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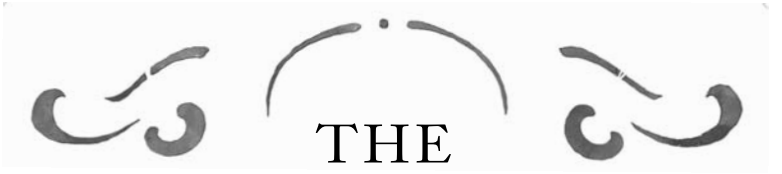
The Miniaturist

Written by Jessie Burton

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THE MINIATURIST

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Dolls' house of Petronella Oortman, anonymous, c. 1686 – c. 1710, Rijksmuseum

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For

Linda,
Edward
& Pip



Petronella Oortman's cabinet house,
The Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

The term VOC refers to the Dutch East India Company, known in Dutch as the Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (the VOC). The VOC was founded in 1602 and ran hundreds of ships trading across Africa, Europe, Asia and the Indonesian archipelago.

By 1669, the VOC had 50,000 employees, 60 bewindhebbers (partners), and 17 regents. By 1671, VOC shares on the Amsterdam Stock Exchange were reaching 570% of their nominal value.

Owing to the positive agricultural conditions and financial strength of the United Provinces of the Netherlands, it was said that their poor ate much better than their counterparts in England, Italy, France and Spain. The rich ate best of all.

Take ye the spoil of silver, take the spoil of gold:
For there is none end of the store and glory out of all
the pleasant furniture.

Nahum 2:9

And as he went out of the temple, one of his disciples
saith unto him,
Master, see what manner of stones and what
buildings are here!
And Jesus answering said unto him, Seest thou these
great buildings?
There shall not be left one stone upon another, that
shall not be thrown down.

Mark 13:1–2

*(All excerpts come from marked passages in the
Brandt household Bible)*

The Old Church, Amsterdam: Tuesday, 14th January 1687

The funeral is supposed to be a quiet affair, for the deceased had no friends. But words are water in Amsterdam, they flood your ears and set the rot, and the church's east corner is crowded. She watches the scene unfold from the safety of the choir stall, as guildsmen and their wives approach the gaping grave like ants toward the honey. Soon, they are joined by VOC clerks and ship's captains, regentesses, pastry-makers – and him, still wearing that broad-brimmed hat. She tries to pity him. Pity, unlike hate, can be boxed and put away.

The church's painted roof – the one thing the reformers didn't pull down – rises above them like the tipped-up hull of a magnificent ship. It is a mirror to the city's soul; inked on its ancient beams, Christ in judgement holds his sword and lily, a golden cargo breaks the waves, the Virgin rests on a crescent moon. Flipping up the old misericord beside her, her fingers flutter on the proverb of exposed wood. It is a relief of a man shitting a bag of coins, a leer of pain chipped across his face. What's changed? she thinks.

And yet.

Even the dead are in attendance today, grave-slabs hiding body on body, bones on dust, stacked up beneath the mourners'

feet. Below that floor are women's jaws, a merchant's pelvis, the hollow ribs of a fat grandee. There are little corpses down there, some no longer than a loaf of bread. Noting how people shift their eyes from such condensed sadness, how they move from any tiny slab they see, she cannot blame them.

At the centre of the crowd, the woman spies what she has come for. The girl looks exhausted, grief-etched, standing by a hole in the floor. She barely notices the citizens who have come to stare. The pall-bearers walk up the nave, the coffin on their shoulders balanced like a case for a lute. By the looks on their faces, you might have thought a few of them have reservations about this funeral. It will be Pellicorne's doing, she supposes. Same old poison in the ear.

Normally processions like this are in tight order, the burgomasters at the top and the common folk beneath, but on this day no one has bothered. The woman supposes that there's never been a body like it in any of God's houses within the compass of this city. She loves its rare, defiant quality. Founded on risk, Amsterdam now craves certainty, a neat passage through life, guarding the comfort of its money with dull obedience. I should have left before today, she thinks. Death has come too close.

The circle breaks apart as the pall-bearers push their way in. As the coffin is lowered into the hole without ceremony, the girl moves towards the edge. She tosses a posy of flowers down into the dark, and a starling beats its wings, scaling up the church's whitewashed wall. Heads turn, distracted, but the girl does not flinch, and neither does the woman in the choir stall, both of them watching the arc of petals as Pellicorne intones his final prayer.

As the pall-bearers slide the new slab into place, a maid-servant kneels by the vanishing dark. She starts to sob, and when the exhausted girl does nothing to check these rising tears, this lack of dignity and order is noted with a tut. Two women, dressed in silk, stand near the choir stall and whisper between themselves. 'That kind of behaviour is why we're here in the first place,' one murmurs.

'If they're like this in public, they must behave like wild animals indoors,' her friend replies.

'True. But what I wouldn't give to be a fly on that wall. *Bzz-bzz*.'

They stifle a giggle, and in the choir stall the woman notices how her knuckle has turned white upon the moral misericord.

With the church floor sealed once again, the circle dissolves, the dead at bay. The girl, like a stained-glass saint fallen from the church's window, acknowledges the uninvited hypocrites. These people start to chatter as they exit towards the city's winding streets, followed eventually by the girl and her maid, who move silently, arm in arm along the nave and out. Most of the men will be going back to their desks and counters, because keeping Amsterdam afloat takes constant work. Hard grind got us the glory, the saying goes – but sloth will slide us back into the sea. And these days, the rising waters feel so near.

Once the church is empty, the woman emerges from the choir stall. She hurries, not wanting to be discovered. *Things can change*, she says, her voice whispering off the walls. When she finds the newly laid slab, she sees it is a rushed job, the granite still warmer than the other graves, the chiselled words

still dusty. That these events have come to pass should be unbelievable.

She kneels and reaches in her pocket to complete what she has started. This is her own prayer, a miniature house small enough to sit in the palm. Nine rooms and five human figures are carved within, the craftsmanship so intricate, worked outside of time. Carefully, the woman places this offering where she had always intended it to lie, blessing the cool granite with her toughened fingers.

As she pushes open the church door, she looks instinctively for the broad-brimmed hat, the cloak of Pellicorne, the silken women. All have vanished, and she could be alone in the world were it not for the noise of the trapped starling. It is time to leave, but for a moment the woman holds the door open for the bird. Sensing her effort, instead it flaps away behind the pulpit.

She closes away the church's cool interior, turning to face the sun, heading from the ringed canals toward the sea. Starling, she thinks, if you believe that building is the safer spot, then I am not the one to set you free.



ONE

Mid-October, 1686

The Herengracht canal, Amsterdam

Be not desirous of his dainties:
For they are deceitful meat.

Proverbs 23:3

Outside In

On the step of her new husband's house, Nella Oortman lifts and drops the dolphin knocker, embarrassed by the thud. No one comes, though she is expected. The time was prearranged and letters written, her mother's paper so thin compared with Brandt's expensive vellum. No, she thinks, this is not the best of greetings, given the blink of a marriage ceremony the month before – no garlands, no betrothal cup, no wedding bed. Nella places her small trunk and birdcage on the step. She knows she'll have to embellish this later for home, when she's found a way upstairs, a room, a desk.

Nella turns to the canal as bargemen's laughter rises up the opposite brickwork. A puny lad has skittled into a woman and her basket of fish, and a half-dead herring slithers down the wide front of the seller's skirt. The harsh cry of her country voice runs under Nella's skin. '*Idiot! Idiot!*' the woman yells. The boy is blind, and he grabs in the dirt for the escaped herring as if it's a silver charm, his fingers quick, not afraid to feel around. He scoops it, cackling, running up the path with his catch, his free arm out and ready.

Nella cheers silently and stays to face this rare October warmth, to take it while she can. This part of the Herengracht is known as the Golden Bend, but today the wide stretch is brown and workaday. Looming above the sludge-coloured

canal, the houses are a phenomenon. Admiring their own symmetry on the water, they are stately and beautiful, jewels set within the city's pride. Above their rooftops Nature is doing her best to keep up, and clouds in colours of saffron and apricot echo the spoils of the glorious republic.

Nella turns back to the door, now slightly ajar. Was it like this before? She cannot be sure. She pushes on it, peering into the void as cool air rises from the marble. 'Johannes Brandt?' she calls – loud, a little panicked. Is this a game? she thinks. I'll be standing here come January. Peebo, her parakeet, thrills the tips of his feathers against the cage bars, his faint cheep falling short on the marble. Even the now-quiet canal behind them seems to hold its breath.

Nella is sure of one thing as she looks deeper into the shadows. She's being watched. *Come on*, *Nella Elisabeth*, she tells herself, stepping over the threshold. Will her new husband embrace her, kiss her or shake her hand like it's just business? He didn't do any of those things at the ceremony, surrounded by her small family and not a single member of his.

To show that country girls have manners too, she bends down and removes her shoes – dainty, leather, of course her best – although what their point has been she can't now say. *Dignity*, her mother said, but dignity is so uncomfortable. She slaps the shoes down, hoping the noise will arouse somebody, or maybe scare them off. Her mother calls her over-imaginative, Nella-in-the-Clouds. The inert shoes lie in anti-climax and Nella simply feels a fool.

Outside, two women call to one other. Nella turns, but through the open door she sees only the back of one woman, capless, golden-headed and tall, striding away towards the last

of the sun. Nella's own hair has loosened on the journey from Assendelft, the light breeze letting wisps escape. To tuck them away will make her more nervous than she can bear to seem, so she leaves them tickling her face.

'Are we to have a menagerie?'

The voice sails sure and swift from the darkness of the hall. Nella's skin contracts, for being right about her suspicions can't banish the goosebumps. She watches as a figure glides from the shadows, a hand outstretched – in protest or in greeting, it is hard to tell. It is a woman, straight and slim and dressed in deepest black, the cap on her head starched and pressed to white perfection. Not a wisp of her hair escapes, and she brings with her the vaguest, strangest scent of nutmeg. Her eyes are grey, her mouth is solemn. How long has she been there, watching? Peebo chirrups at the intervention.

'This is Peebo,' Nella says. 'My parakeet.'

'So I see,' says the woman, gazing down at her. 'Or hear. I take it you have not brought any more beasts?'

'I have a little dog, but he's at home—'

'Good. It would mess in our rooms. Scratch the wood. Those small ones are an affectation of the French and Spanish,' the woman observes. 'As frivolous as their owners.'

'And they look like rats,' calls a second voice from somewhere in the hall.

The woman frowns, briefly closing her eyes, and Nella takes her in, wondering who else is watching this exchange. I must be younger than her by ten years, she thinks, though her skin's so smooth. As the woman moves past Nella towards the door frame, there is a grace in her movements, self-aware and unapologetic. She casts a brief, approving glance at the

neat shoes by the door and then stares into the cage, her lips pressed tight together. Peebo's feathers have puffed in fear.

Nella decides to distract her by joining hands in greeting, but the woman flinches at the touch.

'Strong bones for seventeen,' the woman says.

'I'm Nella,' she replies, retracting her hand. 'And I'm eighteen.'

'I know who you are.'

'My real name is Petronella, but everyone at home calls me—'

'I heard the first time.'

'Are you the housekeeper?' Nella asks. A giggle is badly stifled in the hallway shadows. The woman ignores it, looking out into the pearlescent dusk. 'Is Johannes here? I'm his new wife.' The woman still says nothing. 'We signed our marriage a month ago, in Assendelft,' Nella persists. It seems there is nothing else to do but to persist.

'My brother is not in the house.'

'Your brother?'

Another giggle from the darkness. The woman looks straight into Nella's eyes. 'I am Marin Brandt,' she says, as if Nella should understand. Marin's gaze may be hard, but Nella can hear the precision faltering in her voice. 'He's not here,' Marin continues. 'We thought he'd be. But he's not.'

'Where is he then?'

Marin looks out towards the sky again. Her left hand fronds the air, and from the shadows near the staircase two figures appear. 'Otto,' she says.

A man comes towards them and Nella swallows, pressing her cold feet upon the floor.

Otto's skin is dark, dark brown everywhere, his neck coming out from the collar, his wrists and hands from his sleeves – all unending, dark brown skin. His high cheeks, his chin, his wide brow, every inch. Nella has never seen such a man in her life.

Marin seems to be watching her to see what she will do. The look in Otto's large eyes makes no acknowledgement of Nella's ill-concealed fascination. He bows to her and she curtsies, chewing her lip till the taste of blood reminds her to be calm. Nella sees how his skin glows like a polished nut, how his black hair springs straight up from his scalp. It is a cloud of soft wool, not flat and greasy like other men's. 'I—' she says.

Peebo begins to chirp. Otto puts his hands out, a pair of pattens resting on his broad palms. 'For your feet,' he says.

His accent is Amsterdam – but he rolls the words, making them warm and liquid. Nella takes the pattens from him and her fingers brush his skin. Clumsily she slips the raised shoes onto her feet. They are too big, but she doesn't dare say it, and at least they lift her soles off the chilly marble. She'll tighten the leather straps later, upstairs – if she ever gets there, if they ever let her past this hall.

'Otto is my brother's manservant,' says Marin, her eyes still fixed on Nella. 'And here is Cornelia, our maid. She will look after you.'

Cornelia steps forward. She is a little older than Nella, perhaps twenty, twenty-one – and slightly taller. Cornelia pins her with an unfriendly grin, her blue eyes moving over the new bride, seeing the tremor in Nella's hands. Nella smiles, burnt by the maid's curiosity, struggling to say some piece of

empty thanks. She is half-grateful, half-ashamed when Marin cuts her off.

'Let me show you upstairs,' Marin says. 'You will want to see your room.'

Nella nods and a look of amusement flickers to life in Cornelia's eyes. Blithe pirrips from the cage bounce high up the walls, and Marin indicates to Cornelia with a flick of her wrist that the bird must go to the kitchen.

'But the cooking fumes,' Nella protests. Marin and Otto turn back to her. 'Peebo likes the light.'

Cornelia takes up the cage and starts swinging it like a pail. 'Please, be careful,' says Nella.

Marin catches Cornelia's eye. The maid continues to the kitchen, accompanied by the thin melody of Peebo's worried cheeps.

Upstairs, Nella feels dwarfed by the sumptuousness of her new room. Marin merely looks displeased. 'Cornelia has embroidered too much,' she says. 'But we hope Johannes will only marry once.'

There are initialled cushions, a new bedspread and two pairs of recently refreshed curtains. 'The velvet heaviness is needed to keep out canal mists,' Marin observes. 'This was my room,' she adds, moving to the window to look at the few stars which have begun to appear in the sky, placing her hand upon the windowpane. 'It has a better view, so we gave it to you.'

'Oh no,' says Nella. 'Then you must keep it.'

They face each other, hemmed in by the mass of needlework, the abundance of linen covered in *B* for Brandt,

encircled by vine leaves, entrenched in birds' nests, rising out of flower beds. The *B*s have gobbled up her maiden name, their bellies fat and swollen. Feeling uneasy but duty-bound, Nella brushes a finger over this bounty of wool, now bearing on her spirits.

'Your grand ancestral Assendelft seat, is it warm and dry?' Marin asks.

'It can be damp,' Nella offers as she bends over and tries to adjust the large pattens strapped awkwardly to her feet. 'The dykes don't always work. It's not grand, though—'

'Our family may not have your ancient pedigree, but what's that in the face of a warm, dry, well-made house,' Marin interrupts. It is not a question.

'Indeed.'

'*Afkomst seyt niet.* Pedigree counts for nothing,' Marin continues, prodding a cushion to emphasize the word *nothing*. 'Pastor Pellicorne said it last Sunday and I wrote it in the flyleaf of our Bible. The waters will rise if we're not careful.' She seems to shake herself out of a thought. 'Your mother wrote,' she adds. 'She insisted she would pay for you to travel here. We couldn't allow that. We sent the second-best barge. You're not offended?'

'No. No.'

'Good. Second-best in this house still means new paint and a cabin lined in Bengal silk. Johannes is using the other one.'

Nella wonders where her husband is, on his best barge, not back in time to greet her. She thinks about Peebo, alone in the kitchen, near the fire, near the pans. 'You only have two servants?' she asks.

'It's enough,' says Marin. 'We're merchants, not layabouts. The Bible tells us a man should never flaunt his wealth.'

'No. Of course.'

'That is, if he has any left to flaunt.' Marin stares at her and Nella looks away. The light in the room is beginning to fade, and Marin sets a taper on the candles. They are tallow and cheap, and Nella had hoped for more fragrant beeswax. The choice of this meat-smelling, smoky variety surprises her. 'Cornelia seems to have sewn your new name on everything,' Marin says over her shoulder.

Indeed, thinks Nella, remembering Cornelia's baleful scrutiny. Her fingers will be red ribbons, and who will she punish for that?

'When is Johannes coming – why is he not here?' she asks.

'Your mother said you were keen to begin your life as a wife in Amsterdam,' Marin says. 'Are you?'

'Yes. But one needs a husband in order to do so.'

In the frost-tipped silence that follows, Nella wonders where Marin's husband is. Maybe she's hidden him in the cellar. She smothers her desperate impulse to laugh by smiling at one of the cushions. 'This is all so beautiful,' she says. 'You didn't have to.'

'Cornelia did it all. I am no use with my hands.'

'I'm sure that is not true.'

'I've taken my paintings down. I thought these might be more to your taste.' Marin gestures to the wall where a brace of game-birds has been captured in oil, hanging from a hook, all feather and claw. Further along the wall is a portrait of a strung-up hare, a hunter's prize. Next to it a painted slew of

oysters are piled on a Chinese patterned plate, shadowed by a spilt wineglass and a bowl of over-ripened fruit. There is something unsettling about the oysters, their exposed openness. In her old home, Nella's mother covered the walls in landscapes and scenes from the Bible. 'These belong to my brother,' Marin observes, pointing at a brimming vase of flowers, harder than life, coloured in excess, half a pomegranate waiting at the bottom of the frame.

'Thank you.' Nella wonders how long it will take her to turn them to the wall before she goes to sleep.

'You'll want to eat up here tonight,' says Marin. 'You've been travelling for hours.'

'I have, yes. I would be grateful.' Nella shudders inwardly at the birds' bloodied beaks, their glassy eyes, promising flesh puckering away. At the sight of them, she is taken by the desire for something sweet. 'Do you have any marzipan?'

'No. Sugar is – not something we take much of. It makes people's souls grow sick.'

'My mother used to roll it into shapes.' There was always marzipan in the pantry, the only predilection for indulgence in which Mrs Oortman echoed her husband. Mermaids, ships and necklaces of sugared jewels, that almond doughiness melting in their mouths. I no longer belong to my mother, Nella thinks. One day I will roll sugar shapes for other little clammy hands, voices baying for treats.

'I will ask Cornelia to bring you some *herenbrood* and Gouda,' Marin says, drawing Nella out of her thoughts. 'And a glass of Rhenish.'

'Thank you. Do you have an idea of when Johannes will arrive?'

Marin tips her nose into the air. 'What *is* that smell?'

Instinctively, Nella's hands fly to her collarbone. 'Is it me?'

'Is it you?'

'My mother bought me a perfume. Oil of Lilies. Is that what you smell?'

Marin nods. 'It is,' she says. 'It's lily.' She coughs gently. 'You know what they say about lilies.'

'No?'

'Early to ripe, early to rot.'

With that, Marin shuts the door.