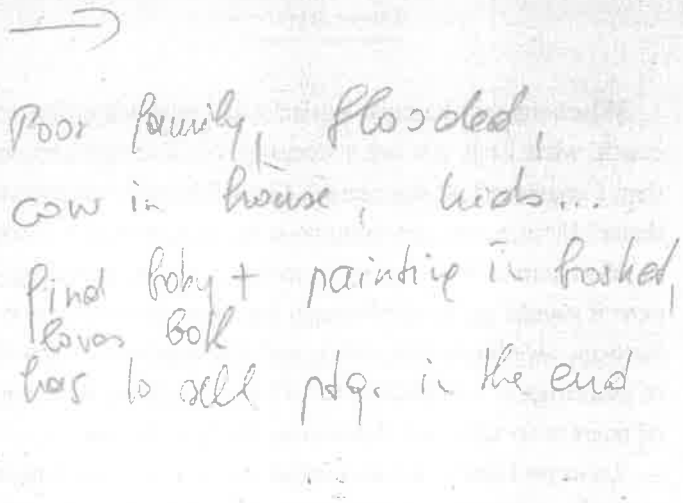

Morningshine

Saskia opened the back shutters and looked out the upstairs south window early the second morning after the flood. Their farmhouse was an island apart from the world. Vapors of varying gray made the neighboring four farmhouses indistinct, yet there was a shine on the water like the polished pewter of her mother's kitchen back home. Let the waters under the heavens be gathered together unto one place, and let the dry land appear, and it was so, she thought. But it wasn't so. And the cow would have to stay upstairs with them until it was so, however long that was, stay upstairs messing the floor and taking up half the room.

She leaned on the sill and peered across the water to the bare elm tree, so small and new it was only a few twigs above the water, to see if their chickens were in it. Maybe Stijn would find them today. She felt the loss of Pookje the most. She was the beauty, with those chestnut feathers soft as baby's hair under her throat. And how she always rose so dainty-like and proud to show the perfect egg she produced. Then Saskia felt ashamed. Others had lost more than a few hens.

She and Stijn had hardly lost anything. The day of the flood she'd made dozens of trips upstairs carrying furniture and food, while the cow's big brown eyes followed her each trip. She tried to make a game of it for the children, and even went down into the cold water to feel around and rescue a few more things after the flood came. By the end of the day her legs ached and her arms hung limp as rags. She had thought Stijn would be pleased that she had gotten so much upstairs, but when he came in through the window after working on the Damsterdiep Dike for two days straight, he took one look at the clutter, and her grandmother's spinning wheel atop hurriedly stacked peat blocks, and said, "Do we need all this?"

She'd forgiven him. He was exhausted and preoccupied.

Now, out the south window, she noticed something dark floating on the water a long way away, turning as if by its own will, first one way and then another.

"Stijn," she said. "Would you look at that, now?" She felt his warm hand on her shoulder as he looked out with her. She had of late—and she knew this annoyed him—milked every chance touch or meaningless encounter for its loving possibility, and so she paused in speaking, so he wouldn't take his hand away. "Isn't that Boswijk's mare floating there?"

She turned to see him squint, to see those dear, new lines fan out from his eyes.

"It is, surely." He reached for his reefer and climbed

out the north window on the other side of the house where he'd tied up his skiff.

Marta and Piet slipped out of bed and clamored over the linen chest to the sill beside their mother. "See," Marta said in her superior, know-everything voice of four years, "horses can too swim."

"That horse isn't swimming. That horse is just tall enough to poke his head up," Piet said.

Saskia gave them both a piece of cheese. There was no more bread. She'd have to learn how to bake in the little peat brazier.

"Saskia!" Stijn's voice rattled an alarm through her.

She squeezed between the cow and a sack of grain to the opposite window. From the rowboat, Stijn handed up to her something flat wrapped in a blanket. She leaned far out the window. It wasn't heavy but it slipped from her grasp beneath the blanket and fell into the muddy water. Stijn lunged for it, rocking the boat, grabbed it, disentangled the blanket and handed up again a painting. She brought it safely over the sill and stared at a beautiful girl looking out a window.

"What is it, Mama?" Marta said.

"My God!" she heard Stijn say. "Saskia!"

She leaned far over the sill and he stood up in the boat and handed her, more carefully, a baby in a basket, then seized the oars.

"A baby! Someone put a baby in our boat," Saskia said.

"A baby. A baby!" Piet echoed. He was five, just at that

age where he mimicked everything he heard, and where everything in the world made him laugh.

She unwrapped the blanket, and the baby became smaller and smaller. It was so young, its face was still rose-colored and puckered. When she got to the sad-colored shawl, dull blue woven with gray-green, her hands shook and she stopped, for she knew the shawl had to be the mother's.

"Who, Mama?" Marta asked.

"I don't know. Poor thing, so cold."

"St. Nicholas!" Piet said. "St. Nicholas put it there." Both children rolled on the floor in laughter.

She lighted a peat block in the brazier to heat water, and prepared to feed and wash the baby. She began to unwrap the shawl and found a wilted cabbage leaf. She smiled.

"What's that for?" Marta said, so close beside her she could hardly move.

"Oh, it's just an old superstition. Good luck for the baby."

"Can we keep it? Can we keep it, Mama?"

"The cabbage leaf?" Piet said.

Marta gave him a little shove. "Can we keep the baby?"

With trembling hands, Saskia lifted from a fold in the shawl a paper, some sort of art document. On the back, printed in big letters, were the words, "Sell the painting. Feed the child."

"Father in Heaven!" she murmured. The black letters

swam like eels before her eyes. To think a mother could write that. She lifted away a wet rag. A boy. A little Moses boy with blue eyes and a few wisps of blond hair. A boy, if she could keep him alive. She put a pot of milk on a grate over the burning peat. She searched in the linen chest for diaper cloths and cleaned and fed him by the time Stijn came back.

"It was Boswijk's mare," he said. "Dumbest horse I've ever seen. I got it roped and rowed it to his barn, but the damned thing wouldn't go up the ramp, so Boswijk's boy and I had to hoist him from the block and tackle in a sling. Now I missed the punt to the sea dike and will have to row."

"We've been given a charge, Stijn."

"That baby?" He looked down at him, not without kindness, but briefly.

"It's a boy." She knew that would make him more acceptable.

"Mighty skinny. Probably won't live more'n a week."

She showed him the paper. "The only name it gives is who made the painting." He turned it over. There followed a silence so long she wondered if they would ever speak again. "A charge from Heaven," she whispered.

"Aye, and the means to carry it out too. Take it to Groningen next market day."

"The baby?" She shot him an apprehensive look, for there was an orphanage there.

"The painting." Stijn wrapped up a hunk of cheese and

a slab of salt pork and climbed out the window into his boat.

The boy was a perfect baby. The shape of his cheeks and the point of his chin seemed to her to form an open tulip. All day she sat feeding him drip by drip, her finger in his mouth, and the milk pouring down her finger. She kissed the bottoms of his feet and kept him warm and couldn't keep from touching him. Every so often he flung his arms open wide, as if to embrace her and the children and the cow and the whole world. They'd have to make inquiries, but in the meantime, God had charged her to keep this boy alive.

Every few hours Marta asked, "What are we going to do, Mama?" And Piet echoed, "What are we going to do?" Most times, she just smiled at them without an answer.

Stijn came home discouraged. Nothing would drain until they repaired the sea dikes. Then the drainage mills could begin working, and when the water got to the crown of the Damsterdiep Dike, then they'd go to work on that. "They're conscripting from as far inland as Woldijk. Those men are given lodgings in Delfzijl, but from here we'll have to punt every day."

She stretched up to kiss him on the cheek.

"Don't touch me. I'm filthy."

She had seen that, but it didn't matter. She drew back.

"It'll be a miracle if we'll get a spring planting," he said.

"We will. I know we will." She put her hand on his arm and felt the muscle tighten. He had a tendency to see the

worst, and it was her job to keep him hopeful. "The baby took milk five times today."

He looked at the basket where she'd laid him. "What kind of mother would leave a baby in a flood?" He took off his outer clothes and sat on the edge of the high cabinet bed built into the wall. Piet, in the children's bed underneath, tugged at his pantleg. Stijn moved his leg out of reach.

"One who had no choice."

"St Nicholas left it," Piet said, and then Saskia remembered. A stranger in a skiff who asked for milk.

"Ssh, Piet. Go to sleep." She poured a basin of dirty dishwater out the window. "He's a good baby." Just then, when Stijn was looking at him, the baby flung his arms wide. "See? He likes you."

Over the next days Stijn was gone at first light and came home after dark, *doodmoe,* as her own father used to say, dead tired. All he had energy for was to eat and say a few sentences about the work. She was afraid to bring up the question of naming the baby, for that would seem to make him theirs. Once, when changing him, she called him Jantje, little Jan, after the name on the paper, and Piet and Marta took it up in the daytimes, but at night they didn't.

The house was to Saskia a happy isle in the midst of flood. She did everything in the cramped space between sacks of groats and their downstairs chests and table, and of course, Katrina, the milk cow. Each day, Saskia put down

fresh straw and laid the dung cakes on the sills and roof to dry. They'd use them later to reconstitute the soil. Then she and Piet, who suffered the confinement more than Marta, rowed across to the barn to stack the dried dung and replenish their supply of grain, potatoes and pickled meat, and to get hay for Katrina. Because they needed milk, the cow had to stay, but Stijn led their plow horse down from the loft on the earthen ramp into the floodwaters and, from the rowboat, guided him, swimming, to the canal where all the villagers' horses were hoisted on a barge to dry pasture inland. With a cast iron oven set on the brazier, she could make round buns instead of the loaves she normally made in the big oven downstairs. She'd lugged the churn upstairs so she could make butter. They would survive. And so would Jantje. He kicked and wiggled and sometimes spit up, but his little voice grew stronger each day. His eyes looked up at her with gratitude, she imagined, that made her heart burst. In the evenings, her happiness, her reports of the events of the day, seemed only to aggravate Stijn.

This wasn't going to be a devastating flood like in the Bible. And it wasn't like the St Elizabeth flood of three hundred years ago that swept away whole villages. She remembered a grim painting belonging to her grandmother that hung above the virginal at home. *Groot Hollandsche Waard* it was called, and it pictured a once populous village that had become a permanent lake. Spires of drowned churches protruded amidst reed beds and nests of wading

birds. Underneath, there was a sober warning: "The Lord God brought humankind up from the vasty deep and made him wax mighty. Likewise, He hath power to consign the evil ones to the consuming deluge." As a child, she'd been fascinated by the painting, but later, when she learned to read, the saying appalled her. She didn't like to think of a God of wrath.

When a flood brings a baby *and* a thing of beauty, it was not the Apocalypse, nor even a winnowing of souls. It was only water lapping four feet deep.

One rare warm day, she put all three children into the boat, lowering the baby in his basket on a sling from the gable beam pulley, just so they could get outside. She breathed deeply and rowed very slowly to enjoy it longer. The motion of the water put Jantje to sleep. She rowed to the four other houses in the hamlet and asked at the windows if they had seen the stranger in a skiff come through again. Stranger? There's nothing but strangers coming through all the time now with so many men repairing the dikes, they said. She told them of the baby, and showed his sleeping, pink face. "It'll be a long sight before he'll dig a garden for ye," one woman said. Boswijk's wife, Alda, gave her some molasses. Back home, she dripped some into his mouth from a spoon every once in a while. Marta sat next to him by the hour, waving a cloth above his face to see if his eyes would follow it, and at the first sign that they did, Saskia celebrated by putting molasses in the dough to make sweet cakes for the children.

As for the painting, she had hung it on a clothes peg to get it out of the way. In the evenings she hung clothes in front of it, so Stijn might not be reminded, but in the day she uncovered it. Sometimes she propped it in the pale slant of light coming in the south window. One morning clear and bright after a rain when they'd collected fresh water in the small roof cistern and buckets roped to the eaves, she washed off the painting, and oh, how it shone, more brilliant even than before. The russet of the girl's skirt glistened like maple leaves in autumn sun. Pouring in the window, creamy yellow light the color of the inner petals of jonquils illuminated the young girl's face and reflected points of light on her shiny fingernails. *Morningshine,* she called it, for her grandmother had told her that paintings had names.

"You'll be just like her someday," she told Marta as she braided her hair. She made up stories of the young woman in Groningen or Amsterdam or Utrecht, how she became famous for her sewing and people from all around would come to have a garment made by her.

If only she would be allowed to keep the painting too. She didn't have many beautiful things, didn't even have a china cupboard, only a floor chest covered with her grandmother's blue linen table scarf. Only one chair with a cushion. Only four painted plates tilted on the shelf, and a pewter measure. Nothing like the whitewashed kitchen stacked with Delftware in the big farmhouse where she grew up just outside of Westerbork, and Mother's long

mahogany dining table and Grandmother's virginal in the front room and paintings on the walls and curtains of pale blue flax.

The girl in the painting had a blue smock. How glorious to drape oneself in blue—the blue of the sky, of Heaven, of the pretty little lake at Westerbork with the tiny blue brooklime that grew along the banks, the blue of hyacinths and Delftware and all fine things. To live and move and have her being in a flow of blue. She held Jantje up to the painting. "See, Jantje, how beautiful she is. Maybe this is your mother. See how young she looks? A fine lady in a fine home." If that was so, Jantje had to know that his mother wore blue. The shawl was not blue enough. Besides, it was old and torn. He needed the painting.

It wasn't only Jantje who needed it. The Oriental tapestry on the table, the map on the wall, the engraved brass latch on the window—since Saskia couldn't have these things in reality, then she wanted them all the more in the painting. For the moments when she was filled with the joy of Jantje blowing bubbles out his tiny mouth, or when Piet made her laugh at his antics, or when Marta ate her bread with her little finger extended like a lady at tea, the grip of wanting left her and she was at peace. But that wasn't constant.

"This boy came from a fine family," she told Stijn one night. He looked at her, apparently too tired to ask with words how she knew. With shoulders slumped, he waited for her explanation. "Just look at that lace on the edge of

the girl's cap. She isn't hurrying to sew on those buttons. She has the leisure to look out the window, and it doesn't matter if they are sewn on that day or the next. That's the boy's mother when she was a girl, I'm thinking. Only fine folk have their portraits painted. I want him to know her. It wouldn't be right to claim him as ours."

"Marketday in Groningen tomorrow," Stijn said.

"Oh, no, Stijn. Let's just wait a little."

"We'll be needing money soon."

She slept that night not touching him in the narrow bed. In the morning, she opened the shutters to find ash-gray fog obscuring everything so that she could barely make out their own barn. "Thank you, Heavenly Father," she whispered. Stijn certainly wouldn't send her out on pathless waters in a fog. She'd be sure to get lost. The next marketday, she feigned sickness, but thought he suspected. The next, Piet actually was. In this way the issue of the painting retreated. Often she studied his face, the lines forming around his eyes thin as hairs, to see if he still thought of it.

"How many more potatoes?" he asked one night after the children were asleep.

She knew he meant the eating potatoes, for no farmer, not even a starving farmer, would touch his store of seed potatoes, the new crop Stijn was pioneering in the north-land.

"Almost a barrel," she said vaguely.

He didn't ask about the pickled meat. They both knew

by her smaller portions that they didn't have much.

"I heard some news on the dike as might interest you."

"What's that?"

"There was a hanging in Delfzijl the day of the flood. A wild witch girl hanged for murder."

"So?"

"So a few days later a baby appears. They always wait for the birth if a woman who's carrying is to hang. Seems to me there's no question."

"This child's mother wasn't a murderer. She wasn't even a shiftless country girl."

"You don't know that for sure."

"Why, just look at the painting. Look at the floor. Stone tiles. Maybe even marble. Look at the tapestry on the table. That's not the home of a wild witch girl, or a peat digger, or even a farmer." She saw his lips press together slightly at her last word. The invention of Jantje's parentage became more real to her as her need for it grew greater. "Jantje came from a good home. In Groningen or Amsterdam. A home with a map on the wall and nice furniture and a mother who wore blue."

"Jantje?"

She flushed when she realized what she said.

"The babe wasn't brought to any other house, Stijn. The Lord has given us a covenant."

"And you break it if you don't sell the painting."

"Can't we just wait? He's not costing us anything. Just a little milk."

"A little milk that would better be going into cheese. A little milk as could be sold. And don't forget, Katrina'll go dry long before our fields do."

She turned from him. He came up behind her and put his hands on her shoulders. "I'm not asking you to give up the child, Saskia."

She nodded, acknowledging his concession, and stood still to enjoy the weight of his hands. He put his face next to hers and she held her breath.

"Go to Groningen tomorrow. It'll fetch five guilders, surely. Maybe eight if we're lucky. It'll keep us in meat."

"But—"

"See that you shop it around. By the university. Don't accept anything less than eight. Try for ten. And show that paper."

The next morning at dawn, she lowered Piet and Marta, the painting wrapped in a bedsheet, and then the baby into the rowboat. She rowed inland following the bare trees lining the Damsterdiep. The dike road was still under water at first, but farther inland, it slowly began to emerge. Through shallow water pierced by sedges and busy with ducks, she rowed as far as Woldijk, the first dike that held, where it crossed the Damsterdiep. She tied the rowboat to a dike cleat and climbed out, stiff in the legs but feeling the exhilaration of solid ground. She paid a boy half a groat to watch the skiff. Immediately, Piet and Marta ran down the dike road crying, "Land, land!" and she let them,

until a small barge towed by a horse was ready to leave for Groningen.

The sight of winter fields waiting for planting on the inland side of the dike filled her with hope. But even that wouldn't have the same effect on Stijn. It wasn't hope that lay between that man and God. Nor was it thankfulness. Or appreciation for a bird or a leaf. Or a kiss. Fear lived in that space instead. The horror of seeing the last of the grain and the fields still wet. The fear of having to abandon the farm and starve beside a canal in Amsterdam, the whole family inching forward their alms bowls in front of the poorhouse. But that wasn't the God she cared to know.

In the distance the tower of the church of St Martin rose above the plain, and as they approached Groningen's tall, stone Water Gate, the children squealed their merriment and jumped up and down. When or where or through what cataclysm do men and women pass that makes them lose that bursting soul-freedom?

They rode past the sugar beet refinery and the metal workers' alley where the children put their hands to their ears, so much banging and hammering there was. To Piet and Marta, Groningen was a dream city, full of magical buildings and arches and windows all containing mysteries. They plagued her with questions—What's that man doing? What's in that cart? What's that metal thing for?—she couldn't keep up with them. And people. So many people, the children marveled.

At the dock Saskia asked directions to the university and

entered a stationer's shop full of books and portfolios and papers, some few paintings, and a wealth of detailed drawings of plants and animals and the human body. She laid the painting on the counter and untied the sheet. If she had to do it, she wanted to do it quickly.

The wizened shopkeeper took one look and asked, "Where did you get this?"

She felt Piet and Marta squeeze up against her legs from both sides. "It was given to me." She unfolded the paper for him to see. He held out his hand for it but she wouldn't let it go. She didn't want him to see the back.

As he read, the fingers of his right hand curled in. He gave her a penetrating look, and his eyebrows twitched in a most unpleasant way that made Piet snicker. She squeezed the back of his neck to make him behave. She knew that all the way home in the boat, he'd twitch his eyebrows and then burst out laughing.

The man's gaze crawled down her homespun skirt of black fustian to her old clogs. "Given to you?"

"Yes, sir." She held tight to the paper.

"Do you know who Jan van der Meer is?"

"No, sir."

"I'll give you . . ." he paused, and Marta lay the tips of her fingers along the edge of the man's desk. Saskia shook her head at her slightly, and Marta swept her hands behind her back. "Twenty-four guilders, for it." He turned away and reached for his cash box as if to conclude the deal.

Her surprise made her blurt out, "Twenty-four?" Jantje

gave a little cry, and she realized she was holding him too tight. She shifted him from one hip to the other.

"Twenty-five. Not a stuiver more."

Stijn would be jubilant with that. Twenty-five guilders would make him tender to her, and it would make keeping Jantje certain.

But the man wouldn't look at her. He just sat there stacking up the coins. His fingernails were long and yellow. She couldn't trust a man with long fingernails. The painting must be worth even more. It was certainly worth more than that to her.

"No, thank you." The firmness in her own voice astonished her. Piet gave her a quick look of confusion. She wrapped the painting in the bedsheet, tying the corners carefully, feeling the man following her to the door, his protestations a blur of sound.

Once outside, terror seized her, and she broke out in a sweat. What if she had made a mistake? What if she was only offered less everywhere else? Twenty-five guilders! Besides feeding them until their next crop, twenty-five guilders would buy a sow and a mating hog. Stijn's dream of breeding stock could come true, and she'd be the reason.

"Twenty-five guilders," Piet said with exaggerated authority, and twitched his eyebrows so violently that his whole face quivered. Marta burst out laughing.

Saskia walked briskly but aimlessly through the streets, bought the children a cinnamon waffle at a street cart, and worried. She peered into the window of an antiquarian

shop and saw paintings on the wall. She made Marta hold onto Piet and they went inside. Drinking horns and beakers and goblets and tankards stood in a clutter on chests and tables. "Don't touch anything," she warned. Marta and Piet were beside themselves, demanding in whispers that the other one look at each new thing—books, brocade cushions, carvings from the East Indies, and when they found a large mirror, they couldn't resist making faces with their eyebrows, noses, cheeks, lips, everything twitching at once, and giggling at themselves. "Ssh," Saskia commanded, and stifled her own chuckle.

The woman was concluding some business with a man, so Saskia had an opportunity to examine a yellowed, scrolled map hanging on the wall. The place names were all strange. She could find neither Oling nor Westerbork. Her breath leaked thinly out her lungs and she felt that she was from nowhere. Piet and Marta were giggling louder so she pushed them gently to the door and was about to leave when the woman said, "Is there something you might want?"

Saskia started at the sound. "No, thank you," she murmured, and gave an apologetic smile. She paused at the doorway and turned back. "Well, perhaps one thing. Do you happen to know who Jan van der Meer is?"

"Of course. From Delft. The painter from Delft. Vermeer." The woman noticed the painting wrapped in cloth. "You have something to show me?"

Saskia came back in and unwrapped it and the children

became serious again. As always when she let herself, Saskia felt sucked into the clean, spare, sunlit room with the young girl in the painting.

"Light. He painted light, you know. Lovely." The woman carried the painting to the window. "Look at her skin. Glazed smooth as silk. Could be. Could very well be."

"Could be what?"

"A Vermeer, my dear."

Saskia unfolded the paper and handed it to her. The woman read it several times, then turned it over. She gave Saskia a long look, then smiled at the baby on her hip.

"Where are you from?"

"Oling. It's only a hamlet. Near Appingedam. We're flooded, and—"

"You take this painting to Amsterdam. It'll fetch a far sight more there than I can pay. Or *anyone* in Groningen. Take it to the shops along the Rokin. Accept nothing less than eighty guilders. And keep it out of the rain."

"Eighty!"

Her voice rose so high that Piet shrieked, "Eighty!"

After more assurances and some shared admiration for the painting, Saskia sold the woman her grandmother's blue linen table scarf with the fine tatting, and then made her way, with the wrapped painting, through the market square to the butchery stalls.

On the row home from Woldijk, her mind flew like a caged sparrow. What would she tell Stijn? That she couldn't

sell it? That it only fetched four guilders and so it wasn't worth selling? She'd sell her small spice chest instead. They would get by on that. He'd never know what the first man offered. Or what this woman said. He would trust her. She'd never given him any reason not to.

At home she uncovered the painting and hung it on the peg and put no clothes in front of it. Eighty guilders!

The story she'd imagined came to life for her. Why would such a young woman who could afford to have her portrait painted by a great artist, why would she, how could she have given away her son? She wasn't at peace the way that artist painted her. She was leaning forward, and the rigidness of her spine showed the ache in her soul. She was a desperate woman with frailties just like her, temptations just like her, a woman who had needs, a woman who loved almost to the point of there being no more her any more, a woman who probably cried too much, just like her, a woman afraid, wanting to believe rather than believing, else why would she give away her son? A woman who prayed, "Lord, I believe. Help thou my unbelief." Saying the words to herself clamped shut her throat and made her cry.

She tried to get the children to go to sleep before Stijn came home. The Lord forgive her or not, she would not tell Stijn. Four guilders, if he asked. After the children were sleeping. Even though the pain of that lie would strike again at the discovery of each new beauty in the painting, truth would drive a wedge between them no tenderness could bridge.

She watched Stijn's eyes when he came in through the window. The first thing he saw was the painting. The second was the pot of beef stew. They hadn't had beef since the flood. She put a bowl of it before him so the aroma would soften him. "I sold Grandmother's handworked table scarf," she explained. He took one spoonful standing up and hung his mud-caked reefer on the peg in front of the painting.

She gasped and could barely restrain herself from whisking it away. Marta and Piet poked their heads out from below the cabinet bed. "We saw lots of bridges and churches and beggars," Marta said, and Piet mimicked a blind man holding out his bowl.

"And we rode the towboat," he added.

"Did you, now." Stijn's hand reached down to ruffle Piet's head.

"Ssh. You're supposed to be asleep," Saskia said.

"What about the painting?"

"I'll tell you later," she whispered, motioning with her head to the children. She couldn't lie in front of them.

She watched Stijn eat the stew. When there was only broth left, he tipped the bowl into his mouth. She ladled out more. When he finished, they both stood up at the same moment, both moved one way, then the other to get between the chests and Katrina who swished her tail at the disturbance. Saskia let out a nervous, twittering laugh. He questioned her with his eyes. Earlier than usual, she got into her night shift, blew out the oil lamp, and climbed into the high bed. He showed tremendous patience

waiting for an explanation. Only when he lay down next to her did he ask again, "Why didn't you sell the painting?"

"I couldn't," she said, and it was the truth. "I tried," and that, too, was the truth. Let him take it as he would. She rolled away from him. In a moment his hand came across her to turn her again to him. Still he waited.

"Stijn, it's like selling the boy's mother. It's making him an orphan." She knew it was foolish, what she was saying, but in the dark, she could admit things. All the hardness of life in the bleak northland rushed over her like a flood and she cried, "There's nothing beautiful up here. Oh, I know you love it, love to look out on your rows of potatoes, love the big, bare flatness of buckwheat, buckwheat, buckwheat, but I didn't come here for that. I came here because of you, and if we can get along without selling it . . . I'll sell the spice chest. Or we can borrow from Father. The fields will be drained soon. Already at Woldijk you can see sedges coming up through the water."

They lay a long time in the darkness before he asked, "How much were you offered?"

It was a long time again while she listened for noises from the children. In spite of the quiet, she whispered, "Twenty-five guilders."

He blew air out between his teeth that cooled the back of her neck. She held her breath and didn't move while the enormity of that sum became truth to him. As much as she tried to contain herself, she turned her face into the pillow and cried.

"I would have sold it if I thought that was a fair price."

"Fair? What do we know about such things?"

"I didn't sell it because another woman told me it was worth eighty. In Amsterdam. So you'd best not be treating the painting that way," she said, "hanging your muddy coat in front of it."

"Eighty!" he whispered. After a long, still moment, she felt him get out of bed and heard the sound of him dropping his reefer onto the bare floor.

She had, for the first time in their marriage, a lightness, a sense of power in being right. She pressed further. "As I said, Jantje is not the child of some lawless wench, or even the son of a farmer." She heard the bite in the last word and knew he did too. She turned her back to him and they were both very still until she fell into a sound and peaceful sleep.

In the morning, in those few moments of half-sleep before she moved but when she heard Katrina stirring for her milking, she felt Stijn's arm laid across her lovingly. She lay still to feel the reality of his tenderness, and after a time, she slipped her hand in his.

Work on the sea dikes was completed before they'd expected, and so now all the drainage mills were turning. Stijn worked on the Damsterdiep Dike now, and as the team of men worked their way inland, his spirits brightened. She even saw him tickle Jantje's belly once, and he called him "Jantje" instead of "the baby." Jantje was

gurgling baby sounds now. She wasn't sure if she should teach him "Mama" and "Papa," so she was working on "cow" and "water."

If only, for one moment, Stijn could feel as she did, if they could be together in the task God assigned them, if he could look at Jantje as he looked at Piet and Marta and know the power of God's intention, then maybe he'd trust enough to let her keep the painting. But of this, there was no indication. The question of the painting hung in the air of their little upper room, and every day she put less and less salt pork in the stew and then fewer and fewer carrots and haricot beans bought from the vegetable seller who occasionally ventured out to flooded villages in a punt. Eventually the stew became potato broth, day after day, and Saskia thought for sure he'd tell her to sell the painting.

Spring came in small evidences—only a tenderness in the air and some grasses poking the water's surface. Inland, just outside the Woldijk, the land was wet but not flooded, and they were spreading refuse from the city to reconstitute the soil. Farmers there might get their crop of sugar beets after all, but Stijn just sat brooding by the window, looking out at his wet fields. With every week, Saskia pointed out a few more branches of trees emerging and another plank of the barn.

Conscription duties lessened so the Water Board permitted each landowner one day free of dike work each week. There was little Stijn could do on the farm, so he said he'd take them on an outing in the skiff.

"And can we go to Woldijk and have races on the dike road?" Piet asked.

"Yes, and maybe even to Groningen."

"And see our horse?" Marta added.

"Of course."

It would be a holiday. Stijn hadn't acted this lightheartedin months. She knew there would be heather beyond Woldijk. The marsh gentian wouldn't be out yet, but there would be yellow pimpernel and bog violet she could pick and bring back that would last a day or two. Already the sun breaking through the clouds made the water glisten in silver patches.

But first Stijn went to the barn.

She stood still and closed her eyes. Katrina's endless chewing filled the room.

Across the water she heard him shout. Not words. Not a curse. Just a deep bellow of anguish.

Through the window she watched him thrashing the water with the oars. She had no place to put the older children so they wouldn't see what would come next. She put Jantje far back into their cabinet bed.

Stijn was already yelling as he climbed in the window. "Saskia, how could you? The seed potatoes! You've been using the seed potatoes."

Piet flattened himself against the wall.

"I—"

"Every farm wife knows, every farmer's daughter knows that you don't touch the seed potatoes. There's only a

quarter of a barrel left! Not enough to seed more than a few rows of potato mounds."

Marta crawled deep into her bed.

"I thought there was another barrel behind the bales," Saskia said, though she knew, even as she said it, that it was not the truth. They wouldn't get a planting this year so she thought they might as well eat them. The potatoes wouldn't last a year. Now she knew—he hadn't given up the hope of putting in a late crop.

"Another barrel? You knew there wasn't. And you knew if I knew, we'd have to sell the painting."

He didn't lay a hand on her—that he'd never do—but he glared at her with a look that shriveled her soul. She felt God Himself scowling down at her. "Selfish. Selfish! I never knew you."

"Maybe I should tell you then. It was your idea to come up to this barren place. I haven't been back home for three years. My parents haven't seen Piet since he was a baby, but not once have I complained. And not once have I regretted it. And not once have I cursed the flood or bad luck or God Himself. Or you."

"But a man's seed potatoes are his future. It's what he *is*."

"Nothing more? You're nothing more than that? I don't believe it. You're holding a grudge. And you know what? It's not against me, because of the potatoes. Or because I didn't sell the painting. Or even against Jantje. It's because of the flood. And you know who it's against?

It's against God. All you see in life is the work. Just planting, hauling, shoveling, digging. That's all life is to you. But not to me, Stijn. Not to me. There's got to be some beauty too."

The upper room was too small to contain him. He climbed out the window, taking Piet and Marta with him, still good for his word to take them on an outing, and she was left with Jantje and Katrina. Their first day outdoors together after more than a year. Ruined. Sobbing, she paced the few steps back and forth across the room, picked up a dried dung cake and hurled it out the window after the retreating boat. It didn't even reach half the distance.

A fine time Piet and Marta would have with that man today. Good riddance to him. She flung herself on the bed so hard Jantje bounced.

Stijn stayed away all day. For the first time during the flood, she was afraid. She'd had a simple faith that everything would be all right—it always was on her family's farm in Westerbork—but Oling wasn't Westerbork. And Stijn wasn't her loving father.

It wasn't that Stijn was unloving. It was just that after eight years, she still had trouble telling the difference between his love and his worry. She'd been wrong about one thing. Stijn's hope. It was there, stronger than hers, but more deeply buried in the dark soil of his soul.

Late in the afternoon she took a good long look, and put the painting in an empty grain sack and sewed it closed.

At dusk she heard the children's voices singing, and his deep voice coming in on the refrain of a silly children's song, but as the skiff drew nearer, the singing faded and eventually stopped. In a sickening silence, Stijn left off the oars and let the boat float slowly toward the house.

Through the window Marta handed her a fistful of wilted blue wildflowers. "Why thank you, *liefje*. These are called lady's smock." She looked at Stijn climbing in after the children. The name meant nothing to him. Piet told her in tumbling sentences all they had done that day, but Stijn was silent. All the anger had gone out of him and only an awkwardness remained.

"I'll go to Amsterdam. The day after tomorrow," she said. "Tomorrow I'll bake enough for you, and I'll take the children. Alda can row me to Woldijk." From there she could get a passenger towboat to Groningen, and another and another all the way to Amsterdam. The trip would take two or three days each way, depending on connections.

On the morning they were to leave, she felt Stijn's eyes as well as Katrina's following her as she packed a few things. "If you can get anything close to eighty," he said as they parted, "take five and buy yourself a different painting. Something you like."

Sitting on the uncomfortable benches on board the large passenger barge headed south from Groningen, she felt like a vagabond surrounded by all that was hers. Occasionally the

children's delight at what they saw penetrated her gloom. What was it all for? To have excitement about life, about life together, about a farm and a new kind of crop that would feed the whole world, and then to see it dissolve into only work, work, and tiny, growing separations. How does it all hold together?

Past Assen they had to wait until a lock was vacated by a larger barge, so she got off to let the children run along the dike road. A small waterway led toward the east. "Is that the Westerborker Stroom?" she asked the locksman.

"Aye, ma'am."

Her heart burned. Westerborker Stroom would take her straight through Beilen to Westerbork.

"Does it have service?"

He motioned with his head to a small flatboat waiting to leave.

Just to float home and have Mother feed her something besides potatoes—the mere thought set her in motion. She called to the children, lifted Jantje to her hip, gathered her things and said, "Children, come. We're going to see your grandparents."

They switched to the small flatboat towed by a young man, and sat on the deck leaning up against some crates. New tendrils of willow branches dipped down and floated gracefully. The tall leafy meadow rue was already bursting in fluffy yellow sunbursts, and every duckling peeped his birthsong. Along the banks, the apple trees were in blossom. A breeze blew and ivory petals rained down on

the boat and the children tried to catch them. Soon she would be in Westerbork where everything was beautiful and everyone was kind.

Beyond Beilen her heart pounded as the landscape became familiar and her peaceful childhood passed before her. On farmhouse doors she recognized the rustic scenes like she had painted on hers, the only one like it in Oling or Appingedam. Nooteboom's corn mill was painted green now, with a handsome red door. And there was the small stone church she went to as a child, where she and Stijn were married. The sight of it brought a pang of guilt, as if she'd been unfaithful in some way.

At first Mother was delirious with relief and joy, loving the children, Jantje equally with the others, not letting him out of her sight. Saskia thought she knew her mother by heart, but when she showed her the painting and told her everything, her mother's smiles turned hard.

"Seed potatoes! You know better than that."

"I know. I know. May I just stay here for a while, until he gets over it? Long enough so he'll miss me? It's so lovely here. The water violets will be out soon, and the children can run free for a change."

"And let that man worry himself sick over you? No. You leave tomorrow. For Amsterdam. The children can stay with me. Get them on your way back. This isn't a holiday. It's business. And you get down on your knees tonight and thank the Lord you have a man as hardworking as Stijn. Work is love made plain, whether man's or woman's work,

and you're a fool if you don't recognize it. The child's the blessing, Saskia, not the painting."

Alone in Amsterdam two days later, she walked along the East Quay past fishwives who shouted insults at her because she passed without buying. She drew her shoulders back. Their mockeries only amused her. While their oily hands were shaking codfish at her, in *her* hands she was carrying a Vermeer.

Spice merchants had set out on the canal edge sacks of powders every shade of yellow and orange and red and brown. Their colors blew onto her skirt and she shook them off. She wore her dainty leather boots with the laces, and she glided along the brickway toward the Rokin feeling a sense of grace and power. She was carrying a Vermeer. The day was sunny. There was no need to hurry.

She walked the Rokin all the way from the Dam to the Singel, keeping the painting in its sack and just looking in all the shops before she declared her business. Art dealers were a strange lot, she decided. Though the signs on the shops identified "Reynier de Cooge, TRADER IN PICTURES," or "Gerrit Schade, EXPERIENCED CONNOISSEUR OF ART," in truth the shops sold frames, clocks, faience, pump organs, even tulip bulbs along with paintings. She showed the painting first to Gerrit Schade, whose walls were covered with scenes of shipwrecks in stormy seas and tavern revels. She suspected he couldn't read. When she held forth the

document, he dismissed it with a wave of his hand and offered her thirty guilders.

"It's a Vermeer," she said.

"I don't particularly care for it," he said. "No action. So no drama."

She covered the painting and left.

She would have to be extremely cautious. At the next three shops, she learned to uncover the painting slowly while she watched the dealer's face. At the shop of Hans van Uylenburgh, she noticed at that moment a tiny, sudden intake of breath. He offered her fifty, and his wife raised it to fifty-five when Saskia shook her head. "MATEUS DE NEFF THE ELDER, only fine paintings and drawings," a sign read. Good. Carefully she held the painting high as she climbed the steep steps. When she uncovered the painting, de Neff made no effort to hide his excitement. "Stunning. Magnificent."

"It's a Vermeer."

"Yes. Yes, it is. A rare find indeed." He called to his associate and his wife to have a look.

She unfolded the paper and he read it carefully, but he spent more time absorbing the painting. "Look at the window glass. Smooth as liquid light. Not a brush stroke visible. Now look at the basket. Tiny grooves of brush strokes to show the texture of the reed. *That*'s Vermeer."

She tried to see what he saw but her eyes flooded, and in this last hungry look at the painting, the girl in a blue smock became a blur. She knew she would sell it to him

even before he named a price. She wanted it to go to someone who loved it. "I call it *Morningshine*," she softly said. It was important that her name for it go with the painting.

When de Neff was drawing up the document of sale, she looked at everything in his shop. Stijn had said she might buy something inexpensive in exchange. There were paintings of rich people playing lutes and virginals, others of ruined castles in the countryside, kitchen maids scouring pots, church interiors, Noah receiving direction from God, vegetable stalls in marketplaces, and windmills alongside riverbanks. She couldn't choose. Some of them were pleasant. Some were interesting. But none of them *meant* anything to her.

He counted out seventy-five guilders in five florin coins, put them in a muslin drawstring bag, and laid it gently in her hand, supporting the weight with his other hand under hers. Looking softly in her eyes, he closed her fingers over the bag and patted them.

It wasn't eighty, but it was still a victory. They would live. Stijn would have his hogs. Jantje would grow up and help Stijn in the fields, and Stijn would be proud of the work Jantje could do, but they, Saskia and Stijn, would never again be as they were.

She meandered across humped bridges, trailing her fingers lightly over iron railings, bought five tulip bulbs, one for each member of the family, and, while the color of the girl's smock was still vivid in her mind, enough skeins of fine blue Leiden wool to knit a soft woolly for each of her three children.