Adagia

a "saying"
epigram, motto

Walking with his wife Digna along the narrow canal, Laurens van Luyken kept a discreet distance behind the young lovers, as if to give them privacy, but he watched their every move. Just beyond his neighbor's oxcart, he saw his daughter lean, unnecessarily, on the young man's arm.

The autumn air blew crisply and Digna drew close her cape. Laurens usually found wind invigorating, but this afternoon it made him feel as though a wall of gray sea were thundering toward him against which he had to brace himself. The breeze was crisp, the fallen leaves were crisp, everything was crisp. Johanna's voice was crisp earlier that day when she told him, "Papa, Fritz asked me to marry him, and I told him yes." Just like that. No prelude. No delicacy. Not even a nod to tradition. As if fathers needn't even be asked anymore to give up their daughters to someone else's love. Was this the way Amsterdammers did things? A herald of how life would be in the new century?

"We should give them a fine gift," Digna said, taking Laurens's arm just like Johanna had done with Fritz.

"Something of ours she's always loved and will always keep."

"Does that mean you're agreeing to this?"

"He's a good fellow. And handsome." He caught her playful smile. "Erasmus says if you must be hanged let it be on a fair gallows."

"Gallows weren't intended for the young and innocent."

Up ahead their dog, Dirk, trotted right in Johanna's way so that she almost stumbled, and then Fritz said something that made her laugh. Laurens watched her press herself against this man and kiss him lightly on his ear. Dirk barked what Laurens knew was an admonition. Laurens found a perverse pleasure in noting that Dirk did not take too keenly to the attentions Johanna was paying to this odd-smelling interloper in leather shoes instead of good, solid *klompen,* clearly not a resident of Vreeland. He was amused when Dirk, trembling with suspicion, had growled something obviously insulting at Fritz when he arrived by coach at noon.

"Look at her, Laurens. Radiant."

Instead, he glanced sideways at his wife. The happiness had traveled: His daughter's wild, dewy bliss had freshened every pore in Digna's familiar face.

"What could we give them?" she asked, a pleasant urgency in her voice.

"A broom and a butter churn?"

"We could give them the *Digna Louise.*"

"No. Fritz has an old smack boat. He told me he took it out last week to the Zuider Zee and nearly froze. No one in his right mind, outside fishermen, would go sailing there after September."

Their neighbors' skiffs were lined up stem to stern where the canal joined Loosdrechtse Plassen. Laurens remembered how as a young girl Johanna called them wishbone boats, for the graceful shape of their prows. He wondered if she told Fritz that just now as they passed the skiffs along the bank.

Johanna and Fritz turned at Ruyter's mustard mill to walk the lakeshore wagon road, and looked back for Laurens and Digna to follow. Something of their expectancy, the feeling that they were sailing forth into an adventure in an untried craft, awakened in Laurens a vaguely competitive warmth, and he slipped his arm around his wife's supple waist. "You cold?" he asked, half hoping that she was.

"I could give her my mother's opal ring, but that's not very much. And it should be something from both of us. For both of them."

To Laurens, everything about the couple ahead bore the conspicuous marks of euphoria. Too soon blooming, he thought, too soon coming in to seed. They had not suffered long winter evenings of soulful contemplation, but were careening ahead as if it were already tulip time.

So now she would go. She would leave Vreeland where she knew every pathway, every plank of every bridge, every

family's horse and wagon, where he'd taught her to skate right here on Loosdrechtse Plassen, where he'd watched her play every summer under the willows at their canal edge, happily pouring buckets of canal water into a cracked and chipped Delftware tea set that had been his mother's. She would leave the town of her birth and ancestry, and go to Amsterdam, nearly half a day's carriage ride over the dike roads.

Laurens was amused that Dirk made such a show of his distrust of this wolf in sheep's clothing, this mountebank with the queer smell, by plunging his way between Fritz and Johanna's legs, but Laurens did not gloat. Something moved him about the way they paid homage to each other with their eyes, Johanna shining with the intoxication of the unknown, and he wanted them to have a moment's peace. Only a thrown stick, well aimed along the narrow bank, would tear Dirk away from his self-appointed office of protecting Johanna. Laurens called to Dirk, threw the stick and missed the grassy bank. Dirk bounded into the lake to chase the splash, and Digna laughed, making it all worthwhile.

She squeezed his arm. "I know! The painting. *Girl With a Sewing Basket.*" Her bright expectant eyes and open-mouthed smile shot through him. "She's always loved it."

"No."

Dirk brought him the stick but he did not take it.

Digna turned to him, a look of bafflement on her sweet ivory face. He watched a breeze blow strands of her

chestnut hair out from her chignon, waving like sea grass in a current. She pulled him along, laughing through her words. "What makes you so ungenerous? She's our only daughter."

"I'm sure we can think of something else."

"Why not the painting?"

"Because I gave it to you."

"But it would be a touch of our home in theirs."

"No, Digna."

"Why not?" She put her hand in his, urging his agreement.

"I wouldn't want to be without it."

"I never knew you were that attached to it. It isn't worth much, though I do like the way it mimics a Vermeer."

He grabbed on to that. "More like a de Hooch. The dealer said de Hooch painted floor tiles the same way."

She smiled a teasing reprimand, a smile recognizing the transparency of his diversion. He felt foolish and exposed. She knew him too well. No doubt she had some adage from Erasmus to warn about people who try lamely to change the subject. Digna rendered favorite epigrams from Erasmus's *Adagia* as embroidery samplers, sometimes keeping the Latin if she liked the way it sounded, like "*Tempus omnia revelat.*" So earnest there by the fireside, over the years she stitched onto stretched cloth as if onto her heart Erasmus's religion of rational thought: Trying got the Greeks to Troy. An ill crow lays an ill egg. No one is injured save by himself.

"Why don't you give them an embroidery adage?"

Her smile turned to scornful laughter. "Why don't you want to give them the painting?"

He looked ahead toward the osier beds along the lakeshore. In the veiled atmosphere of a light fog blowing in, the osier heads bending and rustling seemed to him like ghosts beckoning.

"It . . . I bought it to commemorate a period in my life, and for that reason I can't let it go."

"I thought you bought it for me? Our anniversary. Remember?"

She pulled away and wrapped herself in her cape. A slight tremor passed through him.

"I did. I—" He was losing her now, but held onto the belief that they'd always trusted each other with truth. "It reminded me of someone I knew once."

Digna stopped.

"The way the girl is looking out the window," he said. "Waiting for someone. And her hand. Upturned, and so delicate. Inviting a kiss."

Digna turned. "Let's go back."

He looked ahead at his daughter and her man. "What about them?"

"They'll come."

When they headed back toward the house, Dirk ran before them, bounded back, and sprang forward again, knowing that at home he would be fed. Laurens felt a mild annoyance at his wild, glad movements.

Digna did not question him anymore, but slowed her pace, waiting. He looked out to the pewter-colored lake, agitated into peaked claws by gusts of wind, where he had courted danger many times, skating before the ice was ready.

"Her name was Tanneke. It was when I was working at the Haarlemmermeer pumping plant back in '74." He knew he should give this to her right then, to set the time, so long ago, years before he met Digna. "She lived in Zandvoort. I met her at The Strand, at the *poffertjes* stand. I elbowed my way ahead of her and bought a bagful, spun around and popped one in her mouth." He chuckled softly. "Powdered sugar stuck on her nose."

He longed to steal a glance at his wife, to see if she could imagine the scene to be as sweet and innocent as he remembered it.

The flow of memory as they walked kept him thinking out loud. "We used to go out walking. Along the dunes and in the heather. In the woods too. She loved Haarlemmer Hout, knew its paths as well as Johanna knows the lanes of Vreeland. I kissed her palm once, in those woods, under a fir tree where we'd gone for shelter from a rain."

"Were you in love with her?"

He'd said too much. He was sorry he'd mentioned anything.

"With her I was . . . I was like Fritz." He turned from her so she would not see on his face the happiness he had with Tanneke so long ago.

A gust of memory shivered him. "I was foolish. I didn't keep a rendezvous with her, so that I would appear independent, I suppose. To make her long for me, when it was really I who longed for her. When I went to see her some time later, she had left Zandvoort, and had told her parents not to tell me where she'd gone." A pang at his own stupidity, his passivity or lethargy, shot through him with surprising sharpness, which he hoped his voice had not revealed.

Staring ahead, he felt rather than saw Digna move away.

And now, stupid again, to hurt his wife. They went the rest of the way in silence, and he felt her trying to imagine her way into his past.

They passed the train of skiffs, and the wishbone shapes, inverted now, were to him only his neighbors' old rowboats. They passed their neighbor's vegetable garden, and he had to call Dirk back from trampling through the rows of purple cabbages sitting in enviable order. They passed the windmill of Vreeland, turning faithfully, grinding water out of the soil to keep their tiny island of the universe afloat forever. And they passed a place in their lives, he thought, where all these things—skiffs, gardens, dry land, love—could be maintained without conscious effort.

Dirk ran in wide circles around them, leaping, splashing through seeping puddles. When they got back to the house, his paws would be muddy and would have to be cleaned. Digna usually saw to that. Today he'd do it.

It was strange: When you reduced even a fledgling love

affair to its essentials—I loved her, she maybe loved me, I was foolish, I suffered—it became vacuous and trite, meaningless to anyone else. In the end, it's only the moments that we have, the kiss on the palm, the joint wonder at the furrowed texture of a fir trunk or at the infinitude of grains of sand in a dune. Only the moments.

He wanted to remind Digna of some moment from their life together equally tender as the kiss in the woods, equally important. There'd been many, as when they skated far out on Loosdrechtse Plassen, so that voices of the other skaters were only rustlings of thrushes and they were swirling alone in a white, pure universe, and he had told her he had now known her half his life, twenty-two years, his breath heralding that miracle with clouds of fog, and he had kissed her there on the ice, twenty-two times, in gratitude. He longed to have her think of this, but how she walked, so erect and self-contained, staunched his throat.

As they approached the house he saw that before they'd left she had lit an oil lamp in the parlor for their return. The warm yellow light through the window beckoned them to a cozy house. She always thought of things like that. If he mentioned it now, or the skating memory, it would seem propitiatory.

In the house they stayed out of each other's way while knowing precisely each other's every move. The air between them felt charged.

He wanted her to come to him so he could stroke the smooth skin of her temple, a favorite part of her, right

there by her hairline, hold her by the shoulders first, then draw her close to him, and say he was wholly hers and ever would be all his life.

But she busied herself with setting out the supper, a sure sign that she was not ready for affection, and so he did not do what he longed for most. Letting the moment go felt vaguely, uncomfortably familiar.

Then Johanna and Fritz came in talking of his work in Amsterdam, and he lost his chance.

"When you come to visit us, Papa, we'll go sailing," Johanna said, placating.

To them, life seemed exquisitely simple, clear as polished crystal. Oh, for them to know. Some day they'd know. It's only after years that one even notices the excruciating complexities.

With only enough words to keep up civility, Digna served the *hutspot*, and spent the supper hour flicking off crumbs from the tablecloth.

Laurens knew Johanna thought her mother's sudden change of mood had something to do with her, or Fritz. When Digna stepped into the kitchen to fetch the pudding, Laurens tried to assure Johanna, wordlessly, walking his fingers across the tablecloth to cover her hand like he used to do when she was a child, to make her laugh, or when he wanted to reach Digna if she had drifted from him.

He saw that Johanna's windburned cheeks gave off the rosy glow of a perfectly ripe peach. Notice. Pay attention. Notice this and never forget it, he wanted to say. He

looked at Fritz who was only watching their hands, and the young man's confusion as to what was appropriate for him to think at this moment passed across his face. Laurens straightened himself in his chair and smiled the smile of one who is fully, intensely conscious, smiled broadly as if to say he would not surrender this fatherly right of his hand on hers. No, not just yet. Or ever.

Fingering his hat brim, Fritz left early and Johanna, breathless, turned from the closed door and said, "Aren't you happy for me, Papa?"

Studying the beauty of her cheek so that he would remember it in twenty years, he motioned her toward him.

"Isn't love absolutely the most stupendous thing? I mean, I know you and Mama love each other, but I wasn't prepared."

"Prepared?" The word alarmed him. He knew Digna had not brought herself to discuss those womanly things.

"For the power."

Fearing a tremble in his voice, he did the only thing he could do: He kissed her lightly on the temple before she went upstairs.

Digna took up her embroidery. The cuckoo clock filled the silence. He watched Dirk scavenge what he could of dignity in the face of his mistress's distraction by settling at her feet and letting out a satisfied sigh. For a moment he envied Dirk's easy intimacy.

He didn't know what to say, what to offer her. He tried to conjure what she must have looked like when she was

Tanneke's age. Hair the color of maple leaves in autumn was all he could imagine.

"What adage are you working on now?" he asked, to break the silence.

She held out the embroidery hoop for him to see. She'd just begun the stitching of a bridge across a narrow canal and a willow tree. The words underneath were done in cross-stitch. "*Ne malorum memineris,*" she said.

"What's that mean?"

Solemnly, in full control of the moment, she looked down at the hoop and took two more stitches, making him wait—the thread so long and slow, and that tiny "pook" sound as her needle punctured the stretched fabric. "Remember no wrongs."

It was something for which he had no reply.

He took his clay pipe outside and walked to the canal edge. The wind had died but he felt the dampness of fog and heard the sedge warblers settling in families for the night.

He remembered the satiny feel of Tanneke's hand in his, the weight of it, relaxed, turned upward, and how he felt so gallant when, stiff-backed and formal, new at love, he bent to kiss it, her little finger extended, curved just as in the painting, so inexpressibly delicate, thin as a wishbone, and simultaneously, the tiny, thrilling intake of her breath.

Like so many times at the pumping house, and much later when he looked at the painting, he indulged in

imagining Tanneke and her braid of honey-colored hair, heavy in his hand when he unbraided it, and his life with her, what it might have been.

After that last walk in the woods of Haarlemmer Hout, he'd brought Tanneke home—her house had a stork's nest high on a pole, he remembered—and stayed outside until he saw her silhouette through the curtain carrying her candle to her upstairs bedroom, walking close to the window so he would see her, filmy and ethereal, how, slowly, deliberately, she lifted her dress over her head, and then her shift, and then, teasing him, she blew out the flame. He'd sat in the lane and thought of every part of that room he'd never seen, and now again he made up the details—the small porcelain stove in the corner with its slate hearth where she played as a child, her drawings pinned to the pale blue walls, the tall oval mirror where she appraised her womanliness, her hornbacked hairbrush, her washbowl and pitcher, Delftware probably, like his mother's, the bed with four turned mahogany posts, and the counterpane, peach and mint green perhaps, her grandmother's. And Tanneke naked underneath it. As he thought of these unseen things now, again, he felt that old warm coursing through his veins.

He couldn't honestly promise himself that that would never happen again.

His shame for it made him objective: Was it Tanneke herself that kept this memory alive all these years, or was it merely the euphoria of first love that he'd wished to

preserve? The fact of the question occurring to him at all told him his answer. If Digna could only know, but more explanation would only keep her pain alive.

He'd wait a bit longer to give her time.

What had been so important that he let Tanneke wait and wait at the tram station? He couldn't imagine it to be work at the pumping house that had detained him. It was his need to seem important. But what he'd done that night instead, probably only something with his fellows, he could not remember. He paced along the canal edge to fill the vacancy of memory. Still he could not remember.

He had tried several times to find her, but he knew no friends of hers to ask. To lose someone in a country so small seemed ridiculous, although if he were really honest with himself, there had been a lassitude in his looking. For a while he was content with her phantom being, and then later, when something between curiosity and longing stirred him, he felt foolish to intrude on a life already half lived.

Now he knew, as he'd known a hundred nights when he looked at the smoothly painted upturned hand before he took the lamp upstairs, that there was nothing so vital as paying attention, and perfecting the humble offices of love. And that he'd tried to do with Digna. Maybe in some small way that made less reprehensible his nightly complicity with the painting.

He breathed long and deeply, to expel the past and find his bearings in the present. With Johanna already old enough for love, all this imagining of the past seemed to be

a squandering of the present. A flood of now washed over him, like water breaking through a dike, and he welcomed it. The shared pleasure of a good *hutspot* with sweet carrots and spring potatoes and big chunks of beef when coming in from a windy walk together. The winsome lilt of Digna humming in the garden. Her knowing, almost teasing look, not quite a smile, when she knew she had the upper hand about something, and his willing acquiescence. Her coaxing in the dark next to him—What was your favorite part of the day?—to which he'd always say, because he always thought it—now, touching you. He'd feel the lump of truth form in his throat, the swell of love in his loins. And afterward, the peace of her rhythmic breathing, steady as a Frisian clock, her simple, uncomposed lullaby. Those are things he would, in some final, stretched-out moment, relive. How love builds itself unconsciously, he thought, out of the momentous ordinary.

He finished his pipe, giving her time. Digna would think it through, he knew. It might take her a while, but she would eventually realize that it was imagination, not memory, that was her enemy, if she indeed had any enemy in this.

Digna blinked several times when he came in. She had on her good lavender dressing gown, which she seldom wore, and she was brushing her hair let down over her shoulders. "I took the advice of the painting," she said with a kind of urgent pride.

"What's that?"

"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