I left him hunched there, took another look at the painting I knew would be my last, and could not get out of there fast enough. Poor fool, ruining his life for a piece of cloth smeared with mineral paste, for a fake, I had to tell myself, a mere curiosity.

With that to do ahead of him now, how he'd face me, how I'd face him Monday morning, I didn't know.

A Night Different From All Other Nights

The day before, Hannah Vredenburg and her younger brother Tobias watched their father let his partner's pigeons go, back to their home in Antwerp. One by one, waiting between each for safety, he released them from the attic coop when the early morning was still foggy so no passing officer might see and note the house number. The decree against Amsterdam Jews keeping pigeons—their own or somebody else's—was eight months old, and Hannah knew it was getting too dangerous to disobey. Surrendering them this late at the German police station, as the decree had ordered, would result in repercussions.

"Quickly, Hannah, before Tobias comes up," her father had said, and handed her the paper and pencil in hands trembling too much to write. "Here, write this. Write small." It was the message to be placed in the tiny canister of his partner's last bird. "Kill my pigeons," he whispered, pausing between sentences. "I can't expect you to feed them for the duration. Don't endanger yourself and don't release them, but let them eat their fill first. Leo with the purple-edged wings likes lentils best. Henriette,

the blue-barred female, likes to have her head rubbed. This will be the last message until it's over, God willing. We are well. May you be safe."

That last! Even as she squeezed those last four words onto the little paper, Hannah felt a frantic fluttering against the inside of her rib cage.

"Do I sign your name?"

"No."

She folded the paper just as Tobias came up the ladder in his pajamas.

One by one Father scooped up his partner's pigeons, held them gently so Tobias could stroke them one last time, cupped his hands under their breasts and swung his arms upward to launch them into the air. She handed Father the folded message, which he slipped into the canister of the last bird. She watched him kiss the back of the bird's head, a small moment with closed eyes, and then he flung the last pigeon skyward.

She watched that last free flapping of wings as the bird rose over the peaked roofs to his home in Antwerp. Escape that was no escape. Antwerp, Amsterdam—what difference did it make?

The next day, coming home from school, she saw Henriette, Leo and their two others fly under the gable and peck around the roof trying to get into their own home coop. She felt her breath leak out and leave only blackness: The message got there too late. Her father's partner had already released her family's own pigeons. She hurried

inside, up the ladder stairs and let them in the coop. Their messages told of the German takeover of the diamond trade in Antwerp. A chill spread over her fingers and up her throat as she removed the canisters. She knew at once what must be done. It was only a matter of time. How long before Tobias would realize it too?

That night she stood on the ladder looking into the attic coop while her father, crosslegged on the coop floor, crooned to his birds, and to Tobias. "Leo. Leo. Such a bird. A bird that could carry a two-carat stone in his canister and never feel the weight. Remember that faithfulness, Toby."

She cried then, holding tight to the top rung of the ladder so she wouldn't make a sound. Father's words might tell Tobias what had to be done. He wouldn't be told to remember Leo if Leo could live. She watched Tobias search Father's face a moment. Then he went back to stroking the gray breast feathers of the pigeons, feeding them barley out of his palm. But he didn't giggle as he usually did when Leo's rose-colored toes tickled his arm. She crept back downstairs.

It was awful they couldn't just be freed. That would be fitting to do on Passover, but they'd be bewildered by freedom, she thought, frightened of the prospects of finding a speck of food in South Amsterdam. They'd only peck around the gable of the house to get back into the coop. It would make it obvious that this was the house where they belonged.

The next morning at breakfast, she asked, "Will it be today?"

"Soon." Father gently placed his big palm on the back of her head for a moment.

The whole house waited, breathless, while Passover approached, the night different from all other nights. Mother and Grandmother Hilde had been cleaning kitchen cabinets, the pantry, the oven, the icebox, and now were cleaning shelves in the sideboard and putting away the silver tea set in order to make room on the top for the Passover china. Hannah sat looking at the painting above the sideboard. It was of a girl her own age looking out a window while sewing. The way she leaned forward, intent on something, and the longing in her eyes cast a spell over her every time she looked. The girl wasn't working, at least not at that moment. Her hands were lax, the buttons on the table like flat pearls yet to be sewn on, because what was going on in her mind was more important. Hannah understood that.

It was on an excursion with Father, just the two of them, a couple years earlier that he bought the painting—1940, just before her eleventh birthday. He'd been going to meetings of the Comite voor Joodsche Vluchtelingen, Jewish refugees from Germany, in the Rotterdam Cafe next to the Diamond Exchange and had taken her to an auction where families had donated paintings, vases, jewelry and Oriental rugs to be bid on by other families as a means to raise money for refugee support. It was essential, he'd said, that the

government not bear the expense of the Jewish poor. When this painting came up for bid, she gasped. The face of the girl in the painting almost glowed, her blue eyes, cheeks, the corners of her mouth all bright and glossy, the light coming right at her across the space between them. She seemed more real than the people in the room.

When Father cast a bid, Hannah sucked in her breath, astonished. He bid again. He grasped her hand when the bidding got above two hundred guilders; she squeezed his back when it passed three hundred. The higher the bids, the tighter she squeezed until, when he cast the bid that bought it, she cried, "Papa!" and didn't let go of his hand all the way home. Father buying it seemed to honor her in a way that made her feel worthy.

The moment they walked in with the painting, while it was still wrapped, Mother straightened up and looked from her to Father as if she could tell something significant had happened. Hannah remembered feeling light-headed as she walked through the rooms choosing a place, until she settled on the dining room above the sideboard. She unwrapped it and held it up. "See Mamela, how lovely?" Sitting bolt upright across from it at the dining table, just where she was sitting now, she was the last to go to bed that night.

Tobias came in through the front vestibule. "Hannah, isn't this interesting?" He had in his hand a new spring leaf. "On this edge there are twenty-four spikes but only twenty-two on this," he said. "Why?"

At nine years old, Tobias was full of questions. He loved spider webs and the sound of crickets, kept moth and beetle collections, a small green turtle, a rabbit named Elijah, a notebook where he drew his observations from nature. In his mind, the four years between them made her ultimately knowledgeable, but she never knew what to say. She couldn't answer his passion with hers. "I don't know, Toby. Some things are different, I suppose."

Just then Mother asked him to clean the coop of *hametz*, which meant all barley, peas, lentils, any grain that would leaven when moist. Ridding the house of leavening was an act of remembrance, for Passover. Mother gave him only a couple of dried potato peelings as alternate food for the birds since she used those in soup nowadays.

In the momentary silence, hearing only the coos of the pigeons echoing down the open air vent and her mother's damp cloth whooshing across a shelf, Hannah watched bewilderment descend on Toby's face. He stared at the peelings in his hand, then looked up at her.

"What are they going to eat tomorrow?" he asked.

It was another question she couldn't answer.

His eyes darkened, his smooth forehead furrowed, and for a moment she imagined him, impossibly, as an old man. He knows it's only a token, she thought. If he didn't want to see them suffer, it would have to be done quickly. She saw confusion weight his shoulders and slick over his eyes. She reached out to put her arm around him. He drew away. Sobbing, he flung himself down the hallway and

clambered up the ladder to the attic coop. She felt some nameless thing clutch at her heart.

As soon as he left, Hilde said to Mother, "It's terrible to make a child cry so." Whenever someone left the room, Hilde always had something to say about the person. Hilde drummed her fingernails on the sideboard for emphasis. "Let Hannah clean the coop."

"He loves those birds, Hilde. Let him be with them. Let him grieve. This year he'll understand the Passover story."

Mother fairly attacked the sideboard shelves. In fact, she seemed to scrub everything more ferociously this year. Unbelievable that somehow she continued to clean.

Sputtering, Hilde swung around at Hannah. "Why don't you help your mother?"

Hannah shrugged and dangled a crumple of paper on a string in front of Toby's cat. The boiling of the silverware, the cleaning of the kitchen, the cooking, none of it interested her now.

"That's not an answer."

"I don't want to."

"Want to, she says. What's to want? You just do."

"Everybody does a little, Hannah," her mother said. "Won't you help boil the utensils?"

"Everybody works," Hilde said. "That's what life is. Work and a little play and a lot of prayer. Your great-grandmother Etty worked on the drivewheel you know. Walked the crank in a circle for thirty years until she wore

a groove in the floor to power her husband's polishing scaife. She worked without a complaint until 1867 when she was—"

"Replaced by a horse. I know. You told me the last time you came."

"Well? Helping your mother is nothing compared to that. You want to be married, don't you? You've got to learn how to do these things. Or do you want to end up an old maid working in a sweatshop? Edith tells me you don't do your lessons either. That you don't like school. Unthinkable. You want to go back to the crank?"

Hannah shrugged again. It might not be so bad. If nobody pestered her.

"What do you think we've worked hard all these years for, so you can become a cigar maker? A peddler? That's what happens, you know, to Jews who don't work hard."

Hannah looked at Hilde's gray wool bedroom scuffs aimed at her like two tail-less rats.

"First generation your father is, to be a diamond merchant and not a polisher. That doesn't mean something to you?"

Out of the corner of her eye Hannah saw her mother cringe. "Will you at least go to the grocer for the parsley and the egg?" Mother asked. "Sal Meyer is saving a shank bone for me. It's a lovely day out. The lime trees along Scheldestraat must have new spring leaves by now. Brush your hair and go."

Without a word Hannah put on her unraveling maroon

sweater with the stiff new star, but she moved so slowly after Mother gave her the money that Hilde raised up in righteous outrage, her glare passing from Hannah to Mother and back again. For a second, she dared glare back before she stepped into the vestibule and left the door open a crack to listen.

Hilde waited only a few seconds. "That girl! She never works. She never talks. Can't you get her to talk?"

"How to make her talk. Tell me. I'm sure you know."

"She has no interests. No friends. Last night I asked what she'd been doing this winter and she said 'nothing.' Does she even think?"

"Hilde, don't be cruel. We may never know what she's thinking, but surely she does."

"You should get her to participate."

"You think because I am her mother I can remake her? You're her grandmother. You have a try. She is what she is."

"Lazy and apathetic."

"I suppose when you were her age you never felt like you just wanted to sit and think? You think I don't already ask myself before sleep mercifully takes me what I did or didn't do that made her this way? What I failed to say to her at one unknown, privately crucial day? Tell me, Hilde, how haven't I loved enough? Tell me."

Hannah couldn't breathe. She peeled paint off the woodwork around the inner door.

"All I know, Edith, is that you've got to do something

or she won't have the strength. Why do you let her be so sullen?"

"Let her? You think I don't worry, every single night, that she doesn't want anything enough? You think I don't know what that means now?"

Hannah turned to go and closed the outer door loud enough for them to hear. She didn't care.

It wasn't true. She did want things. That is, she wanted to want things, even to love things, as much as Toby loved every living thing. Only she couldn't say what. It was too impossible now. Wanting anything seemed crazy.

And she did have a friend. Marie.

Marie passed notes to her in school all last year. The last note was that Marie could not go walking with her after school that day because she had to tend her baby brother, but the day after they didn't either, or ever did again. Now they were in different schools, and once when she saw Marie on a street outside the River Quarter, Marie pretended she didn't recognize her. Now Hannah never left the River Quarter just so she wouldn't see her and have to repeat the moment. She did too care about some things.

At least Mother stood up for her. A little. Except when she said that about what made her this way. As if something wasn't right with her. What was missing?

She let out a long, deep sigh. She needed to blow her nose but had no handkerchief with her so she just sniffed and wiped with her hand.

The lime trees did have new leaves that were just

unfurling. What for? she thought. She kicked a pebble on the sidewalk, and then saw two German officers coming the opposite way. For a moment the whole world stopped except the pebble that clattered on toward one tall black boot. Her heart turned to ice. A wetness moistened her underpants. Talking loudly, the men didn't seem to notice the pebble, or even her. They made no move to accommodate her on the narrow sidewalk. At the last second she stepped off the curb to let them pass, and twisted her ankle.

Things were happening. Bigger than preparations for Passover. Beyond the candle glow there were things. There were things. Nothing was the same. Hilde acted as if it was Great-grandmother Etty's time.

But Father didn't. He knew. Maybe that was why he was softer with her. She knew she exasperated him when she didn't do her lessons, but by Sabbath afternoon, he had forgotten. He took long walks with her, leaving Toby and his talkativeness at home, along the canals of the River Quarter, buying her a pickle from the wooden vat at the corner of Vrijheidslaan and Vechtstraat, or to Koco's ice-cream parlor. Or he'd take her to Sunday concerts at Plantage Middelaan, or to the Rijksmuseum. And, that one wonderful day, to the auction. Walking along, he would ask her about her schoolmates, her lessons, to try to get her to talk. She tried to tell him about Marie once, but she couldn't speak the words. He always seemed so tired afterward, letting his shoes fall to the floor in the bedroom,

saying, she heard once, "Maybe a little progress, Edith."

Now it became clear to her what made her love the girl in the painting. It was her quietness. A painting, after all, can't speak. Yet she felt this girl, sitting inside a room but looking out, was probably quiet by nature, like she was. But that didn't mean that the girl didn't want anything, like Mother said about her. Her face told her she probably wanted something so deep or so remote that she never dared breathe it but was thinking about it there by the window. And not only wanted. She was capable of doing some great wild loving thing. Yes, oh yes.

Hannah lingered doing the errands, not wanting to go right home. In the grocers' shops there were queues all the way out to the streets even though less was displayed than last week. After four shops, she stepped out into the boulevard again.

Then she saw them.

Another family of yellow stars carrying suitcases was being herded down the middle of Scheldestraat.

To Westerbork. That place.

Why them? she wondered.

As they passed, for the flash of a second a little boy looked at her with frightened eyes. She dipped her head and walked on. A pain shot through her chest. Ignoring it seemed the same kind of betrayal as Marie's. She turned onto Rijnstraat and hurried home so fast she had a side ache.

She accidentally let the door slam when she came in.

"No parsley, so I got celery, but no egg anywhere."

"No egg? Did you go to Ivansteen's?" Mother asked.

"And to three places on Scheldestraat."

"What'll we do? And those poor homeless refugees coming and not even a full Seder plate."

"It won't matter. In a matter of time, it won't matter at all."

"Hannah! Never say that. Don't let me ever hear you say that."

"What happened?" Hilde took the shank bone from her hands to examine it. "What happened out there on the street?"

Hannah slapped the celery onto the sink counter and turned to leave. "Nothing, Oma."

Hilde followed her. "What did you see out there?"

"Nothing. Just children jumping off porches holding open umbrellas. Playing parachutes. They do it whenever they hear planes. Haven't you noticed?"

She watched Hilde and Mother look at each other in puzzlement. No, of course they hadn't.

That evening with the house darkened, after her parents hid ten pieces of *hametz* around the house, Tobias did the ritual final search for *hametz* by candlelight. Using a feather, he brushed the crumbs into a wooden spoon with a seriousness Hannah couldn't remember from past years when it was more of a game.

"Where'd you get the feather, Toby?" Hannah asked.

"It's Leo's." He held it up and twirled it. "Look how

it's purple on the edge. And wider on one side than the other. It came out in my hand as I was holding him. I didn't mean to."

No. He could never do the birds harm.

Father put the crumbs, the feather and the spoon into a paper bag to be burned the next morning. After Toby went to bed, when she thought he'd be asleep, she drew back the curtain that divided their bedroom and looked at him awhile. The boy in the street had the same curly hair as Toby. Bending to pull the blanket over him, she breathed the musty, innocent smell of rabbit and crayon and pigeon.

Before breakfast the whole family gathered on the porch, and Father struck a match and touched it to the edge of the bag.

"Two places, Sol," Hilde said. "To give it a good burning."

Hannah watched the black edge creep sideways across the bag, like the front line of an army, she thought, bringing a small wall of orange flame behind it until it touched the other black edge advancing to meet it. The Red Sea closing in instead of parting. Eventually the wooden spoon was a burnt bone of dying cinder on the bricks of the porch. Hannah stamped it out.

In the afternoon Father went walking with Toby, Hannah didn't know where, but she knew they'd end up at the Rotterdam Cafe in order to bring home for Seder dinner two of the refugee families who were living upstairs.

Except for the slow rhythmic crunch-crunch of Mother chopping nuts for the *charoseth,* and the coos of the pigeons echoing down the open air vent, the house was quiet. With everything nearly ready for the holiday at sundown, it seemed to Hannah that the rooms breathed expectation, as before a death, or a birth. She thought about that for a while, feeling it settle as she sat sideways in her father's chair at the dining table, fingering idly the scalloped edge of the white tablecloth.

Hilde wedged two candles in the silver candlesticks, arranged the Delftware basin and pitcher on the sideboard for washing the hands, dug a dust rag one last time into the sideboard carving and flicked it along the lower edge of the picture frame.

"You know what she's looking at out the window, don't you?" Hilde said. "Her future husband."

Naturally she'd think that, Hannah said to herself.

"What do you think?" Mother asked from the kitchen doorway.

"Pigeons. Just pigeons," Hannah said.

"Pigeons? What do you mean by that?" Hilde said.

"I mean it doesn't matter what she's looking at. Or what she's doing, or not doing." She looked Hilde dead in the eye. "It only matters that she's thinking."

"Is that why you like her?" Mother asked in surprise.

"And because I know her."

Hannah stood up, went down the hallway and up the attic ladder. Leo was closest, dozing. She grabbed him first,

and in a frenzied flapping of wings, twisted his neck until its tightness released under her fingers. Squawks of the others rang in her ears. She lunged to catch Henriette and skinned her knee. Two, three, four, each time that same soft popping underneath the feathers.

She came down the hallway staring straight ahead. Her hands trembled so much Mother noticed. Hannah looked down too and saw a wisp of feather underneath the nail of her forefinger, the smallest bit of gray breast down. She flicked it away. Mother and Hilde gaped at her, apparently unable to move. Hilde's lips pinched into a purple wound.

"Go wash your hands," Mother murmured.

Hannah turned, caught her foot on the hall runner, and lunged into the bathroom. She heard her mother's voice. "This is one time, in your son's home, you will say nothing, Hilde. Nothing." Hannah turned on the water. She didn't want to hear what would come next. She washed up to her elbows, and her skinned knee. After a while she slipped into her room and lay on her bed. When she heard through the air vent Mother sweeping the coop, she felt a trickle of moisture creep toward her temple. She waited for the chop-chop of the *charoseth*. Then she changed her dress and gave her hair a good brushing.

When Father and Toby came in, she couldn't look directly at them. The two German families were awkward, not knowing where to put themselves. A boy younger than Toby stood wordless and clinging to his father. Mother had Toby introduce each guest to Hilde, had him

pass out the Haggadahs, had him bring the white *kittel* to his father to put on. She had him arrange on the Seder plate the celery, the shank bone, the *charoseth*, a withered root of horseradish and a small peeled potato carved narrower at one end to look like an egg, and then she asked him to watch on the porch for sunset in the western sky. All this, Hannah knew, so he wouldn't think to take the little German boy upstairs to show him the birds.

Mother rummaged in the sideboard and brought out the old Delftware candlesticks. "Here," she said to Hannah. "These were your great-grandmother Etty's, but tonight and forever, they'll be yours. Wash them and put them on the table."

And Hannah did.

"Sunset's coming," Toby announced from the porch. "The sky's all goldy."

Her mother struck a match and held it to an old candle stub until a flame rose, touched it to the two tapers in the silver candlesticks and handed it to Hannah. She did the same with hers. Watching her candlelight illuminate the girl in the painting, she knew why this night was different from all other nights. Real living had begun.