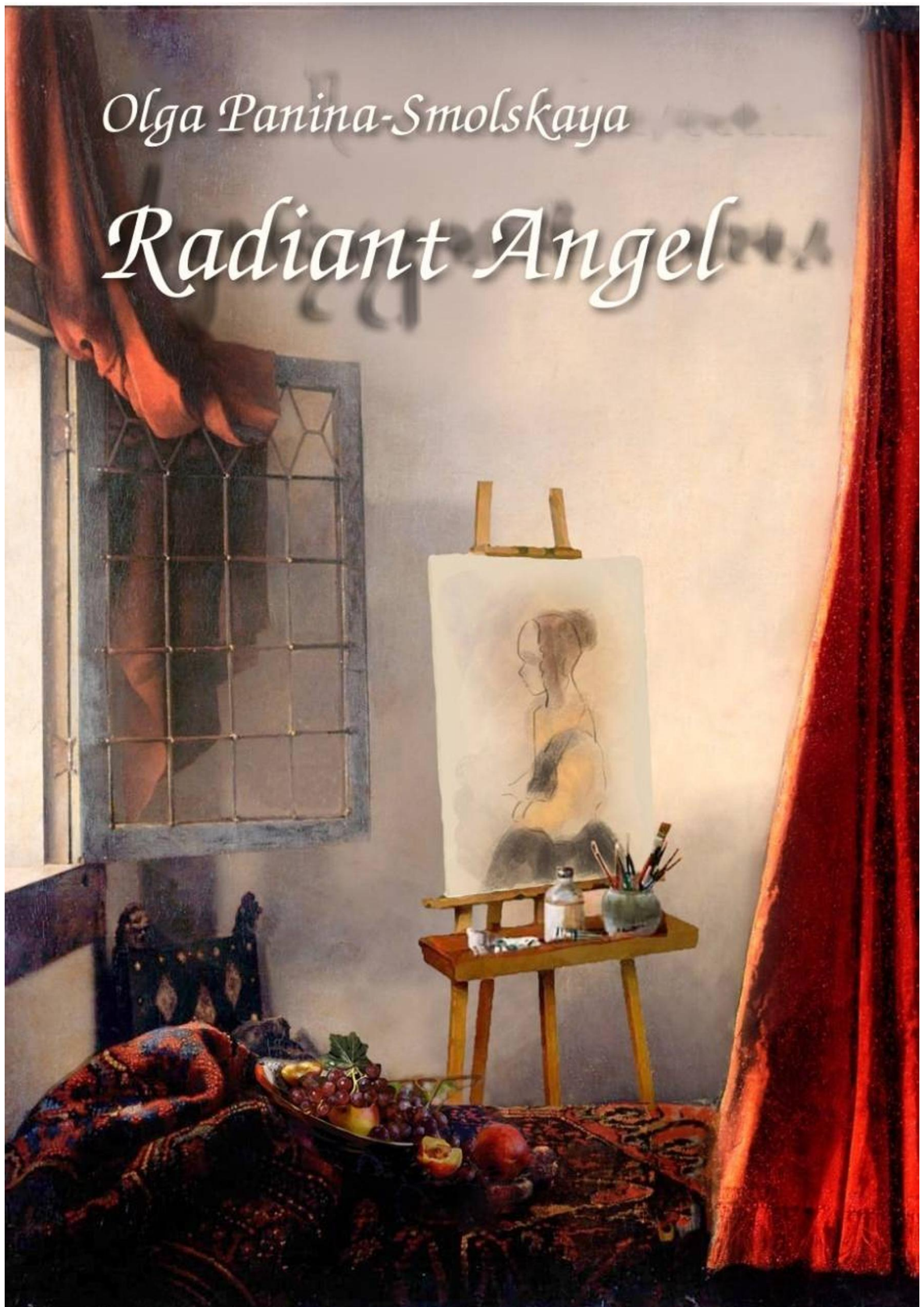


Olga Panina-Smolenskaya

Radiant Angel



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Radiant Angel

«Автор»

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I have written a novella about the life and work of the 17th-century Dutch painter Jan Vermeer of Delft. I warmly invite you to read it.

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Radiant Angel (corrected translation)

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A Historical Fantasy about the Life, Art, and Love of the 17th-Century Dutch Painter Johannes Vermeer of Delft

Chapter 1: The Betrothal of Jan and Catharina

A young man of medium height, strong, well-built, and quick, wearing a long dark cloak and a wide-brimmed hat, from under which thick, wavy chestnut hair fluttered in the wind, was walking hurriedly through the narrow streets of Delft, holding a bouquet of crimson roses in his hand. The sparse rays of the Dutch spring sun, struggling to break through the dense clouds, played upon his face, making it seem as though the young man was smiling. Or perhaps he truly was smiling, for he was rushing to the betrothal to his beloved girl, Catharina!

This event had been postponed several times. The reason lay in the fact that Catharina's mother, Maria Thins, was opposed to the marriage. Their family adhered to Catholicism, whereas her daughter's chosen one—the artist Jan Vermeer—was a Protestant. Furthermore, Maria believed that he lacked business acumen, being a man of art to his core, and therefore a dreamer "not of this world," and she doubted whether he would be able to properly support his family.

Catharina was accustomed to living in comfort, knowing no want. Her father, Reynier Bolnes, a prosperous brickworks owner, enjoyed a considerable income. He managed his business skillfully but possessed a difficult character—despotic, coarse, and cruel, frequently mistreating his wife and children. Because of this, Maria Thins had divorced him, though she remained a wealthy woman. Having had her own difficult experience of an unhappy marriage in the past, she loved and spoiled her daughter and worried deeply for her future.

One evening, three respected citizens paid Maria a visit: the painter Leonaert Bramer*, Captain Bartholomeus Melling, and the lawyer Jan Rank. They came to convince the woman that their protégé—the young and talented artist Vermeer—was a good match for her daughter. Catharina's entreaties also played a significant role. Reluctantly, Maria gave her consent to the union. "Bramer assures me that Vermeer is a worthy, noble young man, and everyone in town knows that his father was a good family man, business-minded and practical," she reasoned, trying to soothe herself with these arguments. "He bequeathed an inn and a tavern to his son, was a member of the Guild of Saint Luke in his time, an experienced weaver, and, moreover, traded in works of art. Surely these qualities of the father must manifest in the son's character over time..."

Catharina had fallen in love with Jan from their very first meeting. A bright spark instantly ignited in her heart. "He is so different from everyone else!" she thought, her breath catching. The young painter seemed to have cast a spell on her, calling her into his world, and she was willing to follow him even to the ends of the earth!

And on that happy day of their acquaintance, Jan realized immediately that this girl was made for him, that only she, and no other, would be his wife!

It had happened at a dinner party hosted by their mutual acquaintance Margaret, an ardent admirer of music and the arts. On a spring day, a large company gathered at her house. Jan arrived last and was introduced to the hostess's friends. They all bowed politely, stating their names. He knew almost all the men gathered at Margaret's house—they were painters, poets, and musicians. Jan warmly greeted his friend Pieter de Hooch, bowed to Gerard ter Borch*, who was visiting Delft briefly on business, and greeted with great warmth his mentor Carel Fabritius, who had once studied under the great Rembrandt*** and was considered his best pupil.

Margaret asked Carel why he had come without his spouse, and the artist replied that she was unwell due to a cold. The hostess shook her head with regret:

"I wish her a speedy recovery. In spring, especially in our climate, the weather is very deceptive, and one must take care of oneself."

While waiting for dinner, the guests engaged in lively conversation. Jan joined the general chatter. Several of Margaret's friends were busy at the table, setting out the utensils (in those days in Holland, noble ladies did not consider it beneath them to perform simple housework alongside the maids). A beautifully dressed girl entered the hall, carrying pastries on a large blue delftware plate—stately, blooming, fair-haired, with a gentle smile on her delicate oval face. Following her, a middle-aged but brisk maid brought in a dish of oysters. Jan admired the young stranger and her soft, cat-like, supple movements. She leaned over the table to set down the pastries, allowing the young man to notice the enticing contours of her slightly exposed bosom.

The stranger was not an irresistible beauty, but there was something more to her than cold, flawless comeliness. Her almost childlike charm, reflecting a purity of soul, immediately captivated Jan.

The girl's soft, golden-brown hair was smoothly combed back and gathered in a bun at the top, while a red ribbon shaped like a five-petaled flower adorned the side of her head. *How touching!* Vermeer thought. A yellow satin jacket trimmed with ermine fur fit her shoulders beautifully, shimmering like gold in the candlelight (it seemed to be a source of light itself). Pearl earrings played in her ears like large, shining droplets, and on the girl's delicate neck, Jan noticed a string of large pearls. These ornaments, mesmerizing with their mother-of-pearl luster, brought to mind warm seas and oceans, the splashing of waves, wondrous shells, and mysterious fish in the depths of the sea. *That is exactly how I will paint her! I must paint her!* he thought at the moment the stranger, accompanied by the hostess, walked toward him to exchange greetings and introductions.

"Catharina Bolnes, my lovely friend," Margaret introduced the girl, and a faint blush bloomed on Catharina's cheeks.

Vermeer bowed and gave his name, while the hostess hurried over to the other guests.

"I have already heard of you and your talent," a smile illuminated Catharina's face.

"And who went to such trouble?" Jan asked, surprised.

"Ah, that I will not tell you," the girl replied playfully.

Jan smelled of paint, and this greatly thrilled Catharina. She did not find the artist's intense gaze presumptuous—Vermeer's attention was pleasing and flattering to her. This penetrating look made her think that Jan resembled a clear-eyed falcon. She kept trying to discern the color of his eyes: were they dark gray or brown?

"If I invite you to dance later, will you not refuse?" asked Vermeer, whose heart was already rejoicing in anticipation of happiness.

"I suppose I won't," Catharina replied with sweet coquetry, tilting her head slightly to the side, causing her red ribbon to flutter like a flower in the wind.

The hostess invited everyone to the table. There were about twelve guests. The young men helped the ladies seat themselves comfortably, pulling out leather-upholstered chairs with embossed patterns on the backs and seats. One of the poets read his verses dedicated to spring with deep feeling. After the first toasts, the room instantly became noisy and cheerful. The maid repeatedly served wine and appetizers to the guests.

"Did you know that our Holland is called a country that smells of herring?" one of the young men asked.

"Well, that is true," Margaret replied, "and I see nothing wrong with that."

"Though we may smell of herring, we are a strong people: our ships roam the open seas, we have colonies in the East and in America, and we fight for every inch of our land, refusing to let the sea swallow it up... What can I say, our Holland is a country of victors, a country of democracy..."

Gerard ter Borch declared with pride, clearly taking pleasure in his words. His plain, elongated face seemed illuminated from within.

"Exactly, it is not about colonies and material wealth, but about the fact that freedom and equality are declared the primary values of our society and are truly so to us," the poet who had previously read the verses about spring continued somewhat grandly.

"And our scientists and artists!" a musician chimed in. "We have much to be proud of! And we need not look far: some of them are right at our table."

"Yes, in our small country, there are more painters than in the whole of Europe combined, and what painters!" smiled one of Margaret's friends.

"I propose a toast to Holland and the Dutch!" Vermeer exclaimed with enthusiasm, raising his glass.

Catharina cast an admiring glance at him. The feasting continued. Soon the musicians began to play, and the young men started inviting the ladies to dance. Jan approached Catharina, bowed slightly to her, and she gave him her hand. There was so much feminine grace, warmth toward him, and a kind of inner tremor in her gesture that Jan's heart filled with tenderness.

He thought that this year of 1653 had turned out to be exceptionally fortunate for him—he had met the kind of girl he could only dream of, and by all appearances, she favored him. How beautifully everything was falling into place! So beautifully, in fact, that it became frightening to lose it all... *If only fate will be merciful to us!* flashed through his mind. But the anxious thoughts vanished as quickly as they had appeared. Jan shook his head as if chasing away sudden fears the way one shooes away bothersome mosquitoes, smiled at Catharina, who looked delightful, flushed from the dance, and paid her a compliment. He wanted to fully enjoy this happiness, so sudden and overwhelming, and think or worry about nothing else!

When the dance ended, the young man kissed the girl's hand and suggested they step over to the window. Their reflections drifted across an oval mirror hanging on the wall, and the artist noted that he and this young enchantress looked wonderful together!

The candle flames reflected in Catharina's brown eyes, making them resemble two radiant pieces of amber. Conversing with the girl, Jan stood very close to her, feeling her warm breath and catching his breath from the fruity fragrance of her body. This aroma reminded him of the scent of ripe peaches—yes, precisely peaches—so delicate, barely perceptible, and alluring... The painter imagined himself in a beautiful garden among fruitful trees and fragrant flowers, over which bees bustled busily, gathering sweet nectar, and birds sang with all their might—a garden where everything was infused with the inexhaustible joy of life and happiness!

The young man adjusted the lace on his white shirt and asked Catharina if she played any musical instrument. The girl replied that she had learned to play the harpsichord and had taken singing lessons. Jan asked her to perform something. A flutist and a violinist offered to play along with Catharina, but she declined. Looking at Jan with a smile, she sat down at the harpsichord, leisurely smoothing the folds of her dress, began to play, and started to sing. Her voice was pure and clear, and her sensitive fingers touched the keys habitually and deftly. The sounds of her voice, blending with the notes of the instrument, echoed in Jan's heart with bursts of joy.

The eye of the enamored artist noted every detail—Vermeer mentally transferred everything he saw onto canvas. *But how best to convey this mood, the atmosphere, and the light diffused within it? How to capture this light? That is the ultimate challenge!* he mused, continuing to admire Catharina.

Finishing her performance, the girl stood up and, responding to the applause, bowed with emotion, still under the spell of the music that had just faded away. Jan looked at her with pride.

One of the guests invited Catharina to play a game of trick-track. She agreed and, smiling conspiratorially at Jan, walked past him, her dress rustling. At that moment, Carel Fabritius approached him.

"Well, how is your progress?" he asked. "Are the new works moving along slowly?"

"Yes, I continue to experiment," Jan replied. "As you know, I relentlessly struggle with how to harmonize color and light. Some things are already working out thanks to your advice. It is difficult to find the key to these mysteries... It is a long road."

"Each of us has our own path..." Carel said thoughtfully. "Previously you practiced your hand in Bramer's workshop, which is a good school, but I have already told you that you should not imitate him or anyone else: you possess such a gift that you will certainly be ahead of everyone. You only need to find your own theme and develop what you already have."

"Do you hold me in such high esteem?" Vermeer asked with embarrassment. "I did not even expect it. But you are incomparably above us all: the freedom with which you paint is magnificent! And your brushwork, and your light... One can only hope to approach it..."

"That is an exaggeration. I, too, am constantly searching for the key to all these secrets."

Margaret loudly announced that after the dancing and games, she was once again inviting everyone to the table—to drink tea with sweet pie and sample exotic fruits. Everyone sat down cheerfully and continued socializing. Jan, sitting next to Catharina, leaned toward her—noticing, with the eye of both an artist and an enamored man, that the girl not only smelled of peaches but also had a peach-like complexion—and whispered:

"May I invite you on a date?"

In response, Catharina cast a quick glance at him.

"Shall we meet next Thursday by the New Church?" Jan continued anxiously. "I will finish work around four o'clock that day. Will you come?"

"Very well," the girl replied quietly. "I will tell Mother that I am going to see my godmother, and my godmother will surely support me."

"I will be eagerly waiting for this meeting," Jan whispered fervently.

Catharina lowered her eyes to hide the emotions that overwhelmed her.

The candles were burning down. The guests thanked the hostess and began to disperse. The young men offered to escort the ladies home. Jan walked with Catharina, holding her arm.

"Where do you live, sweet Catharina?" he asked, and the girl gave her answer.

Jan was surprised and puzzled to learn that she lived in the Catholic quarter, but he tried to hide it. *Nothing will prevent us from being together!* he thought. Then it occurred to him to ask her where she had met Margaret.

"At a well-known milliner's," came the reply. "We were placing orders and began to consult each other on which fabrics were best to choose. That is how we met."

Having escorted Catharina to her house, Jan kissed her hand in farewell and reminded her of their date.

"I will certainly come," the girl assured him, blushing deeply.

For all the following days, it seemed to Catharina that time dragged on endlessly. She seemed to see Jan everywhere—all her thoughts were occupied with him. Looking out the window, she would invariably see someone who resembled Jan, and when she and the maid went shopping, she scrutinized everyone who bore even a remote resemblance to him. Jan appeared to her in dreams, and in the mornings, she tried to reconstruct these dreams in her memory. But sometimes at night, her mentally ill brother Willem would rage in the next room; the girl would wake up, and her reveries would vanish.

"Something is happening to you," her mother noted one day. "You have become so distracted!"

"No, no, it is just your imagination, I am perfectly fine," her daughter replied quickly, trying to compose herself, though it was not easy.

Catharina performed her household chores as quickly and deftly as before, but mechanically. She was afraid that her mother would find out about her feelings for the painter prematurely, and she carefully concealed these emotions, for Jan had not yet confessed his love or proposed to her.

On Thursday at the appointed time, she stood by the fence of the New Church, shifting slightly from foot to foot. A gusty wind, full of the thrilling spirit of spring, bold and exultant, tugged at her

clothes and tried to tear off her head covering. Jan was late, and Catharina began to grow nervous, but then she decided that he must have serious business at the guild or an important meeting. At last, she saw the familiar silhouette and smiled joyfully. The young man was walking fast, very fast, and when he drew near, they rushed toward each other as if they had not seen one another for long months!

"I was delayed by business, but I hurried so!" He pressed Catharina's hands to his chest. "I thought of you constantly, I missed you terribly! I simply did not know how to survive until this hour!"

"I felt the same," the girl allowed the young man to embrace her and felt how warm and cozy she was in his arms.

They walked along the embankment beside the canal, chatting about everything under the sun, skipping from topic to topic. Catharina animatedly answered Jan's questions and asked about his life and his paintings. An hour or more flew by unnoticed. The girl became so engrossed in the conversation that she almost forgot her godmother's invitation to come over for dinner. Remembering, she told Jan, and he agreed.

Agnes, an amiable middle-aged woman, was delighted by the guests and called them to the table. After dinner, as was the custom, they began to play music. The godmother played the lute beautifully, and Jan loved the soft, crooning voice of that instrument. Agnes and her goddaughter sang more than one duet, which brought great pleasure to everyone. Suddenly Catharina realized that it was quite late, and Jan went to escort her home.

When the young people reached the bridge over the canal, the girl suggested:

"Let us stand by the water for a little while."

"Let us," Jan agreed.

"Sometimes, on my way somewhere, I stop here and look at the boats and barges—usually when Mother sends me to the market for groceries or with treats for my godmother."

Twilight enveloped the city, and it suddenly seemed somehow special, full of mystery, intended for the two of them alone. Singing could be heard somewhere in the distance. The early stars, yellow and not yet bright, peeked timidly through the swiftly drifting clouds that resembled huge, billowing sails.

"Every time I look at our sky, I never cease to marvel: what colors, tones, and half-tones!" Jan said with delight. "Look, over there the clouds are deep lilac and jet-black, and following them drift burgundy-red ones with yellow and greenish stripes..."

"True! I, too, sometimes cannot tear my eyes away from such a sky, but more often than not it is gray here, like unbleached linen."

"But try to look closer at it even then—and you will see what you could not discern before. It is so fascinating! There are things you do not see right away."

"I will try to look closer, but will I really see something else?"

"Undoubtedly!"

"Many call our sky dull and colorless..."

"But to me, it is always thrilling and mysterious. I dream of painting a view of Delft such that the sky occupies the greater part of the canvas, and showing how the clouds drift after the rain—slow, majestic, while the silhouette of the city will be visible from afar like something beautiful... I want to divide the canvas into four parts: the embankment, the river, the buildings, and the vast sky. I do not know if I will succeed in reflecting on canvas all the charm of our city and our sky as I see it... For now, these are only plans. I do not like to rush such things; the conception must mature."

Having listened to Jan, Catharina asked slyly:

"I hope I will be the first to see the painting?"

"Of course. It is just a small matter—it remains only to paint it," the artist replied jokingly.

Below, dark and shimmering like antique silver, the water gleamed. Jan, pointing to the light, gray-olive waves, said:

"Look, Catharina, in the water, as in a mysterious mirror, the clouds, the shadows of passing birds, the light of distant stars are reflected... And the wind, like an artist, paints its own picture. One could compose a fairy tale about this."

"How beautiful it is," the girl whispered.

"It is all thanks to you. You inspire me."

Catharina's eyes were very close, those eyes shining brightly in the twilight. Jan's gaze dissolved in them. The young man embraced the girl and gently touched his lips to hers. His heart stopped for a second, then pounded as if it were about to leap from his chest.

"Will you agree to become my wife?" he asked softly.

"I agree," Catharina replied, and happy tears, large like a child's, rolled down her cheeks. "Now we only need Mother's consent."

This evening remained forever in the painter's memory, in the depths of his heart.

Even now, on his way to Maria Thins' house, he recalled those unforgettable hours in full detail.

Vermeer arrived in the part of town where the Catholics lived and stopped at the entrance of a large two-story house with a mezzanine. Standing for a few minutes to calm his agitation, he knocked on the door with a silver knocker. Maria opened it for him. Jan bowed to her.

The woman wore an austere gray dress with a white lace collar; a small bonnet covered her gray hair. Her small, yellow-brown eyes were cold. She glanced at the bouquet of roses in Jan's hands and said, with difficulty restraining her irritation:

"You have arrived late, young man."

There were icy notes in her voice, like the crunching of pieces of ice in a metal mug. Jan felt somewhat uncomfortable.

"A friend of our family, who will be a witness at the wedding, is already here, and we are waiting for you," she added.

"Please forgive me," the artist bowed to Maria once more. "I was delayed at the guild."

"On one's betrothal day, one could arrive on time!" she snapped, and turning around, headed into the living room, her hem rustling, austere and straight.

The embarrassed Vermeer followed her.

She is right, he thought. Even with my busy schedule, I should not have been late!

Cleanliness reigned in the house; it smelled of freshness. The floor in the hall, laid out in light and red marble squares, gleamed. High-backed chairs were neatly arranged, the stained-glass windows tightly closed, and the timid rays of the young spring sun, peeking into the room through the colored glass, played with highlights on the squares of the floor, walls, and furniture, creating a joyful, stirring atmosphere.

The venerable, silver-haired Leonaert Bramer sat in an armchair by a low table. He stood up to meet Jan, and they embraced. The groom asked Maria where Catharina was.

"She is arranging the fruit, she will be out shortly," Maria's voice remained just as icy.

Catharina brought a dish of fruit into the hall, smiled at Jan with her sunny smile, greeted him, and, glancing briefly toward her mother, warned Jan with her eyes that he must tolerate her character. He understood this silent sign.

The girl placed the dish on the table and turned her radiant gaze back to Jan. The young man noted for the umpteenth time that she possessed a remarkably bright and attractive smile. Smiling, she seemed to bestow her warmth upon him. In those moments, it felt to him as though hot sparks were igniting in the depths of her golden-brown eyes, warming his heart. *My love, my radiant angel!* he repeated enthusiastically to himself, like a poem.

"Catharina, these roses are for you," he said, handing the bouquet to his fiancée. She pressed the flowers to her chest and lowered her face into their crimson petals.

Maria invited everyone to sit down and, by right of being the bride's mother, began the speech first.

"I was opposed to this marriage, but the young people insisted," she said sternly. "We must arrange all the details: when and where the wedding and the wedding feast will take place, and where the young family will live. And, most importantly, I would like to remind Jan that I am entrusting him with my most precious possession—my Catharina. He must give me his word that he will care for her and endeavor to keep his family in comfort."

Maria delivered all of this while addressing Leonaert Bramer for some reason, as if not noticing Vermeer.

"Mother!" her daughter stopped her in a pleading voice.

"Dear Maria, today is a celebration—the betrothal of Jan and Catharina, so let us rejoice and congratulate the young couple!" Leonaert said with feeling. "Jan, present the ring to your fiancée as a token of betrothal, and later I will present the gifts. Dears, be happy!"

"Thank you," the groom replied, trying to hide his agitation. "I wish to inform you," he turned to Maria, "that I have converted to Catholicism and see no great difference between Protestants and Catholics: God is one. Catharina and I will be married in the same church where you once baptized her. And we will baptize our future children there as well. Leonaert and I will now also be parishioners of the same church, since he is a Catholic."

"That is gratifying to hear," Maria said reservedly.

"We will celebrate the wedding at my house," Jan continued. "I know what a treasure you are entrusting to me, and I will try to justify your trust. My mother could not come today due to an indisposition and offers her apologies. She asked me to convey that she gives her blessing to our marriage."

"It will not be easy for Jan to combine creativity and family chores, and his loved ones must realize this," Leonaert hastened to explain.

"You are right, I have thought about that too," Maria replied. "I will have to help the young couple, otherwise they will not manage."

Her words sounded somewhat unexpected to those around her. This strong, perceptive woman involuntarily commanded respect from Jan and Leonaert.

"I love your daughter and will do everything to make her happy," the artist assured her.

Maria's face smoothed out and brightened, as if touched by a sunbeam, and her eyes warmed. Everyone breathed a sigh of relief.

"May God be with us!" Leonaert Bramer exclaimed softly.

As for Jan and Catharina, they were so absorbed in one another that they no longer noticed anything around them. They exulted: the wedding would be soon, the beginning of a new life, and everything lay ahead of them!

Chapter 2: The Life of the Young Couple in the "Mechelen" House

After the wedding, Catharina moved into her husband's house, the "Mechelen," on the market square. The young couple was overwhelmed by the happiness of love, and everything for them was warmed and colored by this feeling.

Catharina fluttered about the house like a bird, and no household chore was a burden to her. She constantly cared for the cleanliness and adornment of her dwelling and, trusting no one else, took pleasure in bringing order and beauty to it herself.

The house was spacious, and there was much work to be done, but Vermeer could not afford to hire a servant. The inn and the tavern—everything he had inherited from his father—did not yield a large income. The chores associated with the tavern business were taken on by the artist's mother, Digna Baltens, and his elder sister Gertruyd, who lived in another part of the same house, trying not to disturb the newlyweds as they managed their own household. Jan was still an apprentice, so he and Catharina lived quite modestly.

In the morning, as was usual, the young wife had already gone to the market with her basket and selected small but fresh cuts in the meat and fish rows, buying a few things in the vegetable stalls as well. Returning home, she immediately began to cook, wishing to please Jan with delicious dishes.

"Ah, I forgot to get ginger and cinnamon," she realized. "No matter, there is still a little left."

A gentleman came to see Jan, and they were conversing in the workshop. Catharina saw that the visitor had not come empty-handed but with paintings, meaning he had brought something for sale or had appeared for a consultation regarding the authenticity of canvases (in addition to painting, Jan engaged in appraising, buying, and selling pictures). The woman was filled with pride for her husband: people turned to him for advice; he was valued.

While Jan conducted negotiations with the unfamiliar visitor, Catharina chatted with a neighbor who had dropped in to exchange a few words about chores and the weather. Having treated her guest to a freshly baked pie, the hostess lamented that lunchtime was approaching, yet her husband's meeting with the visitor was dragging on. The neighbor soon ran off, as something was boiling in her kitchen too.

Jan and the guest emerged from the workshop, concluding their conversation on the move. The stranger bowed quickly and departed, and just as Catharina wanted to ask her husband who it had been, she noticed a cat running out of the pantry next to the kitchen with a large piece of fish in its teeth. Catharina clapped her hands in dismay, while Jan laughed:

"Our cat has an excellent lunch today!"

"I'll catch her and pull her tail!"

"My dear, you love her so much that you won't touch her with a finger; you only threaten."

He embraced his wife, and they stood still for a second in this tender pose.

"How is our little one?" Jan asked, stroking his wife's belly.

"Growing, kicking," she smiled.

"It is already autumn outside, time flies, and in the winter our firstborn will be born..."

"I want us to have many children," Catharina said softly.

"I am certain that is how it will be."

"Sweetheart, it is time for you to have lunch and go see Fabritius. You haven't forgotten that you have a meeting scheduled?"

"Of course I haven't forgotten."

"I am setting the table. Today we have pea soup with plums and ginger, and for the main course—veal tongue with green apples. I also baked a pie. What shall I prepare tomorrow?"

"Whatever you prepare—I always like everything."

While Catharina arranged the plates, Jan walked about the room.

"We already have one canvas by Fabritius," he said thoughtfully. "I want to acquire a few more—not for sale, but for the soul, for myself. Carel is painting something new right now and has invited us to look at these pieces."

"With pleasure! You know, I often look at that painting you bought from him and ponder: what is that musical instrument seller thinking about so deeply?"

"Thoughts about life: about the eternal and the fleeting. A remarkable canvas! On one hand—the silence of Delft, the deep reflections of a man—everything is like in a dream; on the other hand—one senses that the earth is round, everything is in motion, moving along a circular line. Life pulsates, softly and steadily... While working, Carel used a wide-angle lens, which is why the image of the city turned out so unusual, and this helps one feel its unique charm."

"That is very interesting, but sit down, otherwise the soup will get cold," Catharina reminded him.

"How deliciously everything smells!" Jan finally sat down at the table.

"I have long wanted to ask you, my dear, wasn't it from you that Carel painted this young man with the musical instruments? You look remarkably alike."

"It seems to me too that my features slip through in him, but I did not pose for Carel; he did not ask me to do so. I admire him—he is a master with a capital M, and it is a great honor for me to associate with him."

"And to me—you are the most extraordinary!"

"That is because you love me, my swallow."

"I truly do love you. And I also feel that you are not like everyone else. And I don't just feel it; I know it."

These words touched Jan to the depths of his soul.

Catharina began to serve the second dish. Jan, watching her, mused on something of his own.

"When I finish the painting *Christ in the House of Martha and Mary*, I will try my hand in a different direction," he said. "I will paint something on the theme of the prodigal son, with bright patches of color, and later—another piece. I will tell you about it now: a man and a woman are sitting at a table by an open window; they haven't seen each other for a long time—and lo, the joy of meeting! He is an officer or a sailor, a traveler; she is a woman beaming with happiness. That will be you, my radiant angel! You must pose for me. Pieter de Hooch has painted similar scenes more than once, but I want my painting to be downright magical in its mood!"

"You will succeed; it cannot be any other way," Catharina smiled and reminded her husband: "Don't forget about your food!"

"You will be my only muse," Jan said, looking with love at her face, slightly rounded from pregnancy. "And time will have no power over you."

"I think you will always paint only what touches your heart..." Catharina said thoughtfully.

"Absolutely. Remember I told you that I dream of painting our sky and the 'portrait' of our city? Well, recently I decided that I will also paint that little street located behind our house, with the almshouse for old women and the adjoining courtyard. But I work slowly; only when I feel that the work is completed can I stop—not before. And now it is time for me to go, my joy; I am late for my meeting with Carel."

Catharina rose quickly from the table:

"Jan, you ate almost nothing!"

"That's not true. Besides, we have the evening ahead of us, we will make up for everything," he kissed his wife and left through the courtyard.

She went out after him and, as always, admired his fleeting gait. The flaps of his cloak fluttering in the wind seemed to her like the wings of a bird.

Having washed the dishes and tidied up the linen closet, Catharina approached the harpsichord and placed sheet music on the music stand to practice some new pieces. *In the evening, I will delight Jan with this beauty*, she thought and touched the keys, but one of them responded with a slightly rattling sound. *Oh dear, a string has slipped*, the woman winced. *In the evening, I will ask Jan to tighten it. For now, I will still play a little.*

Finishing her music practice, Catharina decided to take a walk along the canal. She liked these walks—the splashing of the water, the movement of laden vessels, the cries of birds hunting for fish, the flight of clouds. She remembered how she and Jan had stood on the bridge on that first memorable date, and he had spoken of how he saw Delft, this water, and this sky. "There are things you do not see right away." She suddenly realized that she had begun to look at everything through his eyes—he had burst into her quiet world and colored it with a multitude of hues! Catharina thought almost with terror about what would have happened if she hadn't met him... How would she have lived? Grayly and monotonously, and she would never have been able to feel all that she felt now! *Even for a fraction of this happiness, one could give up a great deal! And some people have no inkling that it is possible to love like this, to live like this... Each of my days is filled with meaning and light; I watch with emotion as a new world is born under my husband's brush, as he is overwhelmed with plans—and my heart exults!*

Jan returned in the evening in high spirits. Catharina rushed into his arms.

"How is Fabritius? What is new with him?"

"I went to his place first, and then to a certain client. Fabritius invites you and me to visit this Sunday."

"Wonderful! And now let's sit down for dinner; the time has come. We have so much left over from lunch: tongue, pie, plus cheese and fruit. After dinner, I will play the new pieces for you, just tighten the string that rattles."

"Very well, I'm going to wash my hands. And when we have eaten, I will do everything."

Over dinner, the conversation turned to Fabritius.

"Carel's wife wanted to treat me to fried carp today, but I was full and declined," Jan said. "This is his second wife."

"Really? I didn't know that. What happened to the first?"

"I'll tell you now. At first, everything went well for Fabritius: he studied at Rembrandt's studio in Amsterdam, was his most talented pupil, then worked in the same city and married. But after some time, a cruel fate began to haunt Carel's family: their children died, and during the third childbirth, his wife died too. In despair, he returned to his native Middenbeemster and only after seven years married again and settled in Delft."

"What a difficult fate!"

"Yes, but fate did not manage to break him... He is incredibly talented and completely loses himself in his work. I watch how he works and learn from him. Unlike Rembrandt, Carel usually places the model against a slightly illuminated background and likes to work in a cold color palette."

"That is too complicated for me," Catharina said, serving Jan the fruit. "What is he painting now?"

"A self-portrait, the painting *The Sentry*, and a small, remarkable piece called *The Goldfinch*."

"What is this *Goldfinch*?"

"Well, you will see for yourself on Sunday. In each of his works lives a soul. A person and their connection to their surroundings are very important to him... And how his experiments in the impasto technique, with a rich brushstroke, admire me!"

"These are very abstruse things. I try to delve into it and understand at least something, but when I look at paintings, I judge them only with my feelings."

"That's perfectly fine! Thank you for dinner, dear. Now I will tighten the string, and you will play for me."

On Sunday, after the morning service at church, Jan and Catharina set off to visit the Fabritiuses.

The autumn turned out to be remarkably dry and warm. Crimson and bright yellow leaves swayed on the branches of trees, and in this fading beauty, there was something valedictory yet bright, like a promise of future rebirth. Falling, they carpeted the ground underfoot. Jan gathered a whole bouquet of them for Catharina. Her golden curls had slipped slightly from under her head covering during the walk; beads of sweat glistened on her forehead.

Carel and his wife, Agatha, were waiting for the guests at the threshold. The scattered rays of the autumn sun softly illuminated their silhouettes.

"We are very glad to see you!" they greeted the Vermeer couple.

The women, having introduced themselves, immediately felt a mutual liking. Agatha asked Catharina how she was feeling.

"Thank you for your concern, I am walking well, though the baby is restless," the guest replied, and then addressed the host: "I would like to see your paintings. My husband told me about them."

"Let us have lunch first, and then we will go into the workshop," Carel suggested.

"Of course," his spouse supported him. "The table is already set."

Continuing to converse, they all proceeded into the hall.

"Today is such a clear day," Vermeer said, helping his wife sit down at the table. "Autumn is remarkably warm this year. Catharina and I had a wonderful walk. Walks are good for her."

"Jan is so caring, I cannot rejoice enough." Catharina affectionately touched her husband's hand.

During lunch, she quietly observed Carel and Agatha, remembering Jan's story about his mentor's fate. Everything he had endured had left its mark on his appearance: in the simple, large features of his open face lived a kind of inexhaustible, deeply hidden sadness. Carel's wife was a simple, caring woman, an excellent homemaker, and a faithful companion. One felt a remarkable warmth in their relationship. *This is exactly what Carel needs*, Catharina thought.

At the table, they spoke of the weather, politics, and painting. They joked.

After lunch, the host led the guests into his workshop. Looking at his canvases, Catharina stood still. Jan stood behind his wife, putting his arms around her shoulders, and examined the paintings too, trying to see them through her eyes.

Carel's *Self-Portrait* told of what this man had lived through in his thirty-two years—a deep narrative in the spirit of Rembrandt.

The Sentry brought a smile to Catharina's face. What a lifelike scene! A young soldier, still a mere boy, languid in the sun, had fallen asleep on duty, so deeply that he had splayed his legs and let his head slump onto his chest. A small black dog was watching him with surprise.

Then they approached a very small painting, the one Jan had spoken of. A yellow goldfinch looked from the canvas at Catharina with an intelligent, attentive, scrutinizing, and wary gaze. It seemed aware of its position as a prisoner, forever chained by its leg, the bitterness of its fate, its lack of freedom. It seemed that Fabritius himself was looking at the world through its eyes.

"I am simply at a loss for words," the guest whispered, pressing her hands to her chest.

"I will give you this painting as soon as it is finished," Carel said, noticing the impression *The Goldfinch* had made on Catharina. "And you may choose one more canvas for yourself."

"You would give us such gifts?" she could not believe it.

"Yes, yes. There will be several occasions for this: soon Jan will be accepted as a master into the Guild of Saint Luke, and then your firstborn will be born."

"You are very generous," Jan said, deeply moved, while the astonished Catharina just stood there, hands pressed to her chest.

A belated spring adorned the trees in delicate, shiny foliage and coquettish flowers. Catharina rejoiced at every leaf, every spring ray. She had become a mother, and with motherhood came new sensations—she began both to feel and to look at the world differently.

This was the first spring in the life of their little daughter, Maria, who was born in January. Catharina's mother, Maria Thins, was happy to have become a grandmother and, in honor of the girl's birth, presented Jan Vermeer with three hundred guilders and another two hundred for Maria.

This evening, as often happened, she came to visit her daughter and son-in-law.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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