

# Woman in Blue

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*To MF*



# Prelude

*This never happens. Almost never. He wakes in the mid-night and the not-yet-morning and he wakes with a picture in his head. It is not the waking that never happens, for some nights the urgent weight of his bladder pulls him from sleep. Especially so on guild nights when he has drunk too much ale – there's a cloth-covered beaten copper chamber pot beneath his bed for just such an eventuality. But it is not his bladder that has disturbed his sleep this night. It is the picture in his head that has woken him.*

*'Do pictures speak?' he wonders. 'Do they shout loud as cattle drovers?' For how else has the picture banished sleep? He can see it complete and finished, like a jewel, everything lit up blue and gold – all the colours of a day in summer. That's how he sees it on waking. And there's a woman in the picture and she is not aware that she is seen. There is something about the woman, he thinks. Something he recognises. At least it feels like recognition.*

*He opens his eyes on the darkness in the room. He listens, his ears sharp as dressmakers' pins. He hears nothing at first, then the slow and heavy breath of his wife beside him in the bed; he hears the spaces between her breaths the loudest. Catharina is in the first months of her pregnancy. He hears the unfaltering ticking of the*

*clock in the hall and the house shifting as houses do, the small cracks and clicks, the dance steps of tables and chairs. Maybe it is one o'clock or two; he would have to get out of bed to check on the time.*

*He turns in the bed, turns his back to his wife, who is asleep. He closes his eyes and the picture is before him again and the woman too; he sees that the woman is young and she is dressed in blue. She's pretty, he thinks – but then aren't all young women pretty to a man whose wife is pregnant and all out of shape and distant? The young woman's hair is pinned up so he can see the gentle arc of her neck as she bends her head a little. He can see the clasp in her hair, the ribbons on the sleeves of her dress – is it a dress or a jacket she wears? She is reading a letter that she holds up to the light. Her lips are parted as though in reading she is also giving silent shape to the words.*

*It is an idea for a picture. That's what he thinks. Perhaps it should be his next painting. He makes a note to himself to sketch out the picture in the morning. Then he looks again for sleep.*

*But he is unsettled. He knows enough about thoughts and ideas to understand that they are sometimes as fleeting and gossamer-thin as breath. He knows that when the bells of the Nieuwe Kerk ring out across the city to announce it is morning, all memory of the young woman wearing blue will have evaporated in the rush and run of things – the fire to be seen to, the children to dress, his wife asking him to make a decision about some small domestic matter of no consequence. And the woman in blue presses her demands on his attention now.*

*'Who is she?' he thinks. 'Why does she exert such a pull on me? Is she someone I once knew, long before? Does she have a name? What is the letter she is reading?'*

*He opens his eyes again. He must get up and make some record of the picture. He knows doing that at least will fix it so that he can conjure it entire in his thoughts when he wakes again. He pushes back the bedcovers and swings his stockinged feet to the floor. He*

*sits a moment, his eyes adjusting to the darkness. Then he pushes himself up from the bed, careful not to shake the wooden frame and wake his sleeping wife.*

*The air is chill and he sucks in breath, tastes metal or blood on his tongue.*

*He creeps from the bedroom, makes his way downstairs to the fire. There's still a warm glow to be found in the coals if you look. He lights a thin taper and transfers the flame to a candle. Then back up the stairs to his studio. He sets the candle down on the table and takes up a fresh sheet of paper and a stick of chalk. He closes his eyes a moment to better see her – the woman in blue reading a letter. Then he fixes his attention on the act of sketching.*

*His hand moves easily across the paper, each line certain and sure and quick. It is to him as though the picture already exists on the page and all he is doing is revealing it, letting the light fall on her and on the letter she is reading. It takes him almost no time at all – or it takes him an hour that feels like no time. He is a little giddy and a little breathless from the work.*

*When he is done, he drops the chalk to the floor and, without looking at the drawing, takes up the candle again. He returns to his bed, snuffs out the candle flame and slips back under the covers. Catharina stirs. He holds his breath until he is sure she has settled and fallen deeper into sleep. He rests his head on the pillow and thinks again of the young woman in the picture.*

*'It will be my best painting yet,' he says to himself.*

*But he also knows that all middle-of-the-night ideas seem brilliant when considered in the dark between sleeping and waking – those same ideas in the cold light of day less so.*

*And the young woman in his picture – already he thinks of the painting as 'his' – who might she be? That he does not yet know.*

*Delft, early 1663*



# A Man in Amsterdam

## *i*

I know exactly where she is. I have a season ticket and I have been often to see her. I know the number of steps from here to there, but I am never in a hurry to get to her. Sometimes I approach her as though I do not know, as though this is my first time and I might walk right on by without ever noticing her. Then at the last moment, the last tiptoe step, I turn; I like that I catch her unawares.

She does not look up or in any other way show that she is observed. I am the one who catches my breath, for each time I see her it is a surprise. She is a young woman dressed in a blue bedjacket and she is reading a letter, all her attention fixed on the single sheet of paper she holds. We see her in profile. Her mouth is a little open as though she might be giving shape to the words she is reading. It is a private moment and yet we get to see it, to linger over it.

Sometimes it is a 'we' and sometimes it is just me. I come early some days. The man on the door knows me. He nods a good morning and lets me in. The floor beneath my feet is hard and my shoes click with every step. I take the stairs, not wasting time with the lift. But even then, I slow my pace as I come close, lightening my step so that

there is almost no sound in the gallery, for I am the first. Then it is just the Woman in Blue and me, and I come upon her as though I have turned a corner in a house and seen her through an open door.

That, I think, is what the artist wanted the viewer to experience. There is something almost transgressive in watching her. I want her to lift her head and catch me looking at her and then to scold me with a hard stare as she clutches her letter fast to her bosom, all the words pressed to her heart and all the words secret again. Of course, this does not ever happen.

There is light in the painting and it falls on her, a soft blue-white light. A kind light. Indeed, at first glance it almost seems that the light emanates from her and behind me everything else is darkness, as though I might be standing in a windowless corridor on the threshold of the room where she stands in brightness.

Behind her, on the wall – on her wall – hangs a large map. It is painted in soft ochres and is almost golden and her hair is the same muted gold and so, standing in front of the map, she almost dissolves into the picture.

I do not speak. I sometimes hold my breath and like that it is as though I am in the picture too, as though I am nothing but pigment and oil and spirit – brushstrokes. But I am not alone with her for long. A woman with grey in her hair stands beside me, so close we touch, and she lifts her phone to the painting, frames the picture she will take and clicks; her phone makes the slowed-down sound that old cameras used to make. She smells too much of lemons, this woman beside me.

We are standing in the Gallery of Honour at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. At the furthest end is the space built specially to house Rembrandt's imposing *The Night Watch*. But it is Vermeer's unprepossessing *Woman in Blue Reading a Letter* that has caught our attention and holds us charmed – holds this woman who smells of lemons and me.

*You don't need to shout to be heard* is what the painting seems to say.

The air has a controlled and even temperature and no one speaks except in whispers – like in a library or a church.

The woman beside me lifts her phone to the painting again, not trusting that she has taken a good photograph of it the first time. She would like me to move a little to one side, but she does not ask. Instead, she takes the photograph crooked. Then, without a second thought, she moves on to the next painting in the room and it is just me and the *Woman in Blue* again.

What I like about the painting – one of the many things I like – is how cleverly the artist has included me in it and made me complicit in the looking. It is an intimate and private moment and Vermeer intrudes on it without at all breaking it, and we – Vermeer and me – stand silent, breath held, just looking at this young woman turned in on herself. She does not know.

I have bought a season ticket to the Rijksmuseum, but that is a secret I keep to myself, the ticket folded and tucked into a small, seldom-used pocket at the back of my wallet. Most especially I do not tell my wife of the purchase, not over our good-morning breakfasts or our how-was-your-day dinners. I do not tell her because we are not really talking these days, at least not about things that matter. Or perhaps I do not tell her because it is something I want for myself and it is something I think she will not understand; when all's said and done, I do not understand it myself.

As for my particular interest in *Woman in Blue Reading a Letter*, I think that is also probably best kept hidden.