

GIRL IN HYACINTH *BLUE*

Susan Vreeland



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*For Scott Godfrey, D.O.,  
and Peter Falk, M.D.*



## Love Enough

Cornelius Engelbrecht invented himself. Let me emphasize, straight away, that he isn't what I would call a friend, but I know him enough to say that he did purposely design himself: single, modest dresser in receding colors, mathematics teacher, sponsor of the chess club, mild-mannered acquaintance to all rather than a friend to any, a person anxious to become invisible. However, that exterior blandness masked a burning center, and for some reason that became clear to me only later, Cornelius Engelbrecht revealed to me the secret obsession that lay beneath his orderly, controlled design.

It was after Dean Merrill's funeral that I began to see Cornelius's unmasked heart. We'd all felt the shock of Merrill's sudden death, a loss that thrust us

into a temporary intimacy uncommon in the faculty lunchroom of our small private boys' academy, but it wasn't shock or Cornelius's head start in drinking that snowy afternoon in Penn's Den where we'd gone after the funeral that made him forsake his strategy of obscurity. Someone at the table remarked about Merrill's cryptic last words, "love enough," words that now sting me as much as any indictment of my complicity or encouragement, but they didn't then. We began talking of last words of famous people and of our dead relatives, and Cornelius dipped his head and fastened his gaze on his dark beer. I only noticed because chance had placed us next to each other at the table.

He spoke to his beer rather than to any of us. "An eye like a blue pearl," was what my father said. And then he died. During a winter's first snowfall, just like this."

Cornelius had a face I'd always associated with Piero della Francesca's portrait of the Duke of Urbino. It was the shape of his nose, narrow but extremely high-bridged, providing a bench for glasses he did not wear. He seemed a man distracted by a

mystery or preoccupied by an intellectual or moral dilemma so consuming that it made him feel superior, above those of us whose concerns were tires for the car or a child's flu. Whenever our talk moved toward the mundane, he became distant, as though he were mulling over something far more weighty, which made his cool smiles patronizing.

"Eye like a blue pearl? What's that mean?" I asked.

He studied my face as if measuring me against some private criteria. "I can't explain it, Richard, but I might show you."

In fact, he insisted that I come to his home that evening, which was entirely out of character. I'd never seen him insist on anything. It would call attention to himself. I think Merrill's "love enough" had somehow stirred him, or else he thought it might stir me. As I say, why he picked me I couldn't tell, unless it was simply that I was the only artist or art teacher he knew.

He took me down a hallway into a spacious study piled with books, the door curiously locked even though he lived alone. Closed off, the room

was chilly so he lit a fire. "I don't usually have guests," he explained, and directed me to sit in the one easy chair, plum-colored leather, high-backed and expensive, next to the fireplace and opposite a painting. A most extraordinary painting in which a young girl wearing a short blue smock over a rust-colored skirt sat in profile at a table by an open window.

"My God," I said. It must have been what he'd wanted to hear, for it unleashed a string of directives, delivered at high pitch.

"Look. Look at her eye. Like a pearl. Pearls were favorite items of Vermeer. The longing in her expression. And look at that Delft light spilling onto her forehead from the window." He took out his handkerchief and, careful not to touch the painting, wiped the frame, though I saw no dust at all. "See here," he said, "the grace of her hand, idle, palm up. How he consecrated a single moment in that hand. But more than that—"

"Remarkable," I said. "Certainly done in the style of Vermeer. A beguiling imitation."

Cornelius placed his hands on the arm of the

chair and leaned toward me until I felt his breath on my forehead. "It is a Vermeer," he whispered.

I sputtered at the thought, the absurdity, his belief. "There were many done in the style of Vermeer, and of Rembrandt. School of Rubens, and the like. The art world is full of copyists."

"It is a Vermeer," he said again. The solemnity of his tone drew my eyes from the painting to him. He appeared to be biting the inside of his cheek. "You don't think so?" he asked, his hand going up to cover his heart.

"It's just that there are so few." I hated to disillusion the man.

"Yes, surely, very few. Very few. He did at the most forty canvases. And only a matter of thirty to thirty-five are located. *Welk een schat! En waar is dat alles gebleven?*"

"What's that?"

"Just the lament of some Dutch art historian. Where has such a treasure gone, or some such thing." He turned to pour us both a brandy. "So why could this not be? It's his same window opening inward at the left that he used so often, the

same splash of pale yellow light. Take a look at the figures in the tapestry on the table. Same as in nine other paintings. Same Spanish chair with lion's head finials that he used in eleven canvases, same brass studs in the leather. Same black and white tiles placed diagonally on the floor."

"Subject matter alone does not prove authenticity."

"Granted, but I take you to be a man of keen observation. You are an artist, Richard. Surely you can see that the floor suffers the same distortion of tiles he had in his earlier work, for example, *The Music Lesson*, roughly dated 1662 to '64, or *Girl with the Wineglass*, 1660."

I never would have guessed he knew all this. He reeled it off like a textbook. Well, so could I. "That can likewise prove it was done by an inferior imitator, or by van Mieris, or de Hooch. They all did tile floors. Holland was paved with tile."

"Yes, yes, I know. Even George III thought *The Music Lesson* was a van Mieris when he bought it, but even a king can't make it so. It's a Vermeer." He whispered the name.

I hardly knew what to say. It was too implausible.

He cleared off books and papers from the corner of his large oak desk, propped himself there and leaned toward me. "I can see you still doubt. Study, if you will, the varying depths of field. Take a look at the sewing basket placed forward on the table, as he often did, by the way, almost as an obstruction between the viewer and the figure. Its weave is diffused, slightly out of focus, yet the girl's face is sharply in focus. Look at the lace edge of her cap. Absolutely precise to a pinprick right there at her temple. And now look at the glass of milk. Soft-edged, and the map on the wall only a suggestion. Agreed?"

I nodded, more out of regard for his urgency than in accord.

"Well, then, he did the same in *The Lacemaker*, 1669. Which leads me to surmise this was done between 1665 and 1668."

I felt his eyes boring into me as I examined the painting. "You've amassed a great deal of information. Is there a signature?"

"No, no signature. But that was not unusual. He often failed to sign his work. Besides, he had at least seven styles of signature. For Vermeer, signatures are not definite evidence. Technique is. Look at the direction of the brush's stroke, those tiny grooves of the brush hairs. They have their lighted and their shaded side. Look elsewhere. You'll find overlapping layers of paint no thicker than silk thread that give a minute difference in shade. That's what makes it a Vermeer."

I walked toward the painting, took off my glasses to see that close, and it was as he had said. If I moved my head to the right or left, certain brush strokes subtly changed their tint. How difficult it was to achieve that. In other places the surface was so smooth the color must have floated onto the canvas. I suddenly found myself breathing fast. "Haven't you had it appraised? I know an art history professor who could come and have a look."

"No, no. I prefer it not be known. Security risks. I just wanted you to see it, because you can appreciate it. Don't tell a soul, Richard."

"But if it were validated by authorities . . . why, the value would be astronomical. A newly discovered Vermeer—it would rock the art world."

"I don't want to rock the art world." The blood vessel in his temple pulsed, whether out of conviction of the painting's authenticity or something else, I didn't know.

"Forgive my indelicacy, but how did you obtain it?"

He fixed on me a stony look. "My father, who always had a quick eye for fine art, picked it up, let us say, at an advantageous moment."

"An estate sale or an auction? Then there'd be papers."

"No. No Vermeer has been auctioned since World War I. Let's just say it was privately obtained. By my father, who gave it to me when he died." The line of his jaw hardened. "So there are no records, if that's what you're thinking. And no bill of sale." His voice had a queer defiance.

"The provenance?"

"There are several possibilities. Most of Vermeer's work passed through the hands of one

Pieter Claesz van Ruijven, son of a wealthy Delft brewer. I believe this one did not. When Vermeer died, he left his wife with eleven children and a drawerful of debts. Five hundred guilders for groceries. Another sum for woolens for which the merchant Jannetje Stevens seized twenty-six paintings. Later they were negotiated back to the widow, but only twenty-one of them were auctioned in the settling of his estate. Who got the other five? Artists or dealers in the Guild of St. Luke? Neighbors? Family? This could be one. And of those twenty-one, only sixteen have been identified. Where did the others go? A possibility there too. Also, a baker, Hendrick van Buyten, held two as collateral against a bread bill of six hundred seventeen guilders. Some think van Buyten had even obtained a couple others earlier.”

I had to be careful not to be taken in. Just because Cornelius knew facts about Vermeer didn't make his painting one.

“Later, it could have been sold as a de Hooch, whose work was more marketable at the time. Or it could have been thrown in as extra *puyk*, a give-

away item in the sale of a collection of de Hooches or van der Werffs, or it could have been in the estate sale of Pieter Tjammens in Groningen.”

He was beyond me now. What sort of person knew that kind of detail?

“Documents report only ‘an auction of curious paintings by important masters such as J. van der Meer that had been kept far away from the capital.’ There are plenty of possibilities.”

All this spilled out of him in a flood. A math teacher! Unbelievable.

But the question of how Cornelius's father obtained the painting, he deftly avoided. I did not know him well enough to press further without being pushy. Not knowing this which he so carefully kept private, I could not believe it to be genuine. I finished the brandy and extricated myself, politely enough, thinking, so what if it isn't a Vermeer? The painting's exquisite. Let the fellow enjoy it.

His father. Presumably the same name. Engelbrecht. German.

Why was it so vital that I concur? Some great thing must be hanging in the balance.



I drove home, trying to put it all out of my mind, yet the face of the girl remained.

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Merrill's funeral the day before had made Cornelius thoughtful. Not of Merrill particularly. Of the unpredictableness of one's end, and what remains unpardoned. And of his father. Snow had blanketed his father's coffin too—specks at first, then connecting, then piling up until the coffin became a white puffy loaf. That jowl-faced minister saying, "One must take notice of the measure of a man" was the only thing said during Merrill's service that he remembered.

Cornelius had to admit on his father's behalf that Otto Engelbrecht was a dutiful father, often stern and then suddenly tender during Cornelius's childhood in Duisburg, near the Dutch border. On this lonely Sunday afternoon with snow still falling gently, Cornelius, reading in his big leather chair, looked up from the page and tried to recall his earliest memory of his father. It may have been his father giving him the little wooden windmill brought back from Holland. It had painted blue blades that

turned and a little red door with one hinge missing that opened to reveal a tiny wooden family inside.

He remembered how his father had spent Sunday afternoons with him, the only child—took him to the Düsseldorf Zoo, gave him trumpet lessons himself, pulled him in a sled through the neighborhood, and when Cornelius suffered from the cold, how his father enfolded Cornelius's small hand in his and drew it into his pocket. He taught him chess strategies and made him memorize them, explained in a Dutch museum the reason for van Gogh's tortured skies, the genius of Rembrandt's faces, and when they moved to America, a result of his father's credo to seize advantageous moments, he took him to see the Yankees in Yankee Stadium. These facts Cornelius saw now as only the good intentions of a patched-up life.

Later, in Philadelphia, he was embarrassed by his father's hovering nervousness whenever he brought home a school friend, and understood only vaguely his father's dark command, "If they ask, tell them we are Swiss, and don't say another word." By the time he brought home friends from

college, his father had moved the painting into the study and installed a lock, secreting it with a niggard's glee. His father's self-satisfied posture whenever he looked at the painting—hands clasped behind his back, rocking on his toes, then heels—became, for a time, a source of nausea to him.

After his mother died, his father, retired and restless, took over tending her garden. Cornelius remembered now the ardent slope of his shoulders as he stooped to eradicate any deviant weed sprouting between rows of cauliflower and cabbage. Did he have to be so relentless? Couldn't he just let one grow, and say I don't know how it slipped through? Joyfully he planted, watered, gave away grocery sacks of vegetables to neighbors.

"Such wonderful tomatoes," one woman marveled.

"You can't get a decent tomato in the supermarket these days." Smiling, he heaped more in her sack.

"We had a victory garden like this during the war," she said, and Cornelius saw him flinch.

Was that his father's Luger, grown huge in his mind, cracking down on a woman's hand reaching for a bun as she was hurried from her kitchen?

The line between memory and imagination was muddled by years of intense rumination, of horrified reading, one book after another devoured with carnivorous urgency—histories, personal accounts, diaries, documents, war novels—and Cornelius could not be sure now what parts he'd read, what parts he'd overheard his father, Lieutenant Otto Engelbrecht, telling Uncle Friederich about the Raid of the Two Thousand, what became known to academics as Black Thursday, August 6, 1942.

From dark to midnight, they dragged them out of their houses, the raid ordered, historians said, because too few Jews called-up for deportation were reporting at the station, and the train to Westerbork had to be filled. By mid-August they moved to South Amsterdam, a more prosperous area. In September, they were still at it, carting them off to Zentralstelle on van Scheltema Square.

Just like the assembly line at the Duisburg plant. From somewhere, his father's voice.

The rest was a tangle of the printed and the spoken word, enlarged by the workings of his imagination. He played in his mind again the Duisburg memory of creeping back downstairs after bedtime and overhearing his father telling Uncle Friederich the story he, a ten-year-old, didn't understand then. This time he staged it as though his father, after too much Scotch, and bloated by a checkmate following too many losses to Friederich, told his brother when in family circles it was still safe to speak, "You've got to see opportunities and seize them on the spot. That's how it's done. Or, if a quick move isn't expedient, make a plan. Like that painting. When my aide spotted a silver tea set in some Jew's dining room, he made a move to bag it. Wrong time. I had to stop him. Property of the Führer."

Cornelius had read of that, the Puls van following the raids the next day, street by street, to cart away ownerless Jewish possessions for the Hausraterfassung, the Department for the Appropriation of Household Effects.

"That's when I saw that painting, behind his head. All blues and yellows and reddish brown, as

translucent as lacquer. It had to be a Dutch master. Just then a private found a little kid covered with tablecloths behind some dishes in a sideboard cabinet. We'd almost missed him. My aide glared at me, full of accusation that I could slip like that and be distracted. With any excuse—the painting, for example, or my reprimand—he might even have reported it."

What always rang in his mind with the crash of dishes, Cornelius would never now be sure was memory or his own swollen imagination: "So I shoved my boot up the Jew-boy's dirty ass. But I took care to note the house number."

What had happened next wasn't difficult to piece together. As soon as they delivered their quota, at 1:00 or 2:00 A.M., while other Jews still lay frozen in their hiding places and when the streets were dead quiet, his father went back. The painting was still there, hanging in spite of Decree 58/42, reported in several histories: All Jewish art collections had to be deposited with Lippmann and Rosenthal, a holding company. But this was not a collection, only a single painting, blatantly dis-

played, or ignorantly. What could his father have thought? That therefore it deserved to be taken? And then would come his father's voice resounding somehow through the years, "By the time I got there, the tea set was already gone."

Going over the same visions he thought his father had, hoped his father had, kept Cornelius awake at night, filled his dreams with the orgy of plunder, mothers not chosen lining up to die, pain not linked to sin, smoke drifting across fences and coating windows of Christian homes, children's teeth like burnt pearls. Driven by imagination, he read like a zealot on two subjects: Dutch art and the German occupation of the Netherlands. Only one gave him pleasure. Only one might dissolve the image of his father's hat and boots and Luger.

Compelled by his need to know, Cornelius traveled to Amsterdam one summer. He avoided van Scheltema Square, went straight to the Rijksmuseum, examined breathlessly Vermeer's works, and in one delicious afternoon, convinced himself of the authenticity of his family's prize by seeing layers of thin paint applied in grooved brush strokes cre-

ating light and shadow on the blue sleeve of a lady reading a letter, just like those on the sleeve of his sewing girl. A few days later he went to The Hague. At the Royal Cabinet of Paintings in the Mauritshuis, he saw points of brilliant light in the large, lovely amber-brown eyes of Vermeer's girl in a blue and yellow turban, the same as on his sewing girl. In the musty municipal archives of Delft, Amsterdam, Leiden and Groningen he pored through old documents and accounts of estate sales. He found only possibilities, no undeniable evidence. Still, the evidence was in the museums—the similarities were undeniable. He flew home, hoarding conviction like a stolen jewel.

"It is. It is," he told his father.

Then came the slow smile that cracked his father's face. "I knew it had to be."

Together they went over every square inch of the painting, seduced anew by its charms, yet the rapture was insufficient to drown out the truth Cornelius could no longer deny: If the painting were real, so was the atrocity of his father's looting. He'd had no other way to obtain it. Now with

Friederich and his mother gone, only two in the whole world knew, and that, together with the twin images in their dreams, bound them willingly or not into a double kinship.

He started to tell someone else once, his one-time wife who had laughed when he said it was a Vermeer. Laughed, and asked how his father got it, and he couldn't say, and her laughter jangled in his ears long afterward. She claimed he turned cold to her after that, and within a year she left, saying he loved things rather than people. The possible truth of the accusation haunted him with all the rest.

After his father's stroke, when the money from such a painting would set him up finely in a rest home, Cornelius agonized. Even an inquiry to a dealer might bring Israeli agents to his father's door with guns and extradition papers efficiently negotiated by the internationally operating Jewish Documentation Center, and a one-way plane ticket to Jerusalem, courtesy of the Mossad. More than a thousand had been hunted down so far, and not just Reichskommissars or SS Commandants either, so Cornelius moved back home to care for him.

Finally, when there would be no more afternoons of wheeling him, freshly bathed and shaven, out to the sun of the garden, when pain clutched through the drugs, his father murmured fragments, in German, the language he'd left behind. In a room soured by the smell of dying, a smell Cornelius knew his father could recognize, Otto whispered, "Bring the painting in."

When they both knew the end was close, Cornelius heard, faintly, "I only joined because of the opportunity to make lifelong friendships with people on the rise."

Cornelius sniggered, then spooned crushed ice between his father's parched lips.

"I only saw the trains. That's all I knew."

He wiped with a tissue a dribble inching down his father's chin, and waited for his father's breath, suspended in indecision, to come again.

"No more than forwarding agents. Sending them from one address to another. What happened at the other end was none of my business."

Right. Of course. This way for the trains, please. Careful, madam. Watch your step. Coolly Cor-

nelius watched a pain worm across his father's forehead. How had he deserved to live so long?

"The thought of opposing or evading orders never entered my head."

Precisely.

Like a moulting snake, Cornelius thought, his father made pathetic efforts to shed the skin of sin in order to get down to the marrow of his innocence in time. But on the last morning, with opaque gray snow fog closing in, came the truth of his grief: "I never reached a high rank."

That allowed Cornelius to bury him inexpensively. Without notice. It wasn't a cruel thing, he told himself. Call it a memorial act, aimed at cheating the world of its triumph by ignominy, but by its very privacy, it failed. He did his best, that is, while his father was still living, did what he could, what he could pry out of himself. Nobody could say he didn't. Alone in this same study, sitting in his father's leather chair that struck him now as being the color of a bruise, he'd read the will. He'd forced his eyes to register each line and not scan down the page to see what he knew he'd see, that

"a painting of a young girl sewing at a window" was his.

Now, for good or ill, there it hung. He felt its presence whenever he came into the room.

On this silent Sunday afternoon, years after his father's quiet burial, and the day after Merrill's, Cornelius sat in the same study, his now, reading Eichmann's trial records and drinking rum and coffee. Outside his window a heavy snow was flattening what had been his father's garden, and across the city it was pressing down on the new grave of Dean Merrill. Inside, he looked up, saw the life in the girl's eyes, and wished—no, longed for someone, Richard, anyone to enjoy the painting with him. No, not just anyone. Richard was safe. He knew art but not art dealers. That old wild need rumbled up from some molten place within, that need to say, "Look at this stupendous achievement. Look at this Vermeer. Pay attention on your knees to greatness."

At least he'd had that with his father. Once, years earlier, his father had called him long distance when he discovered what he thought was a brush

hair left in a mullion of the window. That hair, from Vermeer's own brush, ah! He should have shown it to Richard. To dissolve his doubt. Once he believed, Richard would have the passion to enjoy it like his father had.

His eyes fell to the page and stuck on a line said by Eichmann's judge: "The process of extermination was a single, all embracing operation, and cannot be divided into individual deeds." No. He didn't agree. He thought of the nameless, graveless little boy kicked out the door who may have played with a wooden toy his last free morning in the world.

Did the toy windmill get appropriated too? A souvenir from some hapless Jewish home taken at an advantageous moment in spite of its missing hinge? He imagined his father encased in a glass booth, being interrogated: "And did you not remove this windmill from the house at 72 Rijnstraat after breaking in on the night of 3 September, 1942?" His own third birthday.

Willed or not, the painting didn't belong to him.

It would be doing penance for his father if he himself wouldn't enjoy it more. He tore newspaper into strips, fanned them out and crumpled them over the grate. Then the kindling, crosswise, then the quartered logs. The fireplace opening was barely wide enough. He was grateful it wasn't a large painting; it would be a shame to do it injury with a razor.

He stood up to lift the painting off the wall. This one last afternoon, he would allow himself a luxury he'd never permitted himself before: He touched her cheek. A quiver ran through his body as the age cracks passed beneath the pads of his fingertips. He stroked her neck and was surprised he could not grasp the tie string hanging from her cap. And then her shoulder, and he was astonished he could not feel its roundness. She hardly had breasts. He moistened his lips suddenly gone dry, and touched there too, more delicately, two fingers only, and felt himself give in to a great wave of embarrassed and awkward pity, as when one glances in a hospital doorway at a person partially naked.

Where her skirt gathered, he felt the grooves left by Jan's brush. Jan. Johannes. No. Jan. The familiar name the only appropriate one for a moment like this. Jan's brush. He thought perhaps his fingers were too rough to feel Jan's mastery. He went to the bathroom, shaved with a new razor, dried his face carefully, and, back in his study leaning toward the wall, he placed his cheek next to her dress. The shock of its coldness knifed through him.

He had no right to this.

He laid the painting on the carpet and lit the fire. Kneeling, waiting for the flames to catch, he imagined them creeping toward the pale blue pearl of her eye. The quiet intensity of her longing stilled his hand a moment more.

If he turned the painting over, maybe he could do it.

Such an act of selfishness, he thought, to destroy for personal peace what rightly belonged to the world at large, a piece of the mosaic of the world's fine art. That would be an act equally cruel as any of his father's.

No. Nothing would be. Not just his father's

looting—the safe job of thievery behind the battle lines—not just his father's routing them out, but the whole connected web. In Eichmann's trial record, he'd read, "The legal responsibility of those who deliver the victim to his death is, in our eyes, no less than that of those who kill the victim," and he'd agreed.

Now, waiting for the fullness of the flame, it occurred to him, if the painting wasn't authentically a Vermeer—after all, he had no solid proof—he could do it, couldn't he? He could burn the thing, put the whole sorry business to rest so as not to keep his nerves raw.

Yet if it weren't genuine, the enormity of the crime shrank. Why not enjoy the painting? It was still exquisite. He looked again at her honey-colored profile, as yet unmarked by cruelty or wisdom. The throat moist with warmth from sunlight pouring into the room. The waxen idleness of her hand. So exquisite it had to be a Vermeer. He'd staked his solitude on it. He felt the injustice, looking at the girl, that she would never be known as a creation of Vermeer. He had to get Richard to ad-



mit that it was a Vermeer, and then he'd do it another day. A promise.

In spite of his paintings, Vermeer was among the dead. And his father, and the boy. Cornelius's life, like theirs, like Merrill's, was measured. He wouldn't live forever. He had to know that his years of narrow, lonely anxiety had been required. He had put himself together so carefully: allowing himself no close friends with whom it would be natural to invite to his house; teaching math, which he liked less, rather than history because of what he'd be forced to discuss; taking care to behave identically to people of all races and religions; suppressing anything in himself that might be construed as cruel or rigid or German—and now this boiling need threatening to crack the eggshell of his scrupulously constructed self. The one thing he craved, to be believed, struck at odds with the thing he most feared, to be linked by blood with his century's supreme cruelty. He'd have to risk exposure for the pure pleasure of delighting with another, now that his father was gone, in the luminescence of her eye. To delight for a day, and then to free himself. A promise.

But Richard still did not believe. He had left the night before saying, "Whether it's an authentic Vermeer or not, it is a marvelous painting." Marvelous painting, marvelous painting. That was not enough. There were hundreds of marvelous paintings in this city. This was a *Vermeer*. Nothing less from Richard would satisfy. He had to find some authentic reason for living as he had. The possibility of illegitimacy of what he'd suffered for was like a voice that had the power to waken him from a dream, but the dream gripped hard, as it does to an awakened, crying child, and he would not give it up.

Richard had admired the work. He was, perhaps, only a brush hair's breadth away from believing. The relief from sharing with one person who did not laugh was intoxicating. Why he didn't do it years ago, he couldn't say. He'd wasted years in a miser's clutch, protecting a father who had protected no one. He wanted more. For the first time, he imagined himself telling it all, the history and his father's part of it, so Richard would believe, telling it with burning eyes right there in front of

the painting, and he would not die. He would not die from shame.

He kept repeating it—*I will not die*—while the flames burnt down to coals.

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The painting bound me to Cornelius with a curious tie, compelling but misbegotten, so that when I saw him mornings at the faculty mail room, the thought of that strange, secretive evening and his perverse insistence troubled me still. I felt I'd been plucked by the sleeve and commanded to follow him into a dangerous sea of judgment that could rise up against me as well.

We kept a coded language. One day I asked, not to goad him, but strictly as an aesthetics issue, "Would you enjoy it any less if you were to learn it wasn't authentic?"

"But it is."

"Yes, but just supposing it weren't?"

"I don't have to think about that. I know."

His bloated sureness irritated me.

I had the distinct impression that he was not at home in the world, and I knew it had to do with

that painting. I did a bit of reading, talked to my art historian friend, and one Friday afternoon in the parking lot at school I asked him, "Did you know that a Dutch painter named van Meergeren forged some Vermeers in the 1930s?" He froze there by his car. "So real he had the art critics and curators believing him?"

"Yes, I was aware of that." Cornelius straightened up stiffly.

"And you know how they found out? He sold a few to that Nazi, Goering, and the Dutch government arrested him for treason—collaborating with the enemy, letting Dutch masters leak out of Holland into the hands of the Reichstag. And so he confessed."

Cornelius's eyes darted back to his car where his hand trembled trying to find the keyhole. In that quiver I knew I had inadvertently stumbled onto something. Maybe he knew it was only a Van Meergeren all along, and was trying to make a dupe of me, or sell it to me for an exorbitant price. A friend might let it pass, but we were only colleagues, committed, both of us, the mathematician

and the artist, to truth. "I'd like to see it again, if you wouldn't mind," I said.

"Whenever you'd like," he said, all cordiality, and made a move to get into his car.

"How about now?"

He stood still a moment, gathering himself, it seemed to me. "No time like the present."

In the daylight the painting was even more magnificent than I remembered it. I sank into the chair in a trance. The luster of the glass of milk shining like the surface of a pearl made me believe—this was no copyist's art—but Cornelius's puffed-up manner the weeks before made me obstinate.

Yet now he had none of that smugness. There was only the intense pleasure of the painting. Lovingly he pored over its surface with an intimacy I hadn't noticed before in his flood of facts. If ever a man loved a work of art, it was Cornelius. His face shone with the adoration of a pilgrim for the icon of his God.

"I'd like to believe. It's not that I want to kill your own belief. But there's still one huge question."

"Which is?"

"Cornelius, you and I are teachers. Our fathers weren't millionaires. Unless you tell me how he obtained it, I don't see how—"

The radiance drained from his face.

I let the suggestion lie there and took a sip of the beer he'd brought me. He finished his in one long, thoughtful draft, and held on to the bottle after he'd set it down, as if to anchor himself. I waited.

"I grew up in Duisburg, near the Dutch border . . .," he began, keeping his gaze riveted to the young girl while he spoke of his childhood, as though ingesting strength from her calm.

"And here, after sweating through a high school history class, I asked in spite of Mother's solemn warning never to ask, 'What did you do in the war, Dad?' 'Worked in Amsterdam,' was all he said. Just like it was a job. 'Yes, but what did you do?' I asked. 'I have a right to know.' His body stopped all motion even out to his fingertips, as if he were feeling the first tremors of an earthquake. 'Took them to the trains,' he said."

Cornelius turned to me then.

"He took me to Yankee Stadium. Kept my hand warm in his own pocket. Planted daffodils for my mother. If I could have wept, if he had not trained it out of me . . . after that, he never was the same to me."

Cornelius's eyes, when he told me of the boy in the cabinet, became glazed like melted glass, and there was a hardness to his voice when he told of the missing tea set. When he said he'd tried to burn the painting, his whole body shook, and he slumped down at his desk, spent.

Worse, a hundred times worse than I'd thought. That he had tried to destroy it, I could hardly believe. That he thought such an act might atone sickened me. I did not, I was sorry to learn, find in myself any generosity or charitableness for this man in spite of his suffering.

Clutching the edge of his desk with both hands, he leaned toward me, his forehead a torture of grooves above that hook of a nose. "You won't tell, will you, the others at school? You see, now that you . . . now that one person in the world sees

that it's authentic, it's all worthwhile, don't you think?"

His upper lip twitched in a repulsive way as though tugged by a thread. It became clear to me then why he picked me. He thought an artist might excuse, out of awe for the work, and if I excused, the painting could live.

"What happened to the boy?"

He stammered a moment, unable to put into words what we both knew.

"You know what they say, Cornelius. One good burning deserves another."

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

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