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Opening Extract from...

The Apothecary's House

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Published by Pan Books

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Part One

One

The old woman, laden with bags, crossed the Stadhouderskade as if her life depended on it, forcing a van driver to swear and slam on the brakes. In the blur of snow along the Singelgracht canal, she held her head low like a battering ram. It was a wonder she could see where she was going. A sense stronger than sight was guiding her with a singularity of purpose that made people stop and stare.

As she made it to the opposite pavement, the early January sunlight peeped through. It fell on the great Gothic frigate of the Rijksmuseum with its cargo of Rembrandts, Breughels and Vermeers. It seeped through a plate-glass light well on which a wood pigeon had died in a corner of the museum's research library, ran its fingers over calfskin spines, slid down the brass banister of the spiral staircase and flamed upwards from the burnished oak table, a stack of post-war auction catalogues, a rotary card-index file, the foxed daybook of a local haulage firm, a magnifying glass and Ruth Braams's goose-pimpled forearms as

she raked her fingers back through short, messy, tow-blonde hair.

She folded her arms against her mariner's cable-knit sweater and let her head drop to one side till it almost touched her shoulder. Her skin was pale and cold. The sun was up to its old tricks. Not warmth but the promise of warmth, no sooner given than snatched away. She made no effort to hide her tiredness.

Myles Palmer, the big, ponytailed Englishman – on secondment from Sotheby's offices in a southern suburb of the city – was working through a box of correspondence marked *June 1943* and typing information into a laptop. Nazi expropriations were his specialist historical field.

'Don't abandon us,' he whispered in English, 'the Cultural Revolution needs you.'

'You know what this job's like?' she said. 'I've just figured it out.'

'Like watching paint dry?'

'No – too passive. It's like picking fly shit out of pepper, wearing boxing gloves, that's what it's like.'

Ruth yawned a fist-sized yawn.

She was thirty-two and had finished her doctoral thesis on domestic typology in the work of Jan Steen, the seventeenth-century Dutch painter, five years previously. Since then she'd helped a friend run a hairdresser's that doubled as an art gallery, manned a bike-rental concession and been a guide at the Van Gogh

Museum in the summer for English-speaking tourists and scant gratuities.

A year ago the call had come.

It was from the Amsterdam bureau of the Netherlands Office for Fine Art's restitution project, which was working in tandem with the bureau at the General State Archives in The Hague. Suddenly art historians were in fashion, especially those with built-in crap detectors. Claims were being reviewed and a computerized database and information system set up. Everyone was getting their act together, helped along by a big kick up the rump from the World Jewish Congress's Commission for Art Recovery and the Art Loss Register.

At the start of the Second World War, a quarter of the artworks in Europe had changed hands. Since then they'd been making their way home from that mass exodus in dribs and drabs. Now the last obstacles to the return of looted art, the last conspiracies of silence, were being broken down. This was called 'coming clean' and art historians were the spring-cleaning detectives. A lot of looted art had been repatriated over the decades and held in custody by the Dutch state. Recently it had been put on show and when claimants came forward their claims were investigated. Sales records, letters, snapshots, catalogues, even a scrap of paper with a one-line description of a picture – everything was grist to the mill.

Some museum grandees were in no great hurry. Time

was on their side. They'd shake their heads in commiseration. Sound bureaucratic methods are notoriously long and intensive, my friend. If the investigation outlives the claimants or their heirs, what can we do? The work of art remains state property by default. There's nowhere else for it to go. A token payment's sometimes made to funds for Holocaust survivors. But, above all, museums and governments have responsibilities. They don't want to create precedents. They don't want to give away hundreds of paintings without seriously evaluating the validity of each and every claim.

Then again, all too often, the basic title investigation was a dead end. War kills and what remains when the dust and smoke clear? Ownerless property, goods without heirs ... The voice that might have spoken up is silent. The documentation that might have proved a claim is long since gone. And so a painting hangs in a famous art gallery for all to admire, caught in a shaft of gold, white and blue winter sunshine suddenly breaking through the clouds. It brings smiles of pleasure to the visitors' chapped lips and rheumy eyes. A portrait by Nicolaes Maes, a river landscape by Salomon van Ruysdael, Jan Steen's *The Sacrifice of Iphigenia*. Take a long look at it. Who bothers to question its provenance? Who either knows or cares? It's just itself – a canvas sail on the river of time, indifferent to human motives and the upheavals of history. By diligence, miracle or pot luck, it has survived.

Somewhere, the pitch change of a lift motor and the flip-flap of rubber draught excluder on a swing door.

Ruth looked around at the other research rats, blinking. Pieter Timmermans had pegged out in front of the microform reader. He snored a light rodent snore, head cushioned on folded arms. Myles was trying to decipher a smudged postmark on an envelope with the magnifying glass. Just to distract him, the sunlight had lasered into a white mobile pinprick that danced around like an imp, threatening to singe a postage stamp of the brown-shirted Reichsführer.

Up above on the second tier of gangways, which gave access to a cliff face of books and nondescript ledgers, Bernard Cabrol, the lean French coordinator in his green silk cravat, rested one arm and his flat behind against the wooden book rest on the balustrade. He looked, as ever, like a man kebabbed on the horns of an insuperable dilemma. He bit hard into the gold eraser ring on the end of his pencil and flattened it to an oval.

At an elevated desk in one corner the ill-tempered librarian, who had a cold sore on her lip, peered into the pixels of her VDU then glanced round sharply, as if trying to catch potential fine dodgers or book thieves unawares.

Footsteps . . .

The elderly woman who had battled along the Stadhouderskade now clumped into the reading room.

She wore a woollen rapper's cap with an embroidered NYC monogram, glasses with frames like Bakelite post-war TV screens and a black astrakhan coat which, if it had seen more glamorous days, had sworn an oath of eternal silence. The snow was still white and flaky on her cap and shoulders. A wet umbrella poked out of one of several carrier bags from the De Bijenkorf department store that she had wedged under her elbow as she burrowed deep in a handbag. 'Bags,' thought Ruth: a Lower East Side bag lady – took a wrong turn at Lafayette, no doubt, wandering Mr Magoo-like up the gangplank of an ocean-going liner. But there was a shabby nobility about this rag-picker that held her attention.

The librarian half-rose to her feet and froze. Along with everyone else, now, she was listening to a wet clicking sound that had entered the room with the woman. At first it seemed to have something to do with the bag lady's shoes, since it synchronized with her steps, but when she dropped down like a sack of charity cast-offs on the chair opposite Ruth the sound continued, with its own separate life.

The woman plugged an inhaler into her mouth, shut her eyes and pushed down the button. A low, pressurized hiss. The click disappeared. Her breathing eased.

The librarian – who had run her fingernail down to Emergency: Paramedics on the museum phone list – now cursed, broke her irresolute pose, stepped down

from her pedestal and drew up alongside at battle stations. 'Yes?'

'I would like a glass of water.'

'You can't just walk in here,' the girl sneered. 'They should've stopped you. This is a restricted zone.'

The old woman was disoriented.

Ruth raised a hand. 'Please – get her a glass of water.'

The girl strode off in a huff.

The visitor noticed Ruth and Myles for the first time. She smiled at Ruth – smiled at the scruffy hair, smiled at the street-urchin manner, smiled at the water-blue eyes, dark eyebrows, schoolgirl complexion, nice lips and that fetching way of leaning forward on folded arms, shoulders hunched slightly, suggesting a lazy agreeableness, a desire to help.

'Where am I?' she asked. 'Why did I come here? Can *you* remember? Do *you* know?'

She didn't bother to wait for a reply.

She poked her glasses up on her thin blue nose and tipped the contents of her handbag across the library table. Keys. Plastic cards and till receipts strapped together with elastic bands. Hair grips. A bundle of letters. Lipstick and peppermints. A silver pillbox. A glass flask of Caron perfume. Among the more unusual items a minute ceramic doll's house teapot, a pair of ivory dice and a packet of geranium seeds. Ruth looked down at the odds and ends. For a moment, she thought they were being taken for a ride. It was some kind of vocational

performance test, dreamt up by the Pelman Institute – that, or *Candid Camera*. The old girl was slumming it from the Felix Meritis theatre, a local luvvie in drag.

Ruth's unworthy thoughts vanished whence they came.

The woman was getting organized. She picked up the bundle of mail, cast her eye over a couple of letter-heads – TPG Post, the Dierenopvangcentrum animal hospital – and found the one she wanted, 'Here we are,' she said, teasing it out from the pack. 'I do remember now.' She held her head back to get the right focal length, braced her neck muscles and read the letter to herself. The glasses gave her a studious respectability which had not been in evidence before.

'You wrote this to me,' she said. 'It says you have my picture. So kind! Of course, I saw it at the viewing. That's when I knew. I thought it had been lost forever.'

She folded the letter and smiled at Ruth and Myles.

Ruth glanced behind her. Cabrol had turned round and was watching the show. He was tapping the point of his pencil against his teeth.

'May I see that?' She took the letter and read it. 'Lydia van der Heyden?'

'Yes.'

'You filed a claim.'

'Did I?'

'A year ago. For a painting in the NK-Collection.' She glanced at the name of the painter and the brief descrip-

tion of the work. 'How did you know you could find us here?'

'Where, my dear?'

'Never mind. This letter' – Ruth held it up between finger and thumb – 'is nearly a year old. It's an acknowledgement of one that you wrote to us. It asks you to produce evidence to support your claim. Did you answer it?'

Bags pursed her lips. Her eyes clouded as her thoughts turned inwards. 'I sent a photocopy. A copy of the photograph. I had it done at the post office. The old photograph was all I had.'

'Well, in that case, your claim must be under review.'

'It takes time,' said Myles in his hesitant Dutch, with a sad smile. 'There's a backlog, specially after Christmas. We were off for a week, you see.'

Bags latched a hand onto his shirt sleeve and brought her grey head close to his. He winced. Her breath smelled like old dinners.

'I don't do anything much for Christmas,' she said. 'Since Sander died, that is. There's nothing to celebrate any more. Not at my age, anyway.'

She released him, wrung her hands and looked away, anguished. Then back she came with greater intensity.

'I like the lights on the bridges. I like the little lights, glowing in the dark night, oh yes! Especially when it snows. But I don't go to the Westerkerk for the carols. Too many people, my dear. I go to De Krijtberg on the

Singel. It's like the old days. They do the mass in Latin there on Sunday mornings. Sander and I used to go. I love the paintings and the statues. There's one statue in particular, our Holy Mary, Mother of Jesus. Her face is so pure. There are little changes in her expressions depending on the light. Of course, I know it's only a graven image, but I swear she listens to me. She understands. She knows what I've been through.'

Myles nodded, an unconvincing play of fellow-feeling. Ruth heard steps behind. Cabrol was descending the spiral iron staircase – the bureaucrat, the officiant – listening in as he came. She felt his approach like a cool draught of unease.

'At my age,' Bags went on, with the same fixed inward focus, 'there's nothing left. Only your memories. And they go too. You'll find out for yourself one day, believe me. So I try to keep them alive. I think about Asha and Elfried and Sander. That was another world. I remember the good times though. I watch the telly, for the quizzes. I do crosswords. I'm seventy-nine, you know. My doctor says he's seen a lot worse. I had the hip replacement, and there's the cataract and a spot of rheumatism, but one mustn't complain. I keep going. I make sure I get out every day. Keep on keeping on. That's my motto. You have to, don't you?'

'I suppose you do,' said Myles.

The woman stood up and started rummaging in her carrier bags. 'I brought some brown wrapping paper,

and some string. It's not a very large painting. I should be able to carry it, don't you think?'

Ruth and Myles exchanged a glance.

'Um, listen, you don't seem to understand,' Myles began with an awkward laugh. 'Your claim has to be looked into. It goes before a committee. If there's no problem, if it's accepted, they'll deliver the painting to you. In the meantime, you'll just have to be patient.'

Bags stopped her rummaging and glared at him. 'I think it is *you* who does not understand, young man. That painting is mine. It belonged to my father and to his father's father. I do not find walking easy these days. I do not find anything easy these days, for that matter. Nevertheless, I have come here expressly today, through wind and snow, to pick up my painting.'

Myles reddened. 'Well, you can't. What I mean is, it hasn't been established as yet that it is yours. There's an official thingummy to follow – Ruth, what's *procedure* in Dutch?'

'*Procedure*', said Ruth with the right accent and stress. 'I lent you that book called *De Procedure*, remember? Same spelling as in English.'

Bags's brolly fell with a clatter to the floor. She bent down and picked it up, dropping her carrier bags in the process.

'There's a procedure,' said Ruth, as much for Cabrol's benefit as the old lady's, 'that is followed in our front office. We're just researchers. We don't make the final

decisions. In fact, strictly speaking, we shouldn't have any contact with claimants at all.'

'Strictly speaking's dead right,' Cabrol chipped in as he drew up behind them.

The librarian returned with a glass of water and accompanied by a security guard. She banged the glass onto the table. 'Still want this, do you?'

'It's true that this part of the library's off limits, if you don't have a card,' said Myles. 'I'll give you the office number and you can get in touch. They'll let you know how things stand.'

Bags lumbered to her feet. 'Oh, I know how things stand. I know exactly how things stand. You have been looking after my personal property and now I want it back. So you will please be so kind as to fetch it immediately.' She had switched to the harsh but exalted dowager tone that elderly women of a certain class adopt when insisting on their rights. Timmermans had woken up and was enjoying the spectacle. Even Ruth's cheek muscles moved in to beat down a reflex smile. It was like something out of an old movie. Amsterdam was a youngster's town. Methuselahs were minority fare, a good deal further out on the margins of acceptability than the thriving fringe theatre of hookers and pot-heads.

Bags launched into her family history again.

The guard had one hand on his hip. His fingers played lightly, like a daydreaming pianist's, on the

holster of his automatic pistol. Cabrol wagged a hand to draw the man to one side.

'How did she get through?'

'I was called away for thirty seconds. Had to help a woman fold a pushchair for the cloakroom. She must've just slipped by. I never saw her.' The guard bit his lower lip and shrugged.

Myles handed Bags a card with the front-office number, but she scuffed it to the floor. She was about to go on about her entitlements when the asthma got the better of her. She doubled up, throat clicking, one hand clutched to her ribs. Ruth passed her the inhaler and she cleared her tubes once again.

Cabrol made a little circling gesture to the librarian, indicating the table top, and the librarian began scooping the old woman's belongings together.

'Take your hands off those things!' Bags cried.

She swept round and the handle of her umbrella knocked over the flask of perfume and unstoppered it. A sudden fragrance of old damask roses – drooping Victorian blooms, velvet petals, airless rooms and the ghosts of yesteryear – invaded their corner of the library.

'Great!' said the librarian, dabbing at the spillage with a paper handkerchief. 'That's just what we needed. Now we'll have to live with this pong for the rest of the week!' She continued shovelling the knick-knacks into the handbag.

Cabrol signalled again and the guard grabbed up the

carriers and took Bags by the elbow, assisting her towards the door with one hand in the small of her back. He was too strong, too determined for her. She twisted her head round in indignation. 'I will not be treated like this! I will not! If Sander were alive today, he wouldn't stand for it. He'd stick up for me. I want to see the authorities! Who is in charge here?'

Exeunt.

There was the remote thud of a door and the flickety-flack of draught excluder. For a few seconds the woman's complaints continued before the lift doors closed with a sigh and she was borne away.