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Girl with a Pearl Earring

Written by Tracy Chevalier

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GIRL WITH A PEARL EARRING



Tracy Chevalier

HARPER

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For my father

1664



My mother did not tell me they were coming. Afterwards she said she did not want me to appear nervous. I was surprised, for I thought she knew me well. Strangers would think I was calm. I did not cry as a baby. Only my mother would note the tightness along my jaw, the widening of my already wide eyes.

I was chopping vegetables in the kitchen when I heard voices outside our front door – a woman's, bright as polished brass, and a man's, low and dark like the wood of the table I was working on. They were the kind of voices we heard rarely in our house. I could hear rich carpets in their voices, books and pearls and fur.

I was glad that earlier I had scrubbed the front step so hard.

My mother's voice – a cooking pot, a flagon – approached from the front room. They were coming to the kitchen. I pushed the leeks I had been chopping into place, then set the knife on the table, wiped my hands on my apron, and pressed my lips together to smooth them.

My mother appeared in the doorway, her eyes two warnings. Behind her the woman had to duck her head because she was so tall, taller than the man following her.

All of our family, even my father and brother, were small.

The woman looked as if she had been blown about by

the wind, although it was a calm day. Her cap was askew so that tiny blonde curls escaped and hung about her forehead like bees which she swatted at impatiently several times. Her collar needed straightening and was not as crisp as it could be. She pushed her grey mantle back from her shoulders, and I saw then that under her dark blue dress a baby was growing. It would arrive by the year's end, or before.

The woman's face was like an oval serving plate, flashing at times, dull at others. Her eyes were two light brown buttons, a colour I had rarely seen coupled with blond hair. She made a show of watching me hard, but could not fix her attention on me, her eyes darting about the room.

'This is the girl, then,' she said abruptly.

'This is my daughter, Griet,' my mother replied. I nodded respectfully to the man and woman.

'Well. She's not very big. Is she strong enough?' As the woman turned to look at the man, a fold of her mantle caught the handle of the knife I had been using, knocking it off the table so that it spun across the floor.

The woman cried out.

'Catharina,' the man said calmly. He spoke her name as if he held cinnamon in his mouth. The woman stopped, making an effort to quiet herself.

I stepped over and picked up the knife, polishing the blade on my apron before placing it back on the table. The knife had brushed against the vegetables. I set a piece of carrot back in its place.

The man was watching me, his eyes grey like the sea. He had a long, angular face, and his expression was steady, in contrast to his wife's, which flickered like a candle. He had no beard or moustache, and I was glad, for it gave him a

clean appearance. He wore a black cloak over his shoulders, a white shirt, and a fine lace collar. His hat pressed into hair the red of brick washed by rain.

'What have you been doing here, Griet?' he asked.

I was surprised by the question but knew enough to hide it. 'Chopping vegetables, sir. For the soup.'

I always laid vegetables out in a circle, each with its own section like a slice of pie. There were five slices: red cabbage, onions, leeks, carrots and turnips. I had used a knife edge to shape each slice, and placed a carrot disc in the centre.

The man tapped his finger on the table. 'Are they laid out in the order in which they will go into the soup?' he suggested, studying the circle.

'No, sir.' I hesitated. I could not say why I had laid out the vegetables as I did. I simply set them as I felt they should be, but I was too frightened to say so to a gentleman.

'I see you have separated the whites,' he said, indicating the turnips and onions. 'And then the orange and the purple, they do not sit together. Why is that?' He picked up a shred of cabbage and a piece of carrot and shook them like dice in his hand.

I looked at my mother, who nodded slightly.

'The colours fight when they are side by side, sir.'

He arched his eyebrows, as if he had not expected such a response. 'And do you spend much time setting out the vegetables before you make the soup?'

'Oh no, sir,' I replied, confused. I did not want him to think I was idle.

From the corner of my eye I saw a movement. My sister, Agnes, was peering round the doorpost and had shaken her head at my response. I did not often lie. I looked down.

The man turned his head slightly and Agnes disappeared. He dropped the pieces of carrot and cabbage into their slices. The cabbage shred fell partly into the onions. I wanted to reach over and tease it into place. I did not, but he knew that I wanted to. He was testing me.

'That's enough prattle,' the woman declared. Though she was annoyed by his attention to me, it was me she frowned at. 'Tomorrow, then?' She looked at the man before sweeping out of the room, my mother behind her. The man glanced once more at what was to be the soup, then nodded at me and followed the women.

When my mother returned I was sitting by the vegetable wheel. I waited for her to speak. She was hunching her shoulders as if against a winter chill, though it was summer and the kitchen was hot.

'You are to start tomorrow as their maid. If you do well, you will be paid eight stuivers a day. You will live with them.'

I pressed my lips together.

'Don't look at me like that, Griet,' my mother said. 'We have to, now your father has lost his trade.'

'Where do they live?'

'On the Oude Langendijck, where it intersects with the Molenpoort.'

'Papists' Corner? They're Catholic?'

'You can come home Sundays. They have agreed to that.' My mother cupped her hands around the turnips, scooped them up along with some of the cabbage and onions and dropped them into the pot of water waiting on the fire. The pie slices I had made so carefully were ruined.

* * *

I climbed the stairs to see my father. He was sitting at the front of the attic by the window, where the light touched his face. It was the closest he came now to seeing.

Father had been a tile painter, his fingers still stained blue from painting cupids, maids, soldiers, ships, children, fish, flowers, animals on to white tiles, glazing them, firing them, selling them. One day the kiln exploded, taking his eyes and his trade. He was the lucky one – two other men died.

I sat next to him and held his hand.

'I heard,' he said before I could speak. 'I heard everything.' His hearing had taken the strength from his missing eyes.

I could not think of anything to say that would not sound reproachful.

'I'm sorry, Griet. I would like to have done better for you.' The place where his eyes had been, where the doctor had sewn shut the skin, looked sorrowful. 'But he is a good gentleman, and fair. He will treat you well.' He said nothing about the woman.

'How can you be sure of this, Father? Do you know him?'

'Don't you know who he is?'

'No.'

'Do you remember the painting we saw in the Town Hall a few years ago, which van Ruijven was displaying after he bought it? It was a view of Delft, from the Rotterdam and Schiedam Gates. With the sky that took up so much of the painting, and the sunlight on some of the buildings.'

'And the paint had sand in it to make the brickwork and the roofs look rough,' I added. 'And there were long shadows in the water, and tiny people on the shore nearest us.'

'That's the one.' Father's sockets widened as if he still had eyes and was looking at the painting again.

I remembered it well, remembered thinking that I had stood at that very spot many times and never seen Delft the way the painter had.

'That man was van Ruijven?'

'The patron?' Father chuckled. 'No, no, child, not him. That was the painter. Vermeer. That was Johannes Vermeer and his wife. You're to clean his studio.'

To the few things I was taking with me my mother added another cap, collar and apron so that each day I could wash one and wear the other, and would always look clean. She also gave me an ornamental tortoiseshell comb, shaped like a shell, that had been my grandmother's and was too fine for a maid to wear, and a prayer book I could read when I needed to escape the Catholicism around me.

As we gathered my things she explained why I was to work for the Vermeers. 'You know that your new master is headman of the Guild of St Luke, and was when your father had his accident last year?'

I nodded, still shocked that I was to work for such an artist.

'The Guild looks after its own, as best it can. Remember the box your father gave money to every week for years? That money goes to masters in need, as we are now. But it goes only so far, you see, especially now with Frans in his apprenticeship and no money coming in. We have no choice. We won't take public charity, not if we can manage without. Then your father heard that your new master was looking for a maid who could clean his studio without moving anything, and he put forward your name, thinking that as

headman, and knowing our circumstances, Vermeer would be likely to try to help.'

I sifted through what she had said. 'How do you clean a room without moving anything?'

'Of course you must move things, but you must find a way to put them back exactly so it looks as if nothing has been disturbed. As you do for your father now that he cannot see.'

After my father's accident we had learned to place things where he always knew to find them. It was one thing to do this for a blind man, though. Quite another for a man with a painter's eyes.

Agnes said nothing to me after the visit. When I got into bed next to her that night she remained silent, though she did not turn her back to me. She lay gazing at the ceiling. Once I had blown out the candle it was so dark I could see nothing. I turned towards her.

'You know I don't want to leave. I have to.'

Silence.

'We need the money. We have nothing now that Father can't work.'

'Eight stuivers a day isn't such a lot of money.' Agnes had a hoarse voice, as if her throat were covered with cobwebs.

'It will keep the family in bread. And a bit of cheese. That's not so little.'

'I'll be all alone. You're leaving me all alone. First Frans, then you.'

Of all of us Agnes had been the most upset when Frans left the previous year. He and she had always fought like

cats but she sulked for days once he was gone. At ten she was the youngest of us three children, and had never before known a time when Frans and I were not there.

'Mother and Father will still be here. And I'll visit on Sundays. Besides, it was no surprise when Frans went.' We had known for years that our brother would start his apprenticeship when he turned thirteen. Our father had saved hard to pay the apprentice fee, and talked endlessly of how Frans would learn another aspect of the trade, then come back and they would set up a tile factory together.

Now our father sat by the window and never spoke of the future.

After the accident Frans had come home for two days. He had not visited since. The last time I saw him I had gone to the factory across town where he was apprenticed. He looked exhausted and had burns up and down his arms from pulling tiles from the kiln. He told me he worked from dawn until so late that at times he was too tired even to eat. 'Father never told me it would be this bad,' he muttered resentfully. 'He always said his apprenticeship was the making of him.'

'Perhaps it was,' I replied. 'It made him what he is now.'

When I was ready to leave the next morning my father shuffled out to the front step, feeling his way along the wall. I hugged my mother and Agnes. 'Sunday will come in no time,' my mother said.

My father handed me something wrapped in a handkerchief. 'To remind you of home,' he said. 'Of us.'

It was my favourite tile of his. Most of his tiles we had

at home were faulty in some way – chipped or cut crookedly, or the picture was blurred because the kiln had been too hot. This one, though, my father kept specially for us. It was a simple picture of two small figures, a boy and an older girl. They were not playing as children usually did in tiles. They were simply walking along, and were like Frans and me whenever we walked together – clearly our father had thought of us as he painted it. The boy was a little ahead of the girl but had turned back to say something. His face was mischievous, his hair messy. The girl wore her cap as I wore mine, not as most other girls did, with the ends tied under their chins or behind their necks. I favoured a white cap that folded in a wide brim around my face, covering my hair completely and hanging down in points on each side of my face so that from the side my expression was hidden. I kept the cap stiff by boiling it with potato peelings.

I walked away from our house, carrying my things tied up in an apron. It was still early – our neighbours were throwing buckets of water on to their steps and the street in front of their houses, and scrubbing them clean. Agnes would do that now, as well as many of my other tasks. She would have less time to play in the street and along the canals. Her life was changing too.

People nodded at me and watched curiously as I passed. No one asked where I was going or called out kind words. They did not need to – they knew what happened to families when a man lost his trade. It would be something to discuss later – young Griet become a maid, her father brought the family low. They would not gloat, however. The same thing could easily happen to them.

I had walked along that street all my life, but had never

been so aware that my back was to my home. When I reached the end and turned out of sight of my family, though, it became a little easier to walk steadily and look around me. The morning was still cool, the sky a flat grey-white pulled close over Delft like a sheet, the summer sun not yet high enough to burn it away. The canal I walked along was a mirror of white light tinged with green. As the sun grew brighter the canal would darken to the colour of moss.

Frans, Agnes and I used to sit beside that canal and throw things in – pebbles, sticks, once a broken tile – and imagine what they might touch on the bottom – not fish, but creatures from our imagination, with many eyes, scales, hands and fins. Frans thought up the most interesting monsters. Agnes was the most frightened. I always stopped the game, too inclined to see things as they were to be able to think up things that were not.

There were a few boats on the canal, moving towards Market Square. It was not market day, however, when the canal was so full you couldn't see the water. One boat was carrying river fish for the stalls at Jeronymous Bridge. Another sat low on the water, loaded with bricks. The man poling the boat called out a greeting to me. I merely nodded and lowered my head so that the edge of my cap hid my face.

I crossed a bridge over the canal and turned into the open space of Market Square, even then busy with people crisscrossing it on their way to some task – buying meat at the Meat Hall, or bread at the baker's, taking wood to be weighed at the Weigh House. Children ran errands for their parents, apprentices for their masters, maids for their house-

holds. Horses and carts clattered across the stones. To my right was the Town Hall, with its gilded front and white marble faces gazing down from the keystones above the windows. To my left was the New Church, where I had been baptised sixteen years before. Its tall, narrow tower made me think of a stone birdcage. Father had taken us up it once. I would never forget the sight of Delft spread below us, each narrow brick house and steep red roof and green waterway and city gate marked for ever in my mind, tiny and yet distinct. I asked my father then if every Dutch city looked like that, but he did not know. He had never visited any other city, not even The Hague, two hours away on foot.

I walked to the centre of the square. There the stones had been laid to form an eight-pointed star set inside a circle. Each point aimed towards a different part of Delft. I thought of it as the very centre of the town, and as the centre of my life. Frans and Agnes and I had played in that star since we were old enough to run to the market. In our favourite game, one of us chose a point and one of us named a thing – a stork, a church, a wheelbarrow, a flower – and we ran in that direction looking for that thing. We had explored most of Delft that way.

One point, however, we had never followed. I had never gone to Papists' Corner, where the Catholics lived. The house where I was to work was just ten minutes from home, the time it took a pot of water to boil, but I had never passed by it.

I knew no Catholics. There were not so many in Delft, and none in our street or in the shops we used. It was not that we avoided them, but they kept to themselves. They

were tolerated in Delft, but were expected not to parade their faith openly. They held their services privately, in modest places that did not look like churches from the outside.

My father had worked with Catholics and told me they were no different from us. If anything they were less solemn. They liked to eat and drink and sing and game. He said this almost as if he envied them.

I followed the point of the star now, walking across the square more slowly than everyone else, for I was reluctant to leave its familiarity. I crossed the bridge over the canal and turned left up the Oude Langendijck. On my left the canal ran parallel to the street, separating it from Market Square.

At the intersection with the Molenpoort, four girls were sitting on a bench beside the open door of a house. They were arranged in order of size, from the oldest, who looked to be about Agnes' age, to the youngest, who was probably about four. One of the middle girls held a baby in her lap – a large baby, who was probably already crawling and would soon be ready to walk.

Five children, I thought. And another expected.

The oldest was blowing bubbles through a scallop shell fixed to the end of a hollowed stick, very like one my father had made for us. The others were jumping up and popping the bubbles as they appeared. The girl with the baby in her lap could not move much, catching few bubbles although she was seated next to the bubble blower. The youngest at the end was the furthest away and the smallest, and had no chance to reach the bubbles. The second youngest was the quickest, darting after the bubbles and clapping her hands around them. She had the brightest hair of the four,

red like the dry brick wall behind her. The youngest and the girl with the baby both had curly blonde hair like their mother's, while the eldest's was the same dark red as her father's.

I watched the girl with the bright hair swat at the bubbles, popping them just before they broke on the damp grey and white tiles set diagonally in rows before the house. She will be a handful, I thought. 'You'd best pop them before they reach the ground,' I said. 'Else those tiles will have to be scrubbed again.'

The eldest girl lowered the pipe. Four sets of eyes stared at me with the same gaze that left no doubt they were sisters. I could see various features of their parents in them – grey eyes here, light brown eyes there, angular faces, impatient movements.

'Are you the new maid?' the eldest asked.

'We were told to watch out for you,' the bright redhead interrupted before I could reply.

'Cornelia, go and get Tanneke,' the eldest said to her.

'You go, Aleydis,' Cornelia in turn ordered the youngest, who gazed at me with wide grey eyes but did not move.

'*I'll* go.' The eldest must have decided my arrival was important after all.

'No, *I'll* go.' Cornelia jumped up and ran ahead of her older sister, leaving me alone with the two quieter girls.

I looked at the squirming baby in the girl's lap. 'Is that your brother or your sister?'

'Brother,' the girl replied in a soft voice like a feather pillow. 'His name is Johannes. Never call him Jan.' She said the last words as if they were a familiar refrain.

'I see. And your name?'

'Lisbeth. And this is Aleydis.' The youngest smiled at me. They were both dressed neatly in brown dresses with white aprons and caps.

'And your older sister?'

'Maertge. Never call her Maria. Our grandmother's name is Maria. Maria Thins. This is her house.'

The baby began to whimper. Lisbeth joggled him up and down on her knee.

I looked up at the house. It was certainly grander than ours, but not as grand as I had feared. It had two storeys, plus an attic, whereas ours had only the one, with a tiny attic. It was an end house, with the Molenpoort running down one side, so that it was a little wider than the other houses in the street. It felt less pressed in than many of the houses in Delft, which were packed together in narrow rows of brick along the canals, their chimneys and stepped roofs reflected in the green canal water. The ground-floor windows of this house were very high, and on the first floor there were three windows set close together rather than the two of other houses along the street.

From the front of the house the New Church tower was visible just across the canal. A strange view for a Catholic family, I thought. A church they will never even go inside.

'So you're the maid, are you?' I heard behind me.

The woman standing in the doorway had a broad face, pockmarked from an earlier illness. Her nose was bulbous and irregular, and her thick lips were pushed together to form a small mouth. Her eyes were light blue, as if she had caught the sky in them. She wore a grey-brown dress with a white chemise, a cap tied tight around her head, and an apron that was not as clean as mine. She stood blocking the

doorway, so that Maertge and Cornelia had to push their way out round her, and looked at me with crossed arms as if waiting for a challenge.

Already she feels threatened by me, I thought. She will bully me if I let her.

'My name is Griet,' I said, gazing at her levelly. 'I am the new maid.'

The woman shifted from one hip to the other. 'You'd best come in, then,' she said after a moment. She moved back into the shadowy interior so that the doorway was clear.

I stepped across the threshold.

What I always remembered about being in the front hall for the first time were the paintings. I stopped inside the door, clutching my bundle, and stared. I had seen paintings before, but never so many in one room. I counted eleven. The largest painting was of two men, almost naked, wrestling each other. I did not recognise it as a story from the Bible, and wondered if it was a Catholic subject. Other paintings were of more familiar things – piles of fruit, landscapes, ships on the sea, portraits. They seemed to be by several painters. I wondered which of them were my new master's. None was what I had expected of him.

Later I discovered they were all by other painters – he rarely kept his own finished paintings in the house. He was an art dealer as well as an artist, and paintings hung in almost every room, even where I slept. There were more than fifty in all, though the number varied over time as he traded and sold them.

'Come now, no need to idle and gape.' The woman hurried down a lengthy hallway, which ran along one side of

the house all the way to the back. I followed as she turned abruptly into a room on the left. On the wall directly opposite hung a painting that was larger than me. It was of Christ on the Cross, surrounded by the Virgin Mary, Mary Magdalene and St John. I tried not to stare but I was amazed by its size and subject. 'Catholics are not so different from us,' my father had said. But we did not have such pictures in our houses, or our churches, or anywhere. Now I would see this painting every day.

I was always to think of that room as the Crucifixion room. I was never comfortable in it.

The painting surprised me so much that I did not notice the woman in the corner until she spoke. 'Well, girl,' she said, 'that is something new for you to see.' She sat in a comfortable chair, smoking a pipe. Her teeth gripping the stem had gone brown, and her fingers were stained with ink. The rest of her was spotless – her black dress, lace collar, stiff white cap. Though her lined face was stern her light brown eyes seemed amused.

She was the kind of old woman who looked as if she would outlive everyone.

She is Catharina's mother, I thought suddenly. It was not just the colour of her eyes and the wisp of grey curl that escaped her cap in the same way as her daughter's. She had the manner of someone used to looking after those less able than she – of looking after Catharina. I understood now why I had been brought to her rather than her daughter.

Though she seemed to look at me casually, her gaze was watchful. When she narrowed her eyes I realised she knew everything I was thinking. I turned my head so that my cap hid my face.