"I stopped sewing." She smiled a tiny, wan smile. "I looked it up. *Memineris.* Erasmus says that after liberating Athens from the cruelties of the Thirty Tyrants, Thrasybulus made a decree prohibiting all mention of the past. They called the decree *amnestia.*"

Digna. Oh, Digna.

His eyes welled up and she appeared wavy as though through a glass, then only a blur of lavender, and he did not want even that transparency to be between them. He looked away so she would not see, at Dirk, curled and sighing at Digna's feet, so as not to look at the painting. Soon he'd have to travel half a day over rutted dike roads to see it. And he'd be watched. He imagined with horror the newly framed embroidery sampler declaring in careful stitches its decree of silence and amnesty, hanging within the discolored rectangle on the cream-colored wall. No, Digna wouldn't do that. She wouldn't put it there.

Involuntarily, he looked up to check if the painting was still hanging in its place.

After a time, he said, "If instead of looking out the window, the girl were looking in, at us, she would surely think we were enviable creatures."

That near-smile flicked across her face. "Look long enough," she said softly, "out or in, and you'll be glad you are who you are."

Whether she meant it as observation or exhortation, he would not ask, or imagine.

Hyacinth Blues

I have forgotten, I am ashamed to say, his face.

No, not Gerard's. His.

Now, it's not wise to be shocked. It makes one's face blotchy and you don't want that. I wouldn't tell just anybody, because there are parts, there are parts—but since you asked for counsel in such matters, I will tell you. The truth, that I did not love the husband my father chose for me, I had concealed more carefully than a breast.

That is to say, until I first saw *him*. He was playing in a small orchestra at that somber brick Mauritshuis—the new *Eroica* Symphony which we finally heard in The Hague two years after my sister heard it at the Beauvais—and he was wearing an elegant puce frock coat and red moire waistcoat with thin violet stripes. His breeches were not the same old black silk that Gerard wore day in and day out, but suede, fastened with bows and reaching farther down the leg. Surely he wasn't Dutch.

I have a thing or two to tell you about the Dutch, so I'm glad we have all afternoon. At that Mauritshuis concert, for example, Louis XVI fashions, ten years out of

date, were still in evidence, too blatant not to humiliate them, but miraculously, they carried on without even seeming to notice. That woman loosely connected to the House of Orange, the former Baroness Agatha van Solms whom my husband thought charming, was still wearing side hoops. And her headdresses! She thought it clever to suggest her family's contributions to Dutch naval history by building a ship, a man-of-war I think it was, atop horizontal rows of cadogan curls—no one wore cadogan curls anymore—as if the vessel were bravely battling those ferocious blonde waves. On its stern she flew a tiny flag. Prudently, it was the flag of the Batavian Republic. A cheap way to advertise the role of the House of Orange in sea conquests, if you ask me. Add to this that she still followed that odious practice of tying a red velvet ribbon about her neck as an expression of sympathy for those caught by Madame Guillotine. Not a dram of taste.

Now, don't label me derisive or faultfinding. You didn't have to live there. Besides, there was one Dutch thing I loved. It was a small painting Gerard bought me of a young girl whose skin had the sheen of transparent peaches. She was looking out an open window with such a sweet, naive expression on her face, though at first I thought it a bit vacant. You see, the villagers are cut off from each other by water, always water. Such inbreeding that more than a few of the ladies are half-witted or decidedly curious in a bovine sort of way. Still, this child must have had parents who loved her, and that generated in me both tenderness

and melancholy. Envy, I suppose it was, due to my own barrenness, awareness of which had begun to make Gerard irritable even earlier when we were in Luxembourg.

I placed the painting in the small drawing room, above a blue velvet chaise that intensified the blue in the girl's smock, which hung in graceful folds of that luscious deep blue of the early hyacinths when the blooms are just beginning to open, not the paler blue after they've waned. If I had a daughter, I would dress her in the colors of only the freshest hyacinths and tulips. And just as my sister Charlotte does with her Cherise, I would parade her every spring at the Promenade de Longchamp. And she'd have pearls. So I made inquiries at the artists' guild to have a string of pearls painted in around the poor girl's naked neck.

Gerard said the painting was by a minor artist, some Johannes van der Meer. It didn't matter to me. The girl was lovely, and I claimed her with all my heart.

At first I thought the gift was a placating measure given so I would be content another year or two, until he could secure an appointment back in France. It was after Gerard had a solid month of conferences with the former Countess Maurits van Nassau at the Mauritshuis about some revenue waiver, or so he said, though I know different now. And that, my dear, is the real reason for such propitiatory gifts, so be wary.

Since the Countess Maurits was the concert hostess and a gracious lady in all respects, I called upon her the day after the concert in that mausoleum of a Mauritshuis where

she lived, I can't imagine how. She received me in a room decorated with blue and white tiles on the fireplace and blue Delftware plates standing by the dozen upon shelves and sideboards. And on those plates, always bridges arching up in the air over rivers, and spineless weeping willow trees. Who would want that symbol of melancholia staring at you? I had enough of the real thing, thank you. Poor woman, she couldn't get a decent Ishfahan, or even a Hamadan. Just a Flemish, and chintz everywhere, and two Frisian cuckoo clocks quacking every few minutes—enough to give you the vapors.

Though denuded of her title by The Emperor, she still displayed her wealth upon her ample bosom, somewhat like deflated meringues sad to say, the left one marked by a small mole, but I couldn't be sure; it may have been painted on. She informed me that the violinist was Monsieur le C—, fresh from Paris, and that he was to appear in a matter of weeks as guest performer playing Mozart's Symphony no. 40 in G Minor with the state orchestra, formerly the Royal Orchestra, at the Binnenhof.

"Oh, I do so love minor keys," I whispered. "His bowing technique, of which I am obviously not entitled to speak, certainly had me enraptured." I gave her a beseeching look on the final word.

With the intuition of the subtlest of women, surely a vestige of her lost title, she smiled understandingly. "He is staying for the summer at the Oude Doelen."

That was all I needed.

The Hague was small, only the size of three or four of the grand squares of Paris and their neighborhoods. I knew the Oude Doelen. Gerard and I had stayed there while our home for the duration of his commission was being prepared for us. But first, I had to secure an invitation to the Binnenhof concert. And, second, I had to have a new gown.

There was not a day to waste. Not a dressmaker on van Diemensstraat knew the styles in Paris. Nor did I, exiled as it were, first to Luxembourg and then to The Hague, while Josephine's salons exploded with new styles. And the tiny Dutch shops were no help. As empty as cells, those shops. Why they couldn't smuggle bolts of silk as well as casks of saltpeter is owed entirely to the dullness of the Dutch.

And another thing: You should thank the blessed Virgin, my dear, that God has spared you the uncharitable corset makers in The Hague. I tell you they have not an ounce of mercy—the resentment of the conquered toward his conqueror—no tender little words of understanding when they fit you, unlike Madame Adèle, my own corsetière, who says, I can hear her now, "It's only a question of rearranging the skin, madame." You really ought to try her. She does wonders in lifting the fallen. Rue St. Honoré just off the Place Vêndome.

Nevertheless I set out to clothe myself anew, not just top to toe but air to skin, just in case. My sister Charlotte had written to me that women were beginning to wear pantalets, and then she described them. Even if they were

made of sheer lawn, oh, the discomfort of having rasping cloth there. Discreetly, I asked at a few shops. Not having heard of such a thing, they looked at me askance, so I had to content myself without, even though that distressed me somewhat. Surely Monsieur le C— knew more of what was being worn in Paris than I did, and I hated to be found wanting.

Now where did I leave off? Oh, yes. The Binnenhof. A plain palace from the outside that stretched along the south bank of the Vijver. It redeemed itself, though, once one entered the Trêves Zaal, where the concert would take place, a splendid white and gold reception hall imitating Louis XIV style, quite like the Galerie Dorée of the Hotel de Toulouse. The painted ceiling was dreamlike with clouds and cherubs, and so I was prepared to think the violinists, Monsieur le C— especially, were descending to us from Heaven.

I worked my way toward the first few rows of seats and Gerard followed. The musicians were already seated, and there he was, first violinist, concentrating on tuning the orchestra. His white lace jabot frothed under his dear chin like a whipped dessert. The first movement, *molte allegro*, was a sprightly melody—tra-la-la, tra-la-la, tra-la-la-*lá* it went, and his hands flitting about cast a spell on me. Hardly able to breathe in the sudden heat, I batted the air with my fan. By the happiest of chances, the gesture seemed to attract Monsieur le C—'s eye.

He noticed me. Yes, I was sure of it.

During the long *andante* his eyelids drooped provocatively over his instrument, and his bowing arm caressed the strings as if they were the heartstrings of his beloved. He played the *andante* with such tenderness I nearly fainted. He must have been a child prodigy, some doting mother's darling. By the fourth movement I was dizzy to the point of rapture. You know the feeling or you wouldn't have asked me.

As for Gerard during all of this, I couldn't say. He busied himself more and more with his columns of figures, with dispatches, and especially with the disenfranchised Dutch nobility. He bought a painting by a Dutch artist and began to smoke a long porcelain pipe. My husband, I am sorry to say, was becoming Dutch.

I can't be sure but his defection may have started a year earlier. I remember it was late spring because the hyacinth on my dressing table had reached that stage of sadder, paler blue when its fragrance was most poignant because it was offering up the last of its zest. I had not yet executed my morning glories, that is to say, my morning rites at the dressing table. I had no plaster or powder on yet, and had not put on my ringlets. I was plucking when Gerard said something to me that I didn't hear; truth to say, though I rue it now, I ignored him because I cannot think, much less actually speak, when I am doing my face.

"Claudine!" he said, so loud it startled me and I dropped my tweezers.

The notion of lovers living together is altogether too

demanding. One can be caught so unready. When you get to be my age, you'll understand.

In the mirror I saw him looking at me, sitting on the edge of the bed without his breeches and without his stockings too, so his thin hairy legs dangled off the end of the bed like a spider.

I turned to him and said sweetly, "What is it, *mon cher?*" Always be sweet, no matter what. You never know what's on their minds.

He didn't say what he'd intended to, the words must have flown away like moths, but he had the look of a man to whom something had happened. His eyes were distressed, as though he saw for the first time that our possibilities had been checked, that the son he had imagined would never be. I think it suddenly occurred to him that we had stopped trying to have a child. At that moment I suspected that whatever hold I had on him was slipping. Afterward, a heaviness sat on my heart.

I was brought up to believe that when one marries according to family wishes, with time and patience, love will come, so I had made an effort at love even though I didn't quite know what I was striving for. Oh, there had been occasions of passion, but was that love? I had a sentimental notion, to answer your question, that love meant one would risk all, sacrifice all, overlook and endure all in order to be one with the beloved. I used to hold dear the doctrine—borrowed from my aunt in Provence—that if one acts with sufficient passion in all things, then that

passion will correct whatever might be unfortunate in one's circumstances. But after that look—Gerard's eyes so full of disappointment, as if the world had changed and he recognized it finally for what it was, and would never call it beautiful again—after that look, I was no longer certain of my aunt's doctrine.

I tried to make the best of things, for he was good enough to me after a fashion—gave me a painting of a girl, my wish, not a boy, his, you see—though he was good enough to others too. It was no secret that he'd been well occupied during his period as *ministre d'impôt,* collecting for The Emperor 100 million guilders a year, but exacting less tangible taxes from some privately chosen devalued Dutch nobility, chiefly amongst them that former Baroness of the House of Orange flying the flag on a curl. I resolved to ignore that and not to think, and for the next year I occupied myself with pleasant things, like organizing excursions to the tulip fields of Haarlem in the spring, and in summer braving the wicked sea wind at Scheveningen to shiver in those funny wicker tub chairs on The Strand, and in the winter having skating parties at the Huis ten Bosch. On the ice once, Gerard, nearly falling, let out a little whoop of terror and laughed at himself and reached impulsively for my hand, and I was overwhelmed with tenderness for him, though I wouldn't call it love. He would have reached for any hand to right himself.

And now, thanks to the Countess of the Maritshuis, I knew that Monsieur le C— could, with his swirling

variations on a theme, sweep away the despair of my restlessness.

I sent a message to the Oude Doelen, inviting him and three others of his choosing, a string quartet, to give a chamber evening in our home, "an ample white stone mansion on the Vyverburg," I wrote, so he'd know he would get an audience of substance. He replied cordially, and with that encouragement I called upon him the next day for the purpose of making arrangements. When he received me, the immaculate whiteness of his neck linen sent me into a swoon, but luckily, with my smelling salts and his firm hand at my back, I was able to recover. I invited, breathlessly. That is to say I determined not to breathe again until he assented. He tipped his head in consideration, arched a perfectly plucked eyebrow, straightened the lace at his cuff, gave a slow, practiced smile, and suggested that we take a carriage ride in the Bosch, the great wood outside the city.

We did so, with the curtains down. So steamy it was in that close, rumbling box—it was July—that I couldn't bear it. My fichu was stuck to the damp back of my neck and in the front to my allurement mounds as well. I had no choice but to remove it. In the dim light I discovered as I looked down and sideways—coquettish still, I hoped—that on his waistcoat an entire landscape was worked in petit point. When I took the liberty to run my hand across the stitching, he covered my hand with his, pressing it to him, a sure sign that he had agreed to assemble a quartet. I could breathe!

"Haydn is *de rigueur*," he said, "but might I suggest as well the Mozart Quartet in C Major? It's called 'The Dissonant.' Does that frighten you?"

"On the contrary, it sounds thrilling."

"It begins with a pulsing bass note, like the heartbeat of a man expectant of fulfillment, and then swells to fullness as the higher voices join."

"Does it . . . does it reach *crescendo*?"

"With sublime consummation."

"Then we shall have it."

The next week he sent word by messenger that he had secured the other members of the quartet, and a few days later I called upon him again to discuss the guest list and finalize the evening's musical program, which we did while taking a walk around the feather-flecked Vijver to view the swans.

"It's always politic," I said, "to have some Patriots in attendance, so I have invited the families of Leopold van Limburg Stirum, Gijsbert Karel van Hogendorp, and Adam van der Duyn.

"Did you know that swans mate for life?" he asked. "What do you think about that?"

"Foolish. See how tiny their heads are?"

The evening of the chamber concert, I wore silk faille, the color of a hyacinth, like the girl's smock in the painting, not too showy, but certainly noticeable. In a last-minute inspiration, I had sent our houseman all over the city looking for hyacinths to dress the grand salon. The

scent would be intoxicating. While waiting for his return, I paced the rooms, moist under my arms and breasts. I bathed again, pouring cool water over my neck to calm me, and listened to the sounds of the house—Gerard humming in his dressing gown, off-key but happily; staccato steps on the marble floor, chairs being arranged in the salon, hushed voices urging, "No, no, Madame said you're to put it *there,*" and "Madame said we must not light the oil lamps in the drawing room, and the *petite salle* must be kept dim." It would be ever so lovely, everywhere one looked, those plucky columns of sweetness in all shades of blue standing stiffly up like, like . . . yes, well, this would be a night, I told myself, when ladies sheathed in spangled moonlight would feed on blossoms drenched with honey.

When the houseman finally did return, I saw at once that it was too late in the summer. "No hyacinths, madame. Dreadful sorry. I went to every flower shop I know." He held forward one bedraggled bloom, embarrassingly past its prime. To avoid comparison, I thought it wise not to exhibit it.

The grand salon glowed golden with fresh tapers in the sconces. Pastel guests skimmed across black and white floor tiles polished so that the whole surface seemed coated with glass. Across tinkling laughter, Gerard bent gallantly to kiss the hand of that Orange woman, Agatha of the preposterous headdresses, who was, no doubt, sewn into her gown. I searched the depths of my heart for the graciousness to greet that woman kindly, but a feather bird nested in

organdy on her cabriolet bonnet fell forward at each nod of her head so that it appeared to be pecking for food. I didn't trust myself.

Suddenly there he was!

He wore a sleek tailcoat with a pattern of sea-green scales. When he turned to greet Gerard, I could see the tails tapered into points like the tail of a cod. From the back, he looked, *mon Dieu!* he looked like—a fish, a veritable fish! I couldn't breathe. I couldn't think. He began to make his way toward me when he was intercepted by the Countess Maurits, and then others, and I had to content myself by greeting him without a private word.

During the Haydn I adopted the attitude I imagined him to cherish—a lofty, ethereal dreaminess. I leaned forward to show I was intensely interested, although it shot a pain through my lower back, and the vertical bones in my corset dug into my stomach—which would not have happened had we been in Paris where we belonged.

I noticed Gerard looking around the room distractedly instead of paying full attention to the notes. How could anyone not keep his eyes fastened on the musicians?

I concentrated on Monsieur le C—'s mouth, how he puckered it in a precious little pout when he had to play something *allegro.* His hands, how deft and light, like birds. And his plucking! My heartstrings vibrated. To create such heavenly sounds, such moods, to have the power so to lift the spirit—was it any surprise that he stirred my passion? Heartwrenchingly, I wondered, as you are, if that

could be the budding of love. I wasn't quite sure how to identify it. Was it something that made one all aflutter, or gave one an inner pool of great calm? That sounded too aged. Like a cheese. I preferred the flutter of birds, and my mind gamboled under their spell for all of the Mozart.

After an appropriate time mingling with the guests, I approached him, said that he played like an angel, and let him kiss my hand. It was not difficult thereafter to lure him into the drawing room. I only had to say I had a small Dutch masterpiece to show him. "A painting of a young girl, a virgin," I taunted, though now I'm ashamed I used her so. Passing through the *petite salle,* I turned down the wick in the oil lamp, then took his hand and led him to the darkened drawing room and quickly closed the door behind us. We could see nothing.

I counted the six steps to the divan and we sank into sinful luxury with a sigh. He kissed. I kissed, and I discovered, with the very tip of my tongue, a callous under his left jawbone. With a start I realized that must be where he squeezed the violin with his jowl, an occupational malady I could forgive for the grace of his bowing arm.

And I did forgive, for his hands played me like a beloved instrument. He danced his fingers across my throat *pianissimo* and executed a *glissando* down my spine. His prelude, an *arpeggio* trilling through my entire being. His plucking, all that I had hoped for.

Desperately he was rustling through dress, chemise, petticoat, crinoline and shift, and I thought with gratitude

how impractical pantalets would have been. Breathing. There was deafening breathing and such rustling. Was he suffocating under there? So as not to be indelicate, I'll just say that his strings were swelling into a *vibrato.* He uttered a soft cry, in *tremolo,* until he sang one thin note, *falsetto.*

Was it my imagination or did I hear devilish stifled laughter? Decidedly feminine. We were not alone! Moreover, we might have been seen coming in the door at that moment of illumination. Lighting a lamp would tell me who it was, that is to say, who must be presented with a lavish gift, and quickly too, so that she would remain silent. Under my billowing gown Monsieur le C— stirred, and seemed about to begin the second movement, but I was so distracted by that presence, the rustling of fabric—taffeta it was—that all pleasure I had imagined for weeks flitted as quickly as a grace note. I tried to think who had been wearing taffeta this late into summer. I pushed myself away from him, felt for the table, struck a match and in the first flicker of lamplight saw, on the chaise beneath the chaste eye of the girl in the painting, with his breeches lowered like a plucked goose, Gerard.

And with him, not that Agatha creature of the bird's nest headgear, but the Countess Maurits, both of them staring at both of us.

I was caught, yes, but released too, in the same instant. Heaven's blessing! This would send me back to Paris!

I had only one alternative. Quickly, though without one shoe, I swept through the *petite salle* to the grand salon and

marshaled the Baroness of Orange to witness his disarray. Like it or not, Agatha van Solms was going to countenance the infidelity of her lover.

It was, in all respects, an eventful night. I wouldn't give a thousand placid summer days in exchange for it. When I settled under the bedclothes toward dawn, Gerard was still raging.

"How dare you compromise my position here! You realize, don't you, that it will be all over The Hague tomorrow?"

Those were, I believe, the last words I heard that night as I turned on my side, raised the bedclothes over my ear, and remembered with a chuckle how, on my way back through the *petite salle* with Agatha in tow like a Dutch barge, I had collided with Monsieur le C— slinking his way out. I fell asleep thinking: What a shame we didn't have hyacinths.

Bitterness was out of the question. That I did not charge him with his various infidelities; that I did not attack that matron of the Mauritshuis who, God give her mercy, first introduced me to the pleasures of Dutch musical salons; that I was, in fact, indifferent to my husband's indiscretions testified, to me foremost, that our love was of a tepid paleness. The Hague was, every Dutchman declared pridefully, the very capital of reason above passion. Therefore, what I had been taught to fear, now I embraced. Betrayal—his or mine, it didn't matter—freed me. Best to leave quickly than become a byword of

reproach mentioned behind linen fans out of range of daughters' ears. A season of contrition among the plumbago at my aunt's summer house in Provence, and then I would be back in Paris, at Charlotte's, where there would be theater and opera to keep me from thinking. Ah, that sublime, escaping sigh one sighs when one unlaces one's corset, that exquisite freedom could be mine with only a coach ride back to Paris.

But how to pay for it? Impossible to wait for my father to send me money. That would take a fortnight. And there would be questions. It would be indecent to stay here a night longer than necessary. I had to think. This time, I really truly had to think. What could I do? What did I have?

With a stab of pain, it came to me—the painting.

Trying not to look, I wrapped it in muslin the next morning and called for the carriage. The papers, which Gerard kept in his strongbox, I would have to do without. I started at van Hoep's, but encountered only niggling there. Standing up as if to go, the muslin in my hand, I couldn't keep my eyes from the girl in the painting. What I saw before as vacancy on her face seemed now an irretrievable innocence and deep calm that caused me a pang. It wasn't just a feature of her youth, but of something finer—an artless nature. I could see it in her eyes. This girl, when she became a woman, *would* risk all, sacrifice all, overlook and endure all in order to be one with her beloved.

"This is more than a pretty curio, my good man," I

said. "You are looking into the guileless soul of maidenhood."

There was, I realized then, something indecent about behaving as we had in front of her. The shock to her sensibilities would leave indelible marks.

"Are you sure it's a Vermeer?" the dealer asked.

"Positive. There are papers, but at the moment they are inaccessible to me."

"And the papers indicate—?"

"That it was painted by Jan van der Meer of Delft, and auctioned in Amsterdam about a hundred years ago. I can't remember when or where." I flipped my handkerchief to indicate that such details were of no consequence.

"There's no signature. If there was any chance those papers said a van Mieris, I'd give you two hundred guilders, but for only a Vermeer, phugh."

I wrapped the painting again and left without a word more, took it to a second dealer and said it was a van Mieris.

"Are you sure it's not a Vermeer?"

"I'm certain."

Again he asked for documents, but without papers testifying it as a van Mieris, he offered me only twenty-four guilders. Barely enough for a hired coach and inns to Paris. I accepted, and cried all the way home in the carriage.

Grâce à Dieu, Gerard was at the ministry. I had time for only a quick note to Charlotte: "I am escaping to France. Prepare Father. Let's spend the rest of the summer in Provence."

When my trunks were loaded and I was helped into the coach, what I felt was not a weeping, but a longing to weep that I mastered all too easily. Gerard would survive, and thrive. If there was anything to weep for, it wasn't Gerard, or Monsieur le C—, or even me. It was the painting, for now it would go forth through the years without its certification, an illegitimate child, and all illegitimacy, whether of paintings or of children or of love, ought to be a source of truer tears than any I could muster at parting.

Love as I knew it was foolish anyway, all that business about blood boiling and hearts palpitating, all that noticing of eyeballs. Think realistically, my dear. Who wants to peer into a quivering nostril anyway? If, indeed, that was love, it wasn't enough. I came to see that knowing what love isn't might be just as valuable, though infinitely less satisfying, as knowing what it is. Looking out the coach window at men and women bending over flat potato fields, I determined I would be just as content as my lost girl gazing out her own sunlit window. A great deal can be said for just sitting and thinking. Life is not, nor has been, a *fantaisie,* but one can still amuse oneself, no? And as for Monsieur le C—, though his face eludes me, I still say an *ave* for him every Passion Sunday at the Church of the Madeleine, as a way of thanking him from the strings of my heart for my resurrection.