Then the earthworks were breached and the fens flooded and the fields and crops ruined beyond redemption. And the villagers of March and the web-footed fen folk could see what the coming winter would be like. They would rather have killed a Dutchman! But my father was dead of the ague, and no Dutchman was to be had, so they killed the next best thing: one of their own who had married a Dutch maid. My own husband, Jack."

A maid splashes a bucket of dirty water on the cobbles; Margarethe has to leap back to keep from a dunking.

A goodwife at a window, examining a stain in a lace collar.

Margarethe: "They cornered my man, my sorry Jack Fisher, out in a haunted copse one night last week! They hit my poor Jack on the head with an eel spear. My daughters and I left under cover of darkness the very same evening, fearing for our lives. English peasants are a vengeful lot, and we were seen as strangers, though the girls were born there."

. . . the sounds in the lane, of ale-courage and ale-anger, and the girls started from their sleep, and Margarethe's eyes darting, crusty; and her frightened voice: "We must get away from this place! Up, you lump-kin daughters, up!—or this sleep is your last!"—

The goodwife ducks her eyes away, as if Margarethe has been only a chirping jackdaw on the sill. The window shuts gently. Margarethe moves along to the window of a neighbor without losing the momentum of her recital.

"The English have a morbid fear of the foreigner among them! You know it! And though the girls have an English father, I trained them to speak the language of my grandfather, Pieter ten Broek, who served this town well, or so I am told. I thought we might need to return to our home soil, and so we have. We aren't wastrels or refugees. We're not dirty gypsies. We are your own. Welcome us back."

Iris sees that her mother isn't good at generating sympathy. Something about the hard edge of her jaw, the pinching

nostrils.

"Look at my girls," says Margarethe. "If your stomach can bear it. Haven't I suffered enough?—with one of them

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gibbering and staggering like a drunken farmer on market day"—she shrugs at Ruth—"and the other"—she pushes Iris forward—"plain as a board, an affront to the eye? Why did God deny me sons, who might have been a comfort to a mother in distress? If we die on the streets of this town, for your coldness the hand of God will visit pestilence upon you! Good day. Bitch hound! Iris, mind your sister."

A palsied hand has reached out to draw the window closed against Margarethe and her daughters. A murmured prayer against Margarethe's curse.

"Let me tell you what I know about hunger and plague," says Margarethe, pestering a burgher who is trying to slide by her unaccosted. "Your townsmen refer us to the poor-houses here, and promise that the needy can fatten themselves there on butter and beef. But I have seen the poor fight over a sick dog, to



kill it and char its meat, and puke it up within the hour. I've known hunger to turn father against son, and husband against wife!"

"Mama, the things you say!" Iris is amazed at her mother's testimony.

"You think I embroider these things? Hunger is real," says Margarethe. "Haven't I seen children munching on rats?" But she softens her voice and tries a new approach.

"I have skills, old mother, I know the herbs and tisanes for the stiffness in the joints. I know what to gather, and how to dry it, and what to mete out, and what to reserve. I know the worts, the simples, the roots. I know"—she pauses, judging her next audience of one weak-chinned old dame—"I know the holy words to pronounce, and when they fail, the

unholy. I know the spells, I know the secret charms, I know the invisible comforts . . ."

The frightened crone bangs her shutter closed so hard that it nearly catches her crippled hand at the wrist.

"What we need is a table," says Iris, "a table that always groans with a weight of food, appearing by magic every day—" "Fancy won't feed us, Iris," mutters Margarethe. "God's truth," she cries in anger, "is there no mercy in this damp town? Will the ill chance that chased us from England catch up with us at last, when we have no strength to keep running away?"

Midday. The j>un doing its best, dragging its golden skirts through gritty streets. In a back lane, where the smells of the brewery get trapped in alleys and mildewy work yards, there is one window that doesn't swing shut. Margarethe stands, her hand pressed against her ribs, heaving, trying to keep from weeping with rage. At wit's end, she's working to invent a new story. Ruth plays with the pretty toy that the girl named Clara has thrust in her hands. Iris looks in the window.

The room is tall and airy, more stable than salon, an old storehouse for arms maybe. Iris peers. The room is in disarray. A table holds pots and mortars and grinding stones. A kettle of nose-wrinkling oil gently steams on a low fire. Paintbrushes brandish themselves out of clay pots, unruly as autumn bracken. Against the wall lean freestanding panels of wood, like a series of doors, and one or two panels are propped on easels in the center of the room. Every surface is worked over with color, fields of fog cut with strokes of unapologetic brightness. Every color that Iris has ever known, from midnight blue to the sourest citron.

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A man turns, only slowly hearing Margarethe's words. He seems irritated to be yelled at through his own window, which has been opened for air and light, not for prying eyes or beggars on the prowl.

Iris leans farther to look. The consolation of gray, of green, the surprise of pink. The redemption of cloudy white on four new panels yet to be touched by image.

"Iris, don't be forward with the gentleman," murmurs Margarethe, readying her latest version of woe.

Iris ignores her mother. "What are you doing?" she says through the window.

Looking

\* • he painter lays down a twig of red chalk and blows JL lightly on his fingertips. The folds of his

clothes are lined with red as if powdered with the dust of bricks. He walks over to the window and shakes his head. "What kind of assault is this?" he grumbles.

"No assault, sir," cries Margarethe, now that she has caught one, reeling him in, "only a mother with hungry vir' gin daughters! What does the gentleman need to be done? A woman can be told to do anything. I can help a man's tired wife at all the household tasks. Tell me to sweep, to scrub; I will. Tell me to air a mattress, to fetch water from the well. I will. Tell me to kill a chicken?—I'll pluck it and stew it, send its feathers to the sack for pillowing, its blood organs to the pan for the company of onions, its bones thrown upon the dirt for the reading of fortunes."

"There's no wife here, or why would I be living in squalor? But hold your tongue while I think about it," he tells her, and he turns to glance at Ruth and Iris.

Ruth hides her eyes, but Iris looks right back at him. She

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isn't looking for her father, no no; he is dead these seven days—

A voice outside the door as the door splinters: "And the husband is boxed on the head, bleeding into his bog, and we'll have his wicked wife next, and those girls!"—

—*Stay in the* present moment. Look at *the* present moment. She's just looking at a man who happens to be roughly her father's age. That's all.

He's a man of middle years, with an unshuttered light in his eyes. Iris doesn't remember seeing its like before. He strokes his gingery mustaches and draws fingers down a beard that needs hot water and the attention of a razor. His bald head is glazed from being in the sun without the black hat favored by prosperous burghers. His fingers are dyed with red and violet. Gingerbeard has calipers, scales, tools in his eyes; he stares at Iris. It's a look that's clean of human emotion, at least just now. He stares some sort of judgment at her. Iris drops her eyes at last, beaten by his attention.

"She will be of marriageable age within the month—" begins Margarethe. Iris winces.

"Silence," he murmurs, twitching his fingers at Margarethe.

And looks some more.

"This, then," he says at last. "There's a shed beyond where you can sleep a week or two, at least until my apprentice returns from his journeys on my behalf. After that we'll see. There's work to be done if you can live here in silence. You, Mother, will see to the needs of a bachelor's household. I

won't name or number the tasks, but I want to eat and to sleep and to work without stopping when the mood arises. The older girl, can she wander about by herself?—there's a meadow not far from the bridge, just beyond the Amsterdamse Poort, where the new canal starts its journey to Amsterdam. The flowers of late summer grow there in abundance. She can collect them daily for my studio. The commonest weeds die within hours, and I need to look at them regularly. Is she capable of this? Good. Perhaps you—your name, your name in one word and no narrative—"

"Margarethe," she says, and lifts her head, "Margarethe Fisher, of the good Haarlem family ten Broek."

"Margarethe, if you attend, perhaps I can teach you to grind minerals for me and mix them with oil and powders, to make my colors."

"I am clever with grinding herbs and peppercorns and roots. Minerals and powders are as nothing to me." "Good. And the girls, they are called—?" "My elder daughter, Ruth, and the smart one, Iris." "Not the usual Dutch names," he says, amused. "They were born in the fens of Cambridgeshire. Their English father wasn't inclined to the names of saints and martyrs," says Margarethe, "so the choices were few. When we saw how our first child was spoiled, we named her Ruth, which I'm told means sorrow for one's own faults. Then we chose to name the next daughter Iris, with the hope it might encourage her to grow in beauty like a flower." She looks at Iris and her lips twitch. "As you can see, our hopes were badly abused."

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"Iris is the smart one," he says.

"Smart enough for what you need, I'd guess." Is Mar-garethe leering a little? Surely not.

"For Iris, a difficult task," says Gingerbeard. "I'd like her to sit on a chair in the north light for hours at a time so I may observe her. She must sit without fidgeting, without speaking. She must keep her mouth shut. I will draw her in red chalk on parchment, and perhaps paint her if I'm pleased by my drawings."

Margarethe can't help herself. She says, "For what possible reason could you wish to render the likes of her?" Margarethe puts her hands on Iris's shoulder. The gesture is partly loving but partly a negotiation. And why not, Iris admits, when we can barely reach from one loaf to the next?

The painter replies, "My reasons are my own. Decide and answer me, for I have no more time for this right now. Tell me, yes or no."

"Your name, before we come in your door and accept your kind offer."

But he laughs. "My name can't seal a deal, my name doesn't increase the value of my canvases. My name has no place in a world in which Lucas Cranach and Memling and the Florentines show their paintings! Even in my own time I am anonymous, not quite known as the Master of the Dordrecht Altarpiece. That effort is much admired, but I'm not remembered as its creator. Just call me the Master, and my cock's pride will be assuaged. Will you enter or no?"

They troop inside. The smells in the studio are slightly offensive. Iris picks out the pungency of sappy, new-milled

wood, the resin-scented oil, an eggy stink of sulfur, male sweat.

She stops hearing the clucking of her mother and the hulking shuffle of her sister. Iris looks at the works once her eyes have become accustomed to the inside light.

The panels are limned in red or black line. Some of them are worked with an olive or a sepia wash. A few have been taken further, the solid forms of human beings beginning to emerge from the gloom of the Master's preparations. Scraps of paper, scratched with silvery ink, are pinned to the edges of panels—sketches, she can see, of what the finished work might include.

The sketches are largely of people unclothed. Women

and men alike.

Iris grabs her mother's hand and points wordlessly. Margarethe sets her jaw and considers the situation. At length she says, in a voice intended to be agreeable, "Master, is my daughter to sit undraped for you?"

"I am a painter, not a monster."

Eight or nine pieces in process, or pieces started and abandoned; Iris can't tell. Figures who are naked in the sketches appear clothed in the finished works.

Iris stares in distress at her mother. Behind the Master's back Margarethe makes a face at Iris that means: First we eat, *then* we refuse. Caution, daughter! But Margarethe goes on to remark, "We are in a Roman chapel, full of idols. In England few would sanction such blasphemy anymore. Does all of this painted beauty serve any purpose?"

"Who can say what purpose beauty serves? But at least the Roman Catholics used to pay well for work that inspires their

#### THE OBSCURE CHILD

devotions," says the Master, hunting through a pile of brushes for one to serve in the task at hand. "Back when the Roman Catholics were more than merely tolerated in this land."

"I see the Virgin in blue and scarlet; I see the Christ like a fat Dutch baby raised on cheese. I notice angels everywhere," says Margarethe dismissively.

"I paint my devils, dwarves, and depraved in a separate room," says the Master, waving a hand. "The door to which I keep locked. Not superstitious, I, but nor do I court the wrath of God any more than I need do."

Iris wants to ask: Do you paint imps, thwarties, sting' demons? The kind that run with soundless howling at the heels of mobs, egging them on? But she can't speak about this; her mouth won't collaborate with her mind.

Margarethe begins to arrange pots on the table in order of size. "Get on through to the house, don't handle my things," the Master says, "out back, go on! Be useful with pastry and broom and boiling water! Go to the marketplace and find a healthy fish for my dinner! Get out of my way!"

"What shall I use for coin, Master?" says Margarethe.

"My name," he says.

"The Master of Debt?" she says.

"Schoonmaker," he answered, "but the Master will do. It better do."

Margarethe straightens her spine. "Iris, attend your sister," she says. "You are the smart one. Enough of this mooning about, these vaporish sighs! Keep Ruth under your fist. Do you hear me?" Iris nods.

"Reliable Iris," says Margarethe. "So off I go, and tonight we eat."

Iris keeps a hand on Ruth's shoulder till their mother has hurried out of sight. Then Iris continues her inspection. Since Iris doesn't speak, the Master doesn't seem to mind her being there. As he scrubs a patch of green to apply a yellow glow upon it, he mutters to her, or to himself. She listens as she wanders and looks.

He has a nice voice, rusty and gruff. "So your mother, like other small people, disapproves of sacred art! I should pack up my trunks and remove myself to the Spanish Netherlands, where a healthy Roman Catholic faith still requires a supply of religious imagery. But no, though the Calvinists here tolerate the Papist presence, even turning a blind eye to the secret chapels, the market for sacred art has disappeared."

Iris doesn't know or care about any of this. "But seventy years ago? A hundred? Imagine this. Every eight miles found a clutch of houses with its own small church, and every church boasted a painting of the Holy Family. Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. The Gospels are peopled suddenly and forever by the images that artists deliver for you. We did our work, and God reaped the reward in increased prayer. The true consequence of beauty—tell your mother!—is devotion."

Iris has no idea what he means, but it seems to please him to talk. She sees Josephs and Marys, and Jesuses of all ages and humors. Abandoned over and over again, because imperfect, because unworthy?

The Master rails on, punctuating his pauses with caresses of his brush. "Painting holy subjects has always made a good

## THE OBSCURE CHILD

living for painters! Though who among us doesn't fear being dashed into hell when we paint into a sacred scene from Scriptures some baby we see on the street, a woman we love, a man we admire?"

The Master becomes morose. "And besides picturing the blessed"—this in a sour tone, carping—"as a painter I catalog the corruption of the world! In staggering honesty. The misshapen, the unholy aberrations. The Girl-Boy of Rotterdam? I painted that cursed soul the year before it was stoned to death by the devout. I painted the Seven Stages of Plague, including the gray-green face of the unburied corpse. The hunchbacks, the split-skulls, Dame Handelaers with her horrible donkey jaw. The other side of revelation! Through that door, should you want to see. I'll unlock it for you. All the proofs of our need for God." He points his brush at the door and raises his eyebrows in a question.

Iris doesn't even dare to look at the door, much less ask for it to be unlocked. She doesn't want to see. She wraps her thin arms around her thin chest, and asks herself again: Where have we come to?

The Master turns back to his canvas. "And I'll paint that changeling child yet," he says grimly. "Haarlem's hidden beauty. More witness to the weirdness of this world."

Iris remembers the girl at the window, the girl who gave the toy to Ruth. She had asked if Ruth was a lost one, a changeling. Was Haarlem a haven for such goblin beasts? Iris had heard that from time to time a poor infant might be kidnapped from its cradle and replaced with a rotten, illish creature resembling it in looks alone. A changeling is said to be

deficient of something essential, either memory, or sense, or mercy. Iris wants to ask the Master about the nature of changelings, and how to identify one, but he interrupts her thoughts, mumbling on.

"And even though I testify about the terrible human state, and its rescue by the sanctity of Jesus, what, what, what in this *annus dominus* are we brought to, we the laborers, the artisans, the cooks of linseed stew?" The Master throws his brush across the room. "They want /lowers, flowers for commerce, beauty to sell as if it had its own sake! Why don't the dreamless Calvinists just go off to Constantinople? Why don't they join the pagan Mohammedans who rebuke the notion of portraying divinity in anything but Euclidean tiles of blue and gold? Or why don't I just take myself to the Spanish Netherlands and set myself up there? Where I can paint what I want, and keep food on the table as well?"

"Why don't you?" asks Iris, goaded from her shyness by his ranting.

"I love my home, and this is my home," he yells. "Don't you understand that?"

Iris doesn't answer. Home is hard to recollect already, usurped by that nightmare of torches, accusations, an escape in a flatboat over fields flooded with sea water, as the full moon blazed upon them like the eye of a vengeful judge. Her family had left home so quickly—who really knew if Jack Fisher was even given a Christian burial, or was he still drifting in the suck of the receding tides, a bloated corpse leaching his blood into the ruined crops?

#### THE OBSCURE CHILD

"What, what is it?" says the Master, coming toward Iris, but she starts, and jumps away.

—a minor demon, sniffing the midnight air, on the hunt, chasing after them—

"No," she says, keeping it all unremembered, "no, no." "Then if you won't say, out, out in the air, enough of my prattle; what do you care for the madness of an obsessed man? Go for flowers. Go with your enormous sister for flowers. Trot off and drag an armload of pretty weeds for me, so I can waste my time and feed myself."

He looks at Iris, then peers down into his brushes, splaying the bristles of one with his clean left thumb. "Bring me flowers, child," he says, more softly. "Out into the air with you. You look like a crone before your time."

#### THE OBSCURE CHILD

Mead

eaaw

Schoonmaker—the Master—gives Iris a short knife. He tells her how to find the meadow. Iris helps Ruth put her wooden shoes back on, and she fits on her own pair. Then the girls clasp their hands and run.

Past the brewery with its rich active smells, down a lane that leads through a city gate. Out the gate, across a foul canal, up an embankment, through a mess of hedge, and then: the meadow. A few cows are companionably lowing. Ruth is scared of cows, so Iris flies at them and windmills her arms about, and the cows amble away without taking offense.

The sisters are alone for the first time since leaving their home in England. They aren't Dutch girls, no matter how well Margarethe had taught Iris essential words and grammar. But they're no longer English girls either, since home has been swept away from them. So for now they're merely alone, but together, as together as they can get.

Before the death of Jack Fisher, Iris and Ruth had been no farther from March than the next village over, and that only once, for a fair. What a disaster. The ale had flown too

freely and the reticence that masquerades as Christian charity had collapsed. Men had set down their bowls of ale and taunted Ruth with a stick, saying they were hungry for bacon, and how much would the pig fetch? Iris had snatched that very stick and gone at them, and caused blood to flow, though even with dripping nostrils and split lips the men had fallen against each other in mirth. "The pig and the hound! The hound and the pig!"

The Fisher sisters had never gone to the market fair again. Nor had Iris told Margarethe or Jack exactly what had happened, for what would that mean? Just that Ruth would be kept closer to the hearth than ever. Iris has always thought this isn't right. Without question Ruth is an idiot, but she is not a pig.

Iris can't think about these things, though; when the memories threaten to return, she has to brush them away. She's left those things behind. She's left England behind, and all it means. Any cursed imp is left behind, surely, surely. But have they really arrived in Holland? Or did the boat go awry in the storm? Have they come instead to a place of bewitchment? Perhaps it only looks like Holland, and that's why the grandfather who was to take care of them is not in his house. Don't *be fanciful*, says Margarethe's voice in Iris's mind. But Iris can't help it. The mysteries of this place! Whatever could the Girl-Boy of Rotterdam have been? Or Dame Donkey-Jaw? Or what about the changeling child? If this is no longer England, perhaps it's not Holland either. It's the place of story, beginning here, in the meadow of late summer flowers, thriving before the Atlantic storms drive wet and winter upon them all.

Iris lectures herself. Be commonsensical. Be good. Deserve the food you'll be fed tonight. She says, "So many varieties. What sorts does he want, do you think?"

Ruth plucks a daisy and holds it up.

"That's one, and a good one it is," says Iris, "he wants many. Here, Ruth, can you use this knife without stabbing your thumb? If you pull them like that, the leaves are crumpled. Make your cut down here—bend your knees, that's better. Yes, that's a good one. I don't need to approve each choice. All flowers are good ones, Ruth. Yes, that's another

nice one."

Iris moves away as far as she dares, making sure that Ruth isn't alarmed. Then she moves farther still. She sees an abandoned apple tree at the edge of the meadow. Though it's crippled with age, there are boughs that can be used as a ladder, and she should be able to step from the apple tree to the limbs of the taller, weedy tree that grows next to it. Iris tucks her dark skirt into the band of her apron strings and puts her precious shoes at an angle against the trunk. She begins to climb.

She hadn't been able to see much of the world from the boat that had left from Harwich. Because of fright, hunger, and nausea, she had had to keep her head down on the creaking floor. Iris says to herself, I couldn't stand on the prow of the ship and track our journey to this odd place. But here, on the edge, on the margin, an aging tree is a stepping-stone to a taller tree, and from there . . .

Look one way, and beyond the lip of three or four more meadows is the broad gray ocean, crimped with white lines of water wanting to noise themselves against the dunes. From

## THE OBSCURE CHILD

here the sea appears less monstrous than it had from the dock at Harwich. Then the light had been low, and the waves, close by, had pulled up weights of water, greasy, heavy, dark. Today the sky is hung with clouds random as sailing vessels, flat-bottomed and big-billowed, and the water seems smoothed, changed.

Look the other way, and she can peer above and beyond the leafy hedge, locate the mouth of the brown-blue Spaarne, and trace the river inland to the city walls. She can make out the buildings of Haarlem. Their smart chimneys, their tall facades imitating steps-and-stairs. There: the building she's come to know already as the Stadhuis, the town hall, with its green mountain of a roof. There: the Grotekerk—the Cathedral of Saint Bavo's—its stone spire the color of toasted bread, one angle pink and pockmarked in this light. A small ribbed dome, open to the winds, is perched up top like an airy onion.

Canals ring the town, joining to the Spaarne on north and south sides. Haarlem, or whatever world this might be, is a closed garden itself, of stone and glass and red roof tiles. Beyond, to the east, the occasional ouderkirk—as the Master told her—suggests a group of farmhouses, a crossroads, a ford. Iris looks to see some giant in the distance, some dragon laying a clutch of eggs. She finds an unraveling of smoke. It could be a dragon. It could be anything. "I think it's a dragon," calls Iris.

Ruth has forgotten her task already and sits chewing the stems of flowers.

Iris hasn't attended to flowers much. Things that grow have been their mother's concern: the roots, the herbs for their

leaves and flowers, the flowers for their seeds, the many small snatches of sage, celery, and rue. Iris has overlooked them. But now she sees a nameless variety of wild blossoms. She can't call their names, in English or Dutch. After a few moments in an artist's workroom, she can see only flecks of gold, stalks of red and maroon, starry puffs of blue, stands of white, and all of it peppered against a glowing fold of yellow and green.

Iris says to herself: I will bring Margarethe here for the benefits to be coaxed from seedling, stem, and leaf. Mar-garethe is a mistress of the simples, and she can treat any ailment with an infusion or a plaster.

And there is Margarethe, striding back from the market already, a big fish shining from underneath her arm. Iris thinks her mother looks—from this height—ridiculous, her legs whipping out and her shoulders hunched over. She looks

relieved.

"I see a wicked witch, and a cow that gives milk of pure gold," calls Iris. She decides she will drum up the courage to look at the paintings of the Master's demons and unnatural figures. All the secrets of the world are to be discovered and

recorded!



A flurry of swallows on their way south. "Is that a school of fairies, flying from tree to tree?" she calls, to keep Ruth engaged. "Is that a changeling child I see?"

Below, Ruth smiles and doesn't bother to listen, a simple among simples.

Sitting

for ScKoonmaker

They come to know their patron and his tempers. He wakes up as Schoonmaker and becomes, by grumpy effort, the Master. Mornings are full of muttered curses and swallowed blessings. Enthusiastically he washes himself, paying no attention to the modesty of maidens or widows. The Fishers have to huddle themselves in the kitchen yard until he calls for his laving water to be removed. Then, a cambric shirt pulled over his head at least, he berates Margarethe for every annoying thing: the thinness of the porridge, the hardness of the cheese, the grayness of the bread, the miniature nature of herrings.

Ruth plays with her windmill, the little thing grabbed from the beautiful girl in the house at the marketplace, until the Master roars for flowers. It doesn't happen every day—all field flowers don't die at once, no matter what he says—but it happens often enough.

After the first three or four trips, Iris doesn't need to escort Ruth to the meadow, though if the cows have frightened her Ruth comes home empty-handed. Iris sees, though, that the Master often doesn't look at the flowers Ruth brings. He stuffs them in a bucket and continues to paint the ones he already has, all the while quoting lines of Scripture, as if to punish himself by remembering what holy passion he is kept from because of the nonsense of flowers.

Iris loiters about the studio, trying to get up the courage to ask to see the paintings in the locked chamber of misfits. She is curious to see if he portrays imps and thwarties there. Here the Master paints flowers. "What are you bothering me for?" he mutters, not sounding very bothered.

"Have you ever seen a dragon ... or a hell-imp?" "The patron who doesn't pay his debt is a hell-imp . . ." What a middle-aged answer, and from one who claims to admire his own paintings of monsters and miseries!

She'll ask him tomorrow for the key to the other room. She will. She's always known about imps, and she wants to see one—not in real life (please God, no), but in a painting. That would be safe, and even wonderful.

But the tomorrow comes, and just as she is going to do it—she is, she is!—there's a knock on the door. "Caspar?" says the Master. "Come in!"

Nobody enters. "Iris, open the door, Caspar's arms must

be heavy with presents for me," says the Master boisterously.

Timidly, Iris swings open the top half of the sectioned

door. She sees nothing, but hears a knock on the bottom half.

"Be generous. Open the full door," says the Master.

## THE OBSCURE CHILD

She does. A horrible beast in a huge beard stands there, only as high as Iris's apron strings. It's a talking dog, or a bear cub? It growls at her: "Move aside, what are you staring at, you ugly thing?" A dwarf, a real dwarf. Iris is glad Ruth is in the meadow today. May she stay there safely until this creature leaves! "Where's the old goosander?" growls the creature, pushing in.

The Master seems unimpressed. "Who sent you here?" he said.

"For a half loaf of bread, I'll remove my smalls and show you how the barber tickled my gangrenous limbs with his knives," says the dwarf, who, it appears, is this short because he has no legs. He rocks forward, using his arms to swing himself. Then he rests on two little stubs at the base of his pelvis. They are fitted over with leathery patches laced up by thongs that tie over his shoulders.

"There's a female present," says the Master, "a girl."

"Oh, is it a girl?" says the dwarf. "Such a pretty face it has. I thought it was a monkey with an ailment. You're Schoonmaker, aren't you. Are you still drawing the likes of me?"

"You want me to pay you a half loaf of bread?" says the Master. "Bread is dear, and I've seen your like before."

"I've a handsome package of knobs and knuckles dragging along on the floor," says the dwarf, looking at his crotch.

"Get out," says the Master. "I'm interested in the varieties of the fallen, to be sure, but right now I'm busy with flowers. And I don't like your uncivil tongue when there's a girl present."

The dwarf looks at the Master's study of wildflowers. "You've gone from cataloguing us queerlimbs to portraits

of—cow food?" says the dwarf. "Damn you, your reputation is riper than that."

"Margarethe, bring your broom," calls the Master calmly. "A talking clot of fur has rolled in the doorway. It wants removing, whether it knows it or not."

Iris loses her nerve about inspecting the gallery of misfits. When Ruth comes back, Iris tells her about the dwarf while Ruth sorts the flowers by height and lines them up on the windowsill for the Master to inspect. "Wonderful," he says. "So nicely arranged!" He doesn't move them. They dry and blow away the next day.

"Ready to draw you, before another crazy fish swims by to interrupt me," says the Master at last. Iris isn't sure she wants to be drawn, but a bargain is a bargain.

When the sun has moved to its proper place, the Master places Iris in a chair and composes her hands in her lap. He pulls the cap off her head. Tears start in her eyes. She is afraid he will undress her wholly. Her poor stick self isn't fit

for it.

He misunderstands her concern. "The cap: *filthy*" he says, "and I'm not looking at you anyway, but at the

shape of your head." He takes an hour making marks on the wall. She is supposed to focus on the marks, one after the other, while he keeps returning to his pad of paper and judging the cast of her eyes. By the time he's ready, the light has shifted. He curses her for her stubbornness and throws some flowers at her, and she runs into the kitchen, hiding her eyes—it isn't her fault!

## THE OBSCURE CH

LD

"Cry a little bit if you have to. It's healthy to piss in the fire. But then back you go," says Margarethe, raising a spoon like a truncheon.

"He wants to draw a marble statue, not a person!" cries Iris.

"Then be marble for him, you fool," says Margarethe. "Be bronze if he wants it; be glass; be oak. Be what he wants, or we go hungry."

"He wants beauty," says Iris, rubbing her nose. "He has a hound, and he wants beauty."

Margarethe's expression is blank. At last she says, "Then be beauty. Make-believe it."

Iris gives a wordless cry of exasperation. If she had some thing to throw at her mother, she would throw it.

"He hasn't asked for—?" whispers Margarethe, making bosom-like drawings in the air with her left hand.

Iris shakes her head. Now, oddly, she's irritated. Clearly she's not interesting enough to be insulted in this way.

"I'm done drawing for the day, for the season, forever," cries the Master from the other room. He is stamping back and forth. "I'm trying to decide how to end my life, and you two nattering on like that, it breaks my concentration!"

"Begging your pardon," says Margarethe in a wry, placating voice. "I wouldn't want to interrupt some important thought."

He laughs. There is the sound of a piece of paper being torn. "We start earlier tomorrow, Iris," he says. "You will not elude me, whatever shyness you pretend to. I will fix your face on board without fail. My livelihood depends on it, and so does yours. Dry your eyes and hush your whimpers or I'll have to beat you."

Margarethe raises her eyebrows at Iris. Iris pouts. But by now they both know the Master is not one to beat children.

The next morning he is at work again, and Iris sits for him. He draws her face and hands and her shoulders. "Let your head sink more, advance your chin."

"My neck will ache unless I hold it straight."

"Do as I say."

She sits like a traveler at a campfire, imagining something at her back. Something that should have been left behind in England?—or some new monster, like the lewd dwarf, the Donkey Woman, something darker, inching nearer?

"What a complex wariness in your eyes!" he says.

Later: "Now, without a word of protest, without moving your eyes, your hands, your neck, push out your lower lip. I don't care how it makes you feel. Farther. That's good."

If he catches me, thinks Iris, will he catch what is at my back? That thing that I can't name? That thing I start from in

my sleep?

"Is there really a changeling child in Haarlem?" she asks.

"I'm drawing your *mouth*. Close it!"

It's the worst torture anyone could have devised for her, to have to sit so still!

But, day after day, she sits respectably, clothed. And glad for it now. "Let me see what you have done with me," she says after the fifth afternoon. The lowering sun is pushing dusty golden light at the canvas, and she feels brave.

"There's no point," he says. "I haven't caught you. I'm not trying to catch you. I'm merely using you to suggest a

## THE OBSCURE CHILD

shape to me. There is a shadow on the board; it is not Iris Fisher. It is a nameless girl, spiritless, while *you* are a spirited English-Dutch girl named Iris Fisher. It's easy to assume you're the same as the painting, but you're not. I forbid you to look," he says as she comes closer.

In a warning tone, from the other room, Margarethe: "Ins."

She falls back. "I don't know what I'm doing here," she says.

"You are my muse this month," says the Master.

"I don't know what you mean. You speak in riddles to distract me."

"You're a peasant girl from the marshes, a calf wandered up from the weedy bog; why should I spend my time educating you?" says the Master. "A muse is a spirit from the ancient Hellenic religion, a goddess who visits the man embarked upon the creative act and inspires him."

"We don't hold with goddesses from other religions," calls Margarethe tartly.

"I'm not asking you for opinions, you cook," he replies, as tartly. "Iris, the love of those old pagan stories has swept up every patron and painter alike. The Florentines are as likely to show us lo being turned into a cow, Daphne into a laurel tree, Zeus disguised as a bull out to rape Europa as they are to show us Madonna and Christ, Saint John and Saint Nicholas."

"I do not approve," calls Margarethe—she can't help herself.

But the Master only says, "No more do I, but commerce is commerce. If the rich will buy Venus, then we paint the Mother of God and call her Venus."

"For shame!" says Margarethe. "We eat," says the Master.

"I'd rather go hungry." The moral superiority of the well fed. "Go hungry, then. The more for me." Iris hasn't followed much of this, but she's interested that it bothers her mother. A spiritual awakening in that old iron contraption of a heart? Too hard to fathom. Iris moves on, and says, "I bet you're not portraying me as Venus or another ancient spirit from another land."

He moves away from the board, squints at it with one eye. He frowns. "No," he says. "No, Iris, you're right about that."

"I want to see."

"Go get your sister from the meadow. It's late. Where are my flowers today?" "Let me see."

"Get out of here!" he cries, angry now. Iris leaves, though not fleeing. She leaves with dignity, carefully knocking over a pot of ground powder onto the stone floor. He curses her clumsiness. She doesn't reply.

She is still sulking when she arrives in the meadow. Something is happening here that she doesn't like. The Master is a kind man in some ways, but he makes her angry. He is framing her on his board, but he is framing her in the room too, keeping her in a box, away from him. She might not be beautiful, but he is keeping her small.

Margarethe can't help much. As far as the Master's concerned, Margarethe is little more than annoyance; even Iris, who loves her, can see that. Margarethe is one of the irritants

## THE OBSCURE CHILD

of the world, a black fly at the behind of the cow. No, it's up to Iris to be patient and behave, or the family will be back on the street again. And now that Iris has seen the legless dwarf, heard about the Girl-Boy of Rotterdam, who knows what bizarre villains lurk farther inland? It might not be an enchanted castle and a sugar-voice godmother. It might be major imps and minor demons, huge bumblebees with claws. Or even some fierce god disguised as a bull, to kidnap poor girls and do what bulls are well known to do.

"We'll give him his monstrosity," says Iris suddenly. Ruth looks up from the late daisy heads she is shredding. "He wants to catalogue all the quirks of the world? We'll queerlimb for him, Ruth!" Ruth likes this sound of bravery, which hasn't been heard much since leaving England. Iris wheels about the meadow, laughing, thinking. She lunges at the old apple tree and brings down a dead branch, and snaps the brittle limbs just so. "Antlers," says Iris, "for the Girl-Stag of the Meadow!"

They link hands and run home. Margarethe is out at the well or the market square, away somewhere. The Master is busy in the second studio—the gallery of God's mistakes— so it's easy for Iris to slip in and finger some dun-colored paint from the long board that serves as a palette.

In the shed at the end of the kitchen yard, she coats Ruth's face. "You're a beautiful Girl-Stag," she

croons, to keep Ruth from scraping the muck off with her hand. "Can you sound like a beast?" She knows the answer to this already. Ruth obliges with a passionate moo. "Close enough," says Iris.

## CONFESSIONS OF

### AN UGLY STEPSISTER

Ruth on her hammy hands and strong knees. Iris finds a long cord in the kitchen and ties the rack of apple bough antlers on Ruth's head. Iris drapes a length of brown, foul-smelling sacking over Ruth's back. The pelt. Then Iris kneels behind her sister, right up against her, like that bull Zeus pressing against a cow. She ties the ends of the sacking around her own waist to show that they are one two-headed creature, covered by the same hide. "Now, Ruth," says Iris, "we'll amble to the studio and have our portrait drawn. We'll make the Master laugh, and he'll forgive me for how I bother him!"

They clump and thump across the yard, Ruth mooing the announcement of their arrival. Silence in the studio as they cross the threshold. When the Girl-Stag crawls around the corner made by a painting propped against a stool, they see the Master has returned from the second studio. He's sitting there with an open mouth. He stares at them. He's not alone.

The visitor is a younger man, with a tender beard beginning on his chin, and none of the stoutness that proves the success of greater men. He perches on a stool, mopping a hunk of bread in a broth of milk and onions. "Oh, a household pet!" he cries, and jumps up, knocking over the stool, spilling his broth, bumping into the knees of the Master.

"I was expecting the brilliant daughters of my housekeeper," says the Master. "Instead, let me introduce you to some beast of the forest."

Ruth moos, delighted, unable to hear condescension in the Master's voice. Iris is mortified but gamely keeps on. "We're the Girl-Stag of the Meadow," says Iris. "Are we ugly enough now to suit you?"

### THE OBSCURE CHILD

"The disguise is impeccable," says the Master dryly. "I'd never have known you but for your dulcet tone." Despite himself, he starts to laugh. "Iris, you have some cleverness about you. But you're late, daughters, and you worried your mother; she went to look for you. You worried me too. There is supper in the kitchen. Now look, this is our Caspar, feckless Caspar, returned from the Hague. Silly Caspar, unable to solicit a single commission on this trip, though he carried letters of testimony from patrons in all the courts of Europe."

"I wrote the letters myself," says Caspar boastfully. "Which is Iris and which Ruth?"

"This is Ruth, the elder," says Iris, untying the pelt, feeling foolish, "and I am Iris, the younger."

Ruth won't stay to be observed by a new member of the household. She half gallops, antlers tilting, and disappears into the kitchen, scolding herself with moos.

"Ruth is shy, like me," says Caspar. "Such an appealing trait. But you, you're a rare one, Iris; did you invent that costume? What fun to have a companion here!"

"I'm not running a salon for the practice of conversation," says the Master. "Remember that. Caspar is here to learn the trade of drafting, but he's a hopeless fool, though attractive enough in a pony-like way.

He will canter into a low lintel one day and brain himself, and we will all be relieved. He is bereft of any real talent, or Hals or van Schooten or my current rival, Bollongier, would have taken him in. Caspar is almost as useless as you girls. This should make you feel in good company. I hope you're pleased."

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### STEPSISTER

Iris studies the new arrival briefly, warily. Caspar has a winning smile. He seems used to the gloomy Master. Caspar doesn't take offense at these ironic remarks. He bites the corner of his mouth. His lip is glossy with new blond hairs. Despite herself, Iris has a sudden yen to stroke the early mustache with her finger, the way she likes to stroke the ears of the kitchen cat when it sits in the sunlight of the doorway. "Speak," says Caspar, twisting his hand upward in a courtly, welcoming manner. "Silence," says the Master.

"Porridge," says Margarethe from the kitchen, returned from her search. "Now," she adds.

Didn't the Master say that the Fishers could stay until his apprentice returned? But now the Master makes no suggestion they should pack up and leave. He has grown used to

them. Fair enough.

Iris turns to go. Is Caspar here merely for a visit? If so, will it be a long one? Iris believes she's pleased at the notion of his arrival, but in this, as in so much else, she's not sure.

"The Girl-Stag of the Meadow," says Caspar as she passes him into the kitchen. "Which part are you? Girl or Stag?" But from him the remark is not an insult; it makes her chortle, and she doesn't answer.

Girl

with

Wildflowers

With the arrival of Schoonmaker's apprentice, Iris becomes, if not happier, at least less self-conscious, because Caspar doesn't seem to notice her sorry looks. To be sure, Iris knows that she's not the insult to the human form that huge Ruth, with her withered arm and spilling spit, can seem; but Iris also knows that she's not a proof of a divine presence in a corrupt world.

The best she has been able to wish for, most of her days, is to be unnoticeable.

Every morning the Master draws Iris, and then he begins to paint her, quick studies that he won't allow her to see. He incorporates any meadow flowers that Ruth brings. "What does the form or the color matter," he mumbles, "when what is required is the freshness of the blossom?"

He shifts onto larger canvases. When he has a form he admires, he begins to work more slowly, thinning his colors

## CONFESSIONS OF

### AN UGLY STEPSISTER

with oil so as to keep them wet and malleable days at a time. Every afternoon when the light changes, though—he can sense it to the instant, by some canniness that Iris can't fathom—he throws down his brushes and sends Iris from

the room.

Sometimes Caspar hangs about in the shadows of the studio. From him Iris picks up the habit of watching how the Master works. How he pets a surface with the softest of splayed-bristled brushes. "A blush to emphasize the reflected light," he murmurs.

Iris can't see—she's not allowed to look at the image—but Caspar sucks in his breath and says, "That shrill yellow jagged line—a bold inaccuracy, but so revealing!" The Master grimaces, but Iris can tell he is pleased.

Though it embarrasses Iris to think about it, from a corner Caspar occasionally attempts drawings of her too. He hides his work from Iris and the Master. One morning the Master has had enough of this coyness. "How am I to teach you if I can't see your errors?" the Master grouses.

Caspar replies, "You teach me through your own errors." "And what errors might they be?" The tone is so ominous that Iris breaks her pose to lean and see the Master's scowl.

"In this studio you've painted God and His companions," says Caspar, "and in the next room you've portrayed the degenerate. Your two obsessions. So what you hope to accomplish by—this once—painting in the middle of the moral spectrum—?" He nods at Iris and at the canvas Iris can't look at. "I admire your self-denial, your sacrifice, to forsake your grand subjects for the mundane—"

## THE OBSCURE CHILD

He's needling the Master, though Iris hasn't the wit to work out how. The Master says, "God preserve me! The abuses I put up with, from those who gobble at my own table and warm their backsides at my own hearth!" He snatches a stout cloak from a peg. "I'm locked here with curs and idiots," he says, "while the babble of children and a foolish housewife poisons the air. Get out of my way." He leaves the house for the first time since the Fishers have arrived. Margarethe, hearing some of this from the kitchen, goes to the door and watches him stride down the lane.

He isn't an old man. He walks briskly and with purpose, striking his blackthorn staff against the cobbles. Dogs retreat, children stand still, and the women of the lane mutely nod greetings, showing pious disapproval.

"Oh, Caspar," says Margarethe, "we will all be thrown out on our heads, and then what?"

"Nonsense," says Caspar cheerily. "He doesn't walk enough. He gets bad-humored. He'll be better when he gets back. This is part of my job, don't you see? I have to annoy him enough to keep him involved with the world. Otherwise he would latch the shutters and hide inside his paintings and never emerge. It's a steady trial for him, this habit of black spirits and black bile, and retreating from the world because of it."

"Does he request this of you?" says Margarethe.

"What he requests and what he needs are often separate things," says Caspar.



"Who assigned you to decide the difference?"

"Love assigned me," says Caspar, surprised at the ques-

I

tion. "You are a mother, you know what love requires on

behalf of your family."

Margarethe says, pompously, "Obedience and silence." Caspar says, "Charity, and a cudgel about the shoulders

from time to time."

The Master being gone, Margarethe allows herself to sit in the sun on the stoop next to Iris. Iris is given a bowl of late summer peas to shell. Margarethe rinses lentils. Ruth brings her toy. She squats in the ungainly position taken by small children at play or by folks relieving their bowels in a ditch.

Caspar says to Iris, "Well, he won't be back for hours. He's gone off to see his betters, his cronies."

"He has no friends but us, I thought," says Iris. "He could have a wide circle of friends if he paid them as much attention as he pays his paintings," says Caspar knowingly. He likes to publish his opinions.

"Schoonmaker is thought of fondly by the best artists of the city. But he keeps apart, ashamed that his work is less well regarded than

theirs."

"Tell me," says Iris, brave to approach a subject now that the Master is away, "tell me: Is there a changeling child in

Haarlem?"

"Gossip is stronger than gospel sometimes," says Caspar. "They say there is: Clara, the daughter of the man who has commissioned the Master's current work."

"Clara!" says Iris. "That's the name of the child who gave Ruth the small windmill. She's no changeling."

"Don't ask me for the truth, for cats lie in the sun, and dogs lie in the shade, and I lie whenever and wherever I can

## THE OBSCURE CHILD

get away with it." He grins saucily. "She's a hidden child to Haarlem's prying eyes, so few can prove it or deny it. But the rumor mongers would have it so. And the Master would swear it in court if it would get him a decent commission."

"You talk with too much freedom of your Master's concerns," says Margarethe stiffly. Caspar laughs.

"I'm serious," she goes on. "You're a servant here, as we are; what license allows you to squawk such an opinion against him?"

"Youth," says Caspar, pointing a finger at himself.

Margarethe purses her lips. "Youth is a liability to be outgrown as quickly as possible."

They are a match for each other, Caspar and Margarethe. Iris is amazed.

"Come," says Caspar. He leaps up and tugs Iris's hand. "Do you want to see the paintings he has done of you?"

"I forbid it!" cries Margarethe.

"Oh, what's the harm?" says Caspar. Iris is surprised and bothered by Caspar's touch, and if only to break away from him, she jumps up as if in assent. She hands her bowl to Ruth, who settles the windmill inside it, up to its little wooden neck in emerald peas.

"Iris, will you imperil our position here?" asks Margarethe.

Iris can't answer her mother. Caspar has Iris again by the faintest of touches. Walking backward, he draws her into the studio. "Why shouldn't we learn by studying the Master's work; it's why we're here, isn't it?" says Caspar.

"I am here being silent and helpful," says Iris, to be truthful, "not to learn."

## CONFESSIONS OF

### AN UGLY STEPSISTER

"No master restricts learning, or he is no master," says Caspar. At last he drops Iris's hand—she feels immense disappointment. Sudden hollowness. Ridiculous!

Caspar pivots heavy panels from their careful angles, drying here, there; he finds the one he is looking for, and pushes it out into a waning shaft of sunlight that falls in one corner

of the room.

"A study of. . ." says Caspar. Words fail him then.

Iris puts her hands to her mouth.

Margarethe has been unable to maintain her posture of superiority. Out of interest or a motherly tendency to chaper-one, she has followed them into the chamber.

"Oh," says Iris, "oh."

"It is a good likeness," says Margarethe at last.

"It is severe," Caspar concedes.

"It is severe, and true," says Margarethe. "Iris is plain to look at. Painfully plain. Don't exaggerate her physical virtues, Caspar; it does no good in the end. She must accept it like the rest of us."

Iris on the canvas is well painted, to be sure; even Iris can see that. The colors are magic: a field of black lit with topaz, against which human figure and sprays of wildflowers glow in uncompromising light. The girl is a study in human ordinariness. Yes, it stops shy of grotesquerie; that would be Ruth, or worse. But the eyes are flat, lacking in intelligence; the lips pursed, practicing resentment; the brows furrowed, the chin weak, the nose large. It is entirely Iris, or the Iris that she can guess at when she catches her own image in mirror or puddle or window glass. But it isn't the Iris whose hand almost throbbed with a terrified life of its own when Caspar grabbed

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it. It isn't the Iris who tends to Ruth when her mother has had enough. It is another Iris, a smaller one, secured on canvas thanks to ivory, olive, and smudged umber.

"Do you see what he is doing?" says Caspar.

"Oh, wipe your eyes, you make yourself worse," says Margarethe roughly, and thrusts a rag at her younger daughter.

"Do you see his efforts, do you understand?" says Caspar.

Ruth comes in, pointing at the canvas with surprise. Even she sees the likeness. Oh, hell's unholy agents!

"He's taken and flattened all that is attractive in you," says Caspar. "It's like a lie that has enough resemblance to truth to convince for a brief moment. But you must not take it for gospel. He has used the—the grammar of your features to spell out a sentence. Do you know what it says?"

Iris can't speak.

Margarethe grunts, "It says that with all we have been through, we're lucky to be eating every day, and sleeping safe under a roof. We're lucky if we're not being hunted down by some brimstone-breathing fiend from hell. That's all it says. Come, girls."

"It says," Caspar insists, "it says nothing about luck, nothing about Iris, nothing about girls. It says only one thing. It says: Aren't the flowers beautiful?"

Iris isn't sure she can hear the dreadful painting say anything of the sort.

"Don't you see?" says Caspar. "Here is a clutch of wildflowers ripped from the meadow, and here's a peasant girl paused to catch her breath. They're the same thing; they're about simple values, which are natural, not artificial or cultivated—"

"You embarrass everyone, keep still," says Margarethe. "You're making it worse. Caspar, what good have you done us?" "She likes to look," says Caspar. "Don't you know this about your daughter?"

"She can scarcely look, her eyes are streaming with silly tears." Margarethe doesn't move to hold her daughter. Iris knows that isn't her mother's way. But Margarethe's voice is cold in her daughter's defense, and for a moment that is warmth in itself.

"Stop this nonsense," says Caspar. "You're an apprentice as much as I am, Iris. Don't look at yourself on the canvas. Look at the painting of the Master. It doesn't matter whether he gets the commissions from

the titled families of Europe. He's a genius, though none know it but we in this room. Look at the painting: here is your luck. You are a part of a small masterpiece. You will live forever." Caught forever as a slab-cheeked pike! Iris runs from the room and stands on the other side of the open doorway, her sides heaving as if they will split.

Margarethe doesn't follow her. She says to Caspar, "You've broken a household law of the Master's. I'll advise him to release you from your bondage to him. You've done damage to his intentions, as if the damage you've done to my daughter's spirit isn't enough."

Caspar says, "Oh, hush. You don't have the power to recommend a thing to him, and he doesn't have the power to release me even if he wanted. As for Iris, she'll come to thank me, in time, for the eye needs education, and she has an eye. You're more the fool to be so blind to it."

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"And an 'eye,' as you call it, will find such an ugly girl a husband?" says Margarethe. "When the time comes, an 'eye' will help her be happy at her chores at hearth and table, at well and garden, in the bed and over the graves of her children? You, for all your airs, are young enough to be almost entirely stupid."

"An eye will help her love the world better, and isn't that why we live?"

"And who will love her?" says Margarethe. "I think it won't be you, young Caspar."

She has cut him. Iris, out of sight, knows it, because for once he is silenced. Margarethe mutters beneath her breath about the portrait of Iris with poking sprays of gold and amethyst flowers. "Raw cruelty, but raw honesty," she avers.

Ruth is the one who lumbers out of the room, following the trail of muffled sobs, to comfort her sister by bringing along the pretty plaything, the windmill. It doesn't comfort Iris, but she twirls the arms anyway, trapped into being pleased, for stupid Ruth's sake.

## THE OBSCURE CHILD

### Half a Door

Caspar's strategy to lift the Master's spirits has worked. The next morning Schoonmaker is in fine form. He rouses the girls and Margarethe with a comical song, and Caspar stumbles from the bed, bleary-eyed and crazy-haired, groggy and grateful at once.

"Hilarity at this hour? It's hardly Dutch," says Caspar. "This can't be Holland. Where are we, Padua, Rome,

Marseilles?"

Iris rubs her eyes and thinks once again: Yes, where are

we? Where in the world, or out of it?

"Get yourselves in breeches, wash your face, you," says the Master, "and Iris, no sitting today. Take your sister to the

meadow, now—"

"They haven't had a morsel," says Margarethe. "It's cold in the meadow at this hour. Hoarfrost in the lane, and even the doves in the eaves have chilly throats—"

"—let them take bread with them, and stay there till they're sent for. They can run races to warm up. I'm expecting important company this morning. There'll be no sitting today."

"I will not sit for you again," says Iris in a small voice.

"Tomorrow is time enough," says the Master.

"Never again," says Iris, more loudly. Caspar blushes and ducks his head into a clean shirt, and stays there, like a turtle retracted in its shell.

"What manner of revolution is this?" says the Master, hardly listening. "Margarethe, I'll need your help at my ablutions. Are you skilled at clipping beards?"

"Give me the knife and expose your throat, and we'll find out," says Margarethe.

"Everyone so cheery this morning," says the Master hastily. "Well, no matter. My own blemished self will have to serve. What *arc* you chattering about, Iris?"

"I've seen how you paint my face," says Iris. She has thought the words out, and struggles to say them in an even voice. "You view me with humor and contempt. You've made me look the fool. I already look the fool in my own eyes. I won't be put forward to look the fool to the world."

"So, you've broken my law, and peered at the paintings the moment my back is turned?" The Master's voice is distant-thunderly soft.

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"It was Caspar's suggestion," says Margarethe, shooting the young man a look. He twists in his shirt comically.

"Oh, Caspar," says the Master, contempt and dismissal intermingled. "One expects nothing better of him. Caspar, come out of that shirt, you ass. I'll have your head on a platter by noontime if you don't stop your games. Iris, I have more to do today than to kiss away tears of hurt feelings. Off with you, girls, off, off! A patron is coming by, and the floors,

*f*

Margarethe, must be swept and the paintings arranged to be seen in the best daylight."

Iris is pushed aside, her brave thoughts spoken but unheard. The Master has other matters on his mind.

"We should run away," says Iris fiercely to Ruth. They hold hands and leave the noise of aggressive housecleaning behind them. Along the lane a crippled old dame comes poking with the aid of two sticks. Her back is gnarled nearly double, and her horny hands are tied to the canes so she can't

drop them.

"Looking for that painter fellow," she screeches at Iris, "the one who likes old crippled crabapple trees like me. I'm the Queen of the Hairy-Chinned Gypsies, and I can blow smoke rings out my bottom. Where is he? Tell me, or I'll curse you into the bottom of a well, where you'll have no one but frogs to hear your confession."

Ruth, who is timid of most people, keeps behind Iris, no doubt frightened by the crone's bread-loaf chin, with its thin growth of pig-bristle white whiskers. Iris isn't scared, though; for some reason she thinks about the dame hidden in the shadows near the quay that first day. The one who had said to Margarethe, "You tell your own way!" Iris says, "I'll tell you where the Master lives, if you'll magic him into the bottom of a well!"

"Change him into a slug and hit him with my shoe," says the crone agreeably. "After he paints me and pays me first. Immortality calls, so who am I to keep myself to myself? Tell me where to find him."

"If you promise," says Iris. The crone leers. Oh, to it,

#### THE OBSCURE CHILD

then. "The house just beyond, with the big window and the half door."

"Queen of the Gypsies, Hen to the Cheated Chicks, Dame of the Damned, Sow to the Suffering Sucklings, Midwife to the Changelings, Mother Abbess to the Whores, of whom you'll never be one, you ugly thing. Better go turn yourself in at some convent already, and save yourself the trouble. Bless you, child, and stand aside. I start lunging and I can't stop."

The crone moves off, more like a splayed-leg bug skittering along the surface of a pond than a Queen. *Midwife to the Changelings*, thinks Iris. Can you tell us then about Haarlem's changeling child?

Iris wants to follow. She'd love to see a curse lowered on the Master. To watch him reduced to a slug! She doesn't dare. Instead, she takes Ruth's hands and they hurry along. Iris mutters, "We should go back to the quay and find the boat on which we came, and head back to England. We're not at home here among crazy painters. I hate this madhouse. I hate him. Why would anyone want to see such a painting? Do you think the patron is coming to see that very painting? Take your fingers out of your mouth, you look a mess."

The meadow is still full of the same late flowers, though they now are browning, bug-chewed, going to seed. Iris can hardly bring herself to sit there, because she feels she is imitating the painting: ill-favored young woman shown up by the commonest of weeds.

Once Ruth is settled, happily, with bread to gnaw, Iris climbs the boughs of the apple tree as she has before, and

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makes her way into the second tree that affords a view over the city walls. She watches the Master's household, to see what kind of guest might take it into his head to visit. There's no sign of the Queen of the Hairy-Chinned Gypsies. Probably turned away from the door with a wooden shoe planted in her smoky behind. The Master is in no mood for diversions today.

Iris doesn't have long to wait. Almost before the rest of Haarlem is awake and about its business, a gentleman comes striding from the better district, along the lane to the Master's house. He wears a tall hat with a buckle so brightly polished that it gleams even from this distance, and he sports a cape with a more than generous cut. A lace collar settles on his shoulders like the sepals of a rose, cradling his ruddy countenance. It's an intelligent face, made the more pointed by a well-trimmed goatee and flourishes of mustache. Next to him, thinks Iris with pleasure, the Master looks a bloody

potato eater.

The gentleman stands outside the door of the Master's household for a moment, contemplating the situation. Perhaps he knocks. The door swings open, and there's Caspar, more neatly attired than Iris has yet seen him. Iris hasn't settled on her feelings about Caspar after yesterday. She'd rather not despise him, but somehow he seems in collusion with the Master at her expense. How little she matters in this household!

Caspar ushers the guest inside, and the bottom half of the door swings closed, to keep stray cats and pigs and rude dwarves from wandering in.

#### THE OBSCURE CHILD

Iris says to Ruth, "Why should we be sent to pasture like a pair of disobedient goats?"

Ruth just chews her bread.

"I've given what I had to give, whether I wanted to or no; why shouldn't I learn what is made of me?" says Iris. "Who is he to send us packing?"

Ruth falls back against the grass, enjoying the sun on her face.

"Don't eat lying down, you choke, you know you do," says Iris. "Ruth, sit up." Ruth sits up, fussing.

"I'll be back for you. If the cows come just yell at them. You can yell when you want to," says Iris. "Will you be all right?"

Ruth shrugs.

Iris leaves. It's only a matter of moments, now that she's familiar with the terrain, before she is slowing to a tiptoe and approaching the house, bent over so as not to be seen. She creeps up to the door. It's a warm day for mid'autumn, or maybe the Master wants as much ambient light as he can get; the top half of the door is still open. Iris crouches against the bottom half, her arms hugging her knees, listening. The front studio is just inside, and the Master is issuing his thoughts in a public voice. Bravado, thinks Iris, but it doesn't really disguise his fear.

She's pleased at his discomfiture. Still, she'd rather he be a dead slug on the floor.

She listens and tries to sort out the occasion. Apparently, the visitor is looking at paintings; the Master and Caspar are setting one painting after another up in the best light. There are Annunciations and Lamentations and Nativities;

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there are Saints Basil, Nicholas, and John the Baptist. "And patrons, in their holiest of aspects," says the Master, "I can do women with veils, I do lace as in this study of Catherine of Cleves, and pearls of the finest luster. Notice the skin tone, cherry underpainted with a fine olive-blue, an achievement in both grinding and application that is not common knowledge among my peers—"

"Young von Rijn of Amsterdam has superior flesh tones," murmurs the guest, "and his handling of light, even for a youth, is remarkable. He paints the light of holiness itself. One can't imagine how it is done. Grace of God, one guesses."

"God works through pigment and varnish, just like the rest of us," says the Master with as generous a sigh as he can muster. "May we all aspire to the achievements that Rem-brandt von Rijn will accomplish. In the meantime, let's keep ourselves to the matters at hand. Now, Caspar, show Heer van den Meer the studies of flowers that he requested. Let my woman take that flask for you—Margarethe! Please— and here—are you comfortable, take the bench—here— Caspar, a little this way—just so. Voila."

"Mercy," says Heer van den Meer in a noncommittal tone. "Exactly," says the Master, bravely.

"One can hardly attend to the flowers," says Heer van den Meer. "Who is the unfortunate child? Is she a composite from your wicked imagination?"

"She's as clever as she is homely," says the Master. "Who can know how God chooses to work His way in this world?" "I think there was never a girl of Holland so plain." "She is mostly of England. They are homely there."

"England, say you? How does she come to sit for you?"

"My bosom bursts with charity for the unlucky," sighs the Master. "Such a big heart. It's my curse. A commission from you would help me keep her fed."

"Keep her off the street, you'd do us a service," murmurs Heer van den Meer. There's a little hollow laughter, and Iris hears her mother blandly say, "Will that be all, gentlemen?"

There is silence. "Of course, I'm also impressed by the flower pieces of Hans Bollongier," says the guest. "It was his work that gave me the notion—"

The Master says hurriedly, "Now, good sir, don't be distracted by the novelty of the girl. It's the paintings of flora you wanted to see. I've set off the commonest of flowers with the commonest of faces, so you can judge my touch, my palette, my skill at arrangement. Beauty shines out even in the coarsest of materials if they're arranged well. Not to put thoughts in your head, of course."

"Of course not," says van den Meer.

Another silence. Iris aches to peer over the ledge of the door, but she doesn't dare. Why doesn't the Master show the patron his secret gallery of misfits, dwarves, and other magic folk?

"Does the child know Dutch as well as English?" says van den Meer.

"You are here to look at paintings!" says the Master.



"She does, sir, she does," interrupts Margarethe. "I am her mother."

"And I *am* here to look at paintings," says van den Meer. "Very well. Is this painting dry enough to move in a cart?"

It's a fine painting, you know, it's very fine. I like what I see. You mustn't fight the tides of change so; life needn't be so hard. There are fortunes to be made, there is slow recovery from the endless wars with Spain to be achieved, there is a place for all of us in the good times ahead, but you must not grasp with such lack of dignity at things of the past. Yes, bring the painting to my home, tomorrow if the weather be good. Yes," says van den Meer, "bring the painting, bring the

child as well."

There is a pause. "Why the child?" says the Master. "She's a sullen enough thing. Do you mean to assess my skills by mounting subject and portrait on a stage side by side? She won't do it."

"She'll do what she's told—" begins Margarethe.

"She won't do it because I'll tell her not to do it," says the

Master firmly.

But van den Meer only laughs. "I want nothing of the child's looks, who could?" he says. "But if she's a clever soul who can speak both Dutch and English, she might be of use to my household. Don't worry. The ones who hold the purse strings will look at your painting and they won't care about the model. But as long as you're coming, bring the girl to my house, well scrubbed and courteous, and we'll see what happens. It may solve a domestic problem and keep my good dame happy. In the meantime, I have little else to say. You've carried out your assignment well, and I hope that you'll be engaged at the next stage of our venture. Here is coin to the amount we settled upon. Turn the picture to the wall now; no one should have to look on that longer than necessary."

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He laughs, but none of the others join in. There is the sound of a canvas being shifted.

"And, you, lad," says van den Meer, making ready to leave, "how do you like it here, living in the neighborhood of such a brilliant talent?"

"I am blinded, sir," says Caspar. "A change from time to time would do me good. If there is some small work to be done in your household—"

"I don't need a boy," says van den Meer, "you wouldn't do. Tomorrow, then."

Iris races back to collect Ruth, her shoes on the stones ringing out a kind of alarm. However blank and smoky her childhood, however angry she is at the Master, however uncertain her feelings about Caspar, the idea of solving anyone else's domestic problems seems suddenly a far more gloomy prospect. Where is the Queen of the Hairy-Chinned Gypsies when you need her? I'd be a changeling if I could, thinks Iris; turn me into a flounder, a sparrow, a dormouse. Better yet, turn me into an insensible chair with a broken rush seat, a nail on the hoof of a horse! Turn me into sad thick Ruth! Anything or anyone that is too dull to be able to think about herself. It's the endlessly thinking about yourself that causes such heart shame.

Van den Meer's Household

“I don't see why I should go. I won't be paraded as a Afreak.”

“There is every reason for you to go.” “Why?” “There's no reason for you to know the reasons. Don't be insolent.”

Iris has her hair brushed, her apron tied, her hands examined for dirt. She twists as much as she dares, and Margarethe slaps her when enough has become enough. Iris's cheeks sting, but she doesn't cry out. Margarethe, as if ashamed, turns away to the low workable by the kitchen window. “Now wrap this bit of pastry in a cloth and present it to whoever greets you, and thank them well, in English and in Dutch, for their kindness.”

“I don't know what kindness you are talking about.” Iris doesn't turn her head, but she looks at her mother at an angle, like a bird. “What makes you think I would recognize a kindness if I saw one?”

#### THE OBSCURE CHILD

“Ungrateful child!” cries Margarethe. She approaches her daughter with disbelief. “Do you know what it means to feed a family, and I with no living husband, father, brother, or son to turn to? Do you have any idea how near we are to throwing ourselves on the mercies of the Church or the city fathers? To have had to go from house to house begging for work—for you, stupid witless thing, it is a game. For me, this is my life, a horrid thing. God plagues the mothers of the world with worry, from His own sweet Mary to the meanest fishwife of the harborside!”

“I don't care,” says Iris.

Margarethe draws in her breath and narrows her eyes. “You are too young to know how women must collaborate or perish,” she hisses. “Why should I keep you from that knowledge, what good does it do for you or for me? If you aren't willing to behave and earn a coin when you can, whatever this van den Meer wants you for, I won't answer to the amount of food that makes its way to Ruth's bowl every night.”

Iris bites her lower lip and clenches her small hands together.

“You go and be clever, for that's how you are made. Be a help to your mother and your sister, and stand back, child, from considering your own foolish thoughts. There's no time in this world to indulge in those. Do you hear me? I say, do you hear me?”

“My ears hear you,” says Iris.

“Get away with you, then, and do as you are bid.”

Iris waits on the stoop. Ruth crawls up and puts her head

#### THE OBSCURE CHILD

in Iris's lap. Iris strokes Ruth's hair, which is badly in need of brushing. Out of habit, Iris searches for lice, and thinks about striking Ruth in the face, to punish her for being so slow of mind and useless.

Though she hates Ruth—she bates her—Iris will not see her big sister go hungry.

Her mother, now—another story. How agreeable to see Margarethe pilloried in the stocks and whipped by virtuous citizens. Of whom Iris would be the first to volunteer.

Around the corner of the house come the Master and Caspar, managing the offending canvas between them. They have hired a cart from a neighbor. They fumble like bumpkins, misjudging the height of the step and the depth of the cart. Iris imagines finding a knife from the kitchen and rushing up to slash the canvas to ribbons. But she doesn't destroy the Master's work, since so much hangs in the balance. Mar-garethe's threat is an effective one.

Eventually, the donkey braying in impatience, the cargo is safely covered with a cloth. The Master, Caspar, and Iris wave good-bye to Ruth, who puts her finger in her nose.

All the way through the city streets Iris keeps close to Caspar. She's forgiven him his part in tempting her to view the painting; how could her own sorry looks possibly be Caspar's fault? Besides, with so much else to fear, she can't afford to keep her distance from his good humor. See how he prances! Head high, hair tossed in the sea breeze like a horse's mane, eyes darting left, right, settling on Iris to make sure she is keeping up, turning away to note a weathervane, a whitewashed chimney, a friendly lad grinning from a window.

The Master keeps his head down and his collar up. Iris suspects this isn't so much to guard against the wind, as the weather still hasn't turned bitter, but to protect against the gazes of Haarlem neighbors. Or maybe he's guarding against the fact that there are few glances turned his way, few who really care whether he is coming or going.

Into the Grotemarkt. How orderly is this magical world through which ugly girls may trudge! Iris hears a ring, almost a musical tapping, like a clock striking. It's a man sitting on the cobbles, his legs stretched out on either side of him, hitting stones in place with a hammer. And is that an echo, off the magnificent facade of the Stadhuis? No, it's another man at the same task on the far side of the market square. Every little part of this world must be pounded into place. The whole world a huge ticking clock that tells God's story of charms and punishments.

They reach their destination. It's a house that fronts on the Grotemarkt, the very house against which Ruth leaned that first day—the house of the strange child. The so-called changeling child.

Van den Meer must be a man of means. The broad-shouldered home has a walled garden beside it. In plum-red brick interrupted by gray lateral stones, the house looms up two full stories, with a step gable pinching two abbreviated attics. At this late afternoon hour the sun doesn't strike the front of the house, and the windows facing the marketplace are like panels of black water. The building looks august and—what is it—cautious? Like a house of secrets, like a cage of smoke.

No, thinks Iris, it is something about those dark windows—there in the topmost one, is that a face disappearing? As if unwilling to be seen by the approaching company? Is it the obscure child? Why does everything hide its true face here?

The Master hasn't noticed this. He doesn't even pause to look for the path to the kitchen yard. He hands the reins of the donkey to Caspar and walks up to the door, which is almost level with the cobbles. He knocks briskly.

"Yes, yes, but come in," says a man's voice, sounding busy, irritated. "I'll send the stable boy around to

take the donkey, and he can get some fellows to carry the study of flowers."

"Caspar will help to make sure the painting isn't knocked in transport," replies the Master.

Oh, be knocked in transport, thinks Iris. "And let the girl come in. That's it, don't waste my time. Step right in. What is your name?"

Except for the Master, Iris isn't used to being addressed directly by gentlemen. She ducks her eyes to the steps and almost walks into the doorpost. When she tells her name, she mumbles, and the Master has to repeat it.

"Well, I am Heer van den Meer. I have no time to deal with you yet. Can you manage to sit quietly while a company of gentlemen talk? Or do you need to run and play outside?"

She can't think which would be more horrible, so she doesn't answer.

"Well, come and sit, then," says van den Meer. "Through to the salon."

## THE OBSCURE CHILD

They enter the grandest room that Iris has ever seen. Well-carved and oiled chairs and cupboards stand against walls hung with patterned fabric. Upon a shelf sits a succession of silver bowls; another shelf boasts an abundance of mugs. In shadow or light, everything is patterned: vases, picture frames, candlesticks, porcelain. In the center of the room stands a table draped with a rich carpet of a sort that Iris has never seen before. In lozenges, stripes, curlicues, cartouches. Sage-green, cream, three shades of red, and that blue!

Iris's fingers are clean. She'd like to drive them through the pile and learn if the colors feel different from each other.

Van den Meer points to a small chair in a corner, and there Iris sits. She's forgotten to hand him the pastry Mar-garethe sent as a gift.

Caspar and some servants bring in the painting and prop it up on a sideboard. Iris tries to blur her eyes so that she can enjoy the splendor of the room without having to look at her portrait. There are other paintings to see. One particularly, over a veneered hutch of some sort, shows a capable young woman in yellow and black silks. The way the skirts billow reminds Iris of a bumblebee. A blond woman in silks and shiny ornaments *belongs* in this kind of a house, not an ugly girl with wildflowers.

Van den Meer leaves the Master and Caspar alone for a few minutes. Iris can hear him barking instructions to the kitchen staff for refreshments to be served in an hour: a platter of lobsters and a bowl of lemons—some greens, soaked to remove sand—a pitcher of beer and a pitcher of water and a pile of freshly ironed linens so the guests might clean their

soiled hands. Everything is to be well presented, and can there be a kitchen child to wave a fan above the fish, keep the flies and the cat away?

The kitchen child is gone, he is told, along with that worthless cook who has complained of the plague and left for Rotterdam.

"I have a girl in the salon, she'll do," says van den Meer, and Iris knows he means her.

The guests arrive. A dozen bearded men, stout and prosperous, in ruffles, laces, and the freshest of stockings. Many of them sweep hats with billowing feathers into the air as they greet one another. Van den Meer takes each gentleman up to the Master, making introductions in tones both grave and merry. Each gentleman is promenaded before the painting of Ugly Girl with Wildflowers. Each gentleman comments. Before long there is too much noise for Iris to hear the remarks on the comically plain maiden. She's glad about this.

Glad too that neither the Master nor van den Meer draws attention to her, sitting in the corner.

Caspar pulls up a stool and perches near her. "Are you petrified?" he says. She won't answer.

"They are entrepreneurs," he says. "They know nothing about art except how to buy it. They are like bears wandering in from the eastern forests. Think of them as growling, uneducated beasts that some magician has dressed in laces and sashes."

She has to stifle a giggle, and tears stand in her eyes then, only because Caspar cares enough to talk to her.

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Caspar glances at her, raises his eyebrows, and plows on. "In fact, the guests actually *are* bears," says Caspar. "Van den Meer is their prince regent. Look at his hands. They aren't hands, really, they're just paws that someone has clipped the fur from. See how clumsy he is?"

She stares. Surely he's only jesting? But oh, van den Meer is clumsy, patting the newest guest on the back!

"The bears are too stout from a summer of foraging for berries in the woods, and trout in the streams. They can't even bend at the waist! Look how shallowly they bow to one another."

Iris has to stuff her knuckle in her mouth to keep from gasping aloud.

"I met the Queen of the Hairy-Chinned Gypsies," she begins. But now van den Meer raises his voice and calls the room to attention. Caspar is no more a full-fledged member of this association than Iris is. He settles his hands in his lap and listens.

Iris listens too. This isn't the kitchen Dutch that she has been taught by Margarethe. It's sprinkled with words from other lands, France, Friesland, perhaps, and certainly a remark or two in English. A few words from bear language? The gentlemen seem to have no problem attending and understanding.

Van den Meer doesn't talk right away about the Master or his painting of Ugly Girl with Wildflowers. He talks instead about flowers in general and the native appetite for beautiful blossoms. Iris has heard of tulips before, but she doesn't know if she's ever seen any, so she imagines a spray

of lacy wildflowers of the sort the Master has spent the last few weeks painting. But van den Meer talks as if his gentlemen friends have a firm acquaintance with the tulip—brought in from Vienna, was it, or faraway Constantinople?—and, to be sure, they nod at his words. This is a commodity about which all bears can agree to admire.

Yet when van den Meer strikes a little brass bell that stands on a table, Iris wonders if some of the men

have been play-acting their knowledge of tulips, for their jaws drop open when a girl comes into the room balancing a small bucket of blooming flowers on a silver tray.

Iris's jaw drops too. She can't help it. The flowers are bright and intensely colored, a maroon-red shade striped with white. Richer than cloth, as rich as light. There are *six* blossoms of varying heights, on slender green stalks with ample, recumbent leaves. Only one blossom stands to each plant.

But the girl who carries them is equally striking. So blonde as to be nearly white, hair gleaming like new butter or goat's cheese. It is the child who talked to Ruth through the window. The one who asked if Ruth was a changeling, the one that Caspar said was considered a changeling herself. She looks like a human child. Only perfect. A perfect specimen. What had she said to Ruth? "Thing, get *away from here*." "Ah, my Clara," says van den Meer, with the unbearable smile of a father's pride upon his face. "Look how she shows off the latest strain of blossom . . ."

Clara finds the tray heavy, and her father helps her to settle it upon the table in the center of the room. The

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investors—for such they are, Iris is learning—lean forward and speak in hushed tones about the blooms. There's no exotic scent, apparently, to attract admirers. It's the colors of the flowers, and how statuesque they are. Each man present wants to own a share of the next shipment from some port Iris hasn't heard mentioned before.

"Your appetites," says van den Meer proudly, "are just like the appetites of your fellow citizens, your friends and neighbors, from the jolliest merchants to the most dour men of faith. We're guaranteed a healthy return on our investment if we pool our resources and underwrite the cost of a shipment of tulip bulbs from the East. And as for our painter friend, Master Schoonmaker here, now that we have seen what he can do with ordinary materials"—van den Meer indicates the Master's painting in the edge of the room, eclipsed just now by the tulips, whose blossoms are standing goblets of bloody and pearly light—"our friend can take a subject more worthy of his talents and create for us a painting that we can mount at some formal occasion. We can stir up interest in this new tulip variety to our financial reward. We will have an advantage over other tulip merchants, by having a superior product, and by encouraging talk about it."

Clara's eyes twitch, just once, toward Iris. Clara doesn't come over, though, which allows Iris to observe her from a distance. Clara isn't quite the child she appeared through the window. She seems youthful because of the juvenile gown, the timid manner. But she must be close to Iris's age, nearer a young woman than a babbling child. Iris notices Clara's

clean hands, her soft pink fingers, her neat nails. Like a very young girl, Clara puts a thumb in her mouth. Van den Meer gently reaches out and pulls the thumb away. He never pauses in his remarks.

Is this all that business is? A few remarks about cost, some calculations, a worry about rival shipments, a quick agreement in principle? Before another quarter hour has passed, van den Meer is ushering his investor friends out of the salon and toward a dining chamber somewhere below. When the room is nearly empty, he turns to the Master and says, "So, are you agreeable?"

The Master is turning the color of the tulips. He doesn't speak.

"Of course," says van den Meer, "there isn't any room for you to live here. Nor would my wife allow it.

And I can't send my daughter out to your studio. She doesn't leave the house at all. But you can ship your materials into this salon, and do with the beauty of Clara and the tulips what you've managed with lesser materials. You've convinced us of your invaluable talent. And you'll be well paid."

Deliberately the Master says, "I had thought, that is, I had *hoped* to be commissioned for a portrait of the company of civic guards to which you belong."

"One thing leads to another; nothing happens all at once," says van den Meer. "I can't be absent from my guests for long. Are we agreed, or shall I send out for Bolognier? He's within a brisk walk of this room."

"We haven't even talked about the size of a payment," says the Master.

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"It's only money," says van den Meer, "and aren't you an artist in need of money? If not, there are others in the Guild of Saint Luke who are eager for the work. Will you take on the assignment or no?"

The Master, struggling for time to think, says, "But why did you ask me to bring Iris here? What has she meant in this negotiation? I'd thought that your friends might judge my skill by comparing the model and what I've done with her. I'd hoped that if they approved of my work—"

"Oh, your girl," says van den Meer, "well, the girl. It's not a serious matter. But my wife is concerned for our daughter's education. My little Clara is so cloistered, she needs a companion, and it might occupy her mind and her time to learn English. She's already more than capable at French, and she has a small grasp of Latin as well. We only wish for her the best. Look—you want to see beauty," says van den Meer, a proud father, "look at her. Have you laid eyes upon a more pleasing figure? She'll grow to be a fine woman." His appreciation of his daughter makes Iris's eyes sting.

"Iris has a mother and a sister," says the Master. "They eat like horses."

"Bring them too," says van den Meer casually. "You forget that I can pay for what I want. We must keep the wife happy, isn't that so? Isn't that always the way?"

The Master strides out of the room without answering. Caspar shrugs in Iris's direction and then follows his mentor. The door to the street slams shut behind them. The slamming is the Master's loud opinion about van den Meer's suggestion.

Iris isn't sure what's expected of her. She's alone in the room with Clara and her father. Clara looks down at the tiled floor. Her face is shuttered and boxed; she pinches her lower lip with hidden teeth. She doesn't bother to look at Iris again. "Papa," she says, "may I go now?"

"I've bought you a new friend," says van den Meer. "But first she's needed in the dining hall to help the guests. Come, you, what's your name?" Iris holds out the pastry to him and remembers that she should curtsy, but she doesn't trust her knees.

## THE IMP-RIDDLED HOUSE

The

Small Room of Outside

Much to fear, in this rigid house, but much to admire too. And Iris loves to look. What's best about van den Meer's house is its skins and glazes, and how each rare thing accepts daylight or candlelight or shrugs itself against it. Iris wonders: Has looking at the Master's paintings developed in her this taste for surfaces and textures?

Look at the bowl on the polished table. A bowl from the Orient, van den Meer has told her. But it's not just one thing, a bowl. Look at all the effects that make it up: Deepest in, a lace of purple-gray hairline fractures. Covered by an eggshell wash, through which blue painted lines form blowsy chrysanthemum blossoms. The flowers are suspended in some thin distance of—for lack of a better word—shine. Inside the curve of the bowl, a reflection: a distorted Iris, too blurred to be perceived as ugly.

If she peers harder, will she catch something magical at her shoulder? Something intense and potent coming from behind, stealing up through the highly polished gloom of wealthy rooms?

It was Margarethe who had said it: "The devil himself may send out a whiskery hound to sniff us out, but we've no choice! Come, girls, come." Margarethe had announced their torturer—as they fled England—she had called it to them, she had worried it into being—

But no. Look. Look.

She pays attention. The varieties of Turkey carpet, on tables and walls. The crisp edges and rectangles of white linen. The ringed muscles of candlesticks, their glossy, bulbous reflections. The fur, the inlaid wood, the mementos from faraway places: Venice, Constantinople, Arabia, Cathay.

Schoonmaker's rooms had been sloppy and energetic. These van den Meer rooms are composed. The orderliness of them—their spanking cleanliness, for one thing—is a matter not just of pride but of mental clarity and rightness. A chair out of place?—no one in the house can think straight. Flowers left to stand in a vase until there's a reek of ditch water?—you'd think the bellicose Spaniards were banging at the city gates again.

Some hours after the party Caspar had arrived at the van den Meer's for Iris; he ushered her back to the studio to collect her things. There she found Margarethe arguing with the Master, and Ruth weeping. Schoonmaker didn't want them to

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go, but he couldn't or wouldn't pay for them to stay. "You have your boy, use him as you were wont to do," said Margarethe tauntingly, as if trading on a secret meaning that Iris couldn't be privy to. "And why not? You asked us for three things, and those we gave you: domestic help, a delivery of meadow flowers every day, and a face to paint. We're grateful to you for your hospitality, but we aren't beholden to you."

"When that peculiar van den Meer girl has tired of her new playmate, or learned whatever English she can pick up, you and your daughters will be out on the street," says the Master darkly.

"Watch," said Margarethe. She wore that expression common to cats making the acquaintance of baby birds. "Watch and see if that happens, Luykas Schoonmaker."

Iris and Ruth both turned to see if the Master would answer to this informality of a Christian name. How had their mother the right? Even Caspar seemed surprised.

But Luykas Schoonmaker pointed at the Fisher girls and said, "Ruth won't know enough to appreciate



how she is being treated, but Iris will. She'll be slighted there. She won't make good on the talent for drawing that she possesses."

"And how do you know she possesses any such talent, and what good is it to her if she does?" cawed Margarethe. "She isn't a lady of leisure, to paint scenes of sunny gardens as the mood strikes her! Have you ever seen her as much as pick up a charcoal?"

"She's looked at drawings, even at some cost to her," said the Master. "Her hand clenches an imaginary stub of charcoal while I work my own charcoal across a page. There's nothing in her at all but possibility; but that is rare enough."

"You're as trapped in your conceits as you are in your overlabored drawings," said Margarethe. "You make the world to seem a story, as if anything could happen. Like most men, you are blind to our fate."

"Don't go, Margarethe," said the Master.

"Pay us a salary to stay and we'll stay," said Margarethe, her chin high.

The Master looked at her as if she were offering to sleep with him for a fee. It was a look of disgust, but love and need crowded in too. Margarethe met his eyes just as intently, and continued, "Girls, bring your aprons from the hook, and your shoes from the doorsill. If I understand correctly, Luykas, what with your new commission, you'll be a regular visitor to the van den Meer household. We'll enjoy your friendship there, should we want it."

So, with Caspar to chaperone them, they had crossed the streets of Haarlem at dusk. Their settling in at the van den Meer household was less noisy but no less swift. And Iris had slept that night at the hearthstones, uneasily, feeling the building lifting above her in capable bones of brick. She remembered the face at an upstairs window, disappearing. This is a house of magic, she thought as she drifted to sleep, and she thinks the same on waking up there for the first time.

The family is small. Cornelius van den Meer is a warm but distant fatherhead, and he leaves to his wife, Henrika, the business of managing the household. From a public house beyond the Stathuis, van den Meer and his partners

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conduct a business of investments and merchant mariny. When he returns, reeking of pipe smoke, blusteringly good-natured because of ale and the flattering company of his peers, he sleeps. Iris peeks at him, sitting in the sunny garden, his head back against the wall and his mouth open. He's older than his wife. His beard is as much silver as brown, and his temples and thinning pate have gone entirely gray. His wife won't let him sit on the bench in the front of the house. In full view of the pious on their way to services, or the hungry buying their evening meal? She thinks it looks common, and says so.

Henrika believes in good manners. Her cheekbones are high and knobby, her wrists thin, her scent flowery and bewitching. But mostly it's her coloring that Iris admires, coppery pink blushes and white flushes playing under flawless skin. When Henrika comes to the door of a room, it's on silent feet, as if to make a floorboard creak would be to command more attention than she deserves.

Yet this is just a little drama, a masquerade, for though Henrika's step is silent, it is nonetheless heavy. Margarethe, in the privacy of the hearth, is quick to point out to Iris that Henrika's portrait, not her

husband's, takes pride of place in the reception room. The lady in yellow and black silk, a bumblebee humming to herself. The queen of the family hive. And doesn't she know it! Henrika is happy to tell the provenance of each piece of furniture, each item of decoration. The house, whole and entire, was part of Henrika's dowry. "If the marriage should dissolve, she has the right to appeal to the law to reclaim all her assets," says Margarethe

incredulously. "The wealth of this marriage rests on what she inherited from her father. Her husband brought to the holy union only business sense and good humor."

Iris, yawning, says, "What you learn in three or four days! How can you know about this? She's far too private to be confiding in you."

"Schoonmaker has lived in Haarlem all his life; he knows everything, though he pretends to be bored about it," says Margarethe. "He tells me that Henrika holds the purse strings." She twists her lower lip, an expression of reluctant approval at Henrika's power. "Do you see how Cornelius and Henrika disagree about their daughter, Clara? The henpecked man must leap to respond to every complaint that Henrika makes."

"Oh, Clara," says Iris. "Clara," she says again, biting her lip, for it's Iris who has the main worry now. It's Iris's job to befriend the distant, suspicious child, to gain her trust, to teach her English, to vary her days. And she hasn't made such a good start of it.

If Clara is indeed a changeling, there's no word spoken about it by her parents. She's considered a stropy child—sullen, secretive, and ordinary. Her carrying the tulips into the parlor to show the visiting bear-investors must have been taxing on her, for she doesn't show up to meet the new household members. In fact, Iris sees very few signs of Clara's existence in the house at first, though she hears some: a soft footfall, the sound of a dropped or a thrown plate crashing on the floor, a cry of alarm such as a small child might utter when in the throes of a bad dream. Still the obscure child even when Iris is living under the same roof.

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After several days of Clara simply refusing to appear at all, Henrika brings Iris to the door of Clara's room and calls in to her daughter, "Please, my dear, I want you to meet your new friend."

"No." The sound comes out like a little smothered yelp, as if even in the middle of the day Clara is huddled beneath bedclothes. She won't come out of her room.

The next day, Iris says loudly, "I am very lonely." She draws a deep breath in the gloom of the upstairs hall, and she leans her breast against Clara's door. She tries to make her voice wedge itself through a crack between the planks. "You were kind to my sister once. You let her take your little toy. So I want to talk to you."

"Go away."

Henrika's smile at Iris is brief but forgiving. "She's an unusual child, and I'm patient with her strange ways," she confides. "You have to be patient too."

"But how can I teach her English if I can't even see her?"

"She comes around. Go and help your mother, then. If I can coax her out with the promise of something

special, I'll come and find you."

"What does she want more than anything?"

Henrika purses her lips. "She wants to be alone and to play by herself."

Well, thinks Iris, I'm not going to be the most welcome thing ever to enter her life, then. But there's not much that Iris can do about it, so she wanders downstairs. Margarethe says, "If you can't pry Clara out of her room, then take Ruth out for some exercise. Your sister the ox is banging into things again, which means she's not stretching her limbs as she ought."

They wander up and down the streets. Haarlem is becoming an easy place in which to feel at home. In the street next to Saint Bavo's, women hustle baskets of cloth on their backs. Men trundle wheelbarrows with kegs of ale. The window shutters, which drop down during the day, serve as ledges for the display of wares. Iris and Ruth inspect the goods, a pastime that costs nothing and annoys the shopkeepers. But if the Dutch find Ruth as grotesque as the English did, they keep it to themselves. Only a few children run after her and taunt her.

There is always Saint Bavo's to slip into if the hubbub of the streets gets too frantic for Ruth. Iris doesn't have strong feelings about churches one way or the other, but she remembers what the Master has told her about Saint Bavo's. Built as a Catholic cathedral, it's now in the hands of the Protestants. In foul weather it serves as a kind of indoor public park, where men and women and dogs go to shake off the wet. People stroll for exercise, conversation, and to view the decorations set against whitewashed walls. Iris listens to everything—she imagines bringing Clara here one day and saying all this in English to her. Look! The colored-glass window on the church's west wall, and how one panel of it was removed because it celebrated too gloriously some Catholic bishop of long ago. The slabs in the floor to remember the dead. The lozenges, mounted on pillars, to remember the dead. The dead, the dead, always with us!

There's no memorial to her father, of course, not here or anywhere; there weren't even prayers mumbled in his memory—

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To notice something else quickly—she can't help but notice, having listened to the Master all these weeks—there's very little in the way of religious painting. Not a crucifixion in sight. Not a Virgin as far as you can see. Not even in the most shadowy corners. No wonder the Master feels so useless. For a moment Iris imagines how he must suffer, for she's feeling useless too, wandering about a church instead of performing the task for which she and her mother and sister are being given food and lodging.

Ruth knows nothing of the gospel story, so far as Iris can tell. Her attention, such as it is, is caught by things seen, rather than by things heard. "Look!" says Iris suddenly. "The Queen of the Hairy-Chinned Gypsies!" It's that palsied old woman with the sticks, the spider woman poking along in the shadow of the apse. But when they draw closer, she's gone. Slipped out a side door? Or scurried in spider form up a pillar of Saint Bavo's, where she crouches, drinking in the news of people's murmured secrets?

Iris isn't accustomed to befriending children her own age. Having Ruth in the family has always meant that other children kept their distance. But maybe Iris can entice Clara with the appeal of the supernatural—especially if Clara is a supernatural child, a replacement creature left behind by thwarties when they stole the real Clara-baby away.

The next day, Iris pitches her voice to carry up the stairs, and she calls out, "Ruth, do you remember

yesterday when we saw the Queen of the Hairy-Chinned Gypsies? And how she changed herself into a spider and fled from us?"

It takes only a minute to work. Clara appears at the head of the stairs.

Iris glances into the upper hall, which in its walnut paneling seems, even at noon, nearly dusky. She's amazed and a little frightened. Clara is almost like a ghost, a lambent thing with one hand out against the wall, a shimmeringness in the gloom, like a candle in a midnight forest. She is stunning to look at, with her immaculate skin and her dried-wheat hair. She comes forward, her eyes are hooded and sulky, and her lower lip protrudes in a way that can only mean trouble.

"Come down, some milk and bread, and a little honeyed fruit. It's time to meet this Iris," says Henrika calmly through the open door of her private office. At her table, in grey mid-morning light, she hunches working over a ledger book, an inky quill in one hand, rapid counting on the fingertips of the other.

"Ruth, the old Queen had legs like a spider's, but they were as huge as the hoop of a wagon wheel, weren't they?" says Iris.

Clara ventures down the stairs, close to the wall, but even behaving skittishly, she moves with poise.

"Have your breakfast, we're going out when you're dressed," Iris says to Clara with a nonchalant bossiness she doesn't quite feel. Clara slips into a chair and grabs some bread. Her father smiles and nods at her.

"Oh, Iris, but you won't go out," calls Henrika from her worktable. Her fingers are stained with ink, and she curses in a manner acceptable for well-bred goodwives.

## THE IMP-RIDDLED HOUSE

"I want to take her to Saint Bavo's," says Iris. "We might be able to find the Queen of the Hairy-Chinned Gypsies, or the dwarf with the arms of an ape."

"Clara doesn't go out," says Henrika. "Well, in the walled garden, for some air, of course." Now she appears at the doorway, fixing Iris with a stern look. "She hasn't been away from home for three years. Not since a housemaid once shared some gossip: A changeling child had been born to a glass-blower's daughter. Clara so pestered me to go look at it! I was worn down at last and, covering her with hood and cloak, I agreed to take her there and back again."

"A changeling?" says Iris. How can Henrika say such a thing so openly?

"By the time we got there, the thing had died, and crows had borne its body away."

"Oh," says Iris. Maybe Henrika doesn't know the gossip about her daughter Clara. "What did the crows do with the changeling's body?"

"Dropped it in the Haarlemsmeer, where all children without souls swim until the Judgment Day."

"But I hear they would like to drain the Haarlemsmeer," says Margarethe, bringing cheese from the kitchen and placing it where Clara can reach it. "What will happen to all the drowned soulless babies then?"

"I suspect they will be channeled out to sea," says Henrika calmly. "I don't really know. I have my mind on my figures."

"We could go look for a changeling, I suppose," says Iris craftily, peering at Clara to see if any interest is piqued. Clara looks curious but wary.

But Henrika holds out her quill like a finger, wagging it at Iris. "This is entirely forbidden. You may go out into the garden, or into any room of the house if you knock at the door first. But you may not bring Clara out the front door or out the side gate. Nor may you climb like an urchin over any wall or drop out of any window. You may not slither up the chim-ney nor burrow through the cellars. Do you understand me?" "We are prisoners?" says Iris.

"Clara isn't fit for the world. She trembles so and breaks into chills. Visit the garden and the sheds beyond. Clara knows where she's permitted to go."

Up until now van den Meer has been bathing his face in the steam from his boerenkoffie, which combines the smells of the warmed beer, sugar, and nutmeg with the mattressy odor of his beard. But he tilts his chin parallel to the table and says, as if the next installment in an ongoing argument, "Do you remember hearing that in Delft the clergy banned gingerbread men at the feast of Sinter Klaas? And the children rebelled. They ran shrieking through the streets and wouldn't do their tasks. *Children will rebel eventually, my dear*" Henrika settles her hands at her side and lowers her eyes. In an apologetic tone, addressing the tabletop, she replies, "I am speaking to Iris. I am not speaking to you."

Van den Meer nods affably and says no more. But Iris sees the truth in Margarethe's observation: Although Henrika wears a guise of pretty deference, she acquiesces to no one, least of all her husband.

When Clara, who has appeared to pay little attention to this, finishes nibbling, Iris says, "I'll get my sister and we'll

## THE IMP-RIDDLED HOUSE

go outside into the garden. We'll wait for you there. Come out when you have dressed."

Iris finds Ruth. Iris hates using her sister like this, but huge Ruth may be a more likely attraction than Iris. After all, it was Margarethe's tussle with Ruth that caused Clara to lean out the window and scrutinize the ox girl. Perhaps, being disappointed in never seeing a changeling baby, Clara had seen the howling older Fisher girl as the next best thing: a grotesque.

The back of the house opens out onto a sizable lot, bricked and gated and those iron gates locked. To one side, a kitchen yard for washing and food preparation, for the growth of herbs and vegetables. To the other side, opening off the salon, a small garden, Italianate in design, with pebbled paths and orderly plantings, and pilasters at regular intervals surmounted by granite balls. Behind both kitchen yard and formal garden stands a huge shed, and beyond that is a farmyard, where the chickens and a cow are kept, and maybe other animals as well. The shed door, opening off the kitchen yard, has been locked so far.

Iris sinks onto the grass in the garden. Ivy crawls up two walls, making a green rustle when the wind pushes through. Ruth collapses next to her and moans in gentle hunger, for she adores gingerbread and the mention of it has likely made her mouth water. "No gingerbread," says Iris firmly.

When Clara emerges, she looks sly, but less truculent. Probably she's remembered that, after all, this is

her home. It's *her* world. She pads across the grass to where the Fisher sisters are waiting. A cat, nearly lemon-colored, follows.

Iris decides that the problem of teaching English to Clara can wait. She lies with her head in the grass and doesn't look at Clara, but says, "Why did you want to see the changeling so much?"

"Tell me about the Queen of the Gypsies," says Clara. "Is she the Queen of Changelings too?"

"What is your interest in changelings?"

"Can't you tell? I am a changeling," says Clara.

"I've heard that said. But of course you're not," says Iris. "Changelings can't speak and run and think as people can."

"Maybe changelings in England can't," says Clara calmly. "Changelings here can."

Iris thinks of the face at the upmost window that first day—was it Clara in shadows, or Henrika in veils, or van den Meer himself, bearded and browed—or someone else?

Or something else?

"The devil himself will send out a whiskery hound to snuff us out!"—

Iris rushes on, to keep away from that notion. An imp here, knowing all things, lodged since before their arrival, awaiting them? "Did you ever see a changeling? I mean, other than yourself?" she says.

Clara shrugs. Her eyes slide over to Ruth and then slide away.

"Ruth is a big girl, a bit stupid, that's all," says Iris. "She's not a changeling."

"How do you know for sure?" says Clara. "Isn't she older than you?"

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"Yes."

"Well, she would have been changed before you were born."

"Nonsense."

"Ask your mother."

"I won't. It's foolishness."

"Ask your father."

The wind blows the ivy for moments while Iris watches it. Eyes narrowed, Clara then says, "What?"

Iris doesn't answer.

Clara crawls a little closer. She studies Iris, as a small child will study a bug before smashing it with a stone. "Where is your father? Is he a changeling? Did he fly away?" There's no caress of tenderness in her words, but some unrefined brutality. But when Iris won't speak, Clara sighs, moves on, bored. "Well, then, tell me something else. Tell me about yourself. You aren't a changeling, just a child. I hardly ever meet children. Why are you called Iris?"

"It means a kind of flower," snaps Iris, angry at herself for the tears.

"Oh," says Clara in a superior voice. "Flowers. I know flowers. All we ever hear about is *tulip flowers*. We have a lot of plants growing under a glass roof behind the sheds, and somewhere to the south of town, a well-guarded plantation in the polderlands. Shall we look in the sheds?"

"Later," says Iris. "I've told you about my name. Now you tell me why you think you're a changeling."

"Because this is all the world I have. The greater world is poison to a changeling; I would die. So I am kept, for my own

health and good, merely here: in the pretty prison house, with this small room of outside adjacent to it." Suddenly Clara hoists her skirts to her knees and races back and forth across the sheltered space. She touches each of the three walls of the garden that cage them. "What is mine? These are mine: the song of birds, though you can't always see them. Pouncer the cat, when he wants to stay with me. Sometimes he doesn't. Look, the flat sky that sits on the garden walls like a leaden roof. Some snails. The same old bushes. Soon there will be enough dead leaves to have a fire, and then smoke will be a rope up into the sky. That's mine. It's all I have."

"There's a linden tree," says Iris.

"Where?"

"You can just catch sight of the crown of it. It must be growing on the other side of your garden wall."

"A bird in it. A green finch. That's mine. And that's all." Clara smacks her lips angrily. "At least it's not a crow."

"A green finch in a linden tree," says Iris. "Is it a magic finch?"

Clara looks suspiciously at Iris, as if afraid of being thought gullible. Clara's next question is partly taunting and partly hopeful. "Did you really meet a Queen of the Gypsies?"

Iris feels a bit guilty. Any old hobbled dame isn't an ancient angel; old women are just old women. Iris shrugs, noncommittal.

Clara responds with sass, as if to prove she doesn't care. "Let's go look at the tulips. We own many of them, to grow, to show, to sell. Since I'm not allowed to go outside

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of these walls, I can go to the shed and look, and the gardeners don't mind."

"My mother may mind."

Clara gives a shrug. "But my mother doesn't care, and it's her house, not your mother's. It doesn't matter if your mother minds. Come, Iris. Come, you too, Ruth." Ruth prefers to stay where she is.

The tulip shed is beyond the herb garden, reached through the kitchen door. Sided to shoulder height with rough-milled boards, it's open to the elements for a foot or two above. The boards of the roof aren't all fixed with nails. Some boards can be shifted so that in warm weather sun can come in, while the shed's walls protect the plants from the worst of the wind.

The plants are arranged in terra-cotta trays with porous bottoms. The trays stand on rough tables, and the soil of the nursery floor is dank. The plants appear in ranks, the bulbs apparently having been sunk at intervals of two or three weeks apart. Here are the newest trays of plantings, where nothing shows yet through the reddish-brown soil. Beyond, trays in which plants send up their shoots, trays where the plants grow taller, and then develop a head and some leaves. Finally, near where Iris and Clara stand, the flowers begin to show some color and to open up their petals.

Iris doesn't know how much Clara comprehends the world, but she does take part in her family's concern for the flowers. There are many different varieties of tulip, she tells Iris in a teacherly voice, and new fashions are being imported from the East on a monthly basis. The family's plantation

beyond town is immense, but even within this small nursery there are eight varieties in full or near flower, not counting a few ranks that have passed their prime. Perhaps a hundred and twenty blossoms now? Some are all red and pink and orange, a study in burning colors; many are striped with red and white. Iris doesn't like the tulip's inelegant stem, which seems thick and lacking in grace, but the flowers have heavy heads, something like roses, and maybe those stems need to be strong as cane stalks.

A gardener comes through a door at the back and makes a remark that Iris can't hear, but she understands the tone. Gardeners don't want girls to be playing in the shed. Iris begins to back away, saying, "Come, come, Clara, let's go back to our small garden, where we can run without risk of damaging these things."

Clara doesn't speak at first. Iris doesn't know what is on her mind. Then Clara says, "Aren't these the finest of treasures? Each one springs up, and becomes more red than rubies, more fine than diamonds and more valuable, so we are told; and before you can run back here again to look, the petals have begun to drop and the leaves to yellow. Look, they sag, they fall. Are they the more wonderful because they live such a short time?"

"Like changeling babies?" says Iris, regretting the words almost the moment they're out of her mouth. More forcefully she says, "Let's talk about it away from here."

"Semper Augustus, Viceroy, the yellow-red of Leiden, I know these better than I know my Scripture verses," says Clara in a singsong manner. "The white crowns, the Admiral

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de Maans, the General Bols. The Pope's Head! They bloom and wither in a month's time. Here Papa tries to force the bulbs, for purposes of exciting investors, but out in the polderfields, they grow only once a year, and bloom in the early spring, never to return."

Clara sighs. She stands, a young thing with a heavy adult thought in her mind, as Iris backs away. It's almost a dark thought, though Iris can't quite name it. A sudden slide of light comes through a shifting of clouds, slanting between two roof boards that have been pulled aside. Clara's hair blazes, white fire;



suddenly Iris can't see her, just a glare of light, a child in an inside garden. For an instant Iris believes Clara really is a changeling.

### Small Oils

Canvases, blocks of wood, varnished planks. Mounds of white powder, and blue, and red, and ochre. Stands of brushes in chipped clay pots. The smell, both intoxicating and vile, of oils and turps, and of minerals in their little heaps. Caspar, for the Master and for himself, sorts the ingredients, grinds, sifts, dampens, and seals them in small bowls with wax lids. Painting has come to the strict brick house on the western edge of the Grotemarkt.

Iris watches. It takes a long time for the Master to compose his painting. He moves Clara here, he moves her there. He sits her, he stands her. A hand on her waist, a hand at her bonnet strings, a hand on the table, a hand on her chin. Should she wear an apron and a cap, or her mother's rare jewels? This pose too dainty? This too coy, this too womanly? "No single position catches all of her grace," says the Master defensively when, after a week of hanging back, van den Meer looks in.

"This must be your masterpiece," says van den Meer. "But if you wait a year to decide on a stance for your model,

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the market for tulips may have softened and I won't have the money to pay you."

That day the Master decides.

It's a conventional pose, the Master tells Iris. Clara stands a few feet in from a window on the left. A spray of tulips lies cradled in her left hand, which falls in a soft curve onto a well-appointed tabletop. She holds a tulip bulb in her right hand and studies it as if entranced at the mystery that such imperial blooms can be generated from so humble a bulb. The sunlight, see, will sink at a noontime angle, and it will drop only on the edge of Clara's face, and on one tulip fallen out of the bouquet. The rest of Clara's form will be done in softer colors, set off by the shadow of the room, its costly dark-framed mirror, its chest of drawers, its tiles arranged around the corner of the mantelpiece.

But the color of the tulips? Van den Meer fusses about this. He wants the Master to use the exact *color and* pattern of the tulip that will be shipped in bulk the following month, and not available for growing and subsequent blossoming till the spring, if that. What color and pattern is that? "It's red," says van den Meer vaguely, "with a white stripe, a sort of pantaloons-look."

"Red," says the Master witheringly, "red? And how does the stripe go, exactly? I'll paint from nature or not at all."

Van den Meer scowls and scolds, while Iris huddles with her arms clapped around herself. She hears about how hard it is to fund such a commercial venture, and the financial risks that are run, especially by the weavers of Haarlem, who are very involved this year. The Master pays little mind. Calmly

he continues to sketch the form of Clara in the elegant room, swiping the canvas with a rag reeking with linseed oil, correcting a mistake.

"Of course," says van den Meer, looking out the window and stroking his beard, almost as if talking to himself, "I could always, at this late date, decide to solicit the help of your rival, Bollongier."

"Damn you, damn damn damn," says the Master. "If I go back to painting my catalogue of God's errors, I paint you next, you brute. The worst flaw in God's plan: the henpecked husband. The unnatural in nature—"

At van den Meer's glance, the Master stops. He sighs. He agrees to paint whatever wretched variety of striped tulip van den Meer requires, as long as multiple plants are forced into bloom for the Master to examine during the preliminary studies and the final painting. Van den Meer accedes to this.

After a week, Clara refuses to sit for the sketches anymore. And Henrika seems ready to permit this drastic change of plans. But—maybe shamed by the Master's coarse remark about him—van den Meer puts his foot down and takes Henrika aside into her small office. There are loud words from both sides, and even with the door closed, everyone on the ground floor can hear about guilders and florins, risks and rewards.

Iris listens to all this. When Clara is pouting upstairs that evening, Iris murmurs to Henrika, "Why doesn't Clara want to sit for sketches?"

Henrika looks annoyed at this remark. Van den Meer

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says, "Clara insists that the Master is rude and doesn't want to talk to her, only to look at her."

"It is tedious to sit so still," says Iris. "If you like, I can come in and engage her with tales told in English. She can listen while she poses."

Van den Meer says, "A charitable offer. So you're growing fond of our precious Clara?"

Iris wouldn't put it like that. She thinks: I am growing fond of these good meals. But the truth is that though Clara is willful and timid at once, grander-than-thou while still sucking her thumb, Iris feels at least a grudging regret for the girl. Never to go out beyond the house or garden walls!

Clara likes tales, so she agrees to return. Iris spins out fanciful episodes of her own design, peopled by talking animals, thwarties and household imps, fairies and saints, and the occasional magic comb, cooking pot, or horsehoe. Iris often weaves her tales around a poor benighted girl who is afraid to stray from home, but who is constantly tricked into leaving, or expelled, or jettisoned by force of earthquake, or blown out a window by a huge wind. Clara is made to smile, at least.

Henrika is quiet and pretends to be busy, but Iris notices that when Caspar or the Master are in the house, Henrika is never more than one room away from Clara. Henrika hovers like a bee over a flower, thinks Iris; then she remembers the painting of Henrika in her black-and-yellow bumblebee silks.

When he is not assisting the Master, Caspar does quick studies of his own. They are sketches in oils rather than completed paintings. Caspar has a gift for line but no strong eye

for color, so for the time being he roughs out domestic scenes on boards. Using reddish outlines, he lays in washes of ochre, highlighted with white when the underpainting is dry. He studies scenes of domestic labor with a certain mad joy.

Though Iris is bewitched by Caspar's small oils, she won't allow herself to be drawn—not after Ugly Girl

with Wildflowers. Never again. But Ruth has no pride. Ruth doesn't compose her features to close him out.

A small cartoon of Ruth. The big girl is sitting almost elegantly, on a stool in the kitchen. She clenches the black kettle between her knees. She holds a spoon with two hands, in the true way Ruth does, stirring with the whole strength of her upper body. Her bowed hump of soft shoulders is rendered honestly but not with scorn.

Margarethe, looking over Iris's shoulder at this sketch, observes sharply, "You'd think the kettle is filled with limestone cement, the way Ruth seems to be applying such force to that spoon!"

"But that's how she looks," says Iris, marveling.

"I believe I was having her stir a respectable pottage," says Margarethe. "This painting implies an incompetence in the kitchen. Throw it out." But she's only teasing. Iris wonders: Is Margarethe pleased that Caspar had the charity to paint Ruth without correction of her features? Does Margarethe feel for her older daughter in some way that she rarely shows? Well, of course she must, or why endure such troubles of taking her children across the sea?

Ruth herself crows and claps to see Caspar's cartoons. She doesn't seem confused about the nature of the image on

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the board, and grins in her splay-toothed way at herself stirring dinner. She smiles at Caspar and lurches off to the kitchen to find him a strip of salted fish as a present, which he accepts with a bow.

Caspar's portrait of Margarethe is equally benign. Here she is in the herb garden, in the act of rising: one knee still to the ground, one foot planted in its muddy wooden shoe. She has a basket of simples across one forearm, articulated, Iris sees, by broken scratchy lines, parallel at one end for the stems, and fretted at the other to suggest all manner of seeds, leaves, and dried flowers. The delight, though, is in Margarethe's expression. It almost makes tears stand in Iris's eyes. Her mother as a laborer, at peace for once, for there's nothing lovely or unlovely about herbs, and they behave and they don't bother her.

Iris examines this study with delight. The well-regulated house looms up, brick and ivy and shutters and copings. Only on the third viewing does she notice that Caspar has painted a head of Henrika, looking down with a scowl out of an upper window. Henrika is never seen with any such scowl, and yet it is demonstrably she.

"Her head is too big for the window frame," says Iris helpfully.

"Yes," says Caspar.

She's embarrassed. She's tried to critique the sketch, and he's refused her stupid opinion. She rushes on, more generously. "Caspar, what you can do! A portrait of Mama and Henrika!"

"Not at all," he says, "I'm merely illustrating the old adage: Two dogs and one bone will rarely agree."

Iris bows to look again. Is this what she had seen on the day she'd arrived at this house? Had it been Henrika peering from the window that day?

Or is this clot of dark in Caspar's sketch, in a window even higher up, the last square of glass under the roof beam, actually a squinting, hunched creature of some sort? Is it just scrawled darkness, scribbled in, or can she make out tiny, leering features?

"Have you drawn an imp in this house?" says Iris, looking up.

"I didn't know you could see it too," he says, but then

will say no more.

The Masterpiece

The painting of Clara grows more and more like her— thus more and more beautiful. Though Iris still has never trespassed in the gallery of God's blunders, the Master's locked studio on the other side of town, she's sure that no painting in the Master's house can be anywhere near as compelling as this one. True, saints are inevitably good-looking. All the Master's portraits of the holy populace have been wreathed in light, their eyes crazy with vision. And the Master's brutes must be as wretched as the saints are sacred. The extreme edges of human possibility.

But Clara is merely splendid. Splendid as a human being. Not only a heartbreaking concoction of blonds, cherry blushes, and blue-ochre shadows, but a real girl, with an airy hesitation that seems as much about her good looks as anything else. The tulips that languish in the bow of her left arm look up toward her as a baby one day might.

Iris studies the painting in the late afternoon when the Master has denounced the light for being fickle, as he does

CONFESSIONS OF AN UGLY STEPSISTER

daily, and stalked away. Caspar, who still makes his home with the Master but eats better in the van den Meer kitchen yard, brings Iris in to see. "He would have preferred a commission to do the civic guards. But he has always wanted to paint this legendary perfect child. Can you tell what he has done?" says Caspar. "Do you see how he's intensified the orange in this fold of carpet, so now the blues of her eyes blink three different ways at you instead of two?"

"I don't," says Iris. "But I see that it is more wonderful." And she thinks the Master has painted a kinder expression in Clara's eyes than is strictly warranted.

"Do you see the composition, a series of boxes, look, nine of them of different sizes—here, and here, and here—" Caspar points them out. "And broken in two places only, by this large curve that, since it is shadowed, only hints at a surprise, and then this tulip in full light, here? See how it seems about to fall off the floor?"

"I want to catch it," says Iris, laughing. "I want to save it."

"He teases, and pleases, and makes you stare, and slowly you come to realize that this isn't just any child, but a bloom as perfect as a tulip."

"She is looking at the bulb," says Iris. "She doesn't notice that the tulip is about to fall. Doesn't it make you uneasy?"

"She is noticing one thing and not noticing another, all happening at once," says Caspar. He chuckles; he's just realizing the cleverness of the Master's composition. "Look, and also this: It is about beginnings and endings, for here in the one hand is the hideous bulb, just as well lit as the tulip on the table. He has thought of how to catch us again and again!"

## THE IMP-RIDDLED HOUSE

There are so many things to see! And not only his brush techniques, which bewilder me and make me think I will never learn."

"You learn a lot and you see a lot," says Iris. "Remember that sketch you did of my mother in the herb garden, and Henrika in the house behind her. You caught as much there as the Master has here." She continues, "Only what you caught isn't as pretty to see?"

Caspar slides her a sideways glance. "You're observant as a painter yourself, then, if you perceive that," he says in a confiding voice. Iris shivers with the compliment as if with a sudden chill.

Another thing that Iris notices about the Master's painting of Clara and the tulips is that its increasing perfection doesn't seem to make him elated but rather despondent. He won't talk to Iris about this—in fact, he has little use for her at all now that he has earned the commission. But he mutters to himself. Iris knows this. When she and Clara have tired of English, and fall into a sleepy state, Iris likes to hear the Master fret even as he adores his own work. Soon the day comes when he no longer needs Clara except once in a while, to assess skin tones relative to fabric or background. Still he mutters all the more.

His worry seems to revolve around how well the painting is going. He knows that it's sublime. He doesn't know if it will do the job that Cornelius van den Meer and cronies require of it—to work the viewing public into an even more hearty appetite for the very strain of tulip bulbs they are importing from Vienna and points east—but he no longer cares about that. He sings, not to Clara but to the painting of Clara, to the blue-brown

shadows behind the open window, to the highlights in the silver salver on the mantel, to the folds in the apron, the bonnet, and the linen cloth on the table. He fusses over the glints in the diamond pendants, the mirrored gleams of the three ropes of pearl. He sings, and then he hisses in between his teeth as if in pain.

He touches the canvas with strokes more and more gentle and hesitant. "I am going to ruin you yet," he says once, and Iris, listening, thinks: Ruin who? Ruin you, exquisite painting? Ruin yourself, Master Luykas Schoonmaker? Ruin you, Clara van den Meer, real girl at the edge of childhood?

So he works more and more slowly, as if the tiniest touch of a brush might suddenly turn his masterpiece into a laughingstock. He stands back farther and farther from it, studying it for long stretches. He approaches the painting as a farmboy approaches a bull—gently, wishing it does not need to be done. He takes the troublesome jewels back to his studio, to do further studies, and get the rich highlights right.

Iris picks up another side to his unhappiness too. It seems that the more wonderful this painting becomes, the less chance there is of the Master's ever surpassing it. The more perfect every succulent detail, the more devastating. He weeps over his painting. He looks an old man, or, thinks Iris, like the old man he will soon become. Is that merely the contrast with Clara, so fresh, so young, so beautiful on the canvas? No. The painting itself is making him old, for he is struggling, as if he'll never have courage again to try to love the world in oil and varnish, canvas and light.

Rue, Sage,

Thyme, and Temper

'I \*he day comes when the painting is done but for the 1 caresses of varnish needed to protect against the ravages of centuries. All varnishes can't go on at once; some can be applied only after the painting has dried for months. It amazes Iris that the Master can think about the painting surviving for longer than his lifetime, but when she makes a joke about it he snaps at her. "And what makes you think beauty should go in and out of fashion like—like a rage of eating with forks, or an obsession with the music of the virginal—or a madness to adore tulips, for that matter? Will future generations look at this child and not be stunned by her perfection?"

"They'll be stunned by Schoonmaker's capturing of her perfection," intones Caspar, and this time it's not a poke but a compliment.

"And why not?" says the Master, unable to be humble now. He has no energy.

"I suspect," says Margarethe, passing through with a clutch of humble roots in her hands, "that they'll think you've flattered the child. They won't believe she looked so angelic." She says this with a measure of—what? Something that Iris can't name.

Henrika and Cornelius van den Meer plan a feast for their friends in Haarlem and Amsterdam, for those who have staked sums of capital on the tulip cargoes, and also for those whose tongues are waggish and whose wallets are heavy. It takes a number of days to arrange, to borrow benches from neighbors, to clean the strict house from front to back, from attic to cellars. Margarethe begins to sulk at Henrika and, from time to time, to disagree pointedly, even noisily, over methods of housewifery.

Iris helps, and turns out drawers and pokes in attic corners, looking for something magical here, a dragon's claw, the skeleton of a dead boggart, a fragment of the True Cross with which to work miracles. She finds nothing of the sort. She can't shuck off the feeling that the house is hiding something from her, though. The high, narrow place is haunted somehow, possessed by something fierce and potent, something gifted at disguise. She whirls about, trying to catch sight of it in the edges of the house's many looking glasses. Whatever it is—imp or else-thing—it's deft. It eludes her.

When the day of the party arrives at last, so too does autumn's first really biting cold weather. Late in the afternoon Iris and Ruth sweep fallen linden leaves off the paths in

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the garden. That is, Ruth pretends to sweep them first, and Iris follows up doing the actual job. The idea of a banquet makes the sisters giddy. Van den Meer has said they might sit in the kitchen and peer in from the doorway, as long as they make no noise, and remove themselves to their pallets in the cranny if Henrika tells them to go.

"It'll be night, and tapers will be lit, and there'll be music," says Iris, as much to herself as to Ruth. "And we'll look clean and smart, even though no one will see us." Margarethe has laundered their best aprons, and attempted some clumsy stitchwork upon the pockets. She pricked her finger and cursed and kept on, no matter how tired she became or how low the light guttered, and Iris and Ruth are thrilled with the

idea of wearing clothes made pretty for a feast.

Clara, however, is cross. Van den Meer has told her that she may not sit in the kitchen with Iris and Ruth. Clara has to dress like an adult and dine with the rest of the guests. Clara applies to Henrika, expecting her to intervene as usual. But Henrika's face goes strangely aggrieved, and she won't even discuss the subject.

So Clara sulks in the kitchen while the Fisher sisters perform their chores.

"It isn't fair," says Clara. "I don't want to be snapped at and stared over like a new statue from France or a brass vase from Persia. I want to be in the kitchen with you."

"The perils of being the child of rich parents," says Margarethe smugly. "Suffer."

"What?" says Clara. Iris swivels her head at the edge in Clara's tone, but Margarethe is too busy to notice the danger.

"The changeling has to change herself again, this time into an adult," says Margarethe, as roughly as if Clara were her own daughter. "Live with what life brings you, young one, or you stay young and stupid forever—"

Clara starts up like a cat whose tail has been trod upon. It is one thing to play at being a changeling, thinks Iris, quite another to be teased about it! By an adult, no less.

Holding her fists an inch or two on either side of her ears, Clara begins to scream. Margarethe looks up guiltily. Clara yells that she won't dress to please her mother or her father, she won't speak nicely to the guests, and she won't come out of the kitchen. And besides that, she hopes the painting of Young Woman with Tulips will explode into flames. And she hates her mother and her father.

Iris and Ruth are frozen, not knowing what to do.

Margarethe takes to churning as a way of blocking out the noise. Iris is guilty: Too many stories about poor, timid girls who learn to have brave hearts? "Hush, Clara," says Iris, "you'll wake the imp!"

With her soft step, Henrika arrives. She insists that there's no more to discuss about it and that Clara is being wicked. Clara apparently intends to stay being wicked, for she won't stop screaming. Not until Ruth bursts into tears and sinks to her knees at Clara's hems, and wraps her awkward arms around the girl's hips. "Go away, you ugly ogre," says Clara—in passable English, Iris has to note. But Ruth has no faculty for shame and she doesn't budge, and eventually Clara collapses into her arms, mewling.

"No child of mine ever screamed like a hellcat," observes

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Margarethe to the butter churn.

"That'll do, Clara," says Henrika, but it's clear she's speaking to Margarethe.

Clara sprints out to the walled garden, and Ruth lumbers after her. They leave the door open. Clara flings gravel at birds. Ruth runs her hands through the ivy. The air in the kitchen grows dank, though nothing has changed in the weather. The wind is still brisk, the sea air bracing. Beyond, rooks still caw and squabble

over the tulip sheds. The light still seeps its thin yellow through the open door onto the gray flagstones.

Henrika turns her back to Margarethe. By habit Iris glances into the mirror, hoping to snatch a view of some peppery household spirit, but instead she sees the corner of Henrika's face. Henrika is vexed: both angry and anxious. The beautiful brow is furrowed, and Henrika pinches her lower lip between her teeth, thinking.

"A good dose of chamomile will settle her down," says Margarethe nonchalantly.

"Don't lecture me on the management of my own child," says Henrika in a cold voice, and she sweeps from the room.

"I was trying to *assist*" says Margarethe after her, with exaggerated politeness.

"Mama," says Iris, "you're not minding your tongue."

"Who are you to tell me to mind my tongue?" says Margarethe, languorously.

"What's gotten into you? You always say that we might be tossed out of here if we're not well behaved. There are others who can do the work we do!"

Margarethe puts aside the butter churn. She folds over a cloth to reveal a pair of dead hares roped at the ears. "There are few certainties in our lives, to be sure, but we won't be turned out for a moment's honest remark," says Margarethe. "This isn't like you," says Iris. "You're the one who worries in August if the spring will come soon enough next March."

Margarethe beckons Iris near and whispers, "Haven't you noticed that queen-bee Henrika is with child?"

Though Iris thinks herself clever, she hasn't noticed this. "Oh, it's early yet, but at the moment Henrika can't abide the look of food staring up from the kettle or spit. She can't afford to turn me out now. I'm too well trained in the ways of her household, and this feast is very important."

Iris doesn't answer. She doesn't like her mother to be fawning, but for her mother to be impertinent is equally upsetting. "She's our hostess and our protector," says Iris at last. "Can't you like her?"

"Like her? And what is there of her to like? That her father did handsomely in business? That she has pretensions toward a well-shaped mind? That she coddles her daughter and swaddles her into an unusual infancy? That she does the girl no good? The girl is rotten, or can't you see it?"

"So you notice Clara's unhappiness, at least," says Iris. "Put it like this," says Margarethe. "If Ruth is trapped by her afflictions, to hobble and bawl through all her days, Clara is trapped as well. She's expected to be endlessly docile. Who knows why—because she's so attractive? We're all in our own prisons, I suppose, but Clara's is made worse for her by

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the fears and strengths of her mother. And maybe by her father's weakness."

"And what is the shape of your prison?" says Iris.

Margarethe rubs her nose and says, "There was always a window. You can endure any sort of prison if



you can apprehend a window in the dark. Your father was that window for me. When he died, the window was shut. Oh, I know, you ache at the mention of Jack Fisher, but even so."

"You're going to go the rest of your life without another window somewhere in the dark?"

"You look for it," says Margarethe, suddenly impatient with such prattle. "I'm busy now. I have to skin this brace of hares."

Iris sits at her mother's side and watches. "Tell me what to do, I should know about this," she says.

"So you may find yourself at home in some burgher's kitchen when you are my age, preparing food for guests who won't see your face or ask your name," says Margarethe. "Why should I teach you a whit of it?"

"Because I'm ugly," says Iris, "and I have to know these things, so I can take care of myself someday."

Margarethe runs her hands over the hares as if she is trying to keep from tearing them apart with her fingers. She breathes heavily. Then she says, "Well, then, my dear, look carefully."

Mother and daughter labor over the carcass, removing unwanted extremities, bones, organs. Margarethe shows Iris how to peel back the skin of the skull, how to handle the flesh so it doesn't pull away from the bone too soon, how to rub scatterings of sage, thyme, and tarragon, to turn a dead

animal into a sumptuous meal. After a while Henrika pads back into the kitchen. They all work side by side without speaking, selecting the most perfect fruits, withdrawing the bread from the side oven, hurrying with the newly purchased quails, for the hour is approaching when Young Woman with Tulips will be unveiled for the ravenous merchants.

## Reception

The candles are lit, the tables spread with linen, and Hen-rika has seated herself at the virginal. "What a pretty picture," says Margarethe to van den Meer, but he doesn't hear the sourness in her voice, and he merely answers, "Oh, yes, isn't she?"

Two maidens from a household down the street have come to assist in the serving, so Margarethe can stand at the door and supervise both kitchen and dining salon at once. Caspar has been engaged to collect cloaks and staffs and hats. Iris and Ruth bring stools to the doorway and sit there, wondering about Clara, until at last there's a knock on the door and the first of the burghers arrives.

Almost at once a second guest knocks, and his wife behind him, so Caspar is kept busy, and Iris has to help. Henrika pauses at the virginal as if surprised by visitors. She plays the same melody each time until she is stopped by the new arrivals.

The Master appears. His new coat with its bit of braid can't disguise his fretfulness. He makes a round about the hall,

greeting those he knows, mumbling shy hellos to strangers. Almost at once he escapes to the kitchen, where he shucks off the new coat and sits on the stool that Iris has vacated. He holds Ruth's hand for a bit.

"They're a worthy lot," says the Master to Margarethe, who, though in the midst of last-minute

preparations, takes a moment to sneer.

"Stuffed pheasants and perfumed peacocks, full of airs. They're only merchants, not nobility," says she.

"They admire the talented and they count themselves as learned. Do you know that some of them have invested in the settlement of the New Netherlands across the tremendous Atlantic?"

"They have an uncommon passion for paintings, these Dutch," says Margarethe, as if in this instance she understands herself to be entirely and safely English.

"And why shouldn't they?" asks the Master. "The marvelous Reformation has torn away icon and ornament from the churches. What's left for the hungry eye to admire? My fellow Dutchmen make do with tedious scenes of the merry company. Scenes of meadow, woodland, the lot of the common husbandryman. Views of the city from this aspect or that. Or views of the comic lot of the desperately poor."

"If your painting is met with approval," says Margarethe, "just watch: You'll paint all of that. You'll spend your time gazing on the thick jowls and the double chins of everyone with guilders enough to pay you for their likeness."

"Don't remind me," says he. "My possible patrons are out there in the reception room right now."

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"There's no shortage of subjects, Luykas, nor of coin to pay you for painting them."

"There's no shortage of painters in this part of Holland either."

She lays a pair of poached salmon on a salver and works them with her fingers to move the flesh back into correct form. "So you have a mixed mind? Like most of us. You want the work and the reputation, and you also want to despise your patrons for refusing to pay for religious subjects. This way you can be unhappy, whatever happens next. Here, girl, this is ready; don't let the fish slide off onto the floor. Ruth, move your feet."

"You're a clever woman, Margarethe," says the Master. "If I'm honored and noticed tonight, as van den Meer suggests I will be, would you think of returning to my household and doing for me?"

"I think many things, silly and profound, each night as I put my head down between my daughters to take my rest."

"Well, add this proposal to your list."

Van den Meer is at the door. "Schoonmaker, we're going into the next room to show them your work," he says, "and you here gabbling in the vegetables like a soup boy? Get out here and prepare, at your advanced age, to make your career, and to make mine as well."

Van den Meer calls for Clara. When she doesn't come, he says to Margarethe, "Fetch her, please; she's

upstairs and has to come down at once."

"I'm the princess of the pots and the hearth today, I'm not the nursery maid," says Margarethe. "Do it yourself."

"Though I'm distracted by the occasion," he replies formally, "I'm not insensible to insult, Margarethe Fisher."

Margarethe blushes; she's gone too far. She says in a low voice, "Iris, you do what's required now, in my stead."

Iris hurtles up the back stairs of the house. She goes to Clara's small chamber. The curtains of the bed nook are drawn. No candle is lit here, and shadows blunt the hard edges of the furniture.

"Clara?" says Iris. "Are you within?"

A rustle of bedclothes. Something is there.

"Clara?" Iris's voice is softer, frightened. "Come, open the curtains. Don't scare me so."

The twitch of the drape. The heave of labored breathing. Iris sweeps aside the cloth.

"Oh, come, what's the harm?" says Iris. She looks in and tries to smile.

The figure draws back, deeper into the shadows. "I hate them," says Clara.

"But why do you hate them? What have they done to you?"

"They walk about the world with such big steps," she says at last. Iris wonders if she means that they can stalk the world to their hearts' content without the supervision that every child chafes under, Clara more than most. But this is the way with grown people. It hardly seems a reason to hate them.

"If you go, and smile," says Iris, "and answer when you're spoken to, you can amuse them, and gratify your parents. Then when their attention is turned, for adults never think about one thing for long, you can walk away. They'll never notice."

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"They already have me once," says the girl.

Iris says, "In the Master's painting. I know. I know. But you're beautiful enough to be seen in the flesh. Can't you be happy for that?"

"My father will sell his flowers," says Clara. "We'll become much wealthier than we are. I'm caught on that canvas to sell flowers."

"And so what does that matter?" says Iris. She has meant to be kind, but she's losing her patience.

"When I was caught on a canvas by the Master, people laughed! There are worse things in the world than being a joy to behold and a use to your mother and your father."

"What would you know," says Clara, beginning to look wild, "your father is dead."

"None of that," says Iris, who is learning, "none of that!"

"Dead father, worms in his mouth, maggots in his eyes—"

"Come out of your bed," says Iris, "you little limb of Satan, come out; for if you don't, my mother and my sister and I will be thrown from your house for being unhelpful. And yes, my father is dead, and we can't afford to lose our position here. So if you won't descend the stairs for your own parents, for the sake of your future, then do it for me. Am I to be sent back to England, there to starve?"

It's a clumsy gambit, but it works. Clara throws her arms around Iris. "Don't go back to England," she says. "Learning English with you is the only joy I have." But the hug she gives Iris is hard and strong. The girl has arms like iron bars.

Iris goes on, trying not to flinch in Clara's embrace. "You would understand the joy of a full larder if you had ever had

to live without one, and the joy of a living father if your father were dead. Let's not talk about this now. Come. Be brave like a girl in one of my stories."

So Iris pulls Clara down the back steps to the kitchen. Margarethe straightens Clara's clothes and pinches her cheeks. Van den Meer smiles vacantly, murmuring, "Follow me, duckling. We are just going in to view our future." Clara turns and looks one last time at Iris. Her eyes are nearly hollow. Her pretty upper lip twitches, twice.

Virginal

By the time the last guest has left, Clara is dead to the world, and Iris is barely awake herself. Ruth has crawled under the kitchen table and snores there in her ungainly way, her windmill fallen from her grasp. "It's the latest I've ever been up ... the world is so still," says Iris, peering from the doorway. "Look, the stars almost clatter against each other, there are so many."

The Master calls for his coat. He's drunk and depressed over being so well celebrated. His apprentice, though, is giddy with relief. "Has it been a good evening, then, Caspar?" says Iris as Caspar supports the Master and slides an arm through his.

"The portrait of Clara excited everyone. It's the start of his career all over again," says Caspar. "If he doesn't choke in his sleep tonight, he's a made man. Your mother should consider his suggestion that she return to his household. He'll be able to afford it."

Iris doesn't know what she thinks. She's torn: the pleasure of being near the act of painting, or the benefit of a more

assured schedule of meals in Henrika's well-run household? She answers Caspar merely with a happy shrug.

He leans down and puts his hand fondly on her brow. "You're a good child," he says. Then he and the Master depart, noisily, in streets that are slippery with a fine spray blown in from the midnight sea.

The door shuts, and Iris moves into the hall. Cornelius, Henrika, and Margarethe stand at various places in the room, their backs to each other: Henrika at the virginal, Cornelius before the painting, and

Margarethe near the table littered with the pips and stems of the fruit and the rind of the cheese that finished the meal.

Though the adults are standing and facing in three directions, they're attending to each other too, in some way that Iris can't fathom—oh, she is sleepy! But she notices that Margarethe's hands at the table are dallying, not from exhaustion but from an effort to linger.

"We've had our triumph tonight, all of us," says van den

Meer.

Henrika bows her head to the virginal. Margarethe nods her own head but doesn't answer.

"It's the beginning of our success, do you know what this means?" says van den Meer. "We were right to move slowly and to be sure that he was up to the job, that Schoonmaker. Our caution goaded him on. He surpassed every effort to date. He will not be known as the Master of the Dordrecht Altarpiece. He will be Schoonmaker, and Young Woman with Tulips will be admired and visited from afar. Soon we'll find the right venue in which to show it. People from as far away

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as Florence and Rome will admire it, and admire our Clara—and we will have no shortage of future investors either."

"I hate the thought of it being shown," says Henrika. Van den Meer doesn't reply, and his wife continues in a quieter tone. "She's never going to be more beautiful than she was tonight."

At this van den Meer turns and drains a glass of port. "What do you mean? Are you sad over the child's growing?"

She shakes her head. Van den Meer says, "There's the new baby to make you happy, as Clara emerges into her adult station. It's time for that."

"It's just that now," says Henrika, "Clara's beauty is announced. The reputation of it will precede her, even in this street."

"You couldn't wrap her in shawls forever," he says. "It's been all these years till you would agree to another child, and if you'd done it sooner, Henrika, you might have found a way to release your loving claws off Clara before this. Let's hope she can straighten out and thrive."

Henrika looks furiously sad. Van den Meer continues in a kinder voice, "She'll be at home in any salon in the land; she'll be welcome in France and England. She'll be a credit to your family and to mine. She won't be able to help it."

Henrika turns her face. In the last of the candlelight, Iris can see that tears are glistening. "Have we done well, husband?" she asks.

"Wife, we have triumphed, each one of us," says van den Meer. "Nothing is lost tonight, and everything gained. Schoonmaker walks away with appointments for five studio

visits from merchants wealthy enough to pay him hand' somely for his work. We've elevated our status

here—"

"You've elevated your status," she says softly, reminding him that her bloodlines are too pure to be further purified.

He rolls over her remark, continuing, "—and we've impressed our colleagues with our ability to draw attention to our own stock of tulips. We've secured the rest of our investment. We've introduced our daughter and launched her reputation as a figure of renown. We've worked hard for this, and there's nothing to be dismayed about. The conversation was brisk, the wine sweet, the food plentiful and delicious—" "—Thank you," says Margarethe.

Van den Meer and his wife both look over at her. "You are indeed responsible," says Henrika, with no derision in her voice; she is too tired to squabble. "We're beholden to you for your skills."

"And to your daughter for befriending Clara and encouraging her to come forward," says van den Meer.

"Then would this be the right time to approach you for a modest stipend?" says Margarethe.

"It's late, and I don't discuss such matters when I've been eating and drinking in such a full manner," says van den

Meer.

"Besides," says Henrika, "this fine evening alone cost the household more than we could afford. And the new baby is on its way, and you know the fuss of that. Isn't it enough that you have a place to sleep and food to eat?"

"It is ... gratifying," says Margarethe. "But my daughters are a little older than your Clara, and they don't have your

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Clara's advantages. Put baldly, with their sorry looks, they are millstones around my neck. I have to think of them."

Iris shrinks back within the shadows. She doesn't like to hear such words.

"In any event," says van den Meer, "let's not mar this pleasant evening by such a discussion. Another time, Margarethe, tomorrow or the next day, find me in my hall and we'll consider the matter. I make no comment one way or another."

"But tonight I've received an offer of employment elsewhere," says Margarethe.

"Not from one of our guests!" says Henrika.

"Tomorrow is time enough, Henrika," says van den Meer.

"It's not to be endured," says Henrika. She sits up straight and holds her belly.

"It was from one of your guests," says Margarethe.

"Who?" says Henrika, in a passion.

"Henrika," says van den Meer warningly.

"It was from the Master. He believes that after tonight he'll be in a better position to afford to hire me as help. He's requested my return."

"Go then, go, if you must," says Henrika dismissively. "The ungratefulness!"

"We'll take this matter up in the morning," says van den Meer. "Margarethe, you're not doing the best for yourself."

"I don't ask to do the best for myself, only a little better than nothing," says Margarethe. "You've had a great success tonight, and you think you'll have more in the months to

come. You'll be better prepared to reward a small staff. You've seen how I can serve, and serve I will."

"I protest this, Cornelius," says Henrika.

"You're too tired to protest, and you are with child," says her husband. "I will make the decision that needs to be made, and I will not make it tonight. How often have I to tell you this? Come, all, the lights are to be put out, the shutters barred and the food covered against the mice, and then to sleep. Our life begins again in the morning, as it always must."

"Who makes the decision that needs to be made?" asks Henrika as she blows the candle out. Iris sinks back in the darkness, ashamed of her mother's gall, but also proud of it.

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face is lengthening," says Margarethe. "If you still harbor some fancy that she is a changeling, Iris, notice that Clara is growing up. Changelings die young."

"Some changelings live to be old and broken," says Iris. "I saw an ancient madman with no teeth and cheeks as smooth as a melon. He laughed high and foolishly like any changeling."

"You beware your flighty mind!" says Margarethe. "It leads you astray into distracted moments, and then the devil will take you yet. Clara is no more a changeling than Ruth is."

Iris doesn't reply to this. She knows that though Ruth is huge, stupid, and inarticulate, she is herself and always has been. Iris can never know this of Clara, so the suspicion of a magical transformation will always linger, and can't be proven wrong.

The winter months grind along at their glacial rate. Margarethe and her daughters haven't returned to the Master's house on the poor side of town. Henrika's pregnancy is just too difficult. She doesn't carry herself easily. She complains of mysterious ailments, over which the midwives cluck their

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tongues with confusion. Is Henrika carrying twins perhaps? Has there been a change in her diet? Is the

business worry suffered by Cornelius van den Meer proving to be contagious? Gossip has it that a fiscal crisis in the van den Meer household would be devastating. Much of Henrika's dowry has been advanced as collateral against business loans and

would be lost.

Gossip also has it that there is a household demon living

in the rafters of the attics, coming down only at dark, to

gnaw at Henrika's innards and ruin her health.

Henrika takes to her bed more and more often. Van den

Meer attends her with loving affection when his work allows.

There is worry—it can't be kept hidden—about a missing

ship that hasn't arrived in port with its expected cargo. Van

den Meer and his colleagues disagree about whether to send out an investigator to trace the route and hunt for news. News, good or bad, will come eventually, but is it smarter to know of a disaster earlier, and thus prepare for it? The longer the wait, the stronger the storms of winter will become.

Margarethe is a boon to the household. True, Henrika complains about the English look of the food that Margarethe brings and sometimes even spoons into Henrika's mouth. Too salty, too savory, too foreign! "Always a remark," says Margarethe calmly. "Eat up, for your health." She knows that the queen bee of the household has little choice but to be grateful to the salaried chief of domestic affairs.

In the early part of winter Margarethe hangs the last of the herbs on strings about the kitchen and week by week, by

Henrika's special request, keeps a pot-au-feu on the hearth. The van den Meer household is much larger than any other Margarethe has lived in, and she takes to overseeing the cold room, the wine cellar, and whatever distant matters of barnyard life that the hired men in the outbuildings will sullenly cede to her.

So, Margarethe being kept busy with household affairs, it's a time of liberation for the girls. Margarethe has no interest in sending the girls to school—well, Ruth can't learn, and Iris is needed to govern Ruth!—and van den Meer is accustomed to leaving the supervision of Clara to his wife. Every morning, once the fast has been broken, and ablutions completed, and a few household tasks done, Iris and Ruth set out in their klompen to roam Haarlem and see what is to be seen.

Daily Iris and Ruth make their first stop at the Master's studio, where Caspar pauses in his task of gessoing panels and stretching canvases, grinding pigments and applying varnishes. Daily he heats milk in a pan and adds to it flecks of bitter cocoa bean, drippings of honey, and small scoops of butter. Daily the Master roars at them for disturbing his peace and ruining his chance at a reputation. How is he to finish all the commissions he is getting, how, how, how?—but now the girls only giggle at him.

Ruth has little interest in painting. She'd rather sit in the kitchen and keep Caspar company. He sometimes carves faces out of potatoes to make her laugh. But Iris wanders into the studio and stands a safe distance away, since often her clothes are dripping with rain. She watches the inevitable brown



beginnings of marks on canvas turn into the forms of

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human beings. She watches flesh tones consolidate. She watches heft emerge out of flatness. She hears the Master curse at his own mistakes with such language that Caspar rolls his eyes and sometimes puts his hands over Iris's ears.

The Master moans with grateful distress. Every little domestic animal wants to be memorialized in paint! The very Holy Family itself is being displaced by sinful self-regard: portraits of how wealthy everyone has become! "But I have to eat, I can't live by the word of God alone, no matter what Scripture says; I need bread too," he says. "Damn the human stomach, this fat betrayer of my ideals. Caspar! Another Portrait of Madame Unlucky-in-Looks, done up to appear as Madame Most'Marvelous-tO'Behold. I'm no longer telling the truth with my art, I'm lying. But I have to. How else can I afford that sumptuous cocoa you girls drink every morning of my life? And are you going to leave me any at all, or will I sip this thinning fluid by accident and keel over to an insensible end?"

He works quickly, with mounting confidence. Caspar is learning faster too and becoming a genuine apprentice. When the Master takes off at great speed to the outhouse in the alley, Iris and Caspar relish a small privacy.

One day Caspar reaches out as if to stroke Iris's hair, and stops himself.

"Don't you want to pick up a chalk and try for yourself?" he says.

"Of course I do, but I'm never going to be an apprentice, so why fool myself?"

"When I am the Master, you can be my apprentice," says Caspar.

She laughs boldly at that. She hears the unfamiliar roll of her own chortling syllables—it stops her by its strangeness. And then she has to laugh all the more.

If Clara is growing older, then so too is Iris.

When the girls leave the studio, sometimes they wander through the Amsterdamse Poort to the meadow where Ruth gathered wildflowers. In the mornings the meadow is often still bleached with rimefrost, and Ruth seems puzzled that the flowers she was used to gathering are now no more than brittle brown stems. Still, the meadow is something of a haven for them. One day soon the cold may freeze all the canals over, and then, what a holiday! Better than kermis, Caspar promises, though they have no idea what kermis is. Carnival, he explains, before the hard season of Lent. Oh, Iris asks, is there a harder season than this?—but she can say such a thing now because she is not as unhappy as she once was.

With Henrika so often closed behind the bed drapes, Clara is listless and irksome. She's glad when the girls come home. Before the fire one day, munching small bits of ham flavored with clove, Iris tells Clara, "If you came with us, you wouldn't be so bored here."

"I can't go beyond the house, you know that," says Clara. "Mama won't allow it."

"She'd never know! She's not pacing the floorboards upstairs, peering out the windows!" says Iris. "She's flat on her back!"

"I understand," says Clara, "but all the same. It might get me."

"Who?" says Iris, thinking of the imp.

"Dark wings at the top." But Clara changes the subject herself now, adding briskly, "Before you were here, there was a woman from Flanders to teach me lace making. Before her, a woman from Paris who spoke to me in French. I had a man to teach me fingering on the keys of the virginal, and a man to train me in Scripture verses. Mama brings the world in to me. That's all I can know."

"It's not your mama who keeps you here, not really," says Iris. "I see it on your face. It's yourself."

"What do you say this for?" says Clara, lifting her chin with a pretense at bravery.

"You stand at the window and look up and down the street, but you can't bring yourself to step a foot away from the door," says Iris. She's taunting Clara, but she doesn't care this time. "You're a coward."

"I am not a coward."

"Then come do it right now."

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Iris doesn't want to be mean, but she hates the sameness of everything. "I know what we can do," she says suddenly. "Ruth and I can put you in the wheelbarrow. We can wheel you out the back gate. We won't go into the marketplace, but away toward the banks of the canal. You can keep your eyes closed and not worry about a thing, and then you can open them up and you'll have been carried by magic across the prison walls of your world. It won't be your walking out. You won't even see. We'll be the ones who walk you out."

"It sounds foolish," says Clara.

THE IMP-RIDDLED HOUSE

"Let's try it. Why not?" says Iris.

"You won't dump me in the canal?"

"I promise," says Iris. "That is, I promise to try not to."

Clara gapes. But she has come to know how Iris teases, and suddenly she says, "All right. I'd like to see the canal. I can hardly even remember it."

The wheelbarrow is in a corner of the kitchen yard. At the bottom are some old brown sacks. Clara and Iris snap the clots of soil and the bug carcasses off them. Iris looks up, somewhat guiltily, to see if their venturing out will be observed. There is no dark clot at the top window —just the sky rushing over the steeply pitched roof, a giddy early winter blue with stripes of innocent thin cloud. Nothing untoward.

Clara sits in the barrow like a princess in a palanquin. "No," says Iris, "lie down, like you're dead."

"I don't want to be dead," says Clara.

"You won't really be," says Iris. "Pretend."

Clara begins to be reluctant, but she does as Iris tells her.

"I'm going to cover you with these sacks," says Iris. "Then even if your mother or anything should be looking out the window, she won't see you."

Clara sits up again. "Anything? What do you mean by that?"

But she allows herself to be urged back down. "It's all right," says Iris. "This'll be fun."

"Fun?" says Clara. Her voice is muffled.

"You know it will," says Iris bossily.

"Don't bump me," says Clara. "Don't put me in a place."

"We won't put you anywhere." Iris shows Ruth how to pick up one handle of the wheelbarrow. Ruth is strong and picks up both. Iris then goes around and says, "I might as well ride on top of you. Am I squashing you?"

"You're squashing me!"

"Forgive me, but I can't hear you," says Iris, "all those

bags over your face—"

"You're squashing me!"

"Let's go, Ruth—"

They don't even get the wheelbarrow through the gate when Clara is sitting up, face red and purple.

"Don't squash me! I'm not going!" She pushes Iris with a strength born of an outsized anger. Ruth stands and gapes, her arms dropped

at her side.

"Iris," calls Margarethe from an upstairs window. "What are you doing?" Her voice is calm but low, insistent. "Come in at once and wait for me at the bottom of the stairs." It is not a voice to be disobeyed.

Expecting punishment, they leave the wheelbarrow halfway through the gate and trudge inside. Margarethe's unrushed tread is heard upstairs. The footsteps cross the hall—there's a moan, then a louder moaning—and now the sound of footsteps on the back stairs, and now Margarethe turns into the kitchen. "There you are," she says in an even voice. "Iris, I need you to run and fetch the midwife. I'm afraid that Henrika has taken a great pain, and at far too early a stage in the proceedings."

"But I don't know where the midwife lives!" says Iris. "Use your brain and ask someone. I can't leave the strug-

## THE IMP-RIDDLED HOUSE

gling mother alone." Margarethe is standing with rare calm, not rushing back to attend to Henrika. "And I suppose you should run out to the Grotemarkt and ask who has seen Heer van den Meer."

But Iris is reaching out to touch Clara on the shoulder, for it has just dawned on them that Margarethe is carrying bedding in her arms. Dried blood, streaked brick brown, and raw blood, redder than any tulips that Cornelius van den Meer has brought to flower in his nurseries.

"Go, Iris, don't make me tell you again," says Margarethe, dumping the bedding in a corner and turning to head back up the stairs.

The house, with its bricked-in lives, seems suddenly hushed and severe as a chapel. Iris can feel the whole build'ing crouching around and above her, almost breathing, waiting, poised, paused. What else is locked in here besides the van den Meer family? What thing has crept out of a watery mirror world, as strictly ruled as the original it reflects, to gnaw at Henrika so terribly that she bleeds redder than any paint?

Iris governs her wild thoughts, with effort, and then she turns and does as she is told.

## THE GIRL OF ASHES

### Flowers for the Dead

Within the week Henrika worsens. Nothing helps, neither anything Margarethe can do with herbs, or the minister with psalms, or the surgeon with bleeding. By the Sabbath the only thing left to pray for is that cutting through the abdomen might save the baby inside. But this proves to be a false hope.

Mother and child are laid in a single casket, on a day after an ice storm. The sun glares off a world of glassy edges. The churchyard's features are mounded with snow. The teary men stand close to the grave that has proved hard to dig in such frozen soil. The predikant intones; in the wind his words are lost.

Clara has had to be threatened with a beating to make her join the mourners and come away from the house. At the churchyard she stands far back from the grave, with the other women. The goodwives—dry-eyed to the last of them—murmur that it's a decent enough crowd given the weather. Let's get the old grandmothers back to their hearths before

their lungs give out! Iris doesn't recognize many of these people. But she sees the Queen of the Hairy-Chinned Gypsies, wrapped in dun-colored shawls, standing beyond the churchyard. Iris could swear the stick-limbed crone is watching, though the wrinkled lids are closed. Iris ducks her head, pretending to pray. When she looks again, the Queen is gone.

After the last somber Amen, Iris turns toward Clara. The girl's head is covered, her face wreathed in black fur, and the wind whips strands of her pale gold-white hair about her forehead. She is frightened to be out of the house, frightened by everything, but who wouldn't be in her situation?

A thick-set man approaches. He walks with gravity to Clara and lifts her chin in his hand. "What a legacy of beauty your mother leaves behind," he murmurs courteously. Clara's eyelids tighten and she pulls back; her hands swing behind her, grappling for Iris, who obliges by leaping forward and taking hold. But then Clara is called to her father's side, and she goes.

Iris meanders at the edge of the small crowd that ushers van den Meer back to his home. She ponders a new thought, powerful as a foreign country, powerful as magic itself—

It starts with this: Henrika is *dead*. Her hands are tucked into an ermine muff as if she can be protected from the cold down there in the black earth. Her blonde hair is clean, her eyes pressed closed, and an odor worse than rotting flowers has attended her removal to the bosom of the soil. Henrika was kind to Iris and Ruth, after a fashion. Henrika fought with Margarethe but didn't throw her out of the house. And Henrika is *dead* . . .

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. . . and Iris is *alive*.. That's how the thought goes, and it's a troublesome and guilty one, but Iris *feels* alive: She feels her skin tingle. As Margarethe smartens her daughter up to receive mourners at the door, Iris feels everything. How the hairs pull her scalp when Margarethe drags a brush across her head. Iris feels her wrists in the sleeves of her jerkin, feels her right wrist go back and forth within its cloth tunnel like a clapper in a bell! She feels her whole body within her clothes. It occurs to her that she can sense the cloth skin of her underskirt brush against the skin of her buttocks, and this makes her blush so mightily that Margarethe asks, "What nonsense are you hatching in your ugly head on this most terrible of days?"

She stands and doesn't answer.

All during the afternoon after the burial, neighbors come to call. Iris sits with her hands in her lap, as still as stone, and she can feel the blood climbing the column of her neck, in spirals. She can feel her breasts pooling in her shift. She can feel her nipples stiffen in the cold and relax in the warmth. She can feel her thoughts collect themselves. She tries to sense the household imp, that unseen menace, but it must be scared by the commotion of guests. It seems dissolved. The house is just a house, generating nothing more eerie than chill and dust. Even the mice who usually scabble

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in the walls have gone silent, out of respect for the dead.

Distant family members arrive from their distance. Everything is strange and new. Everything feels richer, weirder. It's as if Iris was granted Henrika's life of feeling since Henrika clearly needed it no longer. Was I always here, thinks Iris, or

have I just been born? Why have I misplaced all my early memories, of childhood in the fens, of Papa? Why don't I attend?

But I must pay attention now, she thinks, because what other choice is there? Maybe when I die my soul will fly to meet God, but when that time comes I won't have the use of clever hands, nor the burden of an ugly face: hands and face will be planted like bulbs in the soil, while only the bloom of the spirit emerges elsewhere. So let my hands and my face make their way in this world, let my hungry eyes see, my tongue taste. It tastes the wet that seeps on either side of my nose. The world is salt. All the world is salt, and every field is sown in salt, and nothing can grow but I must feel every-thing, notice everything—

—why, why, she asks herself, but the urge to feel and notice is more urgent than the urge to answer questions. The commotion within her rises to a clamor, and she can barely keep herself on the bench at the side of the hall. Notice, notice; let noticing take the place of screaming. Notice Margarethe, doing the act of charity for bewildered van den Meer. Notice how she is modest in her helpfulness, her cap respectfully drawn forward to hide her face. Yet notice how she is here with a tray at van den Meer's left

hand, urging him to take golden sherry she has trapped in small glasses like the ghosts of fish. Notice how van den Meer blinks up from the depths of his mourning and accepts Margarethe's consolation, though he doesn't seem to see her. Notice Ruth, and how she's left out of this. How can Iris not have considered before that Ruth's being slow of tongue might not necessarily mean she is slow of feeling? Ruth on a

## THE GIRL OF ASHES

low stool, even farther in the shadows, her roaming eye tracking up and down a bit of unadorned plastered wall. Notice Ruth, with her hands twisting on her knees, as if by dint of force she might fix her legs properly at last and make them work like legs. Ruth with her brown hair that no one has bothered to trim, and a pucker between the brows like a dimple in a potato. What does Ruth know of death, thinks Iris, and for that matter, what do I?

Notice Clara, the girl of the moment, caught in all this attention and hating it. The shock of grief can only partly obliterate Clara's lopsided temper. When she can escape from a bleary relative, she trails away. Iris sees Clara lower her glance and prepare to give a dozing great-aunt a kick in the ankle. But Clara feels Iris's eye upon her and keeps both feet on the floor.

Notice the Master and Caspar, and how bothered they both are, despite their masculine strength. The Master trembling with some kind of panic. Henrika's death brings up in him the need for verities, for the classic tales of the scriptures. Her death is the memento mori that time must also catch him at his crime: Painting interiors with beautiful merchants' daughters or wives, nothing worthy about them except exactitude—he's abandoned both sacred inspiration and cautionary fable. Look how he scratches his brow with a palsied hand not entirely wiped clean of paint! A few flecks of skin drift off. He isn't listening to that chattering neighbor. He's too deep within himself.

Notice Caspar.

Caspar, a blessing of a human being, with his expression as open as a convex mirror. How he follows the Master, see-

ing to his left elbow, muttering someone's name in his right ear, smoothing the way through the social currents for his teacher and his employer. Caspar the good apprentice, Caspar the reliable friend, and also Caspar the handsome man. Oh, Caspar, thinks Iris. Oh, *uudl*.

She watches him when she can bear to look at him again. He is so—what is the word?—so right. So rightly formed. The good-sized shoulders, the capable chest. And then the tapering waist, the comfortable bottom, the well-turned calves, the thighs, the energetic feet. And the face, nested in all that glossy hair. The blunt who-cares nose, the wind-raw lips, eyebrows always askew, unmatched. A face with charity and mockery displayed in equal measure. Look at him, now tending to Clara, with all the affection of a courtier! What other man his age would care about the well-being of a girl? He is brushing her cheek with his hand, he is fiddling with her hair. Clara won't smile at him—how could she on this, the burial day of her mother?—but she does look at him and speak softly, and no one else, not even Iris, has gotten her to utter a word today.

Iris stands. She has to hold onto the edge of the chair. She must make Caspar speak to her or she'll die. They'll be opening up Henrika's grave and tossing Iris's own dead bod right in with her unless she talks to Caspar at once, and makes Caspar look at her, and notice her somehow. If she isn't to be noticed she'll disappear from the room and perhaps never return. She'll evaporate like morning mist. She'll be as gone as the household imp seems to be.

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She floats across the room. She is like a soulless spirit abroad from the depths of the Haarlemsmeer. "You have the power to charm our poor Clara," says Iris to Caspar.

He glances at her. "Charm isn't the word, I think," he says, but he winces at Iris, the most of a smile he can manage given the terms of the day. A smile nonetheless. So that's all right, then.

"Iris," says Margarethe. "You're needed in the kitchen now."

"I'm talking to Caspar," says Iris.

"Iris," says Margarethe, a tone that can't be ignored. So Iris turns away from Caspar, but not before catching his hand for a moment in her own. "Iris!" says Margarethe.

In the kitchen, a lot to be done. Iris isn't familiar with funeral customs of Haarlem, but today the abstemiousness of Calvinism, never fully embraced by the van den Meers, is being ignored entirely. There are bowls of oysters soaking in vinegar, and a brace of hares to unfasten from the spit, and a spill of produce from the cold cellar to be used in various ways. Margarethe, having made her silent procession about the salon, returns with rapid feet down the step to the kitchen, and there she sets a couple of hired girls and her own daughters to tasks. Caspar shows up in the doorway looking for a firkin of water. He's assigned to scrubbing potatoes before he knows what's happened.

"This is a sumptuous feast to prepare at the last minute," he says, observing Margarethe at the center of the whirlwind.

"People only die at the last minute," says Margarethe tartly, but Iris—clever Iris!—knows that her mother means more than this. And so does Caspar.

"These are potatoes that could have been scrubbed last night," says Caspar. "You aren't slack in the matter of household duties, Margarethe. Why this unseemly haste?"

"They are potatoes newly ordered in," says Margarethe, "this morning, if you must know. And likewise the bread that's about to burn if I do not—just this minute—Ruth, move your clumsy carcass from that stool, can't you see I need access to the oven—"

"What is this about?" says Caspar.

"At the last minute," says Margarethe, "van den Meer let it be known that he expected his colleagues to escort potential investors to his home to mourn the loss of his dear wife. Haven't you seen that the portrait of Young Woman with Tulips has been given pride of place in the hall?"

"He's removed the portrait of Henrika?" says Caspar.

"I had thought a painter would be more observant," says Margarethe wryly. "The beetroots, Iris, don't forget those."

With the house full of guests, Iris hasn't noticed the switch either. "But—surely they'll expect to see Henrika above the sideboard!" says Iris. "This is her house and that painting is the best token of her

memory! It's not a time to trawl for investments!"

"You have no idea about this, and why should you, silly girl," says Margarethe, and relents a bit and adds, "as no more do I. But I should think that the best token of a parent's memory is her beautiful child. Besides, Cornelius tells me that there's even more money to be made in the tulip market this year, due to a strong season in the Exchange in Amsterdam. Cornelius and his partners must be protected

## THE GIRL OF ASHES

against the potential loss of their shipment of bulbs. They hadn't yet been able to place the portrait in a venue that would guarantee discussion and snare investors. Timid Henrika had become uneasy about the painting of Young Girl with Tulips, and she had changed her mind about allowing its use for a commercial gain. So it's only sensible to take advantage of this sad but necessary gathering . . ."

"This is vile and corrupt," says Caspar.

"A father must take care of his daughter," says Margarethe. "You're a silly boy and don't know the ways of the world. Henrika would have expected no less of Cornelius."

"And a mother must take care of her own too, I suppose," says Caspar, but darkly, pitching a potato into the fireplace.

"Are you referring to me? I should say so. There is plague in Utrecht, I'm told," says Margarethe, "again. Again, mind you. This is a prosperous country and a fine time to be alive for all who will live to tell the tale, Caspar. I won't be thrown out on the street to watch my daughters starve, or waste away with the pox, or dribble their insides out with bloody flux. And who are you to talk? You take care of yourself, I've noticed, in any way that comes to hand, thanks to the Master."

"I am paid for services rendered," says Caspar sniffily. "I have a trade."

"Hah, is that what they call it, a trade," says Margarethe. "I believe that you are good at your 'trade.'"

"Mama," says Iris. She doesn't catch the drift of meaning, but she's offended at the tone.

"Let her accuse me of low morals," says Caspar bitterly.

"It's only from guilt that she finds the strength to make such claims of others."

"There's too much work to be done to waste time in talk. If you can't help, then be off," says Margarethe.

Iris glances. Caspar refuses to move. "I'm concerned for the well-being of your daughters, though not of you," he says. "I stay to assist them."

"Then let the girls sit on their stools and do their chores without the wagging of tongues," says Margarethe, but with a wave of her spoon she includes Caspar among the girls. Iris waits to see him leap up in anger, but he holds his tongue and merely works the harder.

All afternoon there is coming and going, and little chatting among the kitchen help except to learn what task is next. The lamps are lit as evening draws near, and platter after platter of delicacy goes out to the guests, and empty platters are returned.



Mid-evening, Clara stumbles into the kitchen and settles herself near the fire.

"If you're going to be in the way, you might as well help," says Margarethe.

"I'm tired," says Clara. "I've been standing at attention all day, silent unless spoken to by some hideous old man who wants to tell me I am more beautiful than the painting of me." She peers into the flames and scowls.

"Oh, I'll wager that makes the Master swell with pride," says Caspar, snickering.

"The Master left hours ago," says Clara. "Didn't you notice?"

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"He must be offended that his painting is newly hung for such an occasion," says Caspar.

Clara says, "I don't know what you mean," but before Caspar can explain, Margarethe says, "Clara, stir the pot while you sit there, save me the extra steps."

"I don't know how," says Clara, "and I'm too tired."

"There is no lesson needed in the stirring of the pot," says Margarethe. "Pick up the spoon and stir it."

"I'm not a kitchen girl," says Clara. "I haven't stirred pots before."

"Do not anger me," says Margarethe. "I am working my fingers to the bone to help your poor bereaved father, and while you are in the kitchen you are in my domain. If I tell you to stir the pot, child, then stir the pot you will, if I have to beat you over the head to make it happen."

Caspar and Iris exchange glances. Clara sits up straight. "This is my home," she says. "I will not stir the pot for you or anyone else."

"Margarethe," says Caspar in a voice that betrays nothing of his earlier antagonism, "Margarethe, the girl's mother has been interred this morning. Charity, Margarethe."

"Charity works both ways," says Margarethe. She picks up a smoothed dowel she has been using to roll out pastry. "Clara? Will you stir the pot?"

"I will not," says Clara.

## Plague and Quarantine

The cold snap continues. The days are bleached into sameness by a cloud cover that never varies. Iris, when out on tasks for the household, watches the stolid Dutch at their business, maneuvering over the streets that freeze up into icy ruts every night. The Dutch are buttoned and swaddled against the winter, as stoic and skeptical as their cows. If they believe in imps and demons, within the household walls or outside the city proper, they betray no such faith.

Feeling both older and newer these days, Iris thinks of herself at last as both English and Dutch—English in her hope of catching a glimpse of the magical world living cheek by jowl with this one, Dutch in her impatience with Clara's fecklessness. Iris admits it: Clara is beginning to seem maudlin. At any rate, her

crying morning, noon, and night doesn't make her father pay more attention to her, and it seems only to irritate Margarethe.

"On the streets of Amsterdam, Clara, the carcasses are laid out to be taken to the churchyard," says Margarethe one day.

## THE GIRL OF ASHES

"The plague comes and goes like a foul beast in the night, and Haarlem itself has known its ravages. Must I take you on a walking tour of the devil's handiwork in order to make you stop your sniffing? My own husband was dispatched with a blow to the skull, and even silly old Ruth didn't sob the way that you do. And Iris did as she was told, she dried her eyes and got on with it. Why can't you do the same?"

"Because I don't have a mother to tell me to do so," says Clara, wiping her eyes and her nose. "She isn't here to tell me to do as I'm told!"

"Well, I'm here," says Margarethe, "and I'll have to do."

Clara looks alarmed and angry at such a notion. But, so Iris observes, the anger at any rate has the effect of stilling Clara's tears.

Margarethe's remarks about the plague aren't idle. Those who work in the tulip sheds linger about the doorway to the kitchen, waiting for Margarethe to pass out cheese, bread, and pickled herrings. In return Margarethe collects news about the latest sufferers of the plague. "We shouldn't seem ungrateful for our room and board here," she says to her daughters. "Were we tossed onto the streets again, there to find lodging and food in some more despicable spot, we'd undoubtedly put ourselves in the path of contagion. God has seen fit to secure us here, and we must praise God for His providence."

"God took away Henrika and her baby so that we might be safe?" says Iris.

"Hush your voice," says Margarethe. "God might be listening to such doubt and punish us all."

"But I'm not clear on this point," says Iris. "God spoils other good lives to save our sorry ones?"

"I'll whip you into understanding if I must," says Margarethe.

Iris bows her head as if suddenly full of enlightenment. The prospect of Margarethe becoming pious alarms her.

The winter days crawl on. Comes the feast of Saint Nicolas. At Clara's instruction, the girls all set out their wooden shoes on the hearth. Margarethe sniffs. "You think that Sinter Klaas and his sooty helper, Zwarte Piet, will know that two ugly, hulking English girls live here? I wouldn't dream of

treats if I were you."

"Mama in heaven will have told the good saint about Iris

and Ruth," says Clara confidently.

"So we'll learn," says Margarethe.

And in the morning a small selection of sweets, nuts, and toys is found lodged in each wooden shoe. "But I received nothing more than you did," says Clara to Iris petulantly.

"Nor I more than you," says Iris. "Sinter Klaas has a fair hand."

"But I am the daughter of the household, and you are servants," says Clara.

"Oh," says Iris, brought up short. What to say? "Well, since we're all friends under this roof, whoever received a greater portion would have been bound by friendship to share it. So it's helpful that the favors are smartly divided

already."

Clara looks disgruntled at this but holds her tongue.

## THE GIRL OF ASHES

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Christmas arrives, and then Epiphany. "Now we get to select a king," says Clara. "Whoever discovers a bean baked into the morning cake." She's the lucky one, but her face falls when Ruth finds a bean in her portion too, and so does Iris.

"It is the feast of Driekoningen," observes Margarethe. "All three kings are honored here." Ruth sits up, proud to be a king. Iris and Clara fight over which one will have her face blackened as Melchior. But it scarcely matters, as Clara still won't leave the house, so Iris and Ruth trot off to join other children in the Grotemarkt at their strange songs about Herod and the Magi. Clara is a pouting Melchior from the front window.

The weeks of midwinter are endless. The mornings are locked in frost and fog, sometimes even curtained in snow. Too many days in a row the girls are kept inside. Though Clara teases and taunts the Fisher girls, she's pleased to have the company. But Iris and Ruth become impatient. When the weather lifts, they spend long days at the studio, leaving Clara behind.

Without Henrika's vigilance about education, Clara grows bored.

Margarethe scrupulously ignores her, and makes a practice of sending the girls out to do small tasks more and more often.

One day Iris is shucking her cloak in the hallway when she hears Margarethe remarking to Clara, "It isn't my job to keep you amused. And housework is not amusing, I'll grant

you that, but it whiles the hours away. But you will set yourself above housework, won't you? And for the moment I let it go." Iris tiptoes forward and peers to see Margarethe pushing a broom ostentatiously around Clara's feet and saying, "What delicate tender feet you have, too wonderful to stand upon to do some work and help us laboring folk."

The day arrives when Clara mutters to the pewter mug on the breakfast table, "I'll come with you tomorrow on your tasks if you like."

If there really had been a household imp—of any origin, Dutch or English—it must be long gone, for now is the time it should rattle its bones, chomp its teeth, flare its nostrils, scream with surprise. None of that. Iris notices nothing but cold, thick silence. She holds her breath. Ruth turns to look at Clara. Van den Meer pauses in his breakfast, holding a piece of bread aloft. His eyebrows lift.

"Come with us if you like. It makes no difference to me, none at all," says Margarethe. "It wasn't I who imposed this quarantine on you." But Iris senses a shudder of satisfaction running across her mother's shoulders.

The following morning, as soon as she can peel herself away from the warm hearth, Margarethe wraps herself in a cloak. Clara, nibbling her nails, stands ready. The last time she was away from the house was her mother's burial, when she was voiceless with grief. And before that it was years . . .

They set out toward the center of town, a quartet, Clara gripping Ruth's hand and looking this way and that. Margarethe's intentions are modest ones—a few onions here, a bit of lace there, a new candle mold from the smithy. "We

## THE GIRL OF ASHES

traipse after you like ducklings," says Iris happily. "Even though Ruth has a hard time keeping up. Come on, Ruth, use your big, strong legs. Clara, look at that dog going after the goose!"

"No," says Clara, entranced, "the goose is going after the dog."

"A woman may walk abroad in Haarlem and conduct her business," says Margarethe with satisfaction. "In England a woman is rarely allowed such liberty. She is quarantined for fear of the society outside her door or her farmstead. Clara, don't fiddle with your collar." Margarethe has spoken loudly. Three dames of Haarlem turn and watch Clara attend. "That's an obedient child," says Margarethe.

Iris pulls back a step and thinks about this. Is Margarethe parading herself as Clara's mother-in-stead? Is she is making a show, all about town, of her care for the motherless child?

She studies Margarethe as they wait at the door of the tobacconist, where her mother wants to buy a pleasing blend for van den Meer's pipe. If Iris were to paint Margarethe, what would she notice?

There is the heavy brow, slightly protruding, like a lump of bread dough that has fallen forward from up top. Firmly marshaled eyebrows, knitted together in the act of watching the merchant cut the tobacco to the correct specifications. Margarethe's hand is soldered to her hip, a gesture of patience and intractability both. Her lips are pursed. The lower lip is nipped in, to be pinched by the upper teeth in moments of mild distress. And, Iris realizes, such moments are frequent. Margarethe lives a life of compromise. She takes nothing for granted and barter every sentence to her advantage.

How dear she is, even in her strictness, her chill.

There's another side of Margarethe to be seen later this day, for the route they take home from the shops brings them by an almshouse for old men. Maids and manservants are carrying several corpses out the door to await the gravedigger's cart. "Plague alarm," says the regent crossly when he sees Margarethe stop and stare. "Save yourself, and give the suffer-ers a chance to rest in peace from your scrutiny!"

"The dead are dead," says Margarethe bravely.

"Some here are corpses, some not yet," the regent replies. "We are carrying a few to the Leprozenhuis outside of town. You want to join them and the other lepers, jump in the

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cart.

"God save their souls, and yours," calls Margarethe, and she mutters a few lines of the first psalm that comes to mind, mutters them without conviction or accuracy.

"This is what stalks you," says Margarethe as the girls hurry after her. "This is the devil's work. There's nothing to anticipate but the broad scythe of the reaper that will cut you down. Only jump when it passes, and perhaps you may save yourself until the next sweep. If you don't jump, you don't save yourself."

Ruth jumps out of anxiety, as if she imagines the scythe to be passing exactly then.

"Changelings," says Clara ominously, about the invalids and the corpses.

"How high do you jump?" says Iris to her mother.

"Just you watch me," says Margarethe. "I've jumped from the fens of England to the threshold of the poorhouse of

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Haarlem, and then jumped again. Just you watch me, and you'll learn what there is to learn. Give me room to cast my eel spear, and let follow what may."

Iris watches. Day after day she watches. She watches the ice form on the duck pond down the lane. She watches Margarethe sing as she prepares the hearty stew of root vegetables and prunes. She watches Clara alternately sulk and cozy up to Margarethe. She watches van den Meer's face grow longer as, with every passing week, the shipment of bulbs doesn't arrive.

Then she watches as Margarethe waits, and waits, and chooses the right moment to jump again.

Tke

Nowkere Windmill

The three days before the beginning of Lent, Clara tells them, are called Vastenavond. It hardly seems right to feast like gluttons when Henrika is so newly buried. Besides, the practice of Lenten atonement has never been popular in the Fisher household before. But Margarethe throws herself into the preparations with energy, concocting a stew with mutton, citron, greens, and ginger. "We will take our religious obligations seriously," she says, ladling up to van den Meer and the three girls.

"I suppose we should," says van den Meer. He is brooding, perhaps out of mourning, or maybe—Iris hates to admit—out of fear of financial ruin. "This is a good hutse-pot, Margarethe. As good as Henrika ever made."

"I don't think it's *that* good," says Clara stoutly, dropping her spoon.

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"Now, if you're going to do things right," says van den Meer, "preparing for Lent, Margarethe, you might want to take yourself over to the House of Correction. Careful with a stuiver as you are, you'll appreciate that at kermis time, admission is free."

Margarethe stiffens. "I am correct enough," she says.

"Oh, I suppose!" He hasn't meant to be rude, Iris thinks. Has he? "There you can see the whores and the inmates learning their Bible lessons, being reshaped into Christian worthiness at the expense of the town. It's quite an amusement."

"I have far too much work in managing your household to amuse myself by visiting prisons," she says sharply. "Or alehouses, for that matter."

"You do good work," he says, chastised a bit. "You perform many kindnesses for me and my daughter."

"I should think so. And don't speak about whores in this house."

"It is my house, Margarethe," he reminds her.

"So it is," she gives back to him. "You inherited it from your wife, didn't you?"

"You're feisty for carnival time." His tone is black.

She relents. "I should have said, please don't speak about whores in front of my daughters."

"I won't," he says, still stung. "But who knows what others in the street say about this arrangement?"

Her anger is so intense that Iris imagines the roof might explode. Margarethe hurtles out the door. They watch her sliding on the ice in the streets, wind whipping her black cloaks into huge, crowlike wings. But as the girls continue

munching the rest of their bread, Margarethe stalks back in. Her face is pink and even beautiful because of the intense cold. "Oh, come see," she cries, all fury forgotten. "The canals and the river have frozen over at last, and the whole town is out on the great ice road!"

It's the happiest day so far. Even Clara is caught up in the excitement, and van den Meer remembers there are shoes with runners, probably to be found somewhere in the sheds. After a time, two pair of skates are located. The leather is rotted from one skate, and of the second pair a runner snaps off. But Ruth's feet are far too big to squeeze into them anyway, so Iris and Clara each take a single skate, and the girls and Margarethe hurry out to the Spaarne.

The world is transformed. The skies are hugely gray as usual, and low, but this intensifies the feeling of magic and otherness. Some small boats sit frozen in the water, and children get running starts and glide up to the boats and crash into the sides. Dogs are yapping in every direction. The whole of Haarlem is out on the ice. Margarethe can't help but poke Iris and say, "Look, and see how it is: The rich have skates and warm cloaks, and there's a carriage converted to an ice boat! They can enjoy this oddness and take new pleasure in it. And the poor suffer even harder. Warmth is scarce, and food is absent. You can't live long on ice and snow."

"So are we rich or poor?" asks Iris.

"One skate to your name? You tell me," says Margarethe. "Balance very carefully, my dear. Very carefully indeed."

Enough of object lessons, when the carnival atmosphere spills over onto the city's icy ballroom floor! Iris hurries away,

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letting Margarethe try to balance Ruth, for whom the ground itself is usually trouble enough, and ice is more treachery than treat. Iris links arms with timid Clara and off they go. Frost crinkles the moisture in their nostrils and the corners of their eyes.

"Look, a game," says Iris, "those boys and men, with sticks and a ball—"

"Kolf," says Clara.

Horses on the ice. Trees at the margins of the Spaarne, sticking up like spindly pillars. Toddlers on their bottoms, wailing. Granddames spinning about on skates as freely as any of the young men. There a predikant, looking sour, as if he's merely taking this route to reach his place of prayer the quickest way. Grizzled men from the fields punching holes in the ice and dropping in lines, hoping for fish. Goodwives at their gossip, toddlers in tow. A fat old man falls on his backside in front of them and farts explosively. Off to one side, someone has rigged up a boat with sails, and is trying to make it glide, but the wind isn't strong enough and there are too many giddy young maidens weighing it down. A teacher recites Bible verses to his students as they all lurch along, no skates at all, but smoothly enough on wooden shoes. As far as the eye can see along the curve of the river, tiny pegs of people, in black and gray and red. Someone has made the mistake of urging a cow onto the ice, and she collapses and sprawls there wailing. A pig has escaped and trots along with dispatch, minding its own business and occasionally hooting with pleasure or hunger.

Then, out from the shadow of a beech tree, wobbles the Queen of the Hairy-Chinned Gypsies. "Look!" says Iris, and

before Clara can protest, they are slithering up to her. "You never did turn Master Schoonmaker into a slug!" cries Iris gaily.

"Eh? What's that?" The old thing is deaf from a multitude of scarves, and cursing her canes. "Let him turn himself into a slug. Most folks do."

"You were going to magic him!"

"Why bother. It's your own job to change yourself. These days it's hard enough for a crooked old girl like me just to stay upright." But she peers a bit and grins, enjoying the fun as much as anyone. "I don't know you chicks, do I?"

"Where are the hairy-chinned gypsies today?"

"You're a giddy soul! Why, where they belong, of course, like all of us. Your pretty friend's a quiet one. Her tongue got frozen?"

"She's shy of society."

The crone makes a mocking face. "Then I'll push myself off and save you the bother. Beauty has consequence, but I'm ugly as sin, so I don't care. Good-bye!" With surprising speed she makes headway across the river. The two canes are leggy as usual, and the trailing ends of several scarves, brushing the ice, look like even more legs.

"A real queen should be glorious," says Clara, disappointed. "She's hardly a queen!"

"She's hardly alive," agrees Iris, which makes them both laugh. They fall against each other, turning themselves into a two-headed, wobble-legged Queen of the Hairy-Chinned Spiders. And now here is Caspar, speeding up to them, his face almost purple.

"Where's the Master, then? You've left him far behind?" cries Iris, delighted to see him.

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"He has work to do; what does he care if the river is frozen or turned into honey or dried out from drought?" answers Caspar. "He's painting, cursing the cold, painting, munching on his bread, painting. You need to ask? Race you to the other side!"

"Wait! We only have two skates between us!" says Iris, but they are all off, laughing too hard to get up any momen' turn. Clara as jubilant as Iris, and both of them free of Mar-garethe and Ruth. Too ashamed to admit how wonderful it is not to have to bother with Ruth, for once, but today isn't a day for shame. There's enough of Lent ahead in life for that.

They tag each other and sprint along. Everything is changed. Ice has trapped every twig and reed, every broken hoop of bramble and each spike of fence. The crowds are mostly behind them now, but the friends can still hear the unanimous rush of "Ohh!" as the sun breaks through for a moment, diamonding the landscape.

Too much splendor. The sun burrows back beneath its blankets of cloud. It is early afternoon, but cold as dusk. "Shouldn't we turn back?" says Caspar. "We spend so much energy on the way out, we'll be tired returning."

"Just as far as the next bend," says Iris. "Who knows when we'll be able to ride the ice like this again?" It's nice to be out of the house too, and if Margarethe is being holy, Lent may be a more grim affair than usual.

They've passed beyond the place where the canal meets up with the Spaarne, and they're moving silently between open fields. Here and there a distant farmhouse, with the usual mess of old stork's nest on roof beams, and thin ropes

of smoke issuing from chimneys. Some cattle lowing, out of sight. The birds are with them for a while, but then they disappear, as if they can feel a harder cold approaching, and are making for home.

"This is the bend," says Caspar. "Come now, let's go back." "No, that bend," says Iris.

"That bend is a different bend; it's just come up into view as we passed this one," he says. "I can't stay out longer; the Master will need me to stoke up the fire."



"He needs you to keep him warm? He needs you a lot," says Iris, affecting the ironic tone with which her mother dis' cusses Caspar's apprenticeship. She has stung him; he whips his head and scowls.

"He does indeed, and I'm taking advantage of him in skating so far with you," he says. "I'm going to turn around even if you're not."

Iris hasn't meant to provoke a disagreement, but she's so glad to be away from Ruth and Margarethe, she merely says, "Well, go if you must; we're not bound by your obligations." "Maybe we should turn back," says Clara. Out in the world she's less certain of herself, and also less mean-spirited, Iris has seen. For once, Iris can't help taking the one advantage she has over Clara—that is, the privilege of courage.

"I'm going to the next bend in the river," says Iris, "and I'll find my own way back if I must." She doesn't say farewell to Caspar, but pushes ahead. Proud as a hawk! Her left foot launches and her right foot glides, and she's mastered the art of balance. In a few minutes she hears Clara's voice calling after her. She turns and waits.

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They go to the next bend, and the next after it. "We'll be in Amsterdam before nightfall," says Iris approvingly.

"I have to stop and rest," says Clara, "and I need to lift my skirts and pee."

The landscape is so flat as to be almost vacant. It reminds Iris suddenly of the way she felt when she arrived in Haarlem—what, four, five months ago? As if there were nothing of the past, just a white sheet. In the distance, maybe because a wind is whipping up some blurring edge of snow, the fields merge with the sky. The only solid thing in the landscape besides themselves is a windmill in a nearby field, not all that far from the river's edge. "Come, we'll go there," says Iris, "and if we can open a door, you can squat down in some corner. It's too cold to do it outside."

Clara isn't up for arguing; she's shivering with the effort to hold her bladder. They climb the low bank of the river and slash-clump their way across the field without bothering to remove their skates. The windmill is an old one, abandoned. Only two of the four arms are left, and one of them hangs broken like the limp limb of a hanged man. Icicles make the other arm look as if draped with white fringe. "Icicles will slice you right in half," says Iris. "Mind them. Doesn't this whole place look like a big, ferocious creature, with a blunt head, or maybe headless, and those reaching arms?" A giant in the fields, growing larger as they near—no surprise that, but ominous in this white nothingness . . .

She tries the door. It's locked, but the wood has rotted and with a little protesting shriek, the weight of two healthy girls applied against it, the door springs open and they turn-

ble in. Clara makes for a corner and relieves herself. The piss steams on the dusty floor, pooling over ancient encrustations of bird shit.

Ancient, and not so ancient. A few flapping wings in the dark over their head. "Bats," says Iris. "Or maybe owls." "Spirits," says Clara.

"Spirits, hah," says Iris. "Goblins maybe, but not spirits. Aren't all the local spirits trapped in the ice in Haarlemsmeer today? They can't get out."

"Spirits. I've been here before, I know. The crow at the top of the story."

"What crow, what story? You mean some tale I told, or the top story of your high house? You haven't been here before; you haven't been anywhere before. You don't go to the cathedral, you don't go to school. How could you be out here in the nowhere windmill?"

"I was," says Clara. "I remember now. I remember the shape."

"All windmills are the same shape." "No, they're not. I remember these beams going up like an angle, see? And this machinery. These gears! I remember the noise they make. So loud! So loud that when the wind drives the arms, nobody outside can hear anyone inside."

"All windmills must have the same kind of machinery," says Iris patiently. "It's cold in here, shall we go now?"

"There's a trapdoor in the floor just below this beam," says Clara. "I remember."

"There's no trapdoor. The floor is stone." Iris kicks at the muck. "See?"

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Clara is on her knees. "No. Look." She claws with her fingers, and old straw and debris comes up in moldy patches. "I'm telling you what I know, and you're not listening. There's a space down here. They put me there and they fed me. See the hook?" She points at the beam above, from which a rusting hook protrudes. "So I wouldn't get hurt, they put me in a basket and put the rope through that hook, and lowered me down softly." She's cleared away enough rubbish to prove her point. The floor is wooden, and there, there, is the edge of a trapdoor.

"Who put you down there?" says Iris. "When?"

"They did," says Clara.

"But who? Your father and mother?"

"No, no," says Clara angrily. "The others. The spirits. The crow man, the others."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"When I became a changeling," she says. "Don't you know anything?"

"When did you become a changeling? What happened to you?" says Iris. She peers at Clara's face in the gloom and comes closer. The whole place suddenly smells strongly of bird shit, new, powerful stuff. Iris is entranced by a sort of terror, almost a pleasurable sensation—but she is scared of Clara's monotonous recitation of these impossible facts. Iris says, "Clara, what happened to you?"

"A long time ago." Clara looks in a strange, pointed way at Iris, as if not sure that Iris isn't a spirit, hasn't squirreled her away here to drop her in a trapdoor again. "A long time ago happened to me, and I was a changeling. The crow man changed me. That's all."

Her expression is familiar. She is badly scared, and something more. "Come," says Iris, "away from this place, whether you're having a bad dream or not, let's get out of this place." But Clara is slow to move, and Iris has to tug her. Once outside, they find the wind more bitter, the clouds lower, and the temperature dropping still further. "No talking, let's push on, and cocoa and butter at home to warm us up!" says Iris as gaily as she can. Caspar, damn him, has proven to be right. It's too far back. Iris even worries that they've turned in the wrong direction. But eventually the huddled spires of Haarlem appear, and what's left of the crowds still cavorting on the ice—mostly children and the poor. Everyone else has had enough.

They make the last few steps to the house in a stupor of exhaustion. Clara's face is changed now; it's vacant and far away. It doesn't have the piercing look that it had in the clammy husk of the windmill. She doesn't take any cocoa, she just climbs the stairs to bed, and though Iris would be glad to hear even the sound of weeping, there's only silence from above. Later, as she's falling asleep, Iris remembers when she saw that look on Clara's face before. It was the look that she had in her eyes when she stared out the window at Ruth and told her, "Get away from here." It was that look of being stabbed from inside.

### Invitations

"It's the final day of kermis," says Margarethe, "and poor A eating begins tomorrow. So today we feast." Iris glances at Clara to see if she's pleased, but after the windmill afternoon Clara has seemed pleased by little. On a chest, she hunches in a slump-shouldered way, avoiding everyone's eyes. Iris feels sad for Clara, in a way she hasn't before, because Iris sees that Clara's fears are genuine, not theatrical, even though the reasons for the fears are more mysterious than ever. "Pancakes, Clara," says Iris brightly. Clara doesn't reply.

Margarethe sits over a three-legged pot, stirring batter that she will dribble into a flat pan with a long handle. Some apples are brought from the storehouse. Ruth is supposed to be peeling them, but she keeps forgetting and nibbling at them instead. Van den Meer is in the salon, recovering from a long day at the alehouse. He rests in the half-light, considering the portrait of his daughter with tulips.

"Iris, someone's at the door," says Margarethe, "and my hands are wet. See who it is." Iris admits one of van den

Meer's colleagues, who looks grim. Is it van Stolk or Hande-laers or Maes? She can't keep all these brooding, scowl-faced men straight. And this one more grim-looking than most. Iris hurries to find more candles to brighten the room. She fears the worst.

But by the time she's returned, the colleague has lifted his eyebrows and brightened his eyes, and with his fist he is buffeting van den Meer on the shoulder. The colleague has only been pretending to gloom. The news is really fine: A vessel, recently arrived from a port in France, has passed on the gossip that the long-expected tulip-carrying ship isn't lost at all. It has merely suffered a split mast, and has put in to port in the south of France, where more misfortunes conspired to keep the ship unseaworthy for many weeks in a row. Such crises are normal ones in the life of a sea captain, and soon he is expected to announce departure, bound for Holland. The tulip bulbs have been well stored; with luck they'll suffer no hardship for their longer voyage. All is in order, and since Lent has yet to begin—by a matter of hours—celebration is allowed.

Iris brings the news into the kitchen, and Margarethe takes stock of the situation at once. She removes her apron and she hangs it on a peg in the larder. She pinches her cheeks and fixes a few wisps of hair firmly beneath her bonnet. "Iris," she says, "see to the pancakes. Hold the dog away from the sausage in that pot. Don't let Ruth sit near with her backside to the fire for long or she'll get hives. Keep Clara here

for fifteen minutes and then send her in with three glasses of gin. Afterward, put yourself and the girls to bed.

## THE GIRL OF ASHES

"Do you understand me?"

"What are you doing?" says Iris.

"Jumping," says Margarethe.

Iris does as she's told. As she lies on her pallet, she hears the guest leave. For a long time she hears nothing more, only, once, the sound of a low giggle from the front room. At least she thinks it's a giggle. She can't remember having heard her mother giggle before.

In the morning, Margarethe is at her post preparing the modest Lenten breakfast. She's become engaged to van den Meer the night before, she tells them. "He'll have to be your stepfather," she says, "since I'm needed to be Clara's stepmother."

Ruth shrugs. It isn't clear if she understands the notion. But Iris does. She waits until Clara and Ruth have wandered off to their morning toilet. Iris faces her mother squarely across the kitchen floor. "You could have married the Master," she says to her mother.

"He hadn't the correct prospects," says Margarethe.

"He has talent," says Iris.

"Talent doesn't buy bread," says Margarethe.

"Of course it does!" says Iris. "Look! He lives and breathes and works! He eats!"

"Not another word from you," says Margarethe. "You're a foolish child, and you don't know what sacrifices I make to protect you and your sister. What if I should drop dead of the plague next week? Where would you turn? Answer me that, you smart child."

"I'd go directly to the one who cares for us," says Iris. "The Master, and for that matter, Caspar as well."

"The Master cares for his art, nothing more, and as for Caspar, his caring moves in another direction entirely," says Margarethe. "Do I have to spell out the nature of that particular sin? I can't; today is the beginning of Lent, and it doesn't suit my spiritual needs. You'll see it soon enough. The both of them are fools. They'd give you a home for one night as a Christian must, and feed you bread and porridge. Then before the week is out they'd ship you off to the poorhouse, or find an excuse to send you back to England. No, my girl, you know nothing of how we women are imprisoned in our lives, but there are ways to determine the sentence we must serve. You'll live to thank me."

"It's cold-blooded," says Iris.

"To be dead is more cold-blooded," says Margarethe. "Now, tell me when you're done venting your spleen. I have to work quickly to arrange the details, the better to secure his commitment to this notion. You'll have to do the scrubbing of the stoop this morning, and then polish the hasps and the handles on the front door. We must show right away that there is a new cleanliness pertinent to this change of

situation. I'm not a simpleton, I know that small gestures carry big meanings. Neighbors on this street are ferocious ear-blowers, always whispering about me. I'll give them respectability. They can't bear that I'm here in this handsome house. They can't bear to see the sun shining in the water; they'd begrudge a hen her corn."

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## THE GIRL OF ASHES

The wedding is more quickly arranged than Iris has thought possible. Caspar suspects that the period of mourning is coming to an end, and that neighbors' tongues might start wagging. Van den Meer is relying on local trade for the purchase of his tulip bulbs. He can't afford to scandalize his neighbors or those he meets at the Grotekerk of Saint Bavo's by living in flagrante delicto with an unattached housekeeper, even if she's a widow and ajshre.w and plam as a pumpkin besides.

In the weeks leading up to the wedding, Iris is kept at home more often than usual. So much to do! She has to manage kitchen chores so her mother can negotiate with the church authorities, with the suppliers of meats and wine, with van Antum the clothier for a new dress for the ceremony. Iris would rather throw down the cleaning cloths and run out into the street, heading in the direction of the Master's studio. She grows tired of Ruth's growled complaints, which she can seldom interpret, and of Clara's occasional mews for attention. "Why don't you go out with Margarethe if you're bored?" snaps Iris one day.

"I've seen the world again, and once is enough," says Clara. As if she knows this is silly, she stumbles on. "Besides, my skirt drags. It wants fixing, Iris."

"So your hem is ripped? Goodness, aren't you handy with a needle and thread? What did your mother teach you?"

"She taught me to turn for help when I needed it. She taught me that people would be kind and come to my aid."

"People admire you for your good looks, but sooner or later they'll know it if you've never met a needle and thread," says Iris. "Even a pretty flower has to learn to work, you know."

## CONFESSIONS OF AN UGLY STEPSISTER

"You chatter and my hem stays torn," says Clara.

"I am only a little older than you are!" says Iris. "Why do you plague me?"

"You're my elder by experience," says Clara, a bit sadly. "I didn't ask for you to become my stepsister any more than you did, remember."

Iris realizes that she is being unkind. Sisters—be they stepsisters, half sisters, or full sisters—sisters must do for each other. Isn't this how her mother raised her? Ruth can never do for herself, so Iris must do for her; and now Iris must do for Clara as well.

But Iris won't mend the hem unless Clara promises to try threading the needle herself, and then practicing the stitch that Iris shows her. Clara protests, pouts, makes fun of Iris's bossiness, tries to stick her with a needle—but in the end learns how to mend a hem, and seems a bit happier for it.

The day before the wedding arrives, and Margarethe is having a final fitting of her marriage vestments. Iris begs to be allowed a few moments to herself, and Margarethe refuses. There's too much to do. But van den Meer has picked up from Margarethe that she hasn't invited Luykas Schoon-maker to the party. "Is it fear of what people will say?" he asks. "Because you were a housekeeper there before here? That can't be helped. That's filling the pothole after the calf has drowned. Everyone already knows about it. Schoon-maker is the painter of Young Woman with Tulips, and people will see that painting again. He should be here. Send Iris out to ask him to come."

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"What about Caspar as well?" says Iris.

Van den Meer looks at her as if he has never seen her before. "Of course not," he says. "What use is that?"

"There is plague abroad," says Margarethe. "I hesitate to permit Iris—"

"Margarethe," says van den Meer. So she gives in, affecting wifely submission, as long as Iris promises not to go near the almshouse or the canal, or any other place where the plague is suspected of lingering.

Iris promises. She slips away without alerting Ruth of her intentions. At first Iris walks with dignity, head down, hands tucked into the waistband of her frock to keep them warm. But when she has turned a corner and is out of sight of the tall van den Meer house, she frees her hands to make running easier. It's heaven to thump her feet on the cobbles, to crack panes of ice that have formed in depressions in the road, to scatter the cold water collected below. It's heaven to know that it's still possible to run, though she doesn't know what she's running from, or why.

The Master hardly seems surprised to see her. "So the big day arrives tomorrow," he says. "I should've liked to attend."

"And you shall," says Iris. "I come to bid you welcome."

"And Caspar?" says the Master.

"He hasn't been invited. He is an apprentice, they say it isn't fitting," says Iris. "Where is he?"

"Out for supplies. Don't mind that, he'll be back. I know you love him best and you must put up with me, and pretend you really came to talk with me. It's sad for you." But the

Master is smiling as he says this, and Iris doesn't even bother to pretend to be shocked. She is growing up, she realizes.

Perhaps the Master knows what she's feeling, for he continues in a more serious tone. "Will you have some improvement in your lot by this handsome marriage your mother has arranged for herself?" he says. "I know she'll be more secure than ever I could make her, but how will it be for you? Will she let you go to study?"

"I don't know how to improve my lot, unless it's to take a heavy Spanish veil and hide my ugly face from the good citizens of Haarlem," says Iris.

"Self-mockery is an uglier thing than any human face, Iris. No one can pretend you are a pretty wench,

but you are smart and you are kind. Don't betray those impulses in yourself. Don't belabor the lack of physical beauty, which in any case eventually flees those who have it, and makes them sad. I'm talking about how you'll spend your days now that your mother has married into a better situation. Will you be freed of being a housemaid? Will you be able to be a maiden of leisure?"

"I don't want to rest that much," says Iris. "It seems to me the Dutch aren't overly fond of resting, and in this I feel very Dutch."

"So I have seen. Now, sit down for a minute and listen to what I'm saying. I want to know if you would care to come and be an apprentice in this studio."

Iris has been examining the underdrawing on a gessoed surface. She feels the blood rush to her face, and her gaze falls to the floor for a moment. "You wouldn't do such an ungodly thing!" she says, hardly daring to hope.

## THE GIRL OF ASHES

"Many talented housewives of Haarlem put their nimble fingers to the creation of needlework or of etching on glass," says the Master. "It isn't such a bold step to move from needle to paintbrush."

"You have no idea of my abilities."

"I know that you can see. I know that you know how to look."

She wills herself then to turn and look at *him*. He has set down his brush on the edge of a board. A smear of earthy green is stroked along one cheek. He looks patient, tired, and charitable. He smiles at her.

"I've never drawn a line in my life," says Iris in a small voice.

"There was a moment in my life when the same was true of me," replies the Master.

"What would people say?"

"That along with your clever mother, you were rising in the world. Some would scoff and some would salute you. To consider what other people might say is hardly a good reason to take action or to defer it. You have your own life to live, Iris, and at its end, the only opinion that amounts to anything is that which God bestows."

"But a woman painting!"

"Haarlem has learned to tolerate Judith Leyster, who worked in the studio of Franz Hals until recently. Now she has her own apprentices. Maybe you'd rather go learn with her?" He isn't teasing; he's talking to her as a good friend.

"But"—(it is Lent, after all, and she can't help asking the question)—"do you really think that God smiles on a maiden who is bold enough to paint?"

"Can you deny it? If so, by whose authority?"

Iris begins to grin at the ridiculousness of it. "You're playing with me, Master! And not the first time. You

borrowed my face to prove your worth to van den Meer, and you made a mockery of how I looked. Now you're mocking some secret desire I have."

"A painting is in the eye of a beholder," says the Master. "You could look at the painting of Iris with wildflowers, and you could ask yourself this: Did the Master see me with repugnance, or did he see me with my own beauty?"

But the idea of Iris having any beauty of her own is too much, and she falls to laughing, laughing until tears spring into her eyes, and she has to hide her face with her apron.

"There's no hurry," says the Master, turning back to his work. "I don't need an answer soon. But I've been waiting for you to ask me the question yourself, and you're being obtuse and slow about it.

"And," he adds, "I'm not being entirely selfless. You could be a big help to me. Especially if it turns out that, as I suspect, you have a small talent for this kind of work. The painting of Young Woman with Tulips has done for my reputation what my attempts at holy and unholy subjects haven't done. Haarlem now remembers that I exist, and my commissions have been mounting. I'll soon have more work than I can manage, unless I have an assistant to help me and to help Caspar."

At that, as if on cue, Caspar returns from his expedition, his arms full of lengths of cloth, vegetables, a jug of ale, and a freshly bled chicken for the pot. "Well, Iris! You got back

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safely from the frozen fields; did you skate as far as Muscovy?" He grins at her and shakes his hair out of his eyes. "I understand that by tomorrow you and I will have to be rein-troduced. Iris van den Meer, I haven't had the pleasure!"

"How do you do," says Iris. "You'll need help plucking that chicken, good sir."

"If you can stay until it's stewed, you're welcome to nibble from its carcass. Come, let's leave the old man to his fussing," says Caspar, "and you can tell me all that is in your heart about this wedding tomorrow. I suspect your van den Meer is really going to hang out the broom. If he puts some money out for a party, he'll collect some more goodwill and some more investors. Come whisper some gossip to me."

The Master reassembles a dignified expression on his face, and Iris follows Caspar down the steps into the kitchen. Now that Margarethe is no longer in residence, the place is a mess—oyster shells on the floor, scraps of old squashes, a spill of dried beans in the corner, and mouse droppings everywhere. "The Master wants me to come apprentice," says Iris, "but I think he and you both need more help in the household department."

"He's told you about that, then?" says Caspar. "Oh, Iris, do come! Say you will. You can't lodge here, of course; it wouldn't be fitting. But you can come during the day, as often as you like, and begin to pick up a little of the work for him. We won't ask for you to bring the kitchen to rights—in fact, we won't allow it. You'll never be allowed to set foot inside the kitchen. That isn't the point. I could keep this place clean myself if it were important to do so."

"There's not a household in Haarlem that would approve of this proposal," says Iris.

"Approval is overrated," says Caspar, parroting his teacher. "Approval and disapproval alike satisfy those who deliver it more than those who receive it. I don't care for approval, and I don't mind doing



without."

He throws the chicken down on the table and turns, with sudden elation, and grabs Iris's wrists in his hands. "Do say you'll come," he says. "It would be fun. You would be like a sister to me here. He can be old and miserable when work is going badly, or old and sententious when it's going well, but anyway he's always old, and older every minute. He needs you for help, but I need you for company. Try it anyway. Try it, Iris. Say you will."

She's caught, then, caught in his hands, like a bird who has alighted on a windowsill, looking for a crumb. Though he only holds her wrists, they seem—just now—to be the sole part of her that is truly alive. She is throbbing through her forearms, and her hands are numb. Her wrists ache with intensity. The skin on his palms is soft and warm, the warmest thing she has ever felt; his palms are small cushions, his fingers are fretted knobs of intention. If he snaps his hands, her wrists will both break and her life fly out of her heart through her unstopped veins.

"I can't," she says suddenly, "I can't possibly, I can't ever, no."

"Of course you can!" he says.

"I can't, I can't, don't you see?" she says, and she turns and flees. She leaves the studio behind, and runs on toward her small future and toward her mother's wedding. She can't

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spend years, months, weeks in there with Caspar; she can't spend a day, an hour. She can't bear another minute. He doesn't see how she burns for him. She runs to leave him behind. She doesn't turn back at the sound of his voice from the doorway. She listens instead to the thump of her wooden shoes on the cobbles, a loud punctuation, her only answer to the lovely, impossible suggestion: No no, no no, no no.

## A Fair Light on a Full Table

So the marriage. The predikant is a bit pompous and bothered by a cold. His noisy sneezes distract attention from the bride and the bridegroom. But then, thinks Iris, for that matter, even in her marriage finery, is Margarethe really much to look at herself? Her jaw is slightly receded and her upper teeth lean out in an overbite. Her skin is scrubbed, to be sure, but even if she never walks past a sunny doorway again in her life, she is still hopelessly brown as an egg. Hers is a hard face, even at a celebration, even in a moment of triumph.

As for van den Meer—or Papa Cornelius, as Iris is now expected to call him—he seems more depressed than anything. Perhaps Caspar is right, and van den Meer's marrying his housekeeper is a terrible mistake? Even though Margarethe's stock, two generations back, is solidly burgher, and the memory of her grandfather is still cherished in Haarlem? There stands van den Meer the entrepreneur at the door of his home, greeting the guests who have come to feast, and his chin is down upon his chest as if he hasn't slept well in

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days. Is he merely obliging propriety by this marriage? Or is there some genuine feeling for Margarethe? It's hard to tell.

As goes the wedding feast, so begin the weeks of their marriage: a celebration in the coldest of times,

with spring only a dim hope.

Margarethe takes to her marriage bed without so much as a remark to her daughters. It leaves more room for Ruth and Iris by the hearth; they can keep warmer. But in more ways than this are they distanced from Margarethe. Their mother has decided that she can supervise the work of the household, and perform many tasks herself, but that a cook is needed to prepare the meals and to keep the kitchen in order. Before long she has hired a dull girl from Friesland whose only virtues, so far as Iris can make out, are a tireless application to any task assigned her, and a shyness that keeps her from objecting. Her name is Rebekka, and she doesn't wash enough. She smells of old potatoes.

Iris is assigned to be Rebekka's helpmeet from time to time, a situation she abhors. Rebekka is so listless of expression! Besides, she has no opinion about the imps and dragons and giants of the world. It's true, she's kind to Ruth, in an oblivious way, but she treats Clara and Iris as regrettable appliances in her arsenal of kitchen tools. She doesn't look at paintings or think about them. If she has memories of her home in Friesland, she doesn't bother to share them. "She's very private," says Iris.

"Admit it: She's as thick as a black pot," says Clara bitterly. "She's a fool, and she stinks."

"Stinging words! You're critical of everyone," observes Iris.

"Oh, not everyone," says Clara in an offhand manner. "Only everybody who's alive as well as most people who are dead. I feel quite neutral about anybody not yet born."

"I don't like this kind of talk. Ever since the day we went into the windmill, you've been cross. You're unpleasant to be with."

"You shouldn't have brought me there. It was too far to skate," says Clara.

"I didn't know you were going to be moody and queer about it. Where's Mama?"

"You mean Margarethe?"

"You know who I mean. Mama."

"She and Rebekka have gone to the market for fish and onions. She's not my mama." Clara plants her hands on her hips.

"She's near enough to it, and none other qualifies better," says Iris. "Don't you be sharp to her or you'll find she knows how to be sharp to you."

"You're in love with Caspar," says Clara idly. She takes an apple and inspects it for the brown softness. "You think I'm an idiot because I'm younger than you are. But I'm not as stupid as Ruth. I can tell."

"You have a lot more nonsense in your head than I realized!" says Iris. "Changelings and spirits and theories about romance!" Her heart stomps in her chest. It makes her jump to her feet like a grown woman, brushing her apron down with her hands as if she can't abide the waste of time in idle gossip. "Have you really nothing better to do?"

"I have nothing better to do," says Clara. Her voice begins to rise. "When have I had anything to do? I am too pretty to do anything but be looked at! Mama kept me from

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dirt and grime; Mama kept from the common people on the street, though we are hardy merchant stock, not royalty of any sort. Now Margarethe protects me from the plague. I would *relish* the plague for a change of routine!"

"Hush, that's a filthy sin!" says Iris. "And the corpses we've seen on the street, do they enjoy their change of routine? Clara! If you're so starved for activity, shovel the ashes from the hearth."

"I'm fanned and petted like a flower, I'm going to be planted in some rich man's garden so he can admire me!" shouts Clara. "Papa cherishes me for stupid reasons! Everything done in this household leans on me! Why do you think my father even married your mother? Just so there'd be no blemish on my reputation by his having an old, widowed harpy in the house!"

"You are evil," gasps Iris. "Can you say such things!"

"I can say a lot," says Clara.

"So it seems," says Margarethe at the doorway. Rebekka lurks behind her.

Clara has been sitting on a stool. At Margarethe's words she stands up slowly and faces her. Clara holds her hands at her side in a formal gesture. She doesn't apologize. She doesn't blink.

"I don't know whether to be offended or amused," says Margarethe. "Rebekka, set the fish in a basin of water for the time being, and then see to the floors and the bedding upstairs. You aren't beating the bedding well enough; the bedbugs thrive." Rebekka, who seems uninterested in the tension in the kitchen, does as she is told with the fish and

then disappears up the back staircase. All the while Clara stands at attention, and Iris, with a sinking dread, discovers she feels responsible for the impasse between her mother and her new stepsister.

"Iris," says Margarethe, "go see to Ruth. She needs help washing again, I think; she's suffering the women's ailment and she's worried about it."

"Mama," says Iris in a careful voice, "don't take Clara's words seriously. She's still suffering herself, and learning how to be a daughter in a new family."

"I know Clara well," says Margarethe. "I know her type and I know how she deviates from her type. You have nothing to fear from me, Iris, and nor does Clara." She smiles in a clenched way. "All that stands in the way of harmony at home is an insufficient attention to the Fourth Commandment."

"But I honor my father and my mother," says Clara. "I honor my mother's memory and what she gave to me. And you're not my mother."

"The commandment requires that you yield to me as you did to her," says Margarethe. "I can't lay a claim to your heart, Clara, and I don't want to. But your behavior must reflect your understanding of my place in this house. I won't tolerate your abuse. Is that understood?"

"I understand," says Clara, "that you will not tolerate it."

"And you'll govern your behavior consequent to your understanding?"

"I understand," says the girl, "that you won't tolerate abuse. My behavior is a changing thing from hour to hour and day to day. We'll have to see, won't we? For there are

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things that I won't tolerate either." She begins to move away from the chair.

Margarethe neither strikes Clara for her insolence nor consoles her with an embrace. She merely says in an even tone, "Rebekka is feeling poorly today, and I've just learned we're to have guests at dinner. Your father has invited Master Schoonmaker and his apprentice. We'll need to make the room ready for guests. I will require your help."

"Require what you like," says Clara, and leaves the room.

Margarethe breathes a bit heavily, but only for a moment. Then, ignoring Iris, she begins to arrange the implements for an afternoon of cooking.

"Mama," says Iris, "you must see how unhappy Clara still is, what with her mother's death."

"I see how distraught you were with your father's death, you good daughter," says Margarethe. "You're my standard by which to judge Clara's behavior, Iris."

"I'm older," says Iris.

"Hardly," says Margarethe. "And you had no one to learn from. Was Ruth going to set you an example?"

"Well," says Iris, surprising herself somewhat, "in fact, Ruth did. Ruth was very brave when Papa died. And we all left—like that—like dark birds flying at night—"

"Ruth doesn't know how to be brave or cowardly any more than a loaf of bread does," says Margarethe sharply. "Didn't I tell you to go see to her? Let me be."

In the shed, under a table of potting implements, Ruth is lying with her hands between her legs. "Oh, come," says Iris, "it isn't that terrible, Ruth! Come with me and I'll help you

wash, and bind you with a clean garment." And to herself she thinks, is there no end to what we must endure, even we whose lives are fairly safe?

When she's finished assisting her sister, she sneaks up the back stairs to find Clara and to console her. The girl is sitting in a straight-backed chair, looking out the window at the street below. "She may be my father's wife," says Clara with a cold clarity in her voice, "but she is not the mistress of this family. Not the family that I belong to. I am sorry that Papa has not made this clear to her. It is a mistake."

"You aren't old enough to be the mistress of your father's house!" says Iris bluntly. "And think of all the work that would fall on your shoulders if you were!"

"I'm beginning to think I would appreciate the responsibility of a good day's work," says Clara. "What else do I have? I don't want to go outside again, ever. But I don't want to die of boredom either."

"Beware what you request of life," says Iris. "If what you want is to work, then come downstairs and help

me to arrange the table for guests."

"Do it yourself," says Clara. "I'm busy sulking."

"A pretty sulk you manage," says Iris, somewhat meanly. She leaves the girl alone. Iris thinks: Is it my lot in life to arrange peace among all parties? And why should that be?

The commotion in the kitchen is mercifully distracting. There are bread loaves to remove from the oven, and fruit to select, and cheese to liberate from its rind, and the glasses to collect from the cupboard. It isn't until there is a knock on the door that she realizes that she's been avoiding the most

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obvious fact: Caspar is coming to dine as well as the Master.

"I can't get the door, my hair is slipping from its bonnet," she says.

"Go, and forget your hair; who cares about *your* hair?" says Margarethe.

"Rebekka, you go," says Iris, but Rebekka is sitting before the fire with more than her usual listlessness, and she pays no attention to Iris.

"Do as you're told," says Margarethe to her daughter, sharply, when the knock is repeated.

So Iris does, and she escorts Caspar and the Master into the main room, where van den Meer sits inhaling his unlit tobacco in the well of his pipe. "Citron, mace, and rosemary, to the best of my knowledge," van den Meer says to the Master. "I don't hold that it cures you of worms, but it does delight the nostrils. Have some."

"I've come to work," says the Master, "if you remember. An hour of sketching while your family eats."

Caspar says in an aside to Iris, "You're about to disappear into the kitchen, but don't. You don't need to now. This is your home, you live here. Can't you sit and talk with me a while?"

"Our cook is feeling poorly," says Iris, watching the floor as if it were an icy pond about to crack beneath her feet. "I have to help Mama with her preparations. Time enough to talk when the work is done."

"Then I *will* indulge in some tobacco, sir," says Caspar to van den Meer.

"I didn't offer it to you, boy," says the host, and Iris

notices Caspar's face falling as she leaves the room to go back to her work at her mother's side.

"Are they here as guests of Papa Cornelius or as artists?" says Iris.

"The Master has asked for a favor," says Margarethe. "He's at work on a commission for a family in Amsterdam, I understand, to paint them in a grouping at home. He wants to show them some cartoons of a family at table, and he has come to study us and draw us while we eat our meal. It's my belief that Schoonmaker should be required to buy the supplies for this meal if he's to benefit from watching us eat it. Papa Cornelius disagrees. Papa Cornelius will be ruined if he doesn't watch every penny." Margarethe deposits the gleaming fish on a varnished plank and indicates that Iris should carry it in to the table.

"Now," her mother continues, "we must play the role of the merry family, to honor the request Papa Cornelius makes. Clara," she calls, "Ruth, come to the table, that we may utter our grace and prove our worthiness to God to receive these blessings."

Ruth joins the others at the table. Clara won't.

"Iris," says Margarethe in a somewhat public voice, "please go tell your new stepsister that she is to come to the table at once."

"Mama," says Iris when she has returned, "she says she isn't hungry and she'll not come."

"Iris," says Margarethe, smiling as she serves the guests, "please be so good as to tell your new stepsister that if she does not come at once, she won't eat tonight and she won't eat tomorrow either."

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"Margarethe," says van den Meer, "must you?" But Margarethe shoots him a look.

"I will behave as I see fit. You've asked me to do so, and you've entrusted me with the authority," says Margarethe. "Iris, do as I say."

Iris returns with a sullen and flushed Clara.

"Sit at my left, where I can reach you if I need to correct you," says Margarethe.

"My place is by my father," says Clara.

"Your place is where I say it is," says Margarethe.

"Let the girl put her bottom where she wants," says the Master, quaffing a glass of porter, but Margarethe gives him a look edged in ice, and he falls silent.

"Papa," says Clara. "Papa."

Cornelius van den Meer raises his eyes to the ceiling. He studies the candelabra as he says, "My business empire requires me to deal with squabbling investors, rats and squirrels who gnaw on flower bulbs, the fickleness of the buying public, the threat of accelerated hostilities with Spain. The squabbles around a dining table aren't my concern, and thanks be to God for that. I married a wife to manage the affairs within these walls, and, Clara, you will obey her or—you will obey her; that's all I have to say."

Clara sits down at the seat to the left of Margarethe. Her sweet face looks blank and tight. Margarethe rises and moves around the table, cursing mildly that Rebekka seems too under the weather to perform her duties. With ill-disguised pride Margarethe serves onto the best Ming china. She carries portions of food to the guests and then to her

husband. Then she puts two full plates down before Ruth and Iris.

"But I don't want to eat this," says the Master, taking one bite and standing up again. "I'm here merely to sketch with a red chalk. Pass this on."

"I haven't a plate yet," says Clara. "I'll take it."

"You'll sit where you're ordered, and eat when I give you permission," says Margarethe. She turns the sweetest smile to the Master. "Leave your plate where it is. Surely you see how the candlelight falls nicely on it; you'll be able to draw it more faithfully in that fair light."

"It needs less to be rendered than to be eaten," says the Master with forced joviality. "Pass it to Clara, that's fine with me."

"Here, is there not enough?—I needn't eat," says Caspar, lifting his plate and holding it out.

"Are you all determined to undermine me?" says Margarethe. She stands and pounds the table with the bowl of a silver ladle. "I am the mother here! Are none of you willing to acknowledge my position?"

In the silence Iris sees even Papa Cornelius looks faintly alarmed, an alarm that he manages to cloak when his eyes briefly meet Iris's.

"We do what you say," says van den Meer in a small but steady voice, "or we do not eat at this table."

"Well, apparently I'm not eating at this table anyway, so what means that to me?" says Clara.

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"I won't draw here if my presence causes anyone to go hungry," begins the Master.

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It's unclear what will happen next; the room is struck silent. Iris glances from one person to another, and Ruth hides her face in her apron. Clara sits up straight, and she is suddenly no longer a child but a stripling adult, with that creature's feisty disregard for authority. Her lower lip stops trembling and her eyebrows draw closer together. She seems about to rise from the table and fling something at Margarethe.

But before she can, a sound from the kitchen causes all heads to turn. Margarethe won't move, and Iris is too much intrigued by the dynamics of the argument to budge from her bench. So it's Ruth who makes her cautious trundling step to the doorway of the kitchen to see what has caused the ruckus.

Pausing, Ruth turns back to the table. A white panic has come up in her face. She trembles and, to everyone's astonishment, makes a face that they can all read. She grasps her own neck and bulges her eyes out. The gargle of her uneducated throat completes the message. Rebekka is sick, sick or bludgeoned, or fainted, or dead.

## Wind and Tide

"The imp again!" says Iris—she can't help herself. But in the commotion no one hears her, and she bites back the urge to repeat it, in case a stoat-toothed devilkin is crouching beneath the hutch or worming through the embers, listening. The fury in Margarethe's face is interior storm, and over the roof and against the windows, the wind has come up. "The house is besieged."

Margarethe rocks Ruth aside and takes a closer look at Rebekka. "Go for the doctor, Caspar," she barks. "And you girls, back, out of here. All of you."

Caspar is at the door, winding his cloak up against his chin, when there is a sharp rap. He starts, and so do Iris and Ruth, who stand with him in the shadows of the hallway, gossiping and worrying about Rebekka. Caspar moves to open the door slowly, to peer around it and see who might be approaching at this hour. But the wind strikes a blow as he unlatches the hasp, and the door is thrown to with a crash.

"High wind, it's all," gasps Caspar to Ruth, who cowers against the wall as if more spirits are abroad in the dark and

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galloping their spectral steeds in the noisy air. Branches crack, and out in the nursery it sounds as if a table suddenly turns on its face, or is that more mischief afoot?—and there, at the door, a stocky man in a heavy green cape, one hand raised to pound again.

"Do you bring this wind with you, sir?" cries Caspar in what even Iris can see is a voice of false courage. But it's a kindly gesture meant to console Ruth, whose eyes are by now leaking down along her chin, which she holds in her clenched fists.

"Don't make small words with me," growls the stranger. His voice is rough and cracked, as if he's been shouting himself hoarse in the wind. "Let the scoundrel van den Meer come to hear the news himself, I want to see his face."

"This is not the hour," says Caspar, drawing himself up, offended at the stranger's tone. "He is taken up with a household crisis."

"Get the man or I'll push you over and call him myself," says the stranger. Without thinking, Iris puts her hand on Caspar's shoulder, a quiet apology for the man's rudeness, and she feels the apprentice shudder.

That she can make a young man tremble!

But the young man—her young man—Caspar—is no match for the visitor, who uses his broad chest to heave Caspar to the side as a bull will tumble a pesky hound. "Van den Meer," caws the visitor, "there's news from the dunes, and on the street; come and hear it from me before you hear it elsewhere!"

It's Clara who appears first—not to meet a stranger—she has been hurrying up the stairs away from the kitchen. At the sound of the stranger's voice she pauses at the doorway.

The man looks at her with interest. Suddenly Iris recognizes him: the kind stranger at the churchyard who chucked Clara's chin in his hand.

He drops his head and calls again, "Van den Meer!" Clara doesn't mount the steps into the hall. She turns and goes back into the kitchen, and out the back door into the wind and the night, heading for the nursery, probably.

Van den Meer drops a bloody rag in the doorway of the kitchen. "Haven't you gone for the doctor yet, are you mad?" he yells at Caspar. "What are you waiting for, you simpleton?" Ruth flinches, as always, when such a word is used. Iris says, in a voice she hasn't previously used to Papa Cornelius, "He is answering the knock on your door. Don't criticize him for showing courtesy—"

"Iris," groans Caspar, "please!" With that, he throws himself into the dark and disappears from view.



"What fresh discontent is this, then, Nicolaes van Stolk?" says van den Meer.

"Collect your cloak and draw on stout shoes, if you would watch your fortune grow or collapse before your eyes," says van Stolk sourly, "for at the same time that a storm wind crosses the sea, tossing whales before it and scattering shoals of herring like flecks of sand from the dunes—indeed, tossing the very dunes themselves in the air, and shaping again that insubstantial margin that keeps Noah's flood from punishing the speculators—"

"God has promised not to punish us again with the flood—remember your Scriptures," says van den Meer harshly. "Pity when He was about the business of drowning

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useless species, He didn't include the flowery-tongued gossip among them. Tell me what you have to say, you who love the darkest news. Then take your leave."

"You aren't listening to me," says van Stolk. "The seas are high and the winds are of gale strength, and most of Haarlem is out on the sands to watch for whales—"

"What do I care about whales," says van den Meer heavily. "I have a housegirl with a bloody stomach, and it may be the plague—"

"The plague," says Iris, "no!—"

"—your fellow citizens watch," says van Stolk, "and they see at last the ship bearing your cargo, making small progress in the storm. *The ship*, van den Meer. Half of them have invested in your stock as primary investors, or else they have sold their shares for an impressive gain to more grasping souls. Many of your friends and neighbors are among them, who have more to lose by a sunken cargo even than you do. You who gorge on the fat of someone else's fortune. The least you can do, profiteer, is to join the anxious and keep watch over your wares in the water, and see how the hand of God treats one who prospers on the greed of others ..."

"Stop your preaching," says van den Meer. "I'll come, because I must, but if you stand near me and prattle, I'll drown you myself in the first helpful wave."

The Master appears at the door from the kitchen to see what the fuss is. "Surely," he says, "you aren't going to leave when your kitchen girl is heaving blood—"

"She's a new girl," says van den Meer, "and as Mar-garethe married me to get a household to manage, this is part

of the task. I will not," he says, and repeats in a stronger voice, "I will not be lectured by two guests, one at either side of my own hall!"

Van den Meer and van Stolk stumble out into the stormy evening, where, despite the clouds and the rising winds, a little late light is still dragging across the sky. The Master returns to the kitchen, where Margarethe can be heard heating a cauldron of water and calling for the slicing of lemons. Caspar is long gone, and Clara too. But Clara won't have ventured far. There is no place very far she can go.

Iris and Ruth look at each other. Ruth doesn't like it when two kitchen cats claw at each other. She likes it less when her family squabbles. She sits on her haunches, her petticoats and skirts every which way,

her face mucky with fretting. Iris catches her breath, one hand out to steady herself against the dark oak chest. "Ruth," says Iris, "you mustn't fuss yourself. Everything will turn out all right. The weather is the hand of God, and so is the course of sickness—"

"Are you gagging in there like goose sisters, when I need your help?" calls Margarethe, so the girls go in to help their mother.

Rebekka is laid on a cloth near the warmth of the fire. Iris can't help herself: She studies the scene for color. The bright red of the newest coughed blood, the brick brown of older, dryer splatterings, the goldfish scales of the copper kettle, the brown shadows in which the Master works at assembling a poultice of garlic and lemons. The smell is ferocious, and even the cat looks offended and keeps his distance. "Is it the plague, as Papa Cornelius says?" asks Iris.

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"I'm no student of the physic. I'm merely trying to help the woman breathe," says Margarethe. "Lord preserve us, the plague at last in our own house, to bring us down just when we have survived our trials. I should cart this girl out into the storm and let God take her there, if take her He will!" But she makes no move to follow her own advice, and Iris is sent to hunt for extra blankets in the cupboard upstairs, as Rebekka seems unaccountably chilled, even near the fireplace.

The kitchen is too frightening for Ruth, and Clara is still missing, so after a while Iris settles Ruth in Clara's bed and stays by Ruth's side until she drifts into a fitful sleep. Iris naps too. It's late in the evening when the doctor is located at last—on the dunes, with other witnesses of the disaster that is inevitable . . . that might be averted . . . Just wait. . .

The doctor's arrival wakes Iris. Though she crouches in the stairwell to overhear, she can't make out his hushed report to Margarethe. But after the doctor leaves, Iris ventures into the kitchen, rubbing her eyes, pretending to be just awakened.

"Papa Cornelius still frets at the shore, where the storm takes on a greater fury, so the doctor says," says Margarethe. "I didn't know how the citizens of this town have taken to these investments. Tulips, yes, the mad passion for strong flowers; but the passion to invest, and to make money on speculation? If this cargo is lost, my girl, we are in another stew; so if the plague takes hold in this household, we might find ourselves well out of this sorry dilemma."

"Mama," says Iris. She yawns. "These are adult things, and I am a child."

"You're less a child than your older sister, and I need some comfort tonight," says Margarethe. "The Master has gone back to his studio, since there's nothing else he could do. Prepare me some weak tea, while I keep at this messy work, and Rebekka more or less dies in my lap."

"Clara went out to the nursery—has she come back in?" says Iris.

"That's her business, or so I am told," says Margarethe.

"Mama," says Iris. "Please. She is only a child—"

"Find her and mind her yourself," says Margarethe, "after I have my bowl of tea, to soothe me and keep me alert. Papa Cornelius will not be lectured by his guests, and I will not be lectured by my daughter. I don't care if Clara catches the plague herself—"

"Mama!" says Iris.

"If there's a fortune to inherit, should the cargo go through," says Margarethe, "you'd benefit more if Clara had gone to her grave."

"Oh, you aren't thinking rightly!" says Iris. She has no shame but she worries, for her mother has a wild look in her eye. "You rest, Mama, and let me sponge down poor Rebekka. This isn't like you, you mustn't say such a thing."

"You find Clara, then, and you do the deed of charity," says Margarethe, "but not until after my tea." She closes her eyes for a moment and says in a whisper, "Of course I don't mean such dreadful things, Iris. Of course I don't."

Iris makes the tea as quickly as possible and flees the kitchen sickroom.

The shed is dark and cold, yet even as it creaks beneath

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the lashings of wind and rain, there is a smell of spring, of soil and the wet wooden handles of tools.

Clara is lying beneath a table of tulip bulbs near to flowering. Her eyes are rolled up in her head, and for an instant Iris believes that Clara has succumbed to the plague too. But it's merely a dreary half sleep, from which Clara starts as she realizes that Iris is approaching. "Who's there?" cries Clara.

"It's only me," says Iris. "Why are you out here when commotion plagues your family so inside?"

Clara allows herself to be embraced, and she weeps in Iris's arms. She doesn't answer the question. She merely says, in a dull voice, as if to herself and without expectation of an answer from her stepsister, "Oh, whatever is to become of me?"

## The Girl of Askes

The death of Rebekka is a study in contrasts with the death, just *six* weeks earlier, of Henrika. Rebekka is bundled up and carted away within the hour, and if there's a service for the poor thing, or if anyone makes any attempt to inform whatever scrag ends of family she might have back in Friesland, Iris never learns about it. Rebekka leaves the household as quietly and anonymously as she has come. Perhaps the household imp is trapped in Rebekka's corpse and has been evacuated that way?

Perhaps. The storm has lifted, and, against all expectations, the ship bearing the precious cargo of tulip bulbs has straggled up the ice-choked but navigable Saarne to the tie-up. The ship didn't founder, there were no Leviathans washed up on the beach: The next day folks complain that they lost sleep over precious little in the way of disaster. But, Iris is realizing, this is their way of slighting their own anxiety. If the cargo had been ruined, a number of Haarlem investors would have suffered serious losses.

## THE GIRL OF ASHES

Van den Meer boasts of how he greeted the captain and escorted him to an inn for a hot rum and a bonus of a small sack of gold coins. A triumphant return! Van den Meer spends more time away from his home than he has before. He lingers at the public house where the college of tulip traders meets. He

crowds about lining up new investors for another shipment. He appears not to notice that Margarethe is being more strict and proprietary about the household— or, Iris wonders, is that part of what causes him to spend so many hours away?

As Margarethe spends less time in the kitchen, so she can be parading about the streets of Haarlem in new clothes, Clara takes up the slack by the hearth. She has put off the very young way of clothing herself that Henrika preferred. Clara dresses in plain garb, suitable for a maid. She has decided that she doesn't mind the chores, she tells Iris and Ruth. In fact, she'd rather learn small tricks of cooking instead of turns of Italian grammar or difficult passages in keyboard exercises. "It is a private place, the kitchen," she says simply, and by that Iris suspects she means, *Now that Margarethe is no longer here.*

Then the Easter season is upon them! At last! The brightening skies, the return of warm weather, the hilarity of children let out of doors, with less binding clothing, with longer legs than they possessed the season before. Iris wants to run with them, to ramble in the fields and meadows, but if Clara is growing into a young woman, so is Iris. The day comes when it's Iris's turn to seep and be sore as women do.

Ruth lies with her and puts her hands on her stomach for comfort, and Clara stands in the doorway looking queasy. "Could a worse trial be devised?" says Clara, treating Iris like a horrible specimen at a medical demonstration. "I hope such a trouble never comes to me."

"Go away," says Iris, who can't be kind while her lower regions clutch and ache.

Things settle down. Caspar arrives with word that the Master expects to see Iris in his studio, ready to learn to draw at the least, and to help out when the learning has made her ready. Iris won't even ask Margarethe for permission, for she knows what the answer would be. Besides, she's come to realize that what she feels for Caspar is love, pure and simple— well, now, isn't she old enough to know what love is?—and she won't be able to bear being so close to him every day with' out declaring herself. And she has no courage for that.

Ruth doesn't display much interest when she hears her sister and stepsister talking. Ruth has begun to pay more attention to the animals in the household—the cat, the chickens, the mice that can be rescued from the cat and kept in a small wire cage until they die. Is it merely that the family is getting older, and there are more diversions? Or does Ruth actually seem to be thriving, perhaps due to Margarethe's increased absences? Margarethe refuses to hire another girl from off the street to do housework, for fear the plague will come back and gain the foothold that it hasn't managed to get so far. So Clara does more of the housework, and Iris supervises and mopes and dreams of Caspar, and Ruth keeps to her

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small animals, and stands straighter and looks with a more secure gaze on the world than she's been known to do before.

It's Clara who, with a somewhat devious expression, finally says to Iris, "You alone are unhappy now. What are you waiting for?"

"I don't know what you mean," says Iris, folding some laundry that's been airing in the strengthening April light.

"There's no reason you shouldn't go to Master Schoon-maker's studio and learn a few things about drawing if you like."

"What? And leave you to manage the entire household by yourself?" says Iris. "I may not like supervising you in the housework, but I could hardly think of abandoning you here."

"Don't fret," says Clara. "It brings me nearer to my mother, to do the things that she did. I don't mind Margarethe out being the pride of Haarlem, making friends and spending money. The house is quieter when she's gone. I have something of what I want. So why shouldn't you? Don't you want to paint?"

"I do not know if it's proper for women to paint," says Iris.

"It may not be common," says Clara, "but surely it's neither impossible nor illegal. Wouldn't the Master tell you if it were? And why do you worry about propriety, anyway?"

Iris took a deep breath. "The Master already has a student, Caspar," she says.

"What does that matter? Besides, don't you care for him?" says Clara. Her frankness surprises Iris. "All the more reason to go spend time with him. A chance to get to know him better!"

"Don't be ridiculous," snaps Iris. "You don't want to be caged in the shell of some stupid marriage, Clara, but don't be caged by your own limited experience either. You must be able to see my plight. I'm not as pretty as you; I don't stimulate interest as you do."

"Caspar is very friendly to you," says Clara in an even voice, taking no offense. "You aren't a dull person, Iris, and for all your plainness you're interesting to look at. Why lock yourself in your own cage when someone is handing you a key? Why not learn a skill while spending time with people you care about? Just say what Margarethe would say: Give me room to cast my eel spear, and let everything else follow as it may."

Iris isn't fond of this sentiment. She retorts, "I can't leave you to manage the kitchen by yourself, Clara."

"Ruth can lend a hand when I need help," says Clara. "If you don't ask your mother for permission, Iris, I'll do it for you."

Iris slowly puts her face in her hands. Is there sense in what Clara is suggesting?

"You ought at least to know," says Clara. "What if you're wrong and Caspar could find himself in love with you? What if you lost this chance to learn?"

There is a grunt. Iris looks up through wet eyes. Ruth has come to the doorway, and perhaps she's listened to the conversation. She is nodding at Iris and grinning in an encouraging way.

"Ruth will help me when I need help, won't you, Ruth?" says Clara.

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Ruth nods, puts the cat on the floor, and rolls her sleeves as if to begin scrubbing a floor.

"All right, then," says Iris. "I'll see if I can summon the courage to ask Mama."

"You do that," says Clara. She puts down the small hearth broom and suddenly, with a chuckle, dips her hands in the ashes. She smudges her cheeks and her forehead. "I am no beauty anymore, I'm a simple kitchen girl, a cinder-lass, at home in my ashes and char."

"Don't do that," says Iris, "it makes me shudder. In England we had a child's game about flowers and ashes—Ring a round of rosies, a pocket full of posies; Ashes, ashes, ashes, and down we fall. It is a simple ditty for toddlers to play, to walk and tumble and shriek with, but someone told me once it's a game that derived from fear of the plague, and the ashes are those that we crumple into if the plague should overtake our lives. So don't be the girl of ashes, not even in play; you're too good."

Iris thinks about Clara's offer and amends her remark: "You are far too good."

Clara purses her lips. "No, *you* are good, but what a simpleton! You don't even see that I'm merely looking after myself, as usual." Iris doesn't know if this is strictly true. Clara has been sad, bitterly severed from the possibilities of her life, but is she incapable of kindness? That would make her a sort of beautiful monster.

Clara shrugs as if she can see these thoughts on Iris's face. She continues, "I don't care if you're happy or not, not really. But if you're gone from the house, I'm the more secure

in my kitchen. The more needed, the more private. Call me Cinderling," says Clara, standing up straighter behind her mask of ashes. "Call me Ashgirl, Cinderella, I don't care. I am safe in the kitchen."

Fi

mery

\*O rude an onion as I can be made to look like a rose," ys Margarethe with pleasure. "What do you think of me now?"

She parades up and down the black and white tiles in her new garb. Iris holds her hands together to keep from wringing them. Her mother looks less like a rose than like a heap of unsold flowers at the end of market day, thrown together with no regard for effect. Iris has always thought that Margarethe is possessed of a sober good taste. Now she realizes, with a start, it is poverty that kept Margarethe in appealing browns, blacks, and whites. Left to her own devices and granted a decent purse, Margarethe would rather look like a strumpet.

But Margarethe doesn't notice Iris's disapproval. And Ruth is clapping her hands in appreciation and chuckling at the transformation. Clara, who has come from the kitchen with a basket of turnips in her arms, says merely, "This fills me with a strange joy," and turns around again.

"I should imagine it did," says Margarethe, missing the irony in Clara's tone.

"The colors," says Iris, because she can't think of another remark.

"And the finishing touch—I daren't wear them through the streets," says Margarethe. She unfolds a length of cloth and takes out a pair of dainty white shoes, in leather pounded so smooth as to fit like a skin. The leather shines with an oil so it's like looking at shoes of porcelain or cloudy glass.

"Hardly useful in the streets of Haarlem," says Iris, despite herself. "No matter how well the Dutch clean up after themselves and their horses."

"To be worn when I go forth in a carriage, door to door. Do I hear some disapproval in your voice?" says Margarethe. "Why shouldn't I be well turned out?"

"Please," says Iris, "I don't mean to be rude. They are soft as gloves, aren't they? Where will you wear them?"

"These shoes will open doors for us, as yet still closed," says Margarethe.

"That would be a sight," says Iris. "You mean, they can kick doors open?"

"Oh, the comic airs of the young," says Margarethe, but without rancor. "Put these away in the wardrobe, and wrap them carefully again so as to protect against marks and dirt. You still don't know what your mother is capable of on your behalf."

"And on your own," says Iris in an even voice.

"In a family, the good of one member advances the good of all members."

"Well," says Iris, "then may I propose the good of this member by asking for your permission to take up a posi-

#### THE GIRL OF ASHES

tion—for a few weeks only perhaps—as an associate in the Master's studio? He thinks I can learn some rudiments of drawing, while I help him with the preparation of colors and varnishes and the stretching of canvases and linens—"

"I should think not," says Margarethe, admiring herself in the mirror at the end of the room. "He's been filling your head with notions, and I disapprove."

"It does a girl no harm to learn a skill—" begins Iris.

"I won't have you being an assistant to anyone," says Margarethe. "Not when we can afford for you to learn the things that wealthier girls learn. A little French perhaps, some Italian—you're just as bright as Clara, though you didn't start so young, and now there's time for you to advance. Clara can mind our Ruth."

"I want to go to the studio," says Iris, "not just to assist him, but for what I can learn there. I am being selfish, Mama. I want to learn something I care about. I don't want to prattle in French."

Clara calls from the kitchen, in a pleasant voice, a long declarative sentence—in French. Perhaps she knows what she is doing, for Margarethe blushes—unable to understand—and she stands there for a moment, at a loss. Finally, in reply, and equally loudly, "If Clara really is willing to do the household chores that you might have done together, perhaps I can spare you."

"Merci," says Clara, and they all understand that. And Iris sees that she is the beneficiary of Clara's desire to stay home, whether Clara means to be helpful or not.

\* \* \*

The next day Iris wraps a cloak around herself and takes a basket of bread and a pot of conserves, and makes her way through wet, sun-scrubbed streets. Haarlem is seeing to itself with its usual pride. Doorsills are swept, brasses polished, windows washed, gardens tended, loaves of bread cooling on sills.

Iris realizes that there's a purpose in her step, and it has something to do with her heart, but, as well, it has something to do with her hands—they're eager and ready to grapple with a little red chalk, to try a few early lines on paper.

The Master and Caspar are busy arranging paintings in a sloping pile, smaller paintings nearer the wall, larger ones propped carefully at an angle over them, each one a few inches out from the last so that there's a protective edge of air between them. Caspar's face brightens at the sight of Iris in the doorway, but the Master is frowning and seems hardly to notice.

"If it's bread as a present, put it in the kitchen," he says. "Caspar, let's get the Annunciation next, the one in golds."

"I've come to the studio, not the kitchen," says Iris.

"Then you and Caspar shift these larger paintings, and let me get back to the portrait of Burgher Stoutbelly before I fully wake up from last night's ale. It turns my stomach to think of the time I spend on glorifying insignificant people, and I can only bear to do it when I am partly asleep or partly drunk, and at the moment I'm both. And don't talk to me. I'm in no mood for silly gossip."

"One piece of gossip a day is enough, eh?" says Caspar, winking at Iris.

She realizes the wink, though directed at her and meant

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to draw her in, is an observation about the Master. "What piece of gossip is this?" she says, dropping her cloak and her basket and following Caspar into a side room, where more paintings are slanting in the gloom.

"Gossip for painters and social climbers alike," says Caspar.

"Fortunately I'm neither one, so I can hear the news without overexciting my heart," says Iris, whose heart is well excited as it is, to be in a dark, narrow space with Caspar leaning conspiratorially to whisper to her.

"At a party last night the word was bruited about that Marie de Medici is to spend a fortnight in Haarlem. She is the widow of Henry IV, and she's the Dowager Queen of France. She recently set up a house in Amsterdam, where she shocks the local shopkeepers by going right in and arguing their prices down. She's an old bull."

"I suppose even the very royal must travel sometimes," says Iris. "This hardly seems worth a sour mood."

"She's reported to have two aims," says Caspar. "She's called for an exhibition of the finest of living Dutch painters so that she can choose someone to do what she deems her last portrait—she's sixty-five years of age and faces the grim specter of death. So the painters are in a stew to select their best two or three works and submit them to the Haarlem governors. Everyone hopes to get invited to exhibit and maybe even to meet the Queen. She's holding a similar exercise in Amsterdam, and perhaps again in Rotterdam or Utrecht, though Rotterdam doesn't boast the native ability in painting that Haarlem does."

"Thus—Annunciations?" guesses Iris.



"She's from Florence, which is quite Catholic," says Caspar, heaving at the edge of a huge panel and motioning Iris to do likewise. "She won't have the aversion to devotional subjects that we friendly Calvinists do. But is the Master ruining his chances of being included in the exhibit by submitting work that's so out of fashion? After all, he has to gain the approval of the Haarlem fathers first."

"Surely they have in mind the Queen's taste too," says Iris. "As hosts they'll hope to make her happy."

"To the contrary, as hosts the Haarlem patriarchs are proud of thriving mightily without much of a royal family," says Caspar. "We Dutch all merely nod to our Frederick Henry, Prince of Orange. Still, since the word is that the French she-elephant is coming, the Master is willing to gamble. Let the Haarlem judges decide. The best commission of his life may hinge on this."

"I didn't think the Master was a social climber," says Iris.

"The painters don't necessarily thrill and puff up at that aspect of it," says Caspar. "Anyway, word also has it that the Queen has a secondary aim. She will preside at a ball, or perhaps a series of them, to introduce one of her relatives or godchildren to Dutch society. He may even be looking for a bride among the assembled ranks of young women."

"Surely not!" says Iris. "Members of royal families don't select spouses from the crowds who assemble to gape at them!"

"I should have thought the same," says Caspar. "But those who pay attention to the fortunes of nations remind us that there isn't any eligible young woman in the House of Orange-Nassau. Suppose Holland is to have a long, fruitful

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existence as a republic? For a foreign nobleman on the rise, a bride from the class of men who govern Holland through these prosperous years might be a wise course of action."

"And what about this nobleman's affections?" says Iris. "Isn't he to have some say in a choice of bride?"

"You ask me how these things work?" says Caspar, winking at her again. "What do I know of young men and their affections?"

They don't speak for a while. They heave eight of the Master's Annunciations out of storage. Once the paintings are set up around the room, a family resemblance can be seen among them—not only in the subject matter, but also in the choice of colors that the Master favors. When he finally throws his brushes down in disgust, cursing at the likes of Burgher Stoutbelly, he turns to study the Annunciations.

"Tripe," he announces at the first two. "The colors thud. They are painted with dung and piss. Take them away."

"They are heavy to carry," says Caspar, still breathing heavily.

"They muddy the light and stink up the room. Take them away."

Iris and Caspar carry them back to the side room.

Of the other six the Master says, "In this one the Virgin appears already pregnant. Not appropriate for

the Annunciation. Take it away."

"She isn't pregnant," says Caspar. "She's merely well fed. So is Marie de Medici, they say."

"Take it away, but watch the frame on the doorway. This is one of the larger ones."

"This is hard work," says Iris in a whisper. "Am I going to get to draw at all today?"

"Stop whispering! You annoy me and cloud my thoughts," shouts the Master. "As if I'm not annoyed enough by my own obvious lack of talent. If you can find a knife in there, come in and slice my eyes out, as I clearly don't use them much in the production of paintings anyway. What was I thinking of?"

There are, in the end, only two pieces deemed worth considering. Iris admits that they are fine paintings, and as much good could be said about one as about the other. "No decision needs to be made immediately," says the Master. "But if you had to choose one on my behalf, Caspar, Iris, because I had just tumbled into a ditch and brained myself, which one would you choose, and why?"

"I wouldn't send an Annunciation," says Caspar, which enrages the Master so much that Caspar is forced to go outside and occupy himself well beyond the reach of the Master's fists.

"Well, you tell me, then, Iris," says the Master. "For one reason alone, I prefer the squarer panel to the higher one," says Iris, thinking hard, but requiring herself to be as truthful as she is kind. "In this the Virgin has darker hair, and more tightly curled, the way I imagine the hair of Florentine women might be. Perhaps it would make Marie de Medici think of herself—"

"—Idolatrous idea!" says the Master. "Like the Virgin, the Dowager Queen of France is also named Marie, remember," says Iris.

"—but fascinating and pertinent, to be sure," he contin-

## THE GIRL OF ASHES

ued. "Well, we'll see how that thought sits with us for a while. I'm not sure—"

"I assume you don't want to think about one of your portraits of the maimed, the evil, the fallen?—"

He doesn't even answer that.

"Then there's another possibility," says Iris cautiously. "Your best painting is Young Woman with Tulips. Why aren't you thinking about that?"

"The subject is a coarse one, however beautiful the model," says the Master.

"The way you painted it is superior, and you know it," says Iris. "Even I, who know nothing about painting, can see it."

"It will offend the Dowager Queen to see such a splendid young woman in her prime, and celebrated for just that. It will make her realize how much time has passed in her life—"

"Doesn't she realize that already, and isn't that why she's commissioning a final portrait?"

The Master strokes his beard and idly fingers a few breakfast crumbs from it onto the floor. "Well, I'll take the advice and ponder it in good time. It would mean asking van den Meer to borrow it. On the other hand, think of the people who would see it! Always hunting for investors as he does, he may realize this is the most public reception the painting can ever have. And even if Marie de Medici didn't give me the commission, many wealthy guests would also see it there. Things to think about. Hmmmm."

He ponders for a while, curses, and then remembers Iris. "Now that irritating Caspar has removed himself for a few moments, tell me why you've come to call."

"You asked me to be your assistant, don't you remember?" says Iris.

At this the Master turns and looks at her as if for the first time that day. "There are *many* items of gossip today, then," he says tenderly. "This is as important an announcement as the prattle that a foreign queen comes to dance her ancient feet on our republican floors. First things to be done first! Why didn't you tell me when you arrived? And you've been doing nothing but carting paintings back and forth!"

"What is an assistant expected to do?" she asks eagerly.

"Cart paintings," he says. "Get Caspar from outside and take these paintings out of my sight before I succumb to the temptation to coat them with a muddy oil wash and erase all my hopes of immortality. Work comes first, and drawing later. But drawing will come, my Iris. Before you leave today, you will draw."

### Spine and Chamber

And draw she does. She assumes that skill will guide her fingertips, that shapely lines will uncoil out of the pencil the moment she starts. Surely talent is a thing curled deeply inside, just wait'ing to be exercised, and at the slightest invitation it will stretch, shake itself, make itself known?

Talent, it seems, is not so insistent.

She pecks at the paper with small lines. She smudges them and begins again. She holds back, waiting for the paper to instruct her. She beats it with her hand. It won't deliver up its expectations. Perhaps it has none. The Master has said, "Observe the simplest thing and render it." She hoped for an apple, a chestnut, an egg. Instead he found her a porcelain seashell from some Afric strand.

It is quirky, both glazed and porous, a surface complicated by reflections, depths, stains. The shell stands at an angle like a mace. She hates it. She can't figure out its humblest tip, much less how it crowds its space with spikes, ribs,

volutes, a stem or spine that curls like paper, a circlet of tiny points more ornate than any tiara that the she-elephant, Marie de Medici, might wear at a ball.

The Master pays her no attention, but moves to the other side of the room, where he shingles a canvas with broad strokes of charcoal green. She weeps a little to see his vigor and her own fear. When she spies Caspar moving about the back room, hanging a pot over the coals to boil some water and bruise some roots into a soup, she wipes her cheeks with the back of her hand.

"Look," says Caspar, coming in after a while. "Look how prettily you've smudged your cheekbones with that red chalk. You have a fine bone here and here—"

He touches her face. She casts her eyes to the floor. The paper is a wilderness of indecisive strokes, looking nothing like a seashell. Looking only like failure.

"And they give your face color too," says Caspar, lifting her chin.

"I'm not here to paint myself," she says, more fiercely than she has meant to. "I am to sketch an irritating accident of nature. Look how it brandishes its tips at me! I want to kill it."

"It's not alive," says Caspar. "Draw it, and you make it live."

"Let her be," says the Master in a good-humored, abstracted tone.

"You have to look before you can lift a crayon," says Caspar. "Isn't he saying so to you?"

"She knows how to look," says the Master.

Caspar pays him no attention. He pulls up a three-legged stool and perches on it. His shoulder is a few inches below

#### THE GIRL OF ASHES

Iris's, and it rolls in toward her. Any moment it might touch her. She's afraid that if it does, she might recoil, not out of horror but just physical shock, the way an invisible bright bug sometimes leaps out of bundles of clean, sunny laundry and crackles on the tips of her fingers. She wills herself to attend to his words and not to the achingly sweet turn of his shoulder, how it swells just so into the cords of his slender neck.

"It's a brutish thing to draw, to be sure," Caspar is saying. "Think what the shell is like."

"It's like nothing I ever saw before," says Iris.

"Is it like nothing in nature or in the house or barn of

V'

man

"It's not like a cat, a flower, a table, or a cloud," says Iris.

"Isn't it like a big flower blossom," says Caspar, "snapped off a thick stem and laid on its side?"

"I never saw blossom so huge and garish," says Iris, and then, with a sinking heart, remembers what her mother looked like in the new finery that morning.

"Isn't it like a wheelbarrow, then?" says Caspar. "It balances on one point at this end, and its bulk rests so, and if you could imagine two stems instead of one to be the rafters of the shaft..."

"I never saw a seashell with wheels attached, and this isn't one either," says Iris.

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He tries again. "Don't look at it, then, for what it reminds you of. I take that idea back. Look at it for its own set of proportions. Here. Squeeze your eyes closed, or nearly closed. So you can merely make out a blur of seashell. Can you do that?"

She closes her eyes entirely and thinks of Caspar, more boy than blur, skin more porcelain than a seashell, hair more spiky, voice more soothing, rhapsodic . . .

"Attend," he says, a bit impatiently. She obeys.

"Don't think of particulars," he says. "Think of general shapes. If you can make two motions of your hand across the paper, and you need to spend those motions on the most significant lines of this blurred shape, what motions will they be?"

She shrugs, but is able first to ball her fist, then to sweep it out, to represent the bulk of the seashell chamber on one end and the tapering stem on the other.

"And there you have your first lesson," he says. "Now make those two marks, without fear of how they relate to each other or to the seashell before you. Just sweep those marks on the page as if you're drawing in the flour on the breadbaking table."

"Don't forget to tell her to breathe, and blink, and swallow from time to time," says the Master, somewhat jeeringly.

"You taught me all this," says Caspar to the Master, though his eyes don't leave Iris's hands or the paper. "You just didn't know you were teaching it."

"I should have taught you to drown yourself in the ditch," says the Master.

"Keep at your work and we'll keep at ours," says Caspar. Iris waits for an irate response, but the Master only chuckles and, she sees, behaves.

She has a sloppy knob and the tentative stroke of a spine on the page. "Not bad. They speak to each other. A natural gift for the appropriate weight in the mark," Caspar muses.

## THE GIRL OF ASHES

"Now it's simply a matter of looking at the details and seeing what you see."

"I don't know how to draw the other side of the seashell," she says.

"It can't be seen from where you sit," he says, "so never mind it."

"You can see it, though," she says, "you can tell me."

"Drawing is the only honesty," he ventures. "Don't interpret. Merely observe. Don't think about what you see. Merely see it."

She draws the spine, she draws the chamber. She curses the paper, the chalk, her fingers, herself, the seashell. She can't curse Caspar. But, momentarily, once in a while, she can forget him. Slowly the seashell comes forward. It is a joke of a seashell, an abomination of a seashell, a curse of a seashell. It is still a seashell.

She walks home in the dusk. Many more hours have passed than she intended to spend. The lights are up in the house at home. There is the sound of caterwauling from the kitchens. Not more mischief, not a return of—

She stops herself. She has tried to put aside her tendency to be fanciful. She tries to think in terms she is sure of.

Not more plague, thinks Iris, hurrying.

But it isn't the plague.

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't carry on so, just tell me!" says Iris, throwing her oak aside.

Papa Cornelius sits slumped on a bench. One shoulder lifts higher than the other; at first Iris thinks he is in tears. But his face is sallow and his eyes apparently drained of tears, and his expression seems blanker than anything else. "We are ruined," he says, "the curse of our greed has been our undoing."

"Don't sit there and moan," screams Margarethe. "There are avenues to explore, surely; there are gullible fools beyond the reach of the information you have! Go sell your shares while you can instead of shivering like a ninny!"

"I can't take advantage of my neighbors and fellow citizens like that—"

"Of course you can, what else had you meant to do?" says Margarethe. "Your scruples didn't keep you from importing a new stock of tulips to tease the marketplace with! Why this sudden attack of conscience now?"

"Any moment we can be struck down, by plague if not by

## THE GIRL OF ASHES

insolvency," says van den Meer. "I won't put my immortal soul in peril—"

"So you'll put the mortal bodies of your daughter and your new wife and your adopted family at risk instead? When we have nothing left to eat, we'll thank you for saving our sou/s?"

"Don't blaspheme, Margarethe," he says, "it doesn't beautify you to do so."

"What's happened?" says Iris. "For the love of God, tell me!"

"It is her greed," says van den Meer. He has had his ale. "She is the fisherman's wife: always wanting something more, and more than that besides, and then still more."

"Who taught me greed?" says Margarethe. "Who is my tempter and my tutor?"

"Stop," he roars, "I taught you nothing!"

"Well, I teach you courage in adversity, and you are to march out there—"

But he is not taking lessons from his wife. He is in no mood to march. He puts his head in his hands and mumbles some tale of investments. "I can't understand this," says Iris, turning to her mother, looking quickly at Ruth and Clara, who are huddled, arms locked around each other's waists, in the doorway to the front room. "Don't spare me! I'm not as young and ignorant as I once was."

"The spring is here, the notion of a visiting monarch has spread," says Margarethe, with a gleam in her eye that shows the courage that comes from desperation. "For the last several years the value of the newest variety of tulip has risen, and risen, and on the street and in the halls the same lots of bulbs were being sold again and again, for ever higher prices,

wave after wave of profit. Everyone knows this; everyone has invested. I alone didn't see it, for what do I know of money beyond the single coin a sharp woman can hide in her shoe? But this is the game that Papa Cornelius has been playing with Henrika's dowry, investing in a stock that others can speculate upon."

"That's not the misfortune! That's merely commerce, supplying what's in demand!" says van den Meer.

Margarethe continues. "One man could pay a fortune for the future value of the bulb crop, and turn around and sell his share for two fortunes an hour later. Men were buying not to own the tulips but to sell them again to the most aggressive purchaser. And the value of the lot of tulips, over which we all worried these months, has risen eightfold since arriving in port! A man who never invested in them, never saw them, never sweated over their possible loss in the storms at sea, never trod the dunes watching and praying, could make eight times in an hour what *husband* made in six months! Why should we have been denied income like that? Is it our low birth that keeps us ineligible?"

"Born high or low, we are low now," he groans.

"So I told him to do the same as his neighbors," says Margarethe grimly, "not just to import the bulbs and sell them, but to hazard a guess that there would be buyers to spend even more on the lot than he could! So I told him to buy back his share and sell it again in a while, and build up our coffers, and make us worthy guests to the ball! So I told him to do better in my time than he had ever done in Hen-rika's, lowly though I am!"

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"And what has happened to the tulips? Did they burn? Are they infested with worms?" says Iris, beginning to understand.

"The tulips are the same tulips as ever they were," says Margarethe, "not more beautiful or less beautiful. Simply less desirable. Who knows why. Just as he stood, having paid the highest amount yet offered, and as he began to negotiate to sell for an even higher amount, news about sickness on the far side of town began to filter in. One of the purchasers who has a farm out that way excused himself from the bidding and went to check on relatives. Another merchant stroked his chin and said he couldn't afford to bid. And suddenly the mood had changed, and one by one the burghers and mer' chants began to offer their own lots for sale. The bulbs had, in an instant, become less valuable, though they are still the same bulbs, still ready for planting, still offering the same amount of beauty. And of future value—vanished like smoke. The tulips don't offer the same amount of return, and, like a wind suddenly veering from the east when it has blown from the west, the appetite for investing in tulip bulbs has become, in an afternoon, a

frantic desire to unload them, to sell them for whatever could be gotten. The prices dropped precipitously all day."

"They'll surely rise again tomorrow?" says Iris, though with doubt.

"I've already sold them for a thirtieth what I paid," says van den Meer. "I had to. Tomorrow they may be worth a ninetieth what I paid."

"So they're sold," says Iris. "What does that mean to us?"

"It means," says van den Meer coldly, "I owe in cash and financial instruments many, many times more than my holdings are worth. I am bankrupt and have no resources. It means we lurch into poverty."

"It means we must find ourselves a chance to be bold, to reclaim ourselves and our fortune," says Margarethe.

"We don't have a foothold," says van den Meer.

"We have an invitation to one of the balls," says Margarethe. She withdraws from her sleeve a fold of creamy paper. "Perhaps you sold with an uncharacteristic lack of shrewdness, Cornelius. But the safe arrival of your shipment last month must have reached the ear of the household of Marie de Medici. Grand ladies in the court of her son, they say, arrange tulips in their bosoms—the rarer the bloom, the more exquisite the woman. The old war horse may be estranged from her son, but she's not insensible to style; she's a queen mother. Your notoriety as a major importer has brought you to the attention of the Pruyns, or whoever is proposing the guest list. No one is going to retract this invitation. We are going to the great hall and we are going to meet the Dowager Queen of France and her godson. We'll simply apply our wiles to a different marketplace. Now, take your salty chin out of your hands and stop your sniveling. There's much to be done, and precious little time in which to do it! Give me room to cast my eel spear, and let follow what may."

## THE GALLERY OF GOD'S MISTAKES

### Campaigns

Papa Cornelius is a limp puppet of himself, a rag without a manipulating hand inside. He lies on a bench under a blanket. He shows no interest in going back to the tavern where the college that oversees the buying and selling of tulip futures had met, drunk, and prospered. Margarethe plies him with reliable tisanes. Her skill fails her. She calls in the doctor.

"A bad case of humors, nothing more," the fellow snaps after a perfunctory examination. "I abhor malingers. They waste my time. This is a house that's had more than its share of bad luck this year. One would almost think it were possessed."

"And what are you suggesting?" says Margarethe frostily.

He shakes his head and changes the subject. "The ailment will last its own course. There's nothing to be done. At least it isn't the plague." Nor, the doctor reassures Margarethe, is it contagious.

As van den Meer sinks deeper into lassitude—at times he won't even open his eyes and answer questions that his wife puts to him—Margarethe grows more determined not to buckle under the pressure herself. "I will manage this house,



and I will recover our fortunes," she says to Iris. "He blames me, but he's the one who dithered about. Had he repurchased the lot of tulips a week earlier, when I proposed, he would've sold them long before the crash. I take no responsibility for his cowardice. I take responsibility only for the future, not the past. The past can't hurt you the way the future can." "Not if you have survived it so far," says Iris grimly.

Margarethe and Iris walk back from the well in the Grotemarkt with basins of water. "Be fair to me, and listen," says Margarethe. "The collapse of the tulip market seems to have happened in many places at once. If Papa Cornelius had been less steeped in ale, he might have picked up on the news—apparently the fall in tulip futures happened in Ams' terdam a few days earlier."

How terrible these times, thinks Iris. She sees that many sober citizens are ruined. Some families disappear under cover of darkness, leaving their entire houses and much heavy furniture to be repossessed. Inevitably it's only a small amount of what the unlucky investors are deemed to owe. There are rumors of suicides. Shame! Scandal! So governors and regents meet to see if there's a way to enforce a schedule of payments, a way to stem the swamping tide. Margarethe reports what she hears on the street to Iris. Though Iris follows little of it, she listens as closely as she can.

When Iris has spent only a couple of weeks in the studio, Margarethe calls her into the small room once used by Hen-rika for household governance. A ledger is open. A candle

#### THE GALLERY OF GOD'S MISTAKES

gutters. Dead flies in wiry clumps dot the windowsill. "This is no time for genteel hobbies," her mother says. "Your stepfather is ailing, your sister is a bother, and your weary mother is busy trying to clothe herself and her daughters suitably for the upcoming ball of Marie de Medici and her eligible godson. Your stepsister has taken refuge in the kitchen and refuses to answer the door when a knock is heard. Weak thing. I can do nothing with her. I need you—to speak to creditors when they come to the door, to be both fawning and sly. Are you up for the task?"

"No," says Iris bluntly. And she's not. She has been trying, with a pencil, to be honest and unashamed. Besides, her time with Caspar is becoming, at least temporarily, lovely. He is full of a very household sort of joy, like the kind that abounds from ripe grapes, from big-bellied lutes. In the morning, when she approaches the Master's studio, Caspar will hear her coming to the door and rush, eager as a puppy, and meet her several feet out of the building, as if he wants to say his first hellos beyond the hearing of the Master. Caspar is a simple sort—is it true to say that? Simple, yes, and also firm and solid. Simple doesn't mean shallow.

"I can't leave the studio," says Iris. "Mama, how can I? Now?"

"That I phrase it as a question is merely courtesy," says Margarethe. "If all should go well, you'll have time enough for drawing in days to come. You must obey me now. I have no time to argue."

"Everything is a campaign with you," says Iris bitterly. "Did you ever love anything without the need to subdue it?"

"Never," says Margarethe, with a measure of pride.

"I'll obey you, of course," says Iris, somewhat ashamed. "But I can't imagine, after only these few days, how I can live without the attempt to draw. And I haven't even lifted a paintbrush yet!"

"You must lift a washbrush first," says Margarethe. "I want the front room to shine bright as gold. I'm having an interview with the clothier this afternoon—van Antum, who made my marriage gown. We van den Meers must look proper, stuffed with hidden coin. We must have tulips, even in the house, as if they don't make us gag." Margarethe points at Henrika's tulip vase, a porcelain pillar that stands two feet high and tapers like a model of a church's steeple. "Every spout must hold a perfect blossom. We are proud, Iris, and pride will see us through this devil's maze. Do you understand?"

So Iris goes to work. She fills the tulip vase with orange-headed flowers. Then she pulls a brush across the floor instead of a charcoal stick across a curl of paper. She sweeps soapy water across the brick and watches how the gray lye dries in patterns. She admires the patterns before she rinses them away. It's the best she can hope for.

But all at once she can't remake the form of Caspar in her mind; she can't remember what he looks like. Strong tears fall like drops of brewed tea—she's surprised at the heat of them.

Clara sometimes refuses to mount the step from the kitchen. Iris has to change the buckets of water from time to time, and to find other supplies. When entering the kitchen,

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Iris watches Clara turn a shoulder to her. "Surely you haven't forbidden yourself to look at me too?" says Iris crossly.

"I'm busy with the stew," says Clara, though there's nothing but water being brought ponderously to a boil.

"I'm working hard to help Mama restore our fortunes," says Iris.

"She's done enough to ruin them," says Clara. "Can you really think her capable of anything but ineptitude so colossal it borders on malice?" Clara stirs a big spoon in the air, miming a witch at work over a vicious brew.

Iris is aghast. "You think she was malicious in her advice to your father?"

"I think," says Clara, "her greed blinds her."

"She's become your mother," says Iris, "when you had none."

"Once I had a mother," says Clara. "Now I have no mother, not even a stepmother. I have a big embarrassing crow who speaks in English and Dutch, and who like a crow snatches up every shiny thing, one after the other, until the accumulation of glitter is fanciful at best and a wicked scandal at worst. To say nothing of ugly."

"Let's leave this topic. You're distraught, and I'm exhausted," says Iris. "The clothier will be here momentarily and I have to finish cleaning the room. Mama is trying to borrow dresses for us to go to the ball."

I, says Clara, "am not going to any *ball*."

Though Iris doesn't really know her mother's plans, she says stolidly, "The invitation is addressed to the family van den Meer. If she says you go, you go."

"Nonsense!" says Clara. "Look at me! My hair is limp, my back is aching, my knees are raw. My hands are cracked and unlovely. I have a father to tend to and a kitchen to clean. It's all I want. Nothing of the outside, please. Especially not parading myself like a strumpet."

"You can't be that perverse," says Iris. "Even I am willing to shame myself, to mortify myself with finery and take myself off to some hideous event, if it might improve our lot here. I, the monstrously ugly among us—"

"Oh," says Clara, "mercy, there is nothing monstrously ugly about you. Ruth may be unpleasing, but you are merely plain. If anything, it's my beauty that's monstrous, for it sweeps away any other aspect of my character. And why are you so sure that Margarethe wants me to attend? Now listen, a knock on the door."

"Let him in while I finish the lace runner!" breathes Iris.

Clara brays in a half whisper, "I *will not*. I'm not going to the door, I'm not entering the hall, I'm displaying myself before no one, ever again, not even in the privacy of this very house."

Not *in the privacy of my own house*, Iris notes, but *this -very house*.

As if Clara doesn't even live here anymore.

"You are so selfish!—to deny my request for help!" snaps Iris, and throws down her work to race to the door.

Van Antum the clothier comes in, a man Iris recognizes from the street. As planned, Margarethe is sitting in a shadowy back room, keeping him waiting. "Please, settle yourself in comfort," says Iris. "There's tobacco if you'd like to smoke,

#### THE GALLERY OF GOD'S MISTAKES

and I can bring you a glass of something to refresh you."

"I would like nothing at all," says van Antum. He is plump and fussy, and smells of limes and spilled beer.

Margarethe struts into the room. She has borrowed a set of clothes from Henrika's wardrobe. She's stouter than Hen-rika every was, and Iris's careful eye catches the skirt fabric straining at the seams around the midriff. But Margarethe has developed a coquettish flutter that leads eyes away from such details. "How very good of you to come," says Mar-garethe in an affected air, almost as if she has a duke instead of a merchant in her parlor. "I shouldn't entertain you alone, for it isn't proper, but my husband is"—she pauses, beautifully, theatrically—"indisposed. Iris, before you leave to see to your sister, will you please—?"

She makes a motion with her hand. Iris obliges, though it makes her feel foolish. She turns about like a child being inspected for cleanliness. Then she curtseys at the paunchy old fellow and makes her way out of the room with as much dignity as she can muster.

"A standard size for a young woman. Perhaps a bit more like a beanpole than some," Margarethe is saying. "And her sister the opposite, a veritable ox. A lovely ox, but an ox just the same. Can you help us?" The voice goes up teasingly at the end, almost in a French manner. Iris has to grip the edge of the

wall as she turns the corner to keep from crying out in disgust. Profanity that she has heard bantered by the Master and Caspar rises to her lips; it's an effort not to blurt it out. "I'm sure you can see your way to outfitting two belles. The reward," her mother is saying, "could, in time, be considerable."

What reward is that? There isn't enough coin in the household to cover the bottom of a pot.

"Clara?" calls Margarethe. "Can you come for a moment to the door?"

At first Iris thinks that Margarethe means to have van Antum take the measure, mentally, of Clara's lovely form—to prepare an outfit for the ball that Clara firmly is declining to attend. But when after Margarethe makes several requests Clara finally appears, sullen and covered in ashes, Iris puts her hand over her mouth, perceiving such a dreadful thought that she's ashamed of it.

"Isn't she truly a treasure?" Margarethe is saying.

Van Antum mouths his approval in wordless baby syllables. He folds his hands one over the other as if washing them.

"I'm sure I can do something that will flatter you, something to your satisfaction," he manages, at last, to say.

"Something grander than what I am wearing now," says Margarethe. "Something very grand is called for."

"Something very grand indeed," says the clothier, eyes clapped on Clara until she slips away into the shadows. His chin begins to tremble. "I think the very grandest I can muster."

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### Gallery of God's Mistakes

Every day Margarethe comes back from the market with more stories about the Dowager Queen of France, Marie de Medici. It seems that most of Haarlem relieves its worry over financial panic through gossip about the great she-elephant. Iris is addicted to every scrap of opinion and news.

The Dowager Queen is ancient—perhaps as old as sixty-five. She is doughy, blowsy, and stupid, as well as highly strung and stylish. People whisper that her husband, Henry VI, had a different concubine reserved for every day of the year. "I'd have poisoned him for that," says Margarethe blandly. "But no wonder she dabbles in affairs of state."

The great Marie put in years of service as the regent during her son's childhood. Then, when little Louis XIII grew old enough to embrace his mother with a knife in his hand, Marie raised armies against him. Cardinal Richelieu—whom she considered no more than an elevated *domcstique*—spoke

out publicly against her. With frustrating regularity he was able to sidestep her assassination attempts. "How annoying for her," says Margarethe. Now Marie is in her dotage, safely exiled to the Spanish Netherlands, though reputed to be enjoying some sort of sweet reconciliation with her son.

As if courtly intrigues are as regular to Haarlem tongues as herrings, crones buzz that in her late years Marie de Medici has become tired of matters of government. She's begun to indulge in the affairs of courtiers, cousins, and syco-phants instead. Death is staring her in the face, and she intends to meddle with the world as much as possible before Death gets up its nerve to strangle her. Meddle in the world,

and leave a record of her meddling. "Why do geese walk barefoot? Because they do; that's why geese walk barefoot," say the crones of Haarlem sagely. Why does the Dowager Queen of France meddle in the affairs of her godson? Why, what else are godsons for? What else is the good of life?

The proud stoics of Holland find the stories of Marie's exploits silly and entrancing. Though she's laughed at as a fool, she's still a powerful fool and a captivating one. The Dutch can be sullenly tolerant of their own House of

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Orange in the Hague—but royalty of a different stripe, be it Stuarts or Bourbons or Hapsburgs, carries a different prestige. Hasn't Rubens already memorialized Marie de Medici in the Palace of Luxembourg as a figure of history, someone grand as Charlemagne or Joan of Arc? And still the Queen Mother persists on the stage of the world, shrieking, conniving, orchestrating her entertainments, fussing with the available material. "She's no different from your Schoon-

### THE GALLERY OF GOD'S MISTAKES

maker," says Margarethe at one point to Iris, whose eyes open wide at tales of such intrigues. "She paints with real lives instead of with brushes and livid colors. We won't live to see her like again."

"Tell about the Prince," says Iris. "The one she is hoping to marry off."

"He is a distant cousin, or the son of such," says Margarethe vaguely. "That's right, a godson. I can't learn much about him, as he isn't a part of the regular court and little is known of him. He's called Philippe de Marsillac. Maybe he's one of the last links that the Dowager Queen has with her son, as Philippe is said to move freely back and forth between the court of Louis XIII and the court in exile of the Dowager Queen. Perhaps she means to marry her godson off to someone demonstrably not in any royal family of Europe as a way to break any possible use of him as an agent against her. Who can know how the crowned heads run their households? But her aim is clear. She's no more and no less than a marriage broker to this youth, the same as any conniving aunt or gassy old dame at a hearthside."

"She sounds heartless," says Iris. "Heartless and monstrous."

"I like her zeal," says Margarethe blandly. "Why shouldn't she arrange the world to suit herself? Wouldn't we all, if we could?"

"What wouldn't you do to comfort yourself?" says Iris.

"Precious little," says Margarethe, lifting her chin.

So I fear, says Iris, but to herself.

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Her fears are borne out one afternoon when Margarethe takes herself off to the Master's studio. She insists that Iris join her; perhaps Margarethe wants to make sure that no impropriety is reported by canny-eyed neighbors. She intends to approach the Master for a loan. "That painting of Young Woman with Tulips restored his fortunes," she reasons to Iris as they hurry along. "Cornelius and Henrika revived Schoonmaker's career for him. He owes them something. He owes me."

"I owe you nothing," says the Master when asked. "Besides, it would make no difference if I did. You aren't the only ones struggling at the moment."

"You invested in tulip futures?" cries Margarethe.

"Oh, not I," he answers. "When do I have time to leave my studio? Though other painters did, and suffered for it. Caspar, my spy in all things, tells me that Franz Hals has lost a fortune, and the young Rembrandt in Amsterdam about whom everyone keeps chattering is also in a bad situation." He chuckles meanly. "I'd have lost the money if I could have managed to concentrate on doing so. As it is, since all my patrons are hugely in debt, I'll be lucky to be paid for existing commissions, let alone secure new ones any time soon. So it's all the more important for me to exhibit for the grand Marie."

"But I had wanted to borrow some money," says Margarethe again, hardly believing.

"I don't have the world spinning on my thumb. Wanting will get you nowhere."

He's looking for a study as he talks, shifting aside old paintings. The place has been a mess since Margarethe left

#### THE GALLERY OF GOD'S MISTAKES

for the van den Meers. By habit Iris goes to help him, and even Margarethe lends a hand, as if her kindness will cause him to remember some hidden stash of florins. "You don't know how we are poised to suffer," she says.

"Suffering can make you strong," says the Master. "Look what it's done for me."

"Can't you sell something here you haven't yet sold?" Margarethe purses her lips at three Flights into Egypt, where holy mother Mary is variously demure, brave, and sleepy, but always a model of the perfect human form. Margarethe staring at Mary is like a stork scowling at a swan, thinks Iris.

"You know the market for religious painting is soft," says the Master.

"Can you sell Ugly Girl with Wildflowers and give us half the fee?"

"I painted over that," says the Master, "since it made Iris distressed."

"What about those others?" Margarethe has never showed interest in the Master's catalogue of misfits, but she's desperate. "Moods are grim now! Maybe you'll have a rush of offers—"

"You want to see those?" The Master's eyebrows lift. "Judge for yourself whether they'll stir the prospective buyers? I'll show you if you like. But you, Iris? After all this time?"

"I saw the plague take our Rebekka," says Iris, "more horrible than that can hardly be imagined."

But Iris wants to see if he has painted the imp of the van den Meers' household. She's not sure she believes in such a thing now, but she'd recognize it if she saw it. Wouldn't she?

With a stout key the Master unlocks the door to the gallery of God's mistakes. It's another high room, originally maybe a storage shed for farm implements. One wall is stone, and three have been daubed with mud plaster and whitewashed. The Master pulls the tattered end of a curtain covering a high window.

Light rushes into the mildewy space. From paintings high up near the rafters, from paintings racked waist-height on lengths of raw-milled timber to protect them from the damp floor, faces blink, or seem to. They come into the light again.

Reluctant, grimacing, pathetic, and beastly.

"Mercy!" says Margarethe, her hand on her heart.

Iris winds her fingers into her apron strings.

"I think of them as friends," says the Master, "for aren't we all this bruised?"

The dwarf that Iris had met, there he is, captured on canvas. The Master *had* painted him after all, or had he invented him?

"God created these errors," says the Master, as if reading her thoughts. "I merely took dictation." For all the bravado the dwarf had shown, he seems leery of being seen. He holds one splayed hand over his groin, though his other hand lifts aside the tunic to show a mysterious scar painted on his torso, a red bruise the shape of a ship's anchor.

"A dragon!" says Margarethe, looking further.

"A ewe with an extruded womb," says the Master. "Look more carefully. Was already dead when I saw her."

"Surely that's a dragon!"

"If you're sure," says the Master.

## THE GALLERY OF GOD'S MISTAKES

A child with the face of a parrot. Another dwarf, and a third—a whole family series of them. There's the Girl-Boy of Rotterdam, painted nude, all its disgusting punishments in view. A dog with a goiter that looks like a loaf of bread. A pair of siblings who sit so near that only one skin is needed to cover them both—an affliction of the sort Iris and Ruth had played at when they were being the Girl-Stag of the Meadow.

The joined siblings look at Iris and say, Sorry. The Girl-Boy looks at Iris and says, I don't know why I'm like this, but forgive me. The parrot-faced child is too young to speak, but squawks and bawls for pity.

"The Queen of the Hairy-Chinned Gypsies," says Iris, finding her.

"Old Dame Goos called herself that?" says the Master, amused. "To you? Sometimes she says she is so old, she is Bertha, the mother of Charlemagne. She is the Queen of Sheba. She even boasts, blasphemously, that she is God's own grandmother."

The Queen of the Hairy-Chinned Gypsies fixes an even gaze on Iris. Her look is neither remorseful nor angry. She's uglier than Ruth or Iris herself could ever be, shriveled and pocked, horny of hand, brown of tooth. She leans on her canes as if she's been walking the same road these thousand years. She says to Iris, And what will you make of yourself?

But before Iris can answer, Margarethe is interrupting her thoughts. Margarethe has had enough. She's backing away from the frog-footed, the beasties, and the damned. "You are a/i'end, Luykas, to study these sinners so," she says. "Look at

your work! In one room, holiness so perfectly portrayed that it borders on idolatry—in the next, venomous evil, incarnate and walking among us. You paint the beautiful and the ugly, but what of the in-between?"

She's looking for herself in a painting, as we all do, thinks Iris. Margarethe is trying to locate herself in the world. She has been badly scared.

"Young Girl with Tulips is in between," says the Master, "the here, the now. Clara, a real girl of Holland, rendered truthfully."

"What is the use of beauty? What is the consequence of this?" says Margarethe.

Iris thinks: For once Margarethe has forgotten her goal. She came to look at these paintings to remark on their interest to buyers. But she's gotten caught up in the ideas of them.

Margarethe steams on. "The beauty of flowers, the beauty of girls—even the beauty of painting, that's the subject of your work. What about the beauty of goodness? What about the splendid act? The question of Parcifal, the gesture of the Samaritan on the road? What about the widow who gives her only penny?"

The Master says, softly and in challenge, "And what would you know about that?"

In the courtroom of fiends, the gallery of God's mistakes, Margarethe squares her shoulders and answers him. "Only he with the hobbled foot fully knows the beauty of running. Only he with the severed ear can apprehend what the sweetest music must sound like. Our ailments complete us. That we in our sinful souls can even imagine charity—" She can't

#### THE GALLERY OF GOD'S MISTAKES

go on for a moment. "We may not always be able to practice charity, but that in this world we can even imagine it at all! *That* act of daring requires the greatest talent, greater than any you possess—"

The Master is humbled by shrill Margarethe. "As you like," he says. "So be it. We all do what we can. My job is to see, and testify."

The clamminess in the room becomes apparent. There is no imp here, however hard Iris looks.

"What can have brought you to such a perverse obsession as these!" says Margarethe.

"I look with regret, not prurience," the Master says hotly. "And I'm not the first to do so." He pokes about in a slope-shouldered wardrobe hunched in a corner, and he takes out a panel about two feet square. "This one is the starting point. It's not mine, I hasten to add. Strange panel of mysteries and miseries, isn't it? By one of the Flemish men. I bought it from the studio of Arentsz when I was an apprentice in Amsterdam. One of the Boschs, I think. A study, incomplete on the top left. Take it up in the light if you want to look at it."

"I don't think I do," says Margarethe. "Who could?"



"It's fabulous and unsettling. A portrait of a magic world. I avoid looking at it for years at a time, and then every now and then I scrutinize it as if I've never seen it before."

"It makes my eyes ache," says Margarethe.

But she and Iris drag it to a table and set it in the spring sunlight. "I'm not sure that these things are suitable for you to see," says Margarethe in a dull voice, but she's so curious about the busy painting that she forgets to nudge Iris away,

so they both examine the panel. If this is the magic world!— or is it a dream, or a prophecy of some sort? The landscape is pink and blue, and broken out with strange mountains shaped like towers. But each part of the landscape is equally near, and every part is home to creatures, birds, flowers, and human beings, in ridiculous and shocking conjunction.

A naked woman with the head of a bird is trapped in a glass bubble. Two men without clothes blow trumpets whose crowns disappear into one another's smooth behinds. A girl looks out over the lip of a huge sunflower, trapped there. A man shits gold coins onto a hunk of bread that a woman is busy trying to cram into her mouth. A baby with a bishop's miter pushes a man backward into a well. Demons cavort carnally with men, women, bear cubs, and plants. A sweet girl on her hands and knees seems to have a vine growing out from between her legs, and from the vine dangles a pear, an apple, and a violin.

"This is a painting by the devil himself," says Margarethe.

"Look, Mama," says Iris. "Up in this corner."

There's a dead man floating in a broad field of water. He's naked, gray as the flesh of old fish. Above him a black bird hovers on spread wings. The bird has pecked out the eyes of the corpse. You can see both eyes in the bird's beak, one next to the other, staring from the insignificant corner of the canvas right out at the viewer. Out of all the dozens of creatures in situations of distress, or perhaps wild delight—it's hard to tell—these are the only eyes that peer at the viewer.

"I can't look at this any longer, my own eyes ache," says Margarethe. "They boil with small ghosts. What in the world are we doing here, anyway?"

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"You are coming to understand that I have no money to lend," says the Master. "And nothing from this gallery would interest the householder of Haarlem." He doesn't sound pleased to turn her down, nor does he sound sorry. "Put the painting back where you found it."

"I won't touch that vile thing," says Margarethe. "I'm a good Christian woman."

"Oh, I see," says the Master. "Well, leave it there; Caspar will replace it where it belongs when he returns."

"Caspar," says Margarethe. "I suppose you've given him all the money you might have given me."

"He's my apprentice, not my banker," says the Master. "Are you going to try to annoy me into loaning you money? There's none to loan. I have my own problems. Perhaps you should leave." He begins to wave them away, as if he's sorry he has let down his guard. "I'd thought you might learn some sympathy. But it's more of the same: The unfortunates of the world exist only to shore us up in our own high regard

of ourselves."

"Sententious fool, let God's judgment be on you and me both, and see how we fare!" cries Margarethe. "Iris, come."

On the way home Margarethe rubs her eyes. "Damn! These eyes are bewitched. Caspar, and paintings like that in the house! They should be burned. Ruining a young man like that. Who probably deserves to be ruined. Oh, I see how Caspar has looked at you. Don't be fooled. His attentions are all to distract us from his real tastes. I'm no ninny in the world, you think I don't know?"

Even more than the Master's catalogue of God's errors,

the old, scratched painting of people in a magic world has alarmed Margarethe.

Iris says, "Mama, this is a hard time for you; I don't want to talk about Caspar. Let's just worry about the ball, if indeed we're going to go. Isn't there enough on our minds without berating other people?"

"Beauty has no use at all," says Margarethe, following her own thoughts. "It has no consequence. It lends nothing to the world. You're better off without any, my poor daughter."

Cinderella

Even safe in the cozy nook, Clara's becoming more and more inward. She twists her head away from the front rooms as a matter of course, ducks her eyes when Margarethe arrives at the door to complain, demand, or, once in a while, mutter appreciation. Iris watches, first with the eye of an artist and then with the grudging heart of a sister. Could a beauty like Clara nonetheless be one of God's mistakes?

"Clara," she says one day, "you're becoming a nun before my eyes."

Clara looks up from the churn. Her face is white and glazed with the effort, but she won't hand the job over to Iris to help. "You can call me Sister Cinderella," she says. "I'd be happy to take vows and live under a promise of silence, if I got permission for solitude."

"We haven't yet begun to starve, there's no need of that," says Iris with a proper horror.

"What choices have we, with Papa in his collapse and a madwoman at the helm of this household?" says Clara.

CONFESSIONS OF

AN UGLY STEPSISTER

"Don't say such things," says Iris, and then, despite herself, is forced to clarify by adding, "I'm sure Papa Cornelius

will recover."

"So you don't argue about your mother's madness," says Clara. Her acid tone contradicts the supplicating position of her shoulders and bowed head over the churn.

"Don't ask such betrayals of me," says Iris. "Please!" "She is mad," says Clara. "Small steps to the

madhouse still get us there at last."

"Madhouse or poorhouse, what is your choice?" says Iris, but she can't put her heart into the argument, and she doesn't know why she is defending her mother.

Clara just looks up. "I don't propose that anyone's path in this life is easy," she says. "Why do we argue, Iris? You and Ruth are all that's left to me of my old life, the life that seemed would be troubled only by an excess of happiness."

"Your father will recover," says Iris, a bit more kindly. She looks in the larder for flour so that she might prepare some dough for bread, but there's only the merest dusting of flour in the earthenware jug. She comes out to ask Clara where the day's flour has gone, has the bread dough been set to rise already, but she forgets her task when she sees Clara's shoulders shaking. "Oh, dear sister," says Iris, moving across the room to her, "your father will recover!"

"He hardly knows me!" says Clara. "His whole life is wiped away; it is as if his eyes have been bled of their memories, and they stare without seeing!"

"I know what that's like," says Iris. She struggles over what to say next. "Grieving and worry take many forms. It's

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simply a kind of sickness, but unlike the plague or the pox, it's not fatal. He'll recover. He will! You'll see! And you must do what you can to help him."

Clara blinks at her. In her life she hasn't often been asked to help. It's a proposition she doesn't seem to comprehend. She moves beyond it. Wipes her eyes. "He's there but gone. His body is warm and smells of him, but no more than a heap of garments retains the aroma and the heat of the body when you step from them to bathe. He hasn't given you much mind or much time, so how would you know, but I know: He isn't the man he was. He's hardly a man at all—just a collection of bodily habits, eating, breathing, relieving himself, muttering in his sleep. Don't you see how he's been reduced to nothing?"

"This is an indulgence, this pity and horror," says Iris coldly. "You do what needs to be done, and he'll return to you. He's a good man and he's broken by worry, but he's not dead, Clara. Not the way my father is dead."

Iris pauses, the thought of the floating dead man, his eyes in a bird's beak—

—and goes on. "Give him time to rest and all will be well."

Clara says, "You're older than I am, Iris, and you've seen sadness in your time, but you don't know everything about the world. Leave me to my grief."

"I'll find the biggest key I can and lock you in your cloister if you want," says Iris. "While you mope, at least the madwoman is at work, hard as ever, to fix the dilemma we are all in! If you were less critical you might be more help!"

Clara loses her patience at last, and calls out, "Ruth? Are you there, Ruth? Will you come and sing to me as you so

prettily can? Ruth? There's an annoying gnat in the kitchen, saying things I can't understand. I need to be distracted. Ruth, come sing to me."

Ruth appears from some garden chore that has been given her, appropriate to her attention and her manual skills. She smiles at Iris and she sinks down on her knees before the butter churn. She hums a string of nonsense syllables, long ocean sounds unfettered by the pops and thuds with which real words start and close. Still, the unfocused noise is, in some vague way, musical, and Clara begins to thump the churn again, in time.

Iris tries to say, "And what of me, what about what I'm sacrificing, now that I'm ordered to abandon the studio?" But the start of her sentence is lost in Ruth's noises, and she can't finish it anyway, for her thought is just as self-pitying as any Clara has expressed, and Iris is ashamed.

Van Stolk and van Antum

W • \*ake them! Take the lot! Good riddance to them!"

1 Creditors come and cart away the entire stock of tulip bulbs—sacks and sacks of bulbs, each bulb rustling as if in its own paper parcel. Creditors also take those flowers planted in sets of a dozen and twenty to the tub. Margarethe complains of sores in her eyes—"Ever since seeing that devil's painting of the magic world, all those immoral beasts and flowers!"—and she paws at her eyes in frustration as if to clear them of a film, a crust. Nonetheless, she oversees the proceedings. She watches with a grim mouth, and she orders Iris to make a record on paper of every exchange. The language in which the commerce is carried out is salty or apologetic, but Margarethe never lowers her chin or her voice. Surely poor Papa Cornelius, slowly calcifying in his stupor on the bed, can hear through the bed curtains how Margarethe is dismantling his estate. Whether he understands what he's hearing is, of course, another matter. He speaks little or not at all.

But one day he does emerge, half dressed and slovenly-looking, at the sound of the raspy voice of Nicolaes van Stolk. He's the man who approached Clara at her mother's burial, the barrel-chested citizen who had cried the bad news on the night that the storm had threatened the delivery of the tulip bulbs. Van Stolk has arrived with four sturdy lads to wander through van den Meer's house and look at the furnishings. It seems that van Stolk has paid off the brewers' loan to the van den Meers, and now the van den Meers are in debt to him. He intends to make a proposal to Margarethe about what he might take away in exchange for what is owed him.

"You would harvest the very bones out of our skin, would you?" hisses Margarethe.

"They would do me little good, for I couldn't resell them for a profit," says van Stolk jovially. "Good day, van den Meer. Hard moments come to us all." He doesn't look as if hard moments have come to him any time lately.

"You needn't bother with this tiresome visitor," says Margarethe to her husband, in what passes for charity, but is really an attempt to hurry up her negotiation without interference. "Go back to your couch and I'll have Ruth or Iris bring you something warm to drink." The girls try to urge van den Meer away.

"Why you wandering through my house?" says van den Meer to van Stolk.

"I fancy a few of the paintings," says van Stolk. "They aren't all of the highest caliber, and paintings have lost their value this season since the market is flooded with them. But

## THE GALLERY OF GOD'S MISTAKES

"I'll offer you a fair price for a few lovely items, and deduct that from the amount that you owe me."

"Paintings," says Margarethe, interrupting what is bound to be her husband's objections, "they come and go, as quickly as the styles of clothes and the taste in predikants. We may as well make room for better-quality work, which we'll soon be able to afford. Why not relieve ourselves of a lesser grade of goods while we can—"

"Silence, you harpy," says her husband. "Get out of my house, van Stolk, before I force you out with my fists!"

"I will look at the painting of Young Woman with Tulips," says van Stolk calmly, ignoring him. "To my mind it's the only good piece here."

"You won't even look at it!" Van den Meer steps forward, and the step becomes a run. Even Margarethe shrinks from the expected crash of two full-grown male bodies. But the four youths lock their arms and hold van den Meer back, and van Stolk crosses the hall and flings the door open as if he owns the building.

"Here it is, a major work by a minor artist," he cries. "Splendid as I remembered it. The subject inspired the artist to heights of achievement he'll never again match. It's hard to distinguish which is more magnificent, the beauty of the girl or the sensitive skill of the rendering—but I suppose it doesn't matter. This is what art does, confuses the senses so to magnify the appreciation of the heart." He peers at it fondly, avariciously. "Those jewels the girl is wearing, aren't they Henrika's? They would fetch a pretty price."

"I believe she was buried in them," says Margarethe. "Don't think I haven't searched the drawers and cabinets. If you care to dig up her corpse, you're welcome to them, provided our accounts get the proper credit."

Van Stolk laughs, almost admirably. "You are a fiend. Now, young fellows, scramble up on this table and unhook the work from this wall."

"It's the most valuable piece in the house," says Margarethe shrilly, repeating for the fiftieth time the phrase with which she's ushered all recent visitors through the house.

"Since the house has been denuded of most of your husband's fine possessions, you're not saying much when you say that," says van Stolk.

"I won't have it!" roars van den Meer. Clara comes in from the kitchens at the noise. She claps her hands on her cheeks. Her first response is joy, to hear her father address a visitor, but when she sees who the visitor is, and how agitated her father has become, she flings herself at him.

"Let it go from this house, Papa," murmurs Clara. "Let him take it; he's only a scavenger. Besides, I hated it. It's a painting of vain hopes, and does me no justice."

"You're already changed from the girl in the painting," cries her father. "Look at you! A kitchen maid! Margarethe, what are you doing to my child?"

Margarethe, arguing with van Stolk about the cost of the painting, pays him no mind.

"Come away," says Clara, "come away, Papa; you're hardly dressed."

"My Clara," says her father, but when he reaches out his

## THE GALLERY OF GOD'S MISTAKES

hands, it's toward the smiling, beautiful child in the painting, not to the paler version of the same daughter who now holds her arms about him. "Clara, don't leave me as Henrika did!" He begins to sob.

"I already have a potential buyer for this piece," says van Stolk as he organizes the painting to be maneuvered out the door into the spring sunlight.

But van den Meer has rallied. He steps before the work and says, "I'll see about selling it to you in a few weeks' time, if I have to. You criticized me for engaging in speculation, and I see you are one of the first to profit in this decline. Don't think me fool enough not to notice. But the painting isn't mine to give you right now. If you take it from my house without my permission, the law will accuse you of theft. I'm informing you about this loudly and in the presence of wit-

nesses.

"What are you speaking about?" says van Stolk.

"Luykas Schoonmaker the painter came to me last week and asked me for permission to borrow the painting to show in the exhibit for the visiting Queen."

"You never told me this!" says Margarethe.

"You were out on some scheme. He came to the door and Clara showed him into my bedchamber," says van den Meer. "It is my house, Margarethe, and my daughter, and my painting, and I agreed to the terms of the loan."

"What terms are those? What is he paying?" says Margarethe. "Iris, write this down."

"He is paying nothing. Those are the terms," says van den Meer. "Charity requires no less, and when we give up

charity, we give up our souls. Do you think I haven't learned anything in this hard year? There, I've said what I have to say. Remove the painting forcibly from these premises, van Stolk, and you violate the law. I'll have the schout and his deputies on you at once."

Van den Meer doesn't stop to see what happens, but turns and mounts the staircase. Clara follows, holding out a steadying hand. Van Stolk mutters to Margarethe, "I could ask for the very building if I chose. Don't provoke me, Dame van den Meer, for there isn't anything in your manner that calls forth a warm response, even in the most kindly breast in town, which mine demonstrably is not."

Van Stolk hasn't been gone an hour before another knock on the door summons Margarethe. It's the clothier again, Gerard van Antum, with some samples of lace and the first setting of undercoats and skirts to fit upon Margarethe's bony hips. Iris shows him into the street room. "I could care for some sherry," he admits, when he has been bustling about Margarethe with pins and scrutinizing glances, heaving for breath. His plumpness doesn't help him in his profession. He is like a huge ambulatory

pincushion—overpadded.

"I believe we're just out of sherry," says Margarethe. She invents a fit of coughing to hide the next information, that there's nothing in the cupboard to substitute for sherry. Within a few days, at this rate, there will be no cupboard either.

"Give me a look at the pretty young thing, then," says Gerard van Antum.

"Not till I have a finished costume," says Margarethe.

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"You forget," says the clothier, "I still have the pins in my hands."

"And when you loose them in me, you will have sacrificed your weapons, and it will be my turn," says Margarethe with a forced, gay laugh. "In lieu of sherry I will supply you with a cup of cocoa, and lace it with a flavoring capable of causing you to retch your liver up through your gullet."

He drops his hands; pins spill onto the floor.

"Learn from me, Iris, I'm a witty conversationalist, no?" says Margarethe. "I'm practicing for when I meet the Dowager Queen of France."

"The material you choose is very becoming," says van Antum in a humbled voice.

"I'm delighted you appreciate my taste," says Margarethe. Her eyes stare flintily out the window. "You catch the gossip that drops from every female tongue in the better streets of town. Why really is Marie de Medici displaying her godson here?"

"He's reputed to have an eye for the art of painting," says van Antum. "She relies on his taste in selecting her last portraitist. And there are other reasons."

"Pray tell."

But van Antum purses his mouth primly in Iris's direction. Margarethe sighs and tries another approach. "Clara?" she calls.

Ruth lumbers to the door of the kitchen. "I wanted Clara," says Margarethe.

"Ashgirl," says Ruth. Margarethe starts at the sound of comprehensible syllables from Ruth's mouth.

"Ashgirl?" she says. She's not so much questioning Ruth's

words as the fact that they can be uttered at all. Her voice goes up the register as if enraged. "Asfogi'rl?"

Clara appears then, pushing Ruth behind her into the kitchen to stem the tide of Margarethe's apparent disapproval. "What is it?" she says tiredly.

"Since when is Ruth able to call you Ashgirl?" says Margarethe.

"She's learned to sing some words," says Clara. "I hardly know how."

"You hardly know how, Ashgirl?" says Margarethe. "Charchild, Cinderfeet, you hardly know *haw?*"

"We spend much time in the kitchen," says Clara, "singing and telling stories. She's growing older, too, and listens well."

The clothier doesn't care about the improvement in Ruth's speech. His hands have dropped to the hem of Margarethe's skirt, and he clutches it as if to keep himself from rocking on his knees straight onto the floor. He has seen Clara only once before, and that time she disappeared without a word. "Introduce me," he mutters to Margarethe, and then hits her lightly on the ankle to get her attention. "Introduce me, will you?"

"Oh, very well," says Margarethe. "Are we settled on the size of the ruff, then, and your finding a set of pearl drops to fix in my ears? I can't locate Henrika's diamond pendants. I'll dig up her coffin if I must—"

Van Antum is too transfixed to reply to this comic boast. "Hello," he murmurs, "hello hello."

"So we're agreed," Margarethe continues. "Yes, then, I will tell you: This is my stepdaughter, Clara van den Meer."

#### THE GALLERY OF GOD'S MISTAKES

Don't mind her filth; she enjoys nothing more than to pretend to be a maid. We call her Cinderella as a game.

"Cinderella," says Margarethe, as if to prove such, "Cinderella, don't stand there looking sullen. Say hello to our own Gerard van Antum, and then, if you would be so kind, prepare for him a nice warm tankard of hot cocoa. Iris, go help her. Then, dear man, you can tell me more about Philippe de Marsillac and why he needs help procuring a bride."

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#### The Night Before the Ball

It's to be the most stylish affair held in all of the Provinces of the Netherlands this year! And such sinful excess and

expense!"

There are plenty of occasions for Haarlem folk to disapprove, Iris notices, but not many people who receive the precious invitations actually turn them down. "Better to observe firsthand — all the family will want to hear about the excesses" is the attitude most people take. And they keep the shoemakers busy with new footgear cut from the latest patterns imported from Paris.

For many it's a good time for a ball. Most of those who have suffered in the collapse of the tulip market have sold out and fled, or else, like Margarethe, they are trying gamely to proceed as if the best prospects lie ahead. And who's to say this isn't true? In the family of nations, the Netherlands is still a fledgling in the nest . . . Sprung out of a local gabble of small farmers and fishermen, a handful of provinces has become a nation of international merchants

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who share a growing sense of destiny. The brave market talk asserts just this.

"Those who have fallen will arise."

"Doesn't Holland get the freshest air off the ocean each day, and breathe the newest thoughts? Isn't the ocean itself our own high road to be galloped across in steeds of timber and sailcloth?"

Who cares that the crones and the predikants, using separate sets of words, murmur jeremiads that too much optimism is bad for the soul, and attracts perhaps more attention from God than, strictly speaking, is desirable?

But Marie de Medici is blowing into town like a galleon herself, with her godson, the profoundly handsome and well-positioned Philippe de Marsillac. He is said to have an eye for painting, and his godmother trusts his opinion. But how *can* it be that he isn't equipped to select a wife for himself? An eye for painting also suggests an eye for feminine beauty, surely? Or is he a slow-wit?

Nonetheless, he has been seen, and so has she; Haarlem isn't that large that a large person can easily hide herself or her nephew. And she is gross and unbecoming, and he her opposite in every way.

As the great day draws nearer, Iris and Ruth succumb to the various fittings that the clothier insists are necessary. Iris can see that van Antum is smitten with the splendor of Clara van den Meer, and that Margarethe limits his sight of Clara to a few moments at the end of each session. Even with her eyes continuing to ache and fail, Margarethe directs such

occasions with finesse. She calls "Cinderella!" to the back of the house and then arrests Clara as she approaches, saying, "Don't move, I've dropped a pin and you'll step on it."

So Clara, backlit by the sunlight splashing in a kitchen doorway and reflecting off newly washed tiles, hovers like a Catholic angel, her blond hair escaping its cap in a nimbus, her very arches poised to avoid fallen pins, giving her a look of one who has just set down from heaven.

Margarethe plays Clara even more deviously when Nico-laes van Stolk comes to call. It's become clear that his interest in the painting of Young Woman with Tulips is simply a mask for his interest in the model. First Margarethe sends Ruth upstairs to sit with Papa Cornelius and make sure he doesn't get out of bed. Then Iris is called in for the sake of propriety. Margarethe closes the doors to the front