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I am Rembrandt's Daughter

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Extract

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All those years living across the canal from the New Maze Park, and I never did make it inside. In spite of the promises I pried from my mother, I never did get a taste of the pancakes frying in hot butter that I could smell from our porch step where I went to escape my father's shouting. I never did get to chase the blue-bellied peacocks whose squawks, even from this side of the hedges and across the murky green water of the canal, pierced so many of my mother's silences. I never did get to run my hands through the water of the fountains I could hear splashing inside the park when I was sent to fetch my father, too long at the tavern. But it is too late now. I am new-wed and our ship leaves for the East Indies in a fortnight, and there are accounts to settle.

Behind me two men paw over my father's things. They think that because I stand at the open studio window and point myself in the direction of the park, I don't hear or see them. A girl of sixteen, plainly dressed, is invisible to bargain hunters.

'Couldn't get a sword through this.' The taller man, the one in the black wool doublet that is short in the sleeves and shiny with wear across the shoulders, pokes a bony finger through the rusty eye slit of an antique helmet. His long neck takes a dip at his Adam's apple, which, combined with the thistledown knot of hair on the top of his head and the feathery white tufts of his brows, gives him the look of a new-hatched stork. 'I can barely fit my finger through it.'

'Let me see.' The other man takes the helmet from the first man's hands. 'Damage to the nosepiece. Ruins its value,' he says, though he doesn't put it down. He is short limbed and plump and wears the longest, most beautifully ironed white linen collar I have ever seen. It would have looked elegant on a man twice his size, but on him, it resembles an infant's bib. His fat cheeks and puffy lips only add to the effect, giving him the appearance of a large spoiled baby.

'Who was that French king who died from a lance poked through the eyehole of his helmet?' says the big baby. 'About a hundred years ago?'

The Stork shrugs.

'Henri the Second,' Big Baby says, answering his own question.

'That sounds right.'

'I know it is.' Big Baby purses his lips as he puts down the helmet. 'They don't make things like they used to. Everything is from the Indies these days, not your solid Dutch manufacturing.'

The wide wooden floorboards creak under their feet as they move on to examine the next set of shelves.

Big Baby sneezes. 'So dusty up here.'

'The old fellow hasn't been around here for a while.'

'Well, so far I don't see anything worth making an offer on, just a lot of rubbish. What is that?'

The Stork turns a tall, fluid-filled jar in which pink ropes and pale, almost see-through strips of matter swirl like seaweed around a spongy white stick. Big Baby peers at it closely, dabbing his nose with a lacy handkerchief.

'I do believe… Good heavens, it's an arm! Look – see the fingers?'

'Ja, I do now.'

'A flayed arm. I'd heard old Rembrandt was a student of anatomy. He must have used this to help him paint musculature.'

'I suppose he did.'

'I know he did. He would have needed the help, wouldn't he? Lost his grip in his latter years, I would say.'

The men linger over the jar and the three others like it, then shuffle on to the row of unframed paintings propped against one wall. They pass without a second look at a painting of a maid shading a candle with her hand, a canvas of two African men, and one of a young man in tatters, kneeling before a bearded gentleman.

'Too dark,' Big Baby mutters under his breath. 'And much, much too rough. You can see every stroke! Imagine – he used to be the greatest painter in Amsterdam. Now I wouldn't give six stuivers for the lot.'

I resist the urge to tell them to leave and remind myself that the battle is over. Let it be. I have a husband to think about now. Let the past stay in the past. I close my eyes and let the damp Amsterdam breeze blowing in through the window cool my face.

'I'd heard of him,' says the Stork, 'when I was a boy.'

'We all did.'

They pause before the next canvas, which is so covered with splotches of red, brown and golden paint, that from this angle, it has the choppy surface of a canal in the rain. Big Baby starts to waddle away, then stops when his tall friend won't move.

'What?'

The Stork keeps looking. 'There's something about this…'

It is difficult enough to watch them pick through Father's things, but for strangers to stare at this particular painting…

'Don't look too close,' I say. 'The smell of paint will not agree with you.'

The Stork startles, then notices me by the window. Big Baby looks at me, too, then frowns as he sniffs at the painting. 'There's no smell to this. It can't have been wet for at least a year, not if it's a real Rembrandt. I doubt if it is – it's rough, even for him.' He tips his head towards me, then under his breath, says to the Stork, 'Who's the girl?'

'Rembrandt's maid?' the Stork whispers.

I smile to myself as I turn back to the window. Close. But not quite.

'Where is your master?' Big Baby says loudly. 'I'd like to offer him a guilder for this picture.'

A single guilder, when Father's paintings used to fetch thousands from princes. A paltry guilder for this, of all pictures. Gravediggers get twenty for their services, as well I know. Well, I don't care if we need the money for our journey.

'It's not for sale.'

'What'd she say?' Big Baby asks his companion, as if I spoke in some sort of incomprehensible maid tongue.

'She said it's not for sale,' says the Stork.

'I don't see how this girl would have the authority to make such a decision,' Big Baby says. 'But no matter. Who wants such a messy old thing, anyhow?'

With another crunch of the floorboards, they move on to a stuffed bird of paradise and Father's collection of shells. I cannot help but return my gaze to the canvas, with its blaze of reds and golds and comforting browns. How well I know this painting. Many times I have examined it up close and wondered how Father could make an arrangement of brushstrokes so neatly add up to everything that is important to me. Now, across the studio, I can see neither the short jots nor long swathes of paint. They have melted together to form a scene more dear to me than anything in the world. It is more than just canvas and primer and pigments mixed in oil. Like so many other of Father's paintings, it is the story of my life.

Well, then. If Iam going to take this journey into the past, I had better start at the beginning. I shall go back to my earliest dab of memory – I am just four years of age.

Chapter 1

Three years earlier . . .

Two girls about my age – nearly fourteen – walk arm in arm down the frost-etched bricks of the walkway on the other side of the canal. Even from this side of the window, when the wind gusts, I fancy I can hear the rustle of their fine silk dresses under their fur-trimmed capes as they pass the locked gates of the New Maze Park. An older woman in thick furs waddles behind them like a huge glossy beaver, her proud gaze set on their backs. She must be their mother.

Brats.

From upstairs, Father shouts, 'TITUS!'

My old cat, Tijger, shifts on my lap, setting off a fresh round of rusty purring. In the summer, with the windows open, you can hear the wheezy organ music and the strangled shrieks of peacocks coming from the park. You can catch the distant shouts of vendors selling pancakes and pickled

herring to people lucky enough to have a few spare stuivers jingling in their pockets. Now, in late December, all is quiet in the park.

'TITUS! YOU WASTE TIME!'

With a sigh, I mark my place in my book with a scrap of cloth, then put Tijger from my lap and brush off my apron. Tijger follows me slowly up the stairs, swaying like royalty. He is more than nine years of age – young for people but old enough in cat time. After Titus and my books, he is my closest friend.

Up in my father's workshop, the cooing of wood doves comes from outside the window near where Father stands at an easel. On the shelves around him are ancient helmets, stuffed birds from New Guinea, and dusty seashells. There are swords and poleaxes all in a jumble and a straw mannequin with its hand twisted into a wave. My favourite items are the four jars each containing its own flayed human arm. Charming. And Titus asks why I never have any of the neighbourhood girls over for a visit.

Father glances at me. 'Oh. Cornelia.' He always carries his voice low in his throat, as if his words have to fight him before he will let them out. 'Where is Titus?'

I go over and jab at the remains of the peat sod smouldering in the fireplace. Father will let the fire go out, then he'll shout as if attacked by cutpurses for someone to come relight it. Me.

'He's out,' I say. 'Trying to make money.'

If Father takes the hint, he does not show it. His voice thunders up from deep in his barrel of a chest. 'Tell me how this looks.'

Once the fire is gnawing at the peat with a hushed and satisfying crackle, I pick up Tijger and peer over Father's shoulder. The oily smell of his paint makes my head hurt though I should be used to it. Paint stink has filled my nose since I lay in my hand-me-down cradle. Now Father dabs more paint on a canvas already shingled with thousands of little slabs of it. No smooth, glossy surfaces for my father, though even I, an ignorant girl, know that rough painting, with every brushstroke showing, is unsellable. No rich merchant from the East India Company wants a splotchy mess on the wall of his mansion on the Prince's Canal, yet here is Father, working on a choppy picture of a family with two smiling parents and their three happy children. I laugh. What does Father know about happy families?

Father crooks a corner of his thin lips, which are as red as a child's, even though the rest of his face is flabby and yellowing. He was old when I was born, though my mother was twenty-eight. 'What is the jest?'

Tijger fights to get down. I set him on the floor. 'Nothing. Who were your models? You've had no families up here lately.'

When Father doesn't answer, I go to the rear window. Doves scuttle to one side of the ledge as I look through the thick panes against which thorny naked rose vines rattle. A deep *bong* rocks the sill on which I lean, giving me a start. It

is the death bells of the West Church, at the end of our canal. It has been four years since that terrible time of plague, and still the Westerkerk's foul bells make me flinch. How does one get over a time such as that? In the final year of the pestilence, twenty thousand people died, one for every ten in the city. The death bells had sounded day and night. Funeral processions lined up at the churchyard gates, waiting their turn to bury the victims from the families able to scrape together the guilders for a funeral and the gravedigger. The other choice was to toss a body into the pit behind the Plague Hospital and sprinkle it with quicklime. No street in the city had been without a house whose occupants were locked behind a door marked with a hastily painted *P* for *pest*, and our street – our house – had been no different.

Now, on the other side of our bare patch of courtyard, two of the van Roop girls jump ropes outside their back door. Their family is new to the neighbourhood. The family who had lived there before them, the Bickers, had all been taken by the sickness and no one would rent the house for years. Now the van Roop mother, her bundled baby on her hip, pulls washing off the clothes line strung across the back of the house. All of a sudden I know who Father is painting.

'It's the van Roops – they are the family on your canvas.'

Father throws a grin over his shoulder.

I fight off a wave of pride for having guessed correctly. Cleverness buys no bread. But at least now it makes sense. For weeks I had noticed Father staring out of the back window

of his studio when I had brought him his tray for dinner. When I told Titus about it some days ago at breakfast, he merely dunked his bread in his watery ale and said, 'So?'

I had voiced what everyone whispers in Amsterdam. 'So the old man is going mad.'

'You are just learning this?'

'Well, I think he has got worse.'

'Maybe,' Titus said around a mouthful of bread. Only Titus, with his smooth dark brows, dimpled chin, and finely cut lips, can manage to look handsome while loading his cheeks with half a loaf. Perhaps it is the way his coppery hair curls to his shoulders. My hair is a darker red-brown, with waves given to frizz when it rains. And while his eyes are a hundred interesting shades of green arranged in a halo of flecks, mine are the plain brown of a cow's. It is obvious we have different mothers.

My own chunk of bread crumbled into my ale. I fished the soggy bit from the bottom of my mug. 'How can you be so calm? We can't even pay the baker's bill.'

'Things may change.'

Hope rose in me like a soap bubble. 'Have you had luck with the prints?' Titus had been making the rounds of dealers lately with some prints Father had made several years ago. Usually there is a market for Father's etchings. If only we could get him to stop his crazy painting and make more of them.

'With the prints?' Titus said as he sliced another piece of

cheese. 'No, not just yet.'

'Why doesn't he give people what they want?' I cried. 'Father can paint as smoothly as anyone – I have seen his old pictures. Why does he have to throw globs of paint on the canvas like dog mess?'

Titus gave me a pitying look. 'You are as stubborn as he is. Once you figure out that you cannot change him, you will feel so much better.' He wiped his mouth, then pushed back his bench.

'Don't you care what happens to us?'

Titus bared his teeth at his reflection in the kitchen window. 'Yes.'

'Where are you going?' I hoped I did not know the answer though I was certain that I did. He was always running off to the van Loos' fancy house on the Singel, to see Magdalena. As if he had a chance with her. 'Don't go.'

His expression was that of an amused angel. 'Why, my little Worry Bird?'

He was shaming himself, chasing her so, that was why. The van Loos would never have him, poor as we are. The son of an out-of-fashion painter would make a terrible match for someone of their sort, though Titus's mother, Saskia – who was not my mother, as even strangers will so kindly point out – was the van Loos' cousin. Saskia had married Father when he was the most promising young artist in Amsterdam. Now that Father was a broken old man, the van Loos could not possibly wish to taint their line with the likes of us. Not with me in the

family, the daughter of Rembrandt by his housemaid.

And anyhow, if Titus married Magdalena, I would die of loneliness.

'Just stay,' I said.

'I've got work to do,' said Titus.

Only Titus's willingness to knock on dealers' doors has kept us out of the poorhouse. No dealer wants to speak to Father. They cannot sell the strange work that he does, and besides, he owes them all money. I had hugged my arms to my chest as Titus plunked his hat over his coppery curls and left.

Now, in Father's dusty studio, Tijger rubs against my legs, wanting to be picked up again now that I have put him down. I obey. He weighs less than he used to, as if age were hollowing his bones.

'What are you going to do with this picture?' I ask Father. Maybe a patron with money has come to him directly and asked him to portray a family. It is possible. Father does receive a commission now and then, and sometimes, miraculously, it pleases him to please a patron.

'Do with it?' Father asks in his guttural voice.

'Did someone ask you for it?'

'Yes.' He dabs the finest point of white in the mother's eye. The sound of cooing doves echoes in the room. 'God.'

Something shrivels inside of me. No one else's father speaks of God as if he actually knew Him. Normal fathers keep God where He belongs, in church. Father doesn't even go to church, and he got Mother kicked out of it when he

wouldn't marry her after I was born. He heaps shame upon himself and his family, yet seems to chat as freely to God as did Moses in the Bible, without the bother of the burning bush. 'I should get dinner,' I murmur.

I go back downstairs, Tijger trailing me majestically, fetch my book, then go to check on the pot of cabbage, onions, and a soupbone I had put upon the kitchen fire. There will be enough soup for Titus if he will come home for supper, but there is no guarantee of that. Each day Titus is gone longer trying to sell Father's work when he is not falling over himself at Magdalena's. I am here with just Father and his best friend, God Almighty, unless Neel comes.

The very thought of Cornelis Suythof – Neel, as he has us call him – makes me squirm. Once Father had many pupils, Titus tells me, before we lost the big house and took this cheap place by the canal. I can still hear the sound of students tramping up the wide stairs of our grand old house, laughing, singing naughty songs, dropping their brushes or palettes with a clatter. Only a few pupils followed Father to our new house, and now Father has but one – Neel the Serious, with his messy dark hair and staring eyes. If only he smiled now and then, he would be handsome in a dark and even manly way, but at twenty-one, when he should be dashing and merry like Titus, he is as sombre as a church tower.

I am on my stool, my book open on my lap, when footsteps tap outside the open window. Someone bounds from the street on to our stoop; the front door creaks open. The footsteps

head not to the studio, but my way. It is too early for Titus. Oh, Lord, Serious Neel is due for lessons. What does he want from me now?

But it is Titus who trots into the kitchen and picks up the ladle in the pot over the fire. 'Cabbage again, milady?'

It is odd how relief stings more than anger. 'Don't speak ill of it unless you cook it yourself.'

'Why, little Worry Bird, what is the matter? If it's cabbage that's making you cranky, you'll be happy to hear that soon you will not have to dine on a steady diet of it – not if I can help it.'

'You sold some prints!' I jump up. My book slides to the floor.

He grins when he picks up the book. '*The Seven Deadly Sins of Maidservants*? The things you read. Weren't you reading *Famous Courtesans* last week?'

I snatch the book from his hands. 'Who'd you sell the prints to? Tell me they fetched at least a guilder. We need to pay the baker and the greengrocer and—'

He grabs me by the arms and gives me a playful shake. 'Bird! Hush! Worry, worry, worry, when you should be congratulating me!'

'Why?' I say, my head rattling.

He lets me go. 'Your big brother is getting married. Magdalena and I are to wed as soon as the banns are published.'