



# MINIATURIST

*Jessie Burton*

PICADOR



*Petronella Oortman's cabinet house,  
The Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam*

The term VOC refers to the Dutch East India Company, known in Dutch as the Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (the VOC). The VOC was founded in 1602 and ran hundreds of ships trading across Africa, Europe, Asia and the Indonesian archipelago.

By 1669, the VOC had 50,000 employees, 60 bewindhebbers (partners), and 17 regents. By 1671, VOC shares on the Amsterdam Stock Exchange were reaching 570% of their nominal value.

Owing to the positive agricultural conditions and financial strength of the United Provinces of the Netherlands, it was said that their poor ate much better than their counterparts in England, Italy, France and Spain. The rich ate best of all.

*The Old Church, Amsterdam: Tuesday, 14th January 1687*

The funeral is supposed to be a quiet affair, for the deceased had no friends. But words are water in Amsterdam, they flood your ears and set the rot, and the church's east corner is crowded. She watches the scene unfold from the safety of the choir stall, as guildsmen and their wives approach the gaping grave like ants toward the honey. Soon, they are joined by VOC clerks and ship's captains, regentesses, pastry-makers – and him, still wearing that broad-brimmed hat. She tries to pity him. Pity, unlike hate, can be boxed and put away.

The church's painted roof – the one thing the reformers didn't pull down – rises above them like the tipped-up hull of a magnificent ship. It is a mirror to the city's soul; inked on its ancient beams, Christ in judgement holds his sword and lily, a golden cargo breaks the waves, the Virgin rests on a crescent moon. Flipping up the old misericord beside her, her fingers flutter on the proverb of exposed wood. It is a relief of a man shitting a bag of coins, a leer of pain chipped across his face. What's changed? she thinks.

And yet.

Even the dead are in attendance today, grave-slabs hiding body on body, bones on dust, stacked up beneath the mourners'

feet. Below that floor are women's jaws, a merchant's pelvis, the hollow ribs of a fat grandee. There are little corpses down there, some no longer than a loaf of bread. Noting how people shift their eyes from such condensed sadness, how they move from any tiny slab they see, she cannot blame them.

At the centre of the crowd, the woman spies what she has come for. The girl looks exhausted, grief-etched, standing by a hole in the floor. She barely notices the citizens who have come to stare. The pall-bearers walk up the nave, the coffin on their shoulders balanced like a case for a lute. By the looks on their faces, you might have thought a few of them have reservations about this funeral. It will be Pellicorne's doing, she supposes. Same old poison in the ear.

Normally processions like this are in tight order, the burgomasters at the top and the common folk beneath, but on this day no one has bothered. The woman supposes that there's never been a body like it in any of God's houses within the compass of this city. She loves its rare, defiant quality. Founded on risk, Amsterdam now craves certainty, a neat passage through life, guarding the comfort of its money with dull obedience. I should have left before today, she thinks. Death has come too close.

The circle breaks apart as the pall-bearers push their way in. As the coffin is lowered into the hole without ceremony, the girl moves towards the edge. She tosses a posy of flowers down into the dark, and a starling beats its wings, scaling up the church's whitewashed wall. Heads turn, distracted, but the girl does not flinch, and neither does the woman in the choir stall, both of them watching the arc of petals as Pellicorne intones his final prayer.

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As the pall-bearers slide the new slab into place, a maid-servant kneels by the vanishing dark. She starts to sob, and when the exhausted girl does nothing to check these rising tears, this lack of dignity and order is noted with a tut. Two women, dressed in silk, stand near the choir stall and whisper between themselves. ‘That kind of behaviour is why we’re here in the first place,’ one murmurs.

‘If they’re like this in public, they must behave like wild animals indoors,’ her friend replies.

‘True. But what I wouldn’t give to be a fly on that wall. *Bzz-bzz.*’

They stifle a giggle, and in the choir stall the woman notices how her knuckle has turned white upon the moral misericord.

With the church floor sealed once again, the circle dissolves, the dead at bay. The girl, like a stained-glass saint fallen from the church’s window, acknowledges the uninvited hypocrites. These people start to chatter as they exit towards the city’s winding streets, followed eventually by the girl and her maid, who move silently, arm in arm along the nave and out. Most of the men will be going back to their desks and counters, because keeping Amsterdam afloat takes constant work. Hard grind got us the glory, the saying goes – but sloth will slide us back into the sea. And these days, the rising waters feel so near.

Once the church is empty, the woman emerges from the choir stall. She hurries, not wanting to be discovered. *Things can change*, she says, her voice whispering off the walls. When she finds the newly laid slab, she sees it is a rushed job, the granite still warmer than the other graves, the chiselled words

still dusty. That these events have come to pass should be unbelievable.

She kneels and reaches in her pocket to complete what she has started. This is her own prayer, a miniature house small enough to sit in the palm. Nine rooms and five human figures are carved within, the craftsmanship so intricate, worked outside of time. Carefully, the woman places this offering where she had always intended it to lie, blessing the cool granite with her toughened fingers.

As she pushes open the church door, she looks instinctively for the broad-brimmed hat, the cloak of Pellicorne, the silken women. All have vanished, and she could be alone in the world were it not for the noise of the trapped starling. It is time to leave, but for a moment the woman holds the door open for the bird. Sensing her effort, instead it flaps away behind the pulpit.

She closes away the church's cool interior, turning to face the sun, heading from the ringed canals toward the sea. Starling, she thinks, if you believe that building is the safer spot, then I am not the one to set you free.



ONE

*Mid-October, 1686*

*The Herengracht canal, Amsterdam*

Be not desirous of his dainties:  
For they are deceitful meat.

Proverbs 23:3



## *Outside In*

On the step of her new husband's house, Nella Oortman lifts and drops the dolphin knocker, embarrassed by the thud. No one comes, though she is expected. The time was prearranged and letters written, her mother's paper so thin compared with Brandt's expensive vellum. No, she thinks, this is not the best of greetings, given the blink of a marriage ceremony the month before – no garlands, no betrothal cup, no wedding bed. Nella places her small trunk and birdcage on the step. She knows she'll have to embellish this later for home, when she's found a way upstairs, a room, a desk.

Nella turns to the canal as bargemen's laughter rises up the opposite brickwork. A puny lad has skittled into a woman and her basket of fish, and a half-dead herring slithers down the wide front of the seller's skirt. The harsh cry of her country voice runs under Nella's skin. *'Idiot! Idiot!'* the woman yells. The boy is blind, and he grabs in the dirt for the escaped herring as if it's a silver charm, his fingers quick, not afraid to feel around. He scoops it, cackling, running up the path with his catch, his free arm out and ready.

Nella cheers silently and stays to face this rare October warmth, to take it while she can. This part of the Herengracht is known as the Golden Bend, but today the wide stretch is brown and workaday. Looming above the sludge-coloured

canal, the houses are a phenomenon. Admiring their own symmetry on the water, they are stately and beautiful, jewels set within the city's pride. Above their rooftops Nature is doing her best to keep up, and clouds in colours of saffron and apricot echo the spoils of the glorious republic.

Nella turns back to the door, now slightly ajar. Was it like this before? She cannot be sure. She pushes on it, peering into the void as cool air rises from the marble. 'Johannes Brandt?' she calls – loud, a little panicked. Is this a game? she thinks. I'll be standing here come January. Peebo, her parakeet, thrills the tips of his feathers against the cage bars, his faint cheep falling short on the marble. Even the now-quiet canal behind them seems to hold its breath.

Nella is sure of one thing as she looks deeper into the shadows. She's being watched. *Come on, Nella Elisabeth*, she tells herself, stepping over the threshold. Will her new husband embrace her, kiss her or shake her hand like it's just business? He didn't do any of those things at the ceremony, surrounded by her small family and not a single member of his.

To show that country girls have manners too, she bends down and removes her shoes – dainty, leather, of course her best – although what their point has been she can't now say. *Dignity*, her mother said, but dignity is so uncomfortable. She slaps the shoes down, hoping the noise will arouse somebody, or maybe scare them off. Her mother calls her over-imaginative, Nella-in-the-Clouds. The inert shoes lie in anti-climax and Nella simply feels a fool.

Outside, two women call to one other. Nella turns, but through the open door she sees only the back of one woman, capless, golden-headed and tall, striding away towards the last

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of the sun. Nella's own hair has loosened on the journey from Assendelft, the light breeze letting wisps escape. To tuck them away will make her more nervous than she can bear to seem, so she leaves them tickling her face.

'Are we to have a menagerie?'

The voice sails sure and swift from the darkness of the hall. Nella's skin contracts, for being right about her suspicions can't banish the goosebumps. She watches as a figure glides from the shadows, a hand outstretched – in protest or in greeting, it is hard to tell. It is a woman, straight and slim and dressed in deepest black, the cap on her head starched and pressed to white perfection. Not a wisp of her hair escapes, and she brings with her the vaguest, strangest scent of nutmeg. Her eyes are grey, her mouth is solemn. How long has she been there, watching? Peebo chirrups at the intervention.

'This is Peebo,' Nella says. 'My parakeet.'

'So I see,' says the woman, gazing down at her. 'Or hear. I take it you have not brought any more beasts?'

'I have a little dog, but he's at home—'

'Good. It would mess in our rooms. Scratch the wood. Those small ones are an affectation of the French and Spanish,' the woman observes. 'As frivolous as their owners.'

'And they look like rats,' calls a second voice from somewhere in the hall.

The woman frowns, briefly closing her eyes, and Nella takes her in, wondering who else is watching this exchange. I must be younger than her by ten years, she thinks, though her skin's so smooth. As the woman moves past Nella towards the door frame, there is a grace in her movements, self-aware and unapologetic. She casts a brief, approving glance at the

neat shoes by the door and then stares into the cage, her lips pressed tight together. Peebo's feathers have puffed in fear.

Nella decides to distract her by joining hands in greeting, but the woman flinches at the touch.

'Strong bones for seventeen,' the woman says.

'I'm Nella,' she replies, retracting her hand. 'And I'm eighteen.'

'I know who you are.'

'My real name is Petronella, but everyone at home calls me—'

'I heard the first time.'

'Are you the housekeeper?' Nella asks. A giggle is badly stifled in the hallway shadows. The woman ignores it, looking out into the pearlescent dusk. 'Is Johannes here? I'm his new wife.' The woman still says nothing. 'We signed our marriage a month ago, in Assendelft,' Nella persists. It seems there is nothing else to do but to persist.

'My brother is not in the house.'

'Your brother?'

Another giggle from the darkness. The woman looks straight into Nella's eyes. 'I am Marin Brandt,' she says, as if Nella should understand. Marin's gaze may be hard, but Nella can hear the precision faltering in her voice. 'He's not here,' Marin continues. 'We thought he'd be. But he's not.'

'Where is he then?'

Marin looks out towards the sky again. Her left hand fronds the air, and from the shadows near the staircase two figures appear. 'Otto,' she says.

A man comes towards them and Nella swallows, pressing her cold feet upon the floor.

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Otto's skin is dark, dark brown everywhere, his neck coming out from the collar, his wrists and hands from his sleeves – all unending, dark brown skin. His high cheeks, his chin, his wide brow, every inch. Nella has never seen such a man in her life.

Marin seems to be watching her to see what she will do. The look in Otto's large eyes makes no acknowledgement of Nella's ill-concealed fascination. He bows to her and she curtsies, chewing her lip till the taste of blood reminds her to be calm. Nella sees how his skin glows like a polished nut, how his black hair springs straight up from his scalp. It is a cloud of soft wool, not flat and greasy like other men's. 'I—' she says.

Peebo begins to chirp. Otto puts his hands out, a pair of pattens resting on his broad palms. 'For your feet,' he says.

His accent is Amsterdam – but he rolls the words, making them warm and liquid. Nella takes the pattens from him and her fingers brush his skin. Clumsily she slips the raised shoes onto her feet. They are too big, but she doesn't dare say it, and at least they lift her soles off the chilly marble. She'll tighten the leather straps later, upstairs – if she ever gets there, if they ever let her past this hall.

'Otto is my brother's manservant,' says Marin, her eyes still fixed on Nella. 'And here is Cornelia, our maid. She will look after you.'

Cornelia steps forward. She is a little older than Nella, perhaps twenty, twenty-one – and slightly taller. Cornelia pins her with an unfriendly grin, her blue eyes moving over the new bride, seeing the tremor in Nella's hands. Nella smiles, burnt by the maid's curiosity, struggling to say some piece of

empty thanks. She is half-grateful, half-ashamed when Marin cuts her off.

‘Let me show you upstairs,’ Marin says. ‘You will want to see your room.’

Nella nods and a look of amusement flickers to life in Cornelia’s eyes. Blithe pirrips from the cage bounce high up the walls, and Marin indicates to Cornelia with a flick of her wrist that the bird must go to the kitchen.

‘But the cooking fumes,’ Nella protests. Marin and Otto turn back to her. ‘Peebo likes the light.’

Cornelia takes up the cage and starts swinging it like a pail. ‘Please, be careful,’ says Nella.

Marin catches Cornelia’s eye. The maid continues to the kitchen, accompanied by the thin melody of Peebo’s worried cheeps.



Upstairs, Nella feels dwarfed by the sumptuousness of her new room. Marin merely looks displeased. ‘Cornelia has embroidered too much,’ she says. ‘But we hope Johannes will only marry once.’

There are initialled cushions, a new bedspread and two pairs of recently refreshed curtains. ‘The velvet heaviness is needed to keep out canal mists,’ Marin observes. ‘This was my room,’ she adds, moving to the window to look at the few stars which have begun to appear in the sky, placing her hand upon the windowpane. ‘It has a better view, so we gave it to you.’

‘Oh no,’ says Nella. ‘Then you must keep it.’

They face each other, hemmed in by the mass of needlework, the abundance of linen covered in *B* for Brandt,

encircled by vine leaves, entrenched in birds' nests, rising out of flower beds. The *Bs* have gobbled up her maiden name, their bellies fat and swollen. Feeling uneasy but duty-bound, Nella brushes a finger over this bounty of wool, now bearing on her spirits.

'Your grand ancestral Assendelft seat, is it warm and dry?' Marin asks.

'It can be damp,' Nella offers as she bends over and tries to adjust the large pattens strapped awkwardly to her feet. 'The dykes don't always work. It's not grand, though—'

'Our family may not have your ancient pedigree, but what's that in the face of a warm, dry, well-made house,' Marin interrupts. It is not a question.

'Indeed.'

'*Afkomst seyt niet*. Pedigree counts for nothing,' Marin continues, prodding a cushion to emphasize the word *nothing*. 'Pastor Pellicorne said it last Sunday and I wrote it in the fly-leaf of our Bible. The waters will rise if we're not careful.' She seems to shake herself out of a thought. 'Your mother wrote,' she adds. 'She insisted she would pay for you to travel here. We couldn't allow that. We sent the second-best barge. You're not offended?'

'No. No.'

'Good. Second-best in this house still means new paint and a cabin lined in Bengal silk. Johannes is using the other one.'

Nella wonders where her husband is, on his best barge, not back in time to greet her. She thinks about Peebo, alone in the kitchen, near the fire, near the pans. 'You only have two servants?' she asks.

‘It’s enough,’ says Marin. ‘We’re merchants, not layabouts. The Bible tells us a man should never flaunt his wealth.’

‘No. Of course.’

‘That is, if he has any left to flaunt.’ Marin stares at her and Nella looks away. The light in the room is beginning to fade, and Marin sets a taper on the candles. They are tallow and cheap, and Nella had hoped for more fragrant beeswax. The choice of this meat-smelling, smoky variety surprises her. ‘Cornelia seems to have sewn your new name on everything,’ Marin says over her shoulder.

Indeed, thinks Nella, remembering Cornelia’s baleful scrutiny. Her fingers will be red ribbons, and who will she punish for that?

‘When is Johannes coming – why is he not here?’ she asks.

‘Your mother said you were keen to begin your life as a wife in Amsterdam,’ Marin says. ‘Are you?’

‘Yes. But one needs a husband in order to do so.’

In the frost-tipped silence that follows, Nella wonders where Marin’s husband is. Maybe she’s hidden him in the cellar. She smothers her desperate impulse to laugh by smiling at one of the cushions. ‘This is all so beautiful,’ she says. ‘You didn’t have to.’

‘Cornelia did it all. I am no use with my hands.’

‘I’m sure that is not true.’

‘I’ve taken my paintings down. I thought these might be more to your taste.’ Marin gestures to the wall where a brace of game-birds has been captured in oil, hanging from a hook, all feather and claw. Further along the wall is a portrait of a strung-up hare, a hunter’s prize. Next to it a painted slew of



oysters are piled on a Chinese patterned plate, shadowed by a spilt wineglass and a bowl of over-ripened fruit. There is something unsettling about the oysters, their exposed openness. In her old home, Nella's mother covered the walls in landscapes and scenes from the Bible. 'These belong to my brother,' Marin observes, pointing at a brimming vase of flowers, harder than life, coloured in excess, half a pomegranate waiting at the bottom of the frame.

'Thank you.' Nella wonders how long it will take her to turn them to the wall before she goes to sleep.

'You'll want to eat up here tonight,' says Marin. 'You've been travelling for hours.'

'I have, yes. I would be grateful.' Nella shudders inwardly at the birds' bloodied beaks, their glassy eyes, promising flesh puckering away. At the sight of them, she is taken by the desire for something sweet. 'Do you have any marzipan?'

'No. Sugar is – not something we take much of. It makes people's souls grow sick.'

'My mother used to roll it into shapes.' There was always marzipan in the pantry, the only predilection for indulgence in which Mrs Oortman echoed her husband. Mermaids, ships and necklaces of sugared jewels, that almond doughiness melting in their mouths. I no longer belong to my mother, Nella thinks. One day I will roll sugar shapes for other little clammy hands, voices baying for treats.

'I will ask Cornelia to bring you some *herenbrood* and Gouda,' Marin says, drawing Nella out of her thoughts. 'And a glass of Rhenish.'

'Thank you. Do you have an idea of when Johannes will arrive?'

JESSIE BURTON

Marin tips her nose into the air. 'What *is* that smell?'

Instinctively, Nella's hands fly to her collarbone. 'Is it me?'

'Is it you?'

'My mother bought me a perfume. Oil of Lilies. Is that what you smell?'

Marin nods. 'It is,' she says. 'It's lily.' She coughs gently. 'You know what they say about lilies.'

'No?'

'Early to ripe, early to rot.'

With that, Marin shuts the door.

## *Cloak*

At four o'clock the next morning, Nella is still unable to sleep. The oddness of her new surroundings, gleaming and embroidered, wreathed with the smell of smoking tallow, forbids her to be easy. The paintings in their frames remain exposed, for she had not the courage to switch them to the wall. Lying there, she lets the events that have led to this moment swirl through her exhausted head.

When he died two years ago, they said in Assendelft that Seigneur Oortman had been a man who fathered breweries. Though Nella loathed the suggestion that her papa was nothing more than a sozzled Priapus, it proved depressingly true. Her father tied them up with his knot of debts – the soup thinned, the meat got scaggier, the servants fell away. He'd never built an ark, as all Dutchmen were supposed to, fighting the rising sea. 'You need to marry a man who can keep a guilder in his purse,' her mother said, taking up her pen.

'But I have nothing to give in return,' Nella replied.

Her mother tutted. 'Look at you. What else do we women have?'

The statement had stunned Nella. To be reduced by her own mother caused her a new sort of distress, and grief for her father was replaced by a sort of grief for herself. Her

younger siblings, Carel and Arabella, were allowed to continue outside, playing at cannibals or pirates.

For two years, Nella practised being a lady. She walked with new poise – though there was nowhere to walk to, she complained, feeling for the first time a desire to escape her village, ignoring the enormous skies, seeing only a bucolic prison already developing fine layers of dust. In a newly tightened corset she improved her lute, moving her neat fingers on the fretboard, concerned about her mother’s nerves just enough not to rebel. In July this year her mother’s enquiries, through the last of her husband’s connections in the city, finally fell on fertile ground.

A letter arrived, the handwriting on the front neat and flowing, confident. Her mother didn’t let her read it – but a week later, Nella discovered she was to play for a man, a merchant called Johannes Brandt, come to the country from Amsterdam. As the sun lowered over the browning Assendelft flatlands, this stranger sat in their gently crumbling house and listened to her play.

Nella thought he seemed moved, and when she’d finished he said that he’d enjoyed it. ‘I love the lute,’ he told her. ‘A beautiful instrument. I have two hanging on my wall, but they haven’t been played for years.’ And when Johannes Brandt – thirty-nine, a true Methuselah! Carel crowed – had asked for her hand, Nella decided to accept. It would have seemed ungrateful and certainly stupid to say no. What other option was there but – as Marin puts it – life as a wife?

After the Assendelft ceremony in September, their names entered in the church register, they had a brief dinner at the Oortman home and Johannes left. A shipment needed to be

delivered to Venice, he'd said, and he had to do it himself. Nella and her mother had nodded. Johannes was so charming, with his crooked smile, his suggestion of such power. On her wedding night, the newly married Nella slept as she had for years, top to toe with her wriggling sister. But it was all to the good, she thought, picturing herself rising from the flames of Assendelft like a new woman – a wife, and all to come—

Her thoughts are interrupted by the sound of dogs in the hall. Nella hears a man – Johannes' voice, she is sure. Her husband is here, in Amsterdam – a little late, but here. Nella sits up in her wedding bed, blearily rehearsing. *I am so pleased. Was your journey safe? Yes? So happy, oh so happy.*

But she dares not go down. Struck with nerves, the excitement of seeing him is not quite enough to overcome. Waiting, apprehension blooming in her stomach, she wonders how to begin. Finally she shucks on her pattens, pulls a shawl over her nightgown and creeps along the passageway.

The dogs' claws skitter across the tiles. They bring the sea air in their fur, their tails thwack the furniture. Marin has got to Johannes first, and Nella can hear them talking.

'I never said that, Marin,' Johannes says. His voice is deep and dry.

'Forget it now. Brother, I am glad to see you. I have prayed for your safe return.' As Marin moves out of the shadow to survey him, the light of her candle dips and dances. Craning over the banister, Nella watches the unfamiliar bulk of Johannes' travelling cloak, the surprising butcher's fingers. 'You look worn out,' Marin goes on.

'I know, I know. And autumn in London—'

'Is gruesome. So that's where you have been. Let me.'

With her spare hand, Marin helps remove his cloak. 'Ah, Johannes. You are thin. You have been away too long.'

'I am not thin.' He moves away. 'Rezeki, Dhana,' he calls, and the dogs follow him like familiars. Nella digests the odd sounds of their names. *Rezeki, Dhana*. In Assendelft, Carel called their dogs Snout and Blackeye, unimaginative but perfect reflections of character and appearance.

'Brother,' says Marin. 'She's here.'

Johannes stops but he does not turn. Shoulders dropping, his head inclines a little lower to his chest. 'Ah,' he says. 'I see.'

'It would have been better for you to be here when she arrived.'

'I'm sure you coped.'

Marin pauses, and the silence grows between her pale face and the closed bulk of her brother's back. 'Don't forget,' she says.

Johannes runs his fingers through his hair. 'How could I?' he replies. 'How could I?'

Marin seems about to say something else, but instead she folds her arms across her body. 'It's so cold,' she says.

'Then go to bed. I have to work.'

He shuts his door, and Marin swings her brother's cloak onto her shoulders. Nella leans further over, watching Marin bury her face in the long folds of material. The banister creaks and Marin whips off the cloak, peering up into the darkness. When Marin opens a cupboard off the hallway, Nella creeps back to her room to wait.

Minutes later, at the sound of Marin's bedroom door closing at the end of the corridor, Nella sidles down the main

staircase. She stops by the hall cupboard and expects to find the cloak hanging, but it is crumpled on the floor. Kneeling down to pick it up, she finds it has a damp scent of a tired man and the cities he's seen. After placing it on the hook, Nella approaches the door behind which her husband disappeared, and knocks.

'For God's sake,' he says. 'We'll speak in the morning.'

'It's me. Petronella. Nella.'

After a moment, the door opens and Johannes stands there, his face in shadow. He is so broad-shouldered – Nella hadn't remembered him being this imposing at the half-empty church in Assendelft. '*Esposa mía*,' he says.

Nella does not know what this means. As he steps back into the candlelight she sees his face is tanned and beaten by the sun. His irises, grey like Marin's, are almost translucent. Her husband is no prince, his hair greasy at the scalp, a dull metallic. 'I'm here,' she says.

'So you are.' He gestures to her nightgown. 'You should be asleep.'

'I came to greet you.'

He comes forward and kisses her hand, his mouth softer than she imagined. 'We'll talk in the morning, Nella. I am glad you arrived safely. I'm so glad.'

His eyes rest on nothing for long. Nella considers the conundrum of his energetic fatigue, noticing a musky tang in the air, intense and unsettling. Retreating into the yellow glow of what looks to be his study, Johannes shuts the door.

Nella waits for a moment, looking up the main staircase into the pitch black. Marin must surely be asleep, she thinks. I'll just take one look, to be sure my little bird's all right.

Tiptoeing down the stairs to the kitchens, she finds her parakeet's cage hanging by the open stove, the dying embers gently illuminating the metal bars. 'All maids are dangerous,' her mother had said, 'but the city ones are worse.' She hadn't explained exactly why, but at least Peebo is alive, on his perch, feathers up, hopping and clicking in acknowledgement of Nella's presence. More than anything she wants to take him upstairs, but she thinks of what Marin might do if she's disobeyed, Cornelia arranging a dinner of two little drumsticks with a garland of green feathers. 'Goodnight, Peebo,' she whispers.

Through her bedroom window the mists rise off the Herengracht, the moon above a faded coin. Drawing the curtains and gathering her shawl around her, Nella takes a seat in the corner, still wary of her giant bed. Her new husband is a rich man in Amsterdam, a city power-broker, a lord of the sea and all its bounty. 'Life's hard if you're not a wife,' her mother had observed. 'Why?' Nella asked. Having witnessed her mother's constant annoyance at her father turn to panic on the news of his posthumous debts, she asked why Mrs Oortman was so keen to shackle her daughter to a possibly similar risk. Her mother looked at her as if she was mad, but this time she did explain. 'Because Seigneur Brandt is a city shepherd, and your father was only a sheep.'

Nella looks at the silver ewer on the side, the smooth mahogany writing desk, the Turkey rug, the voluptuous paintings. A beautiful pendulum clock makes its gentle measure of time. There are suns and moons on its face, its hands are filigreed. It is the most beautiful clock Nella has ever seen. Everything looks new, and speaks of wealth. Nella has never



learned this particular language, but she thinks it will be necessary. Picking up the fallen cushions on the floor, she mounts them on the coverlet of deep red silk.

The first time Nella bled, aged twelve, her mother told her that the purpose of that blood was ‘the security of children’. Nella never thought there was much to feel secure about, hearing the cries through the village of women in their labour pains, the coffins sometimes marched to church soon after.

Love was much more nebulous than stains on linen rags. Her monthly blood never seemed connected to what Nella suspected love could be – of the body but beyond it. ‘That’s love, Petronella,’ Mrs Oortman said, observing how Arabella held the puppy Blackeye tight until she nearly choked his canine life away. When musicians in the village sang about love, they sang indeed of pain concealed in the bounty. True love was a flower in the gut, its petals unfurling inside out. You would risk all for love – blissful, never without its drops of dismay.

Mrs Oortman had always complained there were no suitors good enough for miles – ‘hay-chewers’, she called the local boys. The city, and Johannes Brandt, held her daughter’s future.

‘But – *love*, Mother. Will I love him?’

‘The girl wants love,’ Mrs Oortman cried theatrically to the peeling Assendelft walls. ‘She wants the peaches and the cream.’

Nella was told it was right that she leave Assendelft, and God knows that by the end to escape was all she wanted. She had no desire to play shipwrecks with Carel and Arabella any more, but this doesn’t stop the disappointment flooding in

now, sitting by her empty wedding bed in Amsterdam like a nursemaid to a patient. What is the point of being here if her husband will not even greet her properly? Clambering up on the blank mattress, she burrows amongst the cushions, thwarted by the scornful look in Cornelia's eyes, the edge in Marin's voice, Johannes' indifference. *I am the girl*, Nella thinks, *who hasn't had a single peach, never mind the cream.*

The house still seems awake despite the unforgiving hour. She hears the sound of the front door being opened and shut, and then another door above her. There is whispering, foot-steps padding across the corridor, before an intense quiet wraps the rooms.

She listens, desolate, a hairline crack of moonlight glinting over painted hare and rotten pomegranate. It is a deceptive quiet, as if the house itself is breathing. But she doesn't dare leave her bed again, not on her first night. Thoughts of last summer's lute playing have gone, and all Nella can hear running through her head is the herring-seller's words – *idiot*, *idiot*, screeching her country voice.

## *New Alphabet*

After opening the curtain to let in the morning sun, Cornelia stands at the end of Nella's rumpled bed. 'The Seigneur's arrived from London,' she says to the small foot poking through the bedclothes. 'You'll breakfast together.'

Nella's head shoots up from the pillow, her face puffy as a cherub's. She can hear every maid along the Herengracht, their mops clanking in buckets like muted bells as they wash the filth from their front steps. 'How long have I been asleep?' she asks.

'Long enough,' replies the maid.

'I could have been in this bed for three months, under a spell.'

Cornelia laughs. 'What a spell.'

'What do you mean?'

'Nothing, Madame.' She offers her hands. 'Come. I have to dress you.'

'You were up late.'

'I was, was I?' Cornelia's tone is impudent, and this confidence makes Nella falter. None of her mother's maids spoke to her in such a way.

'I heard the front door in the night,' she says. 'And one above me. I'm sure of it.'

'Impossible,' replies the maid. 'Toot locked it before you went up.'

‘Toot?’

‘It’s what I call Otto. He thinks nicknames are silly, but I like them.’ Cornelia takes an undershirt and puts it over Nella’s head and rigs her into a blue gown shot with silver. ‘The Seigneur paid for this,’ she says, her voice full of admiration. Nella’s excitement at the gift quickly fades – the sleeves are too long, and however tightly Cornelia ties her in, her ribcage seems to shrink within the oversized corset.

‘Madame Marin sent the seamstress your measurements,’ Cornelia tuts, pulling the stays tighter and tighter, dismayed by the acres of ribbon left over. ‘Your mother put them in a letter. What will I do with all this spare material?’

‘The seamstress must have got it wrong,’ says Nella, looking down at her swamped arms. ‘I’m sure my mother knows my size.’



When Nella enters the dining room, Johannes is talking with Otto, murmuring over some lengthy documents. On seeing his wife he bows, an amused expression on his face. The colour of his eyes has solidified, from fish to flint. Marin sips lemon water, her eyes fixed on the gigantic map on the wall behind her brother’s head, pieces of land suspended in gaping paper oceans.

‘Thank you for my dress,’ Nella manages to say. Otto moves to the corner and waits, hands full with Johannes’ paperwork.

‘This must be one of them,’ replies Johannes. ‘I ordered several. But it does not look as I imagined it would. Is it not a little large? Marin, is it not a little large?’

## THE MINIATURIST

Marin takes a seat, tidying her napkin into a perfect white square, a loose tile on the black expanse of her lap.

‘I fear it may be, Seigneur,’ says Nella. The quiver in her voice is embarrassing. Where was it, along the line of communication between Assendelft and Amsterdam, that her bridal body was shrunk to parody? She looks at the map on the wall, determined not to pick at the ludicrous length of her sleeves. There is Nova Hollandia, palm trees fringing its coast, turquoise seas and ebony faces inviting the onlooker in.

‘Never mind,’ Johannes says, ‘Cornelia will trim you down.’ His hand wraps round a small glass of beer. ‘Come and sit, eat something.’

A hardened loaf and a slim fish lie on a plate in the centre of the damask tablecloth. ‘We are eating frugally this morning,’ Marin explains, eyeing her brother’s glass. ‘A gesture of humility.’

‘Or privation as a thrill,’ Johannes murmurs, taking up a forkful of herring. The room is silent except for the sound of his gentle mastication, the bread a block between them, dry, untouched. Nella tries to swallow her fear, staring at her empty plate, noticing how the aura of sadness so quickly gathers around her husband. ‘Think of the things you’ll eat, Nella,’ her brother Carel had said. ‘I heard in Amsterdam they scoff strawberries dipped in gold.’ Now how little impressed he’d be.

‘Marin, have some of this fine ale,’ Johannes says eventually.

‘It gives me indigestion,’ she replies.

‘The Amsterdammer’s diet of money and shame. You can’t trust yourself. Go on, be defiant. Bravery in this city is so rare these days.’

‘I just don’t feel well.’

Johannes laughs at this, but Marin’s face is pinched in humourless pain. ‘Papist,’ she says.

During the self-improving breakfast, Johannes does not apologize for failing to attend his new wife’s arrival the day before. It is to his sister he talks, whilst Nella is forced to roll up her shirtsleeves in order not to drag them through her piece of oily fish. Otto is dismissed and he bows, his fingers clasped carefully around the sheaves of paper. ‘See to it, Otto,’ Johannes says. ‘With my thanks.’ Nella wonders whether the men Johannes trades with also have a servant like Otto, or whether he is the only one. She scrutinizes Otto’s face for any expression of discomfort, but he seems sure and deft.

Bullion prices, paintings as currency, the carelessness of some of the cargo-packers moving his stock from Batavia – Marin devours Johannes’ far tastier titbits. If he ever seems reluctant, Marin snatches them, an honour which might evaporate. She takes his snippets of tobacco sales, those of silk and coffee, of cinnamon and salt. He talks of the shogunate’s new limitations of transporting gold and silver from Dejima, of the long-term damage this might cause, but how the VOC are determined that profit must come before pride.

Nella feels drunk with all this new information, but Marin’s head seems steady. What news of the pepper treaty with the Sultan of Bantam, and what does that mean for the VOC? Johannes tells her of the clove-planters’ rebellions in Ambon, their land over-populated with trees at the VOC’s behest. When Marin demands the exact nature of their unrest,

he grimaces. ‘By now, the situation will have changed, Marin, and we’ll know nothing.’

‘And that, Johannes, is too often the problem.’ She asks him about some silk due to a tailor in Lombardy. ‘Who won the import right?’

‘I forget,’ he says.

‘Who, Johannes? Who?’

‘Henry Field. A merchant with the English East India,’ he replies.

Marin thumps her fist. ‘The *English*.’ Johannes looks at her, saying nothing. ‘Think of what this means, brother. *Think*. The last two years. Allowing it to wander to another man’s purse. We haven’t—’

‘But the English buy up our Haarlem linen.’

‘With their tight fists.’

‘They say the same of us.’

From bullion to sultans via the English, Marin’s lexicon is a serious astonishment. Johannes is surely crossing a forbidden boundary – for what other woman knows this much about the ins and outs of the VOC?

Nella feels quite invisible and ignored – it is her first day here and neither of them has asked her a single question, though at least the mercenary debate gives Nella an opportunity to inspect her new husband under lowered lids. That suntanned skin – she and Marin are ghostly in comparison. Nella imagines him with a pirate’s hat, his ship beating the dark-blue waves of a faraway sea.

She goes further – picturing Johannes without his clothes, imagining the thing he has underneath the table waiting for her. Her mother has told her what wives can hope for – a

rising rod of pain, the chance it won't go on too long, the wet clam dribble between your legs. There are enough rams and ewes in Assendelft to know exactly what happens. 'I don't want to be just that kind of wife,' she told her mother. 'There is no other kind,' came the reply. Seeing her daughter's expression, Mrs Oortman had softened slightly, taking Nella in her arms and patting her stomach. 'Your body is the key, my love. Your body is the key.' When Nella asked what exactly she was supposed to unlock, and how, her mother had demurred. 'You'll have a roof over your head, thanks be to God.'

For fear the other two might see these memories cross her face, Nella stares at her plate. 'Enough about all that,' Marin says. Nella jumps, as if her sister-in-law has read her mind. Johannes is still talking about the English, swilling the amber ale at the bottom of his glass.

'Have you spoken to Frans Meermans about his wife's sugar?' Marin interrupts. His silence makes her grim. 'It's just *sitting* in the warehouse, Johannes. It arrived from Surinam over a week ago and you still haven't told them what you're going to do with it. They're waiting.'

Johannes puts down his glass. 'Your interest in Agnes Meermans' new wealth surprises me,' he says.

'I'm not worried about her wealth. I know how Agnes wants to breach these walls.'

'Always your suspicions! She wants me to distribute her sugar because she knows I'm the best.'

'Well, sell it and be done with them. Remember what is at stake.'

'But of all the things I might sell, you push for this! What about *lekkerheid*, Marin – the craving craze for all things sweet



– what might your Pastor say?’ Johannes turns to his wife. ‘My sister thinks sugar is not good for the soul, Nella, but she wants me to sell it anyway. What do you make of that?’

Nella, remembering her rebuffed request for marzipan, feels grateful for his sudden attention. Souls and purses, she thinks, these two are obsessed with souls and purses.

‘I’m merely keeping my head above the flood,’ Marin says, her voice tight. ‘I fear my God, Johannes. Do you?’ Marin grips her fork like a small trident. ‘Please just sell the sugar, brother. It is to our advantage that there is no Guild of Sugar-sellers. Our own prices, to whom we want. Get rid of it and soon. It would be best.’

Johannes stares at the untouched loaf still resting in the middle of the damask. Nella’s stomach rumbles and she clutches it instinctively as if her hand will keep it quiet. ‘Otto would not approve of our new kind of free trade,’ Johannes says, his eyes flicking to the door.

Marin drives her fork tines into the damask cloth. ‘He’s a Dutchman. A pragmatist. He’s never even seen a cane plantation.’

‘He nearly did.’

‘He understands our *business* as well as we do.’ Her grey eyes bore into his. ‘Wouldn’t you agree?’

‘Do not speak for him,’ Johannes says. ‘He works for me, not you. And this tablecloth cost thirty guilders, so kindly stop making holes in everything I own.’

‘I was at the docks,’ Marin snaps. ‘The burgomasters drowned three men yesterday morning, one after the other. Hung weights on their necks. Put them in sacks and threw them in the water.’

Somewhere in the hallway, a plate clatters. ‘Rezeki, bad dog!’ comes Cornelia’s cry, but Nella notices both Johannes’ dogs are in the corner of this room, fast asleep. Johannes closes his eyes, and Nella wonders how drowning men have anything to do with stocks of sugar, or Otto’s opinions, or Agnes Meermans trying to breach their walls.

‘I know how a man drowns,’ he murmurs. ‘You seem to forget I’ve had to spend most of my life on the sea.’

There is a warning in Johannes’ voice, but Marin keeps going. ‘I asked the man clearing the dockside why the burgo-masters had drowned them. He said they didn’t have the guilders to appease their God.’

Breathless, she stops. Johannes seems almost bereft, sagging in his chair. ‘I thought God forgives all, Marin?’ he says. He doesn’t seem to want an answer to his question.

The air is hot, the atmosphere a bruise. Red-faced, Cornelia appears and clears the plates, and Johannes rises from his chair. The three women look at him expectantly, but he moves out of the room, batting the air with his hand. Marin and Cornelia seem to know what this means, Marin taking up the book she has brought with her to breakfast. Nella eyes the title – Hooft’s play, *True Fool*.

‘How often does he go away?’ Nella asks.

Marin puts the book down, tutting in displeasure as a page bends the wrong way on the table. ‘My brother leaves. He comes back. He leaves again,’ she sighs. ‘You’ll see. It’s not difficult. Anyone could do it.’

‘I didn’t ask if it was difficult. And who is Frans Meermans?’

## THE MINIATURIST

‘Cornelia, how is Petronella’s parakeet this morning?’ Marin asks.

‘He’s well, Madame. Well.’ Cornelia avoids Nella’s eye. Today there are no giggles, no sly remarks. She seems tired, as if something is bothering her.

‘He needs clean air,’ says Nella. ‘The kitchen must be so full of cooking fumes. I’d like to fly him round my room.’

‘He’ll peck at something valuable,’ says Marin.

‘He won’t.’

‘He’ll fly out of the window.’

‘I’ll keep it closed.’

Marin slams her book shut and walks out. The maid straightens, narrowing her blue eyes in her mistress’s wake. After a moment’s hesitation, she too leaves the room. Nella slumps back in her chair, staring sightlessly into Johannes’ map. The door is still open, and she can hear Marin and Johannes whispering outside the study.

‘For the love of Christ, Marin. Have you got nothing better to do?’

‘You’ve a wife now. Where are you going?’

‘I also have a business.’

‘What business do you have on a Sunday?’

‘Marin, do you think this house is run by magic? I’m going to check the sugar.’

‘I don’t believe you,’ Marin hisses. ‘I won’t allow this.’ Nella feels the tension condensing between the siblings, a second, silent language filling to the brim.

‘What other man lets his sister speak to him like this? Your word is not the law.’

‘Perhaps. But it’s closer than you think.’

JESSIE BURTON

Johannes strides out of the front door, and Nella hears the velvet suck of air, the outside once more shut away. She peers round the door and observes her new sister-in-law in the hallway. Marin has covered her face, and her shoulders hunch; a pose of misery.