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Written by Kim Devereux

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Rembrandt's Mirror

Kim Devereux



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The sun has barely crept over the horizon but the gracht is already awash with souls eager to wring a living – or a little more than a living – from the stream of commerce that pulsates through our great city's canals. The water sparkles in the canal below, throwing flecks of light against the walls that rise straight up from its depths. Crates are hoisted up on ropes from barges to the upper storeys of houses, their hungry doors always open for more.

A window glints. That one there, just beneath the stepped gable. And beyond the glass, a woman. Now she is gone again. Or was it merely a reflection? The window blinks again. That glass, that very glass, used to be so clean. It's warm inside. She was here once. Looking out, the glass is full of soot. She would have scrubbed it, with a white linen cloth. Rub, rub, rub, in little circles, her eyes focused on the spatterings of ash.

There, a faint reflection in the handmade glass. A pretty round face. It's her again. She is cleaning the glass. This soot sediment – it's so slow coming off. The reflection, clearer now: a face with eyes translucent as honey. The white cloth is still going round and round,

wiping her face in and out of existence. Now her eyes fix on something trapped in the glass. Tiny beads of air. The air from long ago. From when the house was built. Encapsulated.

From the outside, looking in, her face is made fluid by the glass. She opens the window and draws a breath of cool morning air. She takes her cloth, wrings it over the abyss. One more squeeze and a final drop is released. It falls and falls all the way down towards the sparkling wet. A glass bauble suspended in the air. And yet to her it's hurtling towards its destiny, hitting the surface of the canal.

It joins the waters. It now knows all. It created the ripples which are spreading out and out. Back above, Hendrickje's smiling face appears distorted by the surface of the water. How happy she is. She closes the window, just before flotsam would have wiped her from view.

PART I

Amsterdam, 1642

The Night Watch

Rembrandt's house, Sint-Anthonisbreestraat,
June 1642

All is darkness, except for the afterglow of what he saw before he closed his eyes. Two throbbing specks of light. How beautiful they are. And in between the two there's a wisp of luminance, connecting them, like a half-formed thought.

He opens his eyes to let the light in again. For a moment the entire canvas rears up at him, twice his height. He backs away until he's up against the wooden roof support, taking the whole thing in: thirty-odd night watchmen in a restless broil, each jabbing in a different direction; but wait, the lieutenant is about to pull them back into order with his call to march. He squints. The image blurs, letting him see what matters: islands of ivory in a sea of dark. But the dark has teeth, forever gnawing at the light.

He lets his lids part a little more. The brightest of the two islands is Lieutenant van Ruytenburch's coat and there's his visual echo – the girl with the dead chicken hanging from her belt. She's a shade more buttery than him. His ivory calls out, her light form answers, so satisfying to the eye, which loves a repetition. A tension

is growing between them, taut as a string, waiting to be plucked. The corners of his mouth rise into a smile.

The sound of a cough. A reminder. He dismisses it from his mind. The canvas is waiting. He opens his eyes fully, struck by the carmine dress of the musketeer. Red is such a pregnant colour, drawing attention by its deep tone alone. He is a choirmaster listening. Right beside the sonorous black of the captain's uniform soars the shining bright lieutenant. Baritone and soprano. Foils to one another. And all around, the choir, singing not with one voice but many: different coloured clothes, textures, characters and vigorous movements in all directions. And yet together they make a perfect harmony. It's just as he intended it.

He is imagining the other group portraits that will hang alongside his. Rows and rows of brightly lit heads, about as life-like as playing cards. Another intrusion. She coughs again. But he needs to take care of the details now. The dark silhouette of the musket butt is similar to the shadow of the captain's hand. He makes them mimic one another – same length, same angle, adds a thumb-like hook to the butt. Now, they chime together – resonant. He scours the picture for more. The carmine of the musketeer and the sash of the captain, both the same red. The lieutenant's partisan, and the captain's outstretched hand. Perfectly parallel. Now the picture hums and whispers like a colony of bees – alive.

More coughing. He listens harder to the bee choir. He won't be distracted. Looks for more enhancements. The coughing stops. He waits, brush in hand, unable to look at the painting anymore,

straining to hear. Samuel, his assistant and most promising pupil, seems oblivious to the pause, busy preparing lead white on the grinding stone. The boy is all limbs and yet so full of intent, so serious, at fifteen. Just as he was.

The lean-to is two storeys high and shelters the enormous canvas and several ladders. Supported by a few columns it is open to the yard, making the silence from her open window opposite undeniable.

She coughs again, uncontrollably it seems. The boy looks up at him, his eyes urging him to go to her. So he puts down his palette and brushes, strides across the yard, into the corridor, through the entrance hall, where he notices one of his paintings. He's walked past it a hundred times but now he's caught by it, forgetting where he meant to go. It's her as Flora, wearing a red dress, her left hand resting on her bosom. Saskia. Above her blue eyes is that expanse of luminous forehead that he always wants to kiss, surprised each time that such a simple act can make him happy in an instant. Her right arm is outstretched, offering him a red carnation and some are strewn in the background, too. She smells of them, and other flowers – though not now she is ill. Was it only six months ago that he painted this? Another cough moves him on. He has a thought, steps into the print room on the way, picks up a copper plate and dry-point needle and continues on. It is *her* bedroom now of course. His clothes are still kept there but he has been sleeping in the guest bed in the anteroom so as not to disturb her while she recovers. He has to stop himself from breaking into a run. How could he have stayed away for so many hours?

Her face lights up when he enters. He smiles broadly in response. Her eyes are drawing him to her and her hand lifts from the bed, ready to touch the back of his neck like she always does. He's floating like pigment in too much oil. Then her hand drops, as she remembers not to touch him.

He ignores the chair and sits down on the edge of the bed. Surely that's allowed. Only now does he notice the plump but determined shadow in the corner. Geertje's still there, keeping watch. She gets up, dismissed by an unspoken signal from her mistress.

What to say? Saskia is silent too. Where's her hand? He feels under the warm cloth for her palm. She does not object. There it is, the skin sweaty, the flesh strangely cold. His fingers fold around hers and he's adrift no more. He beds down and rests his head next to hers on that mountain of pillows. Her hair tickles his cheek but he does not move. It's a privilege to be so close to her.

He's tired. How long has it been since they slept in the same bed? Perhaps he could have a little sleep now. Suddenly she jolts up, coughing. He sits up too, wants to help but he can only wait and watch with empty hands. While she's coughing uncontrollably she's searching for something under the covers. Then she pulls out a cloth and presses it hard against her mouth, her fingers blanched.

Then it's over, silence, as if nothing has happened. She takes away the cloth and puts it under the covers. She is still gasping for air. Before he can say anything she asks between breaths, 'How is it progressing? Is it how you wanted it?'

He can't help grinning. 'Yes, yes, it's nearly there. It will

burst their little heads when they see it.'

'You've told them, haven't you?'

'I told them they're going to get a group portrait like no other. Maybe I should have charged them twice the going rate as they are getting all the drama and action of a history painting thrown in as well.'

'You *are* charging them nearly twice the going rate,' she says, almost laughing.

'Ah yes, that is true, my dove,' he says.

Her expression changes. 'How is Titus? Is Geertje looking after him well?'

'He's doing splendidly. She won't let him out of her sight. Yesterday, she says, he crawled all the way from the kitchen to the storeroom and then started pulling himself up on boxes. He can't wait to walk. He's a strong lad.'

He wants her to know that Titus will live. Then she'll get better soon, for Titus.

'I'll get him,' he says. 'Shall I? Only this once; I'll stand by the door with him so you can see him.'

She looks uncertain but finally she nods. He's intoxicated by the thought of them all being together for a few moments.

He's only nine months old but Titus is heavy in his arms. He's in a contented mood. Geertje has a way with him or maybe he's just naturally cheerful. The baby tries to finger his moustache but thankfully his hand goes wide of the target. They've reached the door. 'Look,

Titus, there's your Mammie.' He holds him up, hands under his arms. Saskia raises her hand in a wave. 'Hello, Titey. What's your Pappie doing holding you up like a fisherman showing off his catch?'

Then he bounces him up and down in the air and Titus chuckles with glee. Saskia is laughing but she's also close to tears.

'You're beautiful, you know, just like your parents,' he says, nodding and hoping that Titus will nod back. If only Saskia did not look so sad. Her tired smile tells him it's enough. 'All right, Squiglet, time to go.'

He raises Titus's little hand in a wave and Saskia returns the gesture and then they leave. Geertje has been hovering in the corridor all this time as if to prevent any harm to her charge. He hands over the baby.

When he returns to Saskia, even before he can sit down, she says, 'We need to talk about my will.'

'You already have a will.' The words are out before he can make them sound less brusque.

'It is outdated,' she replies.

'We'll go through it when you're better.'

'No, Rembrandt, the notary is coming later today. I will leave my possessions to Titus, as is the way. This might cause a great deal of accounting and expense after my death. I don't want you to have to draw up an inventory and account for every saucer to my family. The notary says this can be avoided if I give you the right to make use of Titus's portion of the inheritance until he comes of age. That way you don't have to worry about a thing.'

He feels the touch of her hand on his. Her face seems luminous; how can this be when he knows that the fine lines that have appeared around her mouth and eyes even in the last few weeks are only the gentlest sign of her suffering?

He tries to forget those little changes. She's here, talking, breathing, looking at him more kindly now. He remembers the copper plate and needle he has brought – he'll draw her. Now. For his pleasure. He sits up to see her better. Just as the figures of the group painting suddenly seemed to organize themselves this morning, so do the features of her face. It's perfectly clear what matters. He'll only need a few lines . . .

He rests the plate on the little table and presses the needle into the metal, incising a line. It's very fine, like laying down a single hair. She settles back into the cushion, looking out of the window. Is she looking at the clouds or at the space in between? He draws her right pupil. Round and round the needle goes. A shining circle of copper burr, reflecting the light. It will be a deep black on the print. He has to stop going round and round, but he's afraid of stopping. With the pressure of his hand on the needle he wants to fix her and him to this moment for ever. Another cough, and another, and another. There might be no end to the coughing. No chance to catch the next breath. Each one drains a little of her strength away. He tries to continue drawing from memory until she can breathe again but his hands won't move. Finally she's released. She sinks back in the pillows, breathing deliberate careful breaths so as not to trigger another bout. He looks at her face again. Picks up where he left off. A line for her

jaw, her nose, her eyes. Simple. As simple as her only task: to draw a breath and let it go again.

After a while there are no more lines begging to be drawn. 'You sleep a while. I'll go and do a print of this. I'll show you later.'

Her hand holds him back, then she puts his hand to her chest, presses it to her heart. He can feel the beat of it. Slow, steady. Such a small heart, engaged in restless effort . . .

Then she takes his hand to her lips, kisses the back of it and lets it go. He knows she does not want him to kiss her for fear of infection so he strokes her forehead with his fingers, as softly as if drawing into wax. For a long while after he can still feel the sensation where she kissed his hand.

He's gone over the drawing with a burin, engraving deep lines into the copper. When he's satisfied, he carefully dabs on the ink. Then he wipes the plate shiny again with a cloth. The grooves retain the black. Finally, he polishes off the last remnants with the heel of his hand; there's no better tool to avoid black lines around the edges of the print. Then he beds the plate down onto a thick sheet of the finest quality Chinese paper inside the press, puts the felt matting down and rolls the drum over it. Under the pressure of the drum, the paper rises up into the grooves and licks the ink off the plate.

Now paper and plate are wed and he has to slowly prise the paper away so it does not tear. He looks at the sheet edge-on. Black lines rise like mountain ridges from flats of white. He regards the nonsensical

landscape for a moment, then holds it at arm's length to finally contemplate the image.

But there is no familiar face, only thin inky lines that he cannot assemble into anything meaningful. They are floating in front of the paper, suspended in the air, slowly coming towards him. Any moment now they'll drop to the floor in an irretrievable mess, or is it he who is about to fall? They hang in space, separate from all else. Impossible. Then at last he can see her face. There it is, in perfect clarity, but then the lines vanish, as if they never existed. The paper is empty. He lets go and it slowly sails to the floor.

He does not return to her. Neither that day nor the next. He continues working on *The Night Watch*. When she coughs, he wants it to stop, to give her – and himself – a reprieve. But when it's quiet, the silence screams at him.

He pits his brush against it all and paints van Ruytenburch's gold-trimmed buff coat. The more she coughs, the more he works to knit gold embroidery from oil and pigments. When Geertje eventually comes, saying, 'The mistress wants you,' he goes and sits with her. But as soon as she's asleep he hurries back to *The Night Watch*. He must finish it. And as van Ruytenburch's coat begins to warm him, her lazy body is falling away from her. Her face is growing leaner all the time.

He starts finding reasons not to go to her, as if one unguarded look were the beginning of something he cannot finish. He knows that if he looks, he'll have to stay and keep watching. He'll have to

walk her right to the gate. She'll pass through to the other side and he'll be left on his own. If he stays away, she simply will have to get better. She would never leave him without saying goodbye.

Even from the lean-to he can hear that her breathing has acquired a rasping sound with a mournful sigh for an exhale. He paints as long as there is light and then beds down on the other side of the house from her. But still he can hear the persistent in-and-out. It's the third morning since he's last seen her. In one of those long silences Geertje comes and says, 'Master, the mistress, I am sorry, it was only a little change, the gaps between her breaths slightly longer. And I soon went in but . . .'

Now he's running – maybe he can still catch her – but it is too late. The body lies collapsed, head and shoulders slumped sideways at an impossible angle. The mouth is open, more of an exit than an entry. A few years ago he thought he'd got Christ's limp body just right when they took him off the cross. He had not. He tries to look but he can't – not at the dead eyes. So he fixes his eyes on her locks. Has the hair just moved from a little breath? Perhaps she is asleep? Everything in his body agrees. She is asleep. Geertje is wrong. He thinks of their dead babies, merely a few weeks old. How he held each of them. How his body insisted that they were alive because they were warm, even as he felt them limp as drowned cats in his arms. Back then, slowly, something in him had come to understand that soon they'd grow cold and then stiff and he would not be able to move their little limbs. Saskia and he had sat with them, their grief bearable while the imitation of life still clung to the babes.

Part of him wants to hold her too, as if to prolong her departure a little. But it is too late. He has no doubt at all that she is gone. He cannot bear to feel her body warm while knowing her to be dead. And most of all he cannot bear his body comprehending, as it had in the end with his babies, that all that is left now is – this absence.

He tries to will himself to step closer, to perform the rites, as she would have wanted: push down the untouchable eyelids with a cloth, use a pillow to keep the head tilted forward so that the lower jaw is brought up to close that dark hollow of a mouth, make her limbs lie less haphazardly – as if she were merely having a little rest that will turn out to last for ever. But death is none of those things. It has torn through her and left him with a pile of bones.

He averts his eyes, backs away and knocks over one of the candles. When he bends down to right it, smoke from the snuffed flame enters his nostrils, sharp like a long needle.

The very next day he finishes *The Night Watch*. He knows it won't be long before his own rigor will set in. After the last brushstroke he starts to pull a thick blanket over things: first over the memories of the girl who was his love, then over the room that holds what remains of her. He never goes back. The blanket is very accommodating; it does not care whether it is stretched over little joys or great sorrows. In the morning he goes around the house and closes all the shutters. He'll live under a shroud – there is no better place to hide from death. Not that he wants to hide; he wants to join her now, as he should have done before.

The house becomes a dim and mute world and even Geertje

appreciates this, hardly producing a sound when she cleans and cooks. And when she gets it into her head to light candles, he simply goes around after her, blowing them out again.

That month they carry two bundles from the house. The rolled-up body of the canvas remains with him for a few more weeks but his wife is gone within a day.

