Still Life

In the stately brick townhouse of Pieter Claesz van Ruijven on the Oude Delft Canal, Johannes was welcomed into the same wood-paneled anteroom where he'd come to offer his paintings, one by one, over the past ten years.

"He is occupied at present," the young servant said. "What shall I tell him is the nature of your business?"

"I was hoping to see the paintings."

A quick, two-note giggle escaped her. "You? You haven't seen them enough already?" She ushered him into the great hall. "I'll tell him you're here."

Left alone. Exactly what he'd hoped for. His paintings warming the room from all sides.

View of Delft, large and alone and radiant on the far wall. Morning's breathless stillness before the city wakes from within. Light the only actor, streaming down lovingly onto the far tower of Nieuwe Kerk and the orange roofs in the city's distance. And in the foreground the town wall, Schiedam and Rotterdam Gates and even the herring boats, all still, darker, under a cloud, not yet waking. In

such momentary quietness, would anyone else ever feel the grace of God? To see the painting from this distance, he could take it all in at once. Walking toward it as if approaching the city thrilled him. He'd never experienced that sensation in the small upper room across the river he had rented to paint the view.

Oh, for that room again. For its gift of silence. Now he painted in the main room of his family's cramped lodgings right on the market square. Eleven children were always running underfoot, their *klompen* clattering on the tile floor. The boys screaming their imaginary battles. The girls bickering over chores. Little Geertruida's tortured coughing. The baby crying. His mother's boisterous tavern just next door, and Willem, his besotted brother-in-law, shouting wild claims through the passageway.

He craved quietness. Any abrupt noise could make him take a stroke at the wrong angle; then light wouldn't fall correctly on the grooves left by the brush hairs; he'd have to stroke over it again. With that extra layer of paint, the mistake would be raised from its surroundings by the width of a silk thread. That he could not disguise. Every time he looked, there it would be, screaming at him. Failures like that would paralyze him if he saw any today.

Instead, he scanned the painting for places of splendid exactitude, marks of authority of his brush. Here, up close, there was comfort in the glazed smoothness of the blue slate roof of the Rotterdam Gate, and rightness in the sanded texture of his impasto on the foreground roof tiles.

Yes. But were these only accidental successes?

Something in the great hall felt different. He looked around. Ah! Pieter had moved *Little Street* adjacent to *View of Delft*. He liked that proximity, the dear, quiet commonness of *Little Street* next to the grandness of the whole city. He felt as a quickening in his blood the absolute, startling necessity of the Venetian red shutter on that little street, and the intimacy of the figures quietly going about their lives. A girl knelt at the curb, her back to the viewer so that her raw umber skirt ballooned out behind her like an enormous, airy pumpkin. It pleased him all over again. He'd seen his own girls sit just like that, utterly and happily engrossed.

But did the world need another painting of people quietly going about their lives? Could another painting make up for the scarcity of meat on his family's table?

Behind him boot heels clicked against the marble floor. He turned and asked, "How goes it with you, Pieter?"

"Fine. Fine."

"The brewery?"

"Excellent well. Rising as surely as the head on a good ale." Pieter offered him a glass of wine from a bulb-shaped white decanter. Jan held up his hand to decline. "So you have begun another painting and have come to entice me with the hearing of it?"

"No new painting just yet. I'm trying to decide."

"Just pick one of those daughters of yours or Catharina again, set her down, and paint. Your brush will do it."

In a loud puff of breath Jan vented his amusement at Pieter's simplicity.

"I know you think it's got to embody some truth," Pieter said in an exaggerated, plodding rhythm, smiling.

"Or if not, then at least give compensation for reality."

For a painting to say something he held to be true, it took rumination, sometimes months of apparent inactivity. He could not will himself to discover truths. But he could give himself over to a painting or a subject with devotion and ardor, like the girl was doing nosing down onto that curb, committing body and soul to her endeavor. Yet now he felt hesitant before any subject that suggested itself, flogging himself with the sin of selfishness if he were to continue.

"A man has time for only a certain number of paintings in his lifetime," Jan said. "He'd better choose them prudently."

"You will. I know that. You like to make me wait."

Jan chuckled gravely, knowing he was being teased. He felt himself wrestling with the imminent maw of nonpainting he was not sure would still be life. Whenever he approached the completion of a painting he could sense a shameful dread of resuming contact with the realities of hearth and family. His family receded into vagueness while he was deeply at work on a painting, but between paintings, it advanced into sharp responsibility.

"I've been given the opportunity to enter the caffa cloth business with a cousin," Jan said. "I know something

about it. My father was a caffa weaver."

Pieter lit his arched porcelain pipe. Through the smoke his expression became solemn. "You have another obligation, you know."

Yes, he knew. The two hundred guilders Pieter had advanced him against the sale of his next two paintings, whether to Pieter or to anyone else. Yet now he needed two hundred more. "I know, I know. I'm looking for a subject."

"I don't mean the debt. I mean a deeper obligation. The obligation of talent."

Yes, speak of that, he said to himself. Convince me. He regarded the glowing yellow-ochre light streaming over the hands of *Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window.* "Why does the world need another painting of a woman alone in a room? Or a hundred more paintings?"

It was a risk to say that. Maybe he'd made a mistake, but he was desperate for Pieter to give him an answer to counter his self-doubt, that shadow companion that lay each night between Catharina and him in the darkness, scraping raw his need to be in the security and joy of the next painting.

"The world doesn't know all that it needs yet," Pieter said, "but there will come a time when another of your paintings of a woman by a window will provide something."

"But the cost . . ." And he didn't mean the price he would set. The cost was to his household. The cost was to

Catharina who never had him fully to herself. Any anticipated private moment with him was invaded by his intimacy with a painting. The cost was to his little Geertruida, who, through lack of a winter's cloak or a proper fire, suffered a lingering sickness. Every painting, every month he did not work at selling cloth cost his family something.

"So if not to tell me of a new painting, then what, Master Jan?"

"I—" Suddenly, what he really came to ask congealed on his tongue and he could not bring it out. "I just came to study the paintings."

"Any time, my good man." Pieter slapped him on the back. "Any time. The hall is open to you. And now, if you'll excuse me . . ." He stepped to the double doors and then turned back. "Paint, Johannes, paint."

Jan smiled and nodded at Pieter. No one but another painter could know the delicacy required to balance the complexities, to keep reality at bay in order to remain in the innermost center of his work, without which he knew he would only exist at the periphery of art, a mere provincial painter. Limited output and limited following.

One by one, he assessed the rest of his paintings, nine in just this hall, drinking in like a thirsty man the milk of the senses. He let the placidness of *The Milkmaid* flow into him. Her humble room with the broken pane of glass and pitted wall and broken bread round. The dignity and importance of her action, the pouring of milk, so real he could almost hear it splash into the brown earthenware bowl. Yes. And

he'd gotten the folds of her sleeve right not just by altering color tones as every painter did, but by varying the thickness of paint. The day he discovered that, he knew it would change the way he painted fabric forever. It was just days after a child was born, Francis maybe, or Beatrix, and he was bursting with wild excitement from a marvel so separate he couldn't share it with Catharina. That discovery alone should convince him to continue now, but it did not. Now, plunged into the melancholy of being between paintings, and feverish with longing for the moment when the next would reveal itself to him, he admitted: It did not convince.

Later that afternoon he walked back through a neighborhood of open workshops near the Oosteinde Canal, heading for something, he felt, though what it was remained unclear to him. He passed a tallow candlemaker dipping a row of hanging wicks in a steaming vat. He passed a saddler, a blacksmith, a furniture maker; a fuller felting cloth in a wooden trough; a carver gouging wood behind rows of *klompen* and clocks, wooden bowls and spoons; a faience painter applying the same blue windmill, the same willow tree to stacks of plates. All apparently content at their anvils or tubs or benches. He felt no affinity with any of them.

He thought of his father years ago, leaning forward, lifting the silk warp threads with the tip of his shuttle to reproduce the fine patterns of his drawings in the damasked cloth. Had it given him any satisfaction?

The quick beat of wooden clogs on paving stones rang

out from around a corner. Before he could stop, a young girl collided with him, her skirts flying. It was his second eldest daughter.

"Magdalena!"

"Father!"

"Where are you going in such an unwholesome hurry?" He smoothed her hair.

"To the town walls," she said breathlessly. "Mother said I could. I've got my chores done and you weren't there to keep the little ones quiet for. I'll be home soon. It's just to look."

"I know. I know how you love it." Her light brown hair fell unbraided—she'd left home without a cap—and in the breeze, her lifted hair backlit, she appeared ethereal.

"Come with me, Father. Oh, please. What you can see from there!" Her whole body quivered with the anticipation of it.

He chuckled at her urgency and shook his head. He'd already played nine pins with his boys in the lane that morning because they had begged him, said he'd promised, and he had. But it was already late in the afternoon and he had to get on with this. "I will someday. Mind you be home before sunset." As she turned he noticed the heels of her clogs worn down to thin uneven plates.

The way she'd asked, brimming over with enthusiasm and hope, was just the way she'd asked last winter for him to take her ice sailing and he had said no, and that week the weather turned unseasonably warm and broke up the ice

and they missed their chance. He'd felt wounded and bereft. He lived so badly, it seemed, because he always came into the moment encumbered. He almost had a mind to turn around and catch up to her, but he walked on, taking a circuitous route in order to pass under the dappled leafiness of the lime trees lining the canals.

He avoided the market square because he owed Hendrick a bread bill. The day before, Hendrick's reminder of the amount shocked him, four hundred eighty guilders. More than a year's pay for one of those craftsmen. And there were other debts to the grocer and woolener. And now, those worn shoes sent him further into an abyss of despondency.

By some thread pulling him along, he found himself on Mols Laen. He paused at his cousin's house and shop, was relieved to find him not present, then crossed the peat market quickly to the Papists' Corner on the Oude Langendijck where his mother-in-law lived, the aristocratic matron, Maria Thins. Before her waxed oaken door, he thought of Magdalena's worn clogs, and then lifted the silver knocker. He asked, straight away, with no softening cordial prelude: Could she advance him two hundred guilders against the sale of his next painting?

She focused her eyes past him, over his shoulder as if some inanimate thing behind him, a crack in the wall or the decorated virginal, were of more pressing interest. It was her way of making him feel like a beggar even though she owed him plenty, though it wasn't money. On many occasions

he'd saved her witless son Willem from the magistrates when he made a spectacle of himself in the market square. More than once Willem had lowered his drawers and bent over, cackling at Catharina, Willem's own sister, when she'd encountered him there. And he, Jan, had had to intervene countless times to stop a brawl in The Mechelen, his mother's tavern next door, and usually, Willem was at the bottom of it. In spite of this, Maria Thins made him feel unworthy. Still, he looked her in the face. Even at home she was wearing rubies in her stretched white earlobes.

"I'm getting known in Delft now," he said.

"By whom? One brewer? One baker? Any commissions? No. Any church panels?"

"Of course not. Dutch Reformed churches do not hire painters who've converted to Papists."

He saw the slight pulling back of her chin, which showed its fleshy under-twin. It was she who had demanded his conversion, including confirmation by the bishop, as a condition of his marrying Catharina, and he'd been willing despite its possible effects on his career.

"I've been elected as headman of the Guild of St. Luke," he said.

"So I've heard. Congratulations. Does it pay?" The thin bones in the back of her hand rose and fell as she drummed her jeweled fingers on the tapestry draping the table before her.

"A little. Something else might come of it."

"Might. Might. Meanwhile Catharina is with child."

"Unless that son of yours scared it out of her. He chased her with a stick across the market square last week. She doesn't go out now."

"I'm sorry, Jan. Willem's always been unruly, always jealous."

"It's gone far beyond jealousy. The man is dangerous, if not to others, then to himself. How can you defend him when he's attacked you too?"

She rubbed the skin of her temple, as if pushing against memory. "What can I do? He learned it from his father."

"What can *I* do?"

"If you wanted your family to have better than a few rusks for breakfast, you'd give up painting. You'd hire out to one of the potteries. Surely now with your new status in the guild, some pottery will take you on as a faience painter. You can still turn your brushwork into guilders. Into potatoes and *hutspot* and bread. Into blankets and boots for your boys," she went on.

Plate after relentless plate. He imagined them stacked in a wall before him. His knees weakened and he looked away, at the things in the room. He often felt profoundly moved by the expressive power of objects in a room. A golden water pitcher sitting on a narrow red-patterned cloth as if on an altar reflected a dozen shades from scarlet to yellow-gold. He liked the straight, strong lines rising from the solid base and the voluptuous curve of the handle.

"That's a handsome pitcher," he said. "Do you have another one you could use just for a while? I like the way

the cloth is reflected in the gold. Maybe I could paint—"

"Take it. Take it. The cloth too." She waved it away, and he felt he'd been waved away too. "Why God gave me such a son-in-law. Son and son-in-law, both irresponsible. Both crazed."

"The advance?"

"I'll think on it. I can't promise. Willem gets furious if he thinks I'm favoring you, and then he breaks things. He hasn't forgotten the last loan. And he thinks I'll give a sizable endowment at the christening. But I can't. Rents due me from the Beijerlands are in arrears."

"I thought if only I could have enough to rent a small studio then I'd have no interruptions and I could produce more."

"I said I'll think on it."

On the way home carrying the pitcher wrapped in the cloth, he felt a sick, hollow ache descending with nightfall. He'd have to face Catharina without a stuiver. He'd tell her tonight he would work at something else. A disgrace to ask at a pottery. He'd never be regarded as an artisan after that. Only a craftsman. Better to do something entirely different. He'd work for his cousin selling cloth. He'd start tomorrow. For only a couple years. Maybe less if he did well. To interrupt what little continuity he had would be disastrous to his work. It would be a long crawl back.

He heard shouting when he was still a few houses away. Neighbors gathered in front of his door. He ran inside. In the main room he found his children screaming,

Geertruida and the baby crying, and Willem beating Catharina with a stick. She had fallen onto her spinning wheel and curled there on the floor against it trying to protect her unborn child. With a furious swing, Jan struck him on the head with the base of the pitcher. It stunned him enough that Jan could pull him off Catharina and deliver a mighty blow to his stomach. Willem fell, crushing an easel. Jan kicked him and yanked his arms behind him and sat on him.

"Francis, fetch me some twine. All we've got. Maria, Cornelia, tend to your mother." While Willem was still dazed, Jan bound him, hand and foot, to a straight-backed chair, and tied the chair to the stairway. Then he saw the stick. An iron pin protruded from its end. "Johannes, roust out van Overgauw, the man who set your arm. Remember? Four houses down. Toward the church. Where is that Magdalena? Beatrix, fetch your Grandmother Maria. Carry a lantern, child. It's getting dark."

The room spun upon the point of the iron pin until he heard his wife whisper to the older girls, "I'm all right. I'm all right," already diminishing it for the children's sake. He was, after all, their uncle, she'd say. Jan took the wet cloth from his eldest daughter and washed Catharina's arm where the nail had left a long, deep scratch.

"How did it begin?"

"He came in raving."

Willem stirred and began to shout something wild about a she-devil. Jan gagged him with the red cloth and

came back to Catharina filled with self-reproach for his own negligence. If he had been home, this wouldn't have happened. Swallowing back remorse, he stroked Catharina's face and throat with the damp cloth.

"I'm all right," she said.

"But the child."

Foreign, disturbed air filled the room all the way into the corners. The Spanish chair overturned, the spinning wheel broken, his painting of *Christ in the House of Mary and Martha* hanging crooked, the tablecloth pulled off the table, earthenware bowls broken on the floor, the children's soup spilled, the wooden cradle rocking and its forgotten occupant still crying unattended—all order in his universe disarranged. The cradle still rocking from having been knocked in the scuffle made a rhythmic crackling sound. The town scene he'd painted on the side of the cradle, practice for his *View of Delft,* caught the light, then didn't, then did. It was a long moment before he stepped over to bring it to rest. The cradle had survived longer than the baby it was made for, his grandmother, a fact that struck him now with wonder. How things can live longer than people.

He lifted the baby to his shoulder, the down of infant's hair heavenly soft against his own cheek. Swaying from side to side, soothing her, he breathed the child's sweet, milky smell, felt her little mouth trying to suckle his neck.

Van Overgauw came immediately to examine Catharina and dress the wound, but Maria Thins kept Jan waiting a sufficient amount of time to communicate without a doubt

that she wouldn't be hurried. The moment she arrived, her eyes showing too much white, she swept over to Catharina's bedside.

"I'm all right, Mother."

Jan put it to Maria Thins directly. "I can summon the magistrates and have him clapped in prison, or we can confine him ourselves in a private house of correction."

Her nostrils flared, her eyes darted about uncontrollably. "Where?"

"Taerling's."

Willem squirmed violently against the twine across his chest, and tried to speak.

She hesitated. Jan held up the stick with the iron pin to show her. "It's better than a public asylum."

Alarm shot out from her eyes. In one instant, obligation shifted. She was incurring a huge debt to him. Tearfully, unable to look at her son gagged and moaning, she nodded agreement. Before she could change her mind, Jan asked a neighbor to fetch Taerling. "And have him bring manacles."

Jan and Catharina passed the night in mute shock. The next day, she lost the new baby. Jan sat with Catharina every day until she recovered. Feeling helpless, he brought her broth in a cup, and mended her spinning wheel. And every night for a week, he lurched awake at Geertruida's shrieks, held her hot, damp body, sobbing from her nightmare, until warm milk and his arms around her calmed her enough for her to sleep again.

Too soon the other children resumed their boisterous play and argument. Doors banged. Children outside wanted in. Children inside wanted out. The two youngest boys, Francis and Ignatius, took to imitating what they'd seen, and staged fights knocking heads with wooden mugs, kicking bellies, tying up the vanquished. They squabbled over who would be Papa and who would be Uncle Willem, the mug yanked back and forth between them until the fighting was real. Jan stormed at them to stop.

He agreed to oversee Willem's confinement in the house of correction. Being his brother's keeper seemed a spurious way to gain entrance into the Kingdom of Heaven. Couldn't he paint his way in instead? He felt his life slipping.

Maria Thins lent him three hundred guilders. It wasn't the same as earning money from his art, but it gave him some time. He paid enough to appease the baker and the grocer, bought the children new shoes, made a payment on the iceboat, and bought bricks of pigment and Venetian turpentine. Then it was gone.

If only he could work faster. Paint, Johannes, paint, he told himself. Yet if he did work faster, how could he produce paintings grounded in deep beds of contemplation, the only way living things could be stilled long enough to understand them? And wasn't everything he painted—a breadbasket, a pitcher, a jewelry box, a copper pail—wasn't it all living?

Pulverizing a small brick of ultramarine with a mortar

and pestle one day, loving the intensity of blue as rich as powdered lapis lazuli, he heard a commotion in the main room. His second daughter, Magdalena. Far too old for this. As soon as he entered, she stopped shouting. Fear of making a move stilled everyone, even Ignatius. Blessed silence, marred by the scrape of her chair against the tile floor when she backed away from him.

In a moment she lifted her face to his, her cheeks rosy with shame. Regret glazing her eyes softened him. She stood before him as if offered by God. The blue cloth of her smock draped like billowy sky. There was something in this girl he could never grasp, an inner life inscrutable to him. He was in awe of the child's flights of fancy, her insatiable passion always to be running off somewhere, her active inner life. To still it for a moment, long enough to paint, for eternity, ah.

Was it possible to paint with good conscience what he didn't understand? What he didn't even know?

"Sit down."

Painting was the only way even to attempt to know it.

The chair scraped again when she moved to sit at the corner table by the window.

Her eyes, pale cerulean. How had he never noticed? The face, not beautiful; the expression charged yet under containment—for him, he believed. To render it with honesty rather than pride or even mere love, to go beyond the painting of known sentiments into mystery—that was her challenge to him. His sense of obligation deepened,

renewed itself, as Pieter had said. The open window reflected her face, and in one pane, the image of her cheek shone luminous as though blended with the dust of crushed pearls. He opened the window a few centimeters more, then less, settling on an angle. A whiff of breeze stirred the loose hair at her temple.

"If you sit here mending, I will paint you, Magdalena. But only if you stop that shouting." Her eyes opened wider and she pursed her lips shut against the smile that might burst into words. He brought the sewing basket, placed it on the table, and thought of its dear, humble history, picked out by Catharina from a dozen at some merchant's stall. He moved Geertruida's glass of milk into the slant of light, that glass that someone had washed the day before and the day before that. He set the golden pitcher near it and slightly behind. It shimmered in the stream of sunlight, reflecting blue from Magdalena's sleeve. No. He took it away. It was beautiful, but there was more truth without it. He placed on Magdalena's lap her brother's shirt that needed buttons. He adjusted her shoulders, and felt them tighten, then slowly relax under his hands. He arranged her skirt and her white linen cap Catharina had made. Her hand had fallen palm upward on the shirt, her delicate fingers curled. Perfect. It was not in the act of doing anything. Any intended action was forgotten and therefore it was full of peace.

In a sudden movement his wife rushed over to take away Geertruida's glass of milk.

"No, leave it, Catharina. Right there in the light. It makes the whole corner sacred with the tenderness of just living."

In the arranging of these things he felt a pleasure his selfishness surely didn't deserve. He stepped back and breathed more slowly, and what he saw, lit by warming washes of honey and gold, was a respite in stillness from the unacknowledged acts of women to hallow home. That stillness today, he thought, might be all he would ever know of the Kingdom of Heaven.