

GIRL WITH A PEARL EARRING

by

Olivia Hetreed

**For Educational
Purposes Only**

INT. GRIET'S HOUSE DAY

A bare white wall. Sunlight falls softly through an open window.

Sounds from outside; water-lap against stone; a woman calls a greeting; wooden clogs on cobbles.

The plaster is roughly finished. There are blue grey shadows, a fuzz of brown dust, pale cream highlights.

Inside the house quiet noises; the swish of a scrubbing brush on stone; a rocking chair creaking to and fro; a knife chopping.

CLOSE ON: A kitchen knife, sharp-edged, pitted black, slices through white-green onion rings, juice flecking the blade. Slivers of onion pile up on a dark wood chopping board, tiny threads of yellow-green in the white. Reflected for a moment before the blade sweeps them away.

EXT. VERMEER HOUSE DAY

A handsome Dutch town house, red-brick, three storeys high.

The front door opens and a MAN and WOMAN come out. His clothes are dark and fine, his face half-hidden by a wide hat. She is ripely pregnant, her belly large against the swathes of her fine velvet dress. She leans on his arm for support, but still leads the way.

CAPTION OVER: DELFT 1664

EXT. DELFT STREETS DAY

As they walk through the prosperous town they are greeted and bowed to: people of consequence. He nods, she smiles and waves to acquaintances, blonde curls dancing.

INT. GRIET'S HOUSE DAY

Splitting a red cabbage, exposing the white veins between dark purple leaves. A GIRL'S hand, small and deft, places the cabbage by the onion.

EXT. GATES NEAR BRIDGE DAY

The couple cross a bridge over the canal, turn into narrower streets, poorer houses tightly-packed. WOMEN in white caps and aprons over dark clothes look up from scrubbing front door steps, WORKING MEN raise their hats. He still nods, she ignores them.

A BOY (FRANS) leans on the bridge, watching from under a mop of blond curls. The moment they are gone he is off - racing down the street, cutting through an alleyway to get ahead of them.

INT. GRIET'S HOUSE DAY

*

In the kitchen his sister, GRIET, reacts to the sound of the door; eyes wide, lips parted. Anticipation, uncertainty, even fear. A look we will come to recognise.

*

FRANS (O/S)

Mother!

GRIET pulls the stiff folds of her white cap further forward round her face, resumes her work. She is slight, a young girl but with a sureness to her movements which seems older. Her clothes are as plain and severe as the narrow Calvinist room, the fresh-cut vegetables the only stroke of colour. She slides carrots onto the dish, absorbed in the pattern she is creating.

Her MOTHER comes hurrying into the room in her starched best clothes. A brief, irritated glance at the dish.

MOTHER

Leave that.

GRIET puts down the knife carefully.

INT. STAIRS/ATTIC DAY

GRIET hurries up narrow stairs to a room under the eaves, so low even she must stoop. Only a shaft of light penetrates the room. In the darkest corner a MAN hunches in a rocking chair.

GRIET

Father.

GRIET squats in front of him. We see his hand is badly disfigured, fingers twisted into a claw, skin taut and shiny pink in places, otherwise ridged and gnarled.

GRIET (CONT'D)

The Guild Master...

He nods, face in shadow. This is an expected event.

There is a silent understanding between them. GRIET places his best black jacket on the bed, guides his hand with her spread fingers.

After a moment he stops her, instead he searches with fumbling fingers on a shelf by the bed. There are several tiles propped there, blue figures on white. He feels for one in particular.

A girl and boy, hand in hand. The unmistakable line of GRIET'S cap, FRANS flinging an arm joyfully in the air.

He presses it into GRIET'S hands, a gesture of regret and apology.

EXT. GRIET'S HOUSE DAY

The handsome couple stop at a small house. Now they have arrived the WOMAN hesitates, suddenly nervous. Her HUSBAND tidies a strand of her hair then knocks at the door.

INT. ATTIC DAY

From below the WOMAN'S VOICE; over-loud, her heels clattering on the tiled floor.

GRIET'S FATHER lifts his head - the first full sight of his face, taut and twisted, as if it had been melted and re-set, the eyes scarred and blind. Recent, terrible injuries. GRIET tries to ease on his coat.

GRIET'S FATHER

I cannot... (meet him).

INT. KITCHEN DAY

Griet runs into position, cheeks flushed, and is once more chopping the vegetables as her MOTHER leads in the visitors.

MOTHER

This is Griet.

The MAN and WOMAN step down into the kitchen, crowding the narrow space. GRIET looks to her MOTHER for guidance, carries on with her work, head bent.

The woman, CATHARINA, talks fast, distractedly, her hands forever moving, twisting the blonde curls on her neck.

CATHARINA

She's very small. You think she is strong enough? We can't have a girl who is always worn out and complaining. My mother is worried about her age. And she's never worked outside the home before.

CATHARINA seems too large for the room, too opulent, a pearl-inlaid crucifix dangles heavily between her breasts.

MOTHER

She is strong. A good girl and willing.

CATHARINA

All things considered I suppose it must do but there will have to be a trial. How long should it be, husband?

He isn't listening, gazing abstractedly at the wall. CATHARINA hurries on.

CATHARINA (CONT'D)

I don't know, I can't have someone in the house who won't pull her weight. As it is I hardly...(can make ends meet.) There are all the children to think of too. My husband is Guild Master but we are under no obligation to do this. No obligation at all.

MOTHER

(Stony) She works hard.

CATHARINA twists her necklace round her fingers. Maybe she went too far.

CATHARINA

I mean to say we are sorry for your husband's misfortune. It was a fire?

MOTHER

The kiln exploded. Two men died. He was spared.

CATHARINA crosses herself.

CATHARINA

Deo gratias.

GRIET'S MOTHER stiffens at the Papist words. Uncomfortable silence.

MOTHER

(At last) Aye, God be thanked.

CATHARINA

(Brightly) Well, shall we say a month and if she proves satisfactory- (I will keep her on.)

MAN

What are you doing, Griet?

The MAN'S voice cuts across his wife's. GRIET looks up, startled. He is staring at the vegetables she has arranged in swathes of colour on the dish. GRIET hesitates. Her MOTHER glares at her.

GRIET

Cutting vegetables for soup, sir.

MAN

Why did you lay them out like that?

His quietness is intense, his cool grey eyes hold hers.

GRIET

I- I- Ready for the soup, sir.

CATHARINA snorts. GRIET is thrown; he has intruded into her private world. Instinctively she pulls her cap forward.

MAN

(Gently) Is that the order they go in the pot?

GRIET

No, sir.

The MAN makes a small impatient gesture, her answers aren't what he wants. Her MOTHER is silently urging her.

He picks up a piece of onion and turnip.

MAN

You have separated the whites. And the carrot and cabbage?

GRIET

The colours fight each other.

MAN

Ah.

His eyebrows go up, a small smile. GRIET finds she is very pleased to have pleased him.

CATHARINA

Is that how you spend your time - arranging vegetables?

GRIET

(Alarmed)

Oh no. Not at all.

The MAN drops the shreds of onion and turnip, deliberately careless. GRIET'S fingers move to rearrange them but she controls herself. The MAN is still watching.

MAN

She might clean my studio.

His casual words are shocking to his wife. She gasps and turns; too quickly, the heavy belly off-balance. The kitchen knife spins off the table and clatters on the ground.

MAN (CONT'D)

Catharina! (Quietly) Be careful.

GRIET bends to pick up the knife, crouching at his feet, her face inches from the rich trim of his cloak.

GRIET

Excuse me, Master Vermeer.

INT. BEDROOM DAWN

In the half dark GRIET neatly folds a chemise, two starched aprons, a woollen shawl, her prayer book. FRANS pretends to sleep as she tiptoes out.

INT. KITCHEN DAWN

GRIET'S MOTHER pulls oat cakes from the griddle and burns her hand. The only clue to her heartbreak.

GRIET holds a wet rag to the burn. A rare moment of contact. Recovering herself GRIET'S MOTHER folds the oat cakes into a clean muslin.

MOTHER

The food may be strange to your stomach.

How can she begin to tell her daughter all she needs to know?

MOTHER (CONT'D)

Keep clear of their Catholic prayers. Or if you must be with them when they pray, stop your ears.

GRIET nods dutifully. Her MOTHER hesitates then reaches to the back of the mantelpiece and brings down a tin box, the family treasure chest. It contains some silver coins, a few legal papers and a tortoiseshell comb, prettily decorated but old.

MOTHER (CONT'D)

Had it from my mother, the day I was married. I never thought our family would come to this. (A beat) I hear the Master is a good man. She doesn't know her own mind - someone should've stood up to her before now. She'd work you to death and not even notice.

A silence. Abruptly she thrusts the comb and cakes at GRIET.

MOTHER (CONT'D)

Go on then.

EXT. DELFT MARKET SQUARE DAY

GRIET crosses the empty central square, at one end the grand façade of the Town Hall, at the other the vast brick bulk of the New Church. A few stall holders are setting up.

At the brick star in the middle of the square GRIET hesitates. She adjusts the bundle under her arm, squares her shoulders, heads across the square into the unknown. She looks small and lonely in the huge space.

EXT. STREET DAY

GRIET walks along an unfamiliar street.

EXT. VERMEER HOUSE, OUDE LANGENDIJK DAY

On a bench outside sit four well-dressed GIRLS, one with a BABY BOY on her lap. Four pairs of watchful eyes assessing her in silence. The oldest, MAERTGE (pronounced Mertha) holds a cockle shell and pipe-stem. The youngest (LISBETH), clutching a rag doll, pulls at MAERTGE'S sleeve impatiently.

After a moment the next oldest, CORNELIA, a thin, quick child with bright red hair snatches them and blows a stream of bubbles. They float upwards, glistening in the sunshine.

CORNELIA

Tell Tanneke the new maid is here.

After a moment MAERTGE decides this is the right thing to do. The little ones run after her. GRIET and CORNELIA are left alone. CORNELIA eyes GRIET, smirking at her heavy clothing and clumsy shoes.

EXT. COURTYARD DAY

TANNEKE, the stolid servant of the house, leads the way, talking as she goes.

TANNEKE

Young Mistress is out this morning. I'm to show you round.

She sniffs, as if to say this is not a proper part of her duties. Her face is red from the stove, cheeks pocked.

She indicates the water pump as she leads the way up the steps.

TANNEKE (CONT'D)

Water for the table.

INT. WASHING KITCHEN DAY

The WASHING KITCHEN has a big copper cauldron set over a fire. There is a large heap of soiled laundry.

TANNEKE

Take water from the canal for laundry, it's clean enough this side of town. Soda, coppers, boiler, sand and soap.

The middle of the room is full of sheets drying, carelessly arranged. Surreptitiously GRIET straightens the nearest sheet.

TANNEKE (CONT'D)

Linen goes out to bleach in the sun. In here in bad weather. Flat irons, linen press, pressing table. Cooking kitchen...

She sweeps on down the steps.

INT. COOKING KITCHEN DAY

TANNEKE'S stronghold, dominated by the big cooking fire. Pots and pans, none too clean, hang on the walls. TANNEKE carelessly throws some onion skins in the grate.

TANNEKE

You're to help serve and clear. Buy fish and meat from the Market when Young Mistress don't want to - and that's often enough.

She curves a hand out beyond her own substantial belly.

TANNEKE (CONT'D)

You'll take your meals with me and the children. Pewter and silver, needs polishing every week.

She pulls on a rope and pulley to open a trapdoor down to the cellar.

TANNEKE (CONT'D)

That's your sleeping place. Scour the pots and pans. Fetch in the milk and butter.

No time to pause as TANNEKE leads the way through to another room.

INT. GREAT HALL DAY

There are paintings hung thickly on every wall. GRIET is distracted by the dazzling variety of colour and images. Glancing up SHE SEES CORNELIA watching from the upstairs balcony. TANNEKE rattles off instructions.

TANNEKE

Dust and polish the woodwork, beat the carpets, trim the candlewicks. Floor scrubbed morning and night. Young Mistress and Master sleep and have company here.

The furniture is solid and intricately carved, the heavy curtains round the marriage bed richly brocaded. But dirty laundry, children's shoes and toys lie scattered on the floor, disorderly and profuse, the opposite of GRIET'S clean, bare home.

TANNEKE (CONT'D)

Air the bedding, wash and press the sheets and linen, heat water for Young Mistress to bathe, empty the pots.

TANNEKE stands with hands on hips, out of breath. Her apron is grey and soiled with grease spots, her fingers reddened from work. CORNELIA comes and leans on TANNEKE, catlike in her temporary affection.

GRIET

Have you been doing all this yourself, Tanneke? The cooking and cleaning and washing?

The right words. TANNEKE puffs with grim pride.

TANNEKE

Nobody but. Would've put paid to a scrawny creature like you - day in, day out. On top of all the errands bar the Draper and 'Pothec'ry.

She looks around with proprietorial pride.

TANNEKE (CONT'D)

(Kinder) You'll get used to it.

CORNELIA notices GRIET staring at the paintings.

CORNELIA

Do you like them?

CORNELIA is looking up at her, alert and interested. GRIET smiles back.

GRIET

Did your father do all these?

CORNELIA laughs scornfully.

CORNELIA

No! He just sells them. All his paintings go straight away.

GRIET feels stupid, as she was meant to, but TANNEKE is already bustling out of the room, GRIET must hurry after.

TANNEKE

This way.

INT. GREAT HALL/MARIA THINS ROOM DAY

*

TANNEKE opens the door to a smaller but finely furnished room. She allows GRIET to glimpse inside.

TANNEKE

My Mistress, Maria Thins has this room. 'Tis her owns the house - not her daughter, for all her fine airs.

GRIET has an impression of gaudy Catholic paintings, fine velvet and a prie-Dieu.

INT. STAIRS TO STUDIO DAY

GRIET follows Tanneke's broad back up the stairs. TANNEKE points towards the door at the end of the corridor. In spite of herself she is frightened, her voice a whisper.

TANNEKE

You're to clean in there.

As GRIET takes a step in that direction.

TANNEKE (CONT'D)

(scandalised)

Not now! He's painting.

INT. CELLAR NIGHT

Carrying a night light, GRIET goes carefully down the ladder into the cellar. The glint of bottles and jars, a broken footstool, a child's wooden top, the paint dim under layers of dust.

A sleeping place with a mattress, bolster and blanket has been made on a low wooden shelf. GRIET arranges her few possessions neatly: the prayer book and comb, her best lace collar, chemises and aprons, her father's tile. Wearily she kneels to pray. Her hands are already red and raw from all the work. She is about to take off her cap when she stops, uneasy. She looks around the dark room, shadows flickering in the candlelight. Suddenly she sees a face, ghostly white.

It is a Pieta; Mary holding the dead body of Christ, the Virgin's face hollow-eyed with grief, an arm raised in wild despair.

GRIET looks at it uneasily. Then with a quick decisive movement she takes her spare apron and drapes it over the painting. Blows out her candle. Only the faintest glimmer of light comes from the open trapdoor.

In the dark she can hear noises from the household, the MASTER'S low voice and laughter. She curls up into a ball.

INT. WASHING KITCHEN - DAY

With an effort GRIET heaves up a full pitcher of water and tips it into the washing copper. A fire blazes under the copper and GRIET wipes the sweat from her eyes.

EXT. COURTYARD DAY

GRIET scrubs at soiled linen on a washboard. There are wet sheets hanging up, a huge pile still to do. Her fingers are raw from the washing soda and hot water.

CATHARINA comes out, moving slowly with the weight of her belly. Her chemise is already crumpled, she looks hot and tired, the blonde curls damp on her neck. She watches GRIET working. GRIET turns and dips a curtsey.

GRIET

Good Morning, Madam.

CATHARINA looks annoyed.

CATHARINA

Don't speak till you're spoken to.

But she seems exhausted by this, continues to stand there absently, one hand on her belly, the other nervously jangling the household keys which hang at her hip. GRIET takes a man's shirt from the laundry basket. CATHARINA makes an effort.

CATHARINA (CONT'D)

Tanneke showed you what needs to be done? The laundry and so on.

She has barely more experience of this situation than GRIET.

GRIET

Yes, Madam. The shopping when you want. (A beat)
And the studio...

CATHARINA'S face tightens instantly.

CATHARINA

This is only a trial, nothing is settled yet.

INT. HOUSE/GROUND FLOOR DAY

GRIET follows CATHARINA through the house, carrying a mop, cloths and bucket. CORNELIA darts up the stairs ahead of GRIET.

INT. CORRIDOR OUTSIDE STUDIO DAY

Outside the STUDIO CATHARINA stops, catching her breath. GRIET waits in silence. CATHARINA stares at the closed door. CORNELIA tugs at her skirts.

CATHARINA

Cornelia, go down.

But when CORNELIA ignores her CATHARINA makes no further effort. She seems trapped, helpless. A finger twists and twists in her hair.

CATHARINA (CONT'D)

I... My husband... You are to clean in there. (A beat) Go in. Go in!

Hesitantly GRIET sidles past them and opens the door. Inside is a heavy curtain she must push aside. CORNELIA tries to follow but CATHARINA grabs her back as if from the edge of a cliff.

INT. STUDIO DAY

Now GRIET is inside, looking out. CATHARINA is stuck in the doorway, holding back the curtain, CORNELIA glowering at her side.

CATHARINA

You must disturb nothing, leave all just as it is.

Griet holds her mop and pail in the middle of the room, not wanting to start while CATHARINA watches.

CATHARINA (CONT'D)

Well, open the shutters. You can't work in the dark.

GRIET moves from window to window pulling open the heavy wooden shutters, sunlight floods into the room. Downstairs the BABY starts crying, CATHARINA pushes her curls back impatiently.

CATHARINA (CONT'D)

He must not be disturbed. (A beat) It's important.

With these words, almost a plea, CATHARINA closes the door.

Left alone GRIET looks round the STUDIO. It is large and uncluttered, unlike the rest of the house. Clean palettes and brushes laid neatly on a table, a tall cupboard, a half-open door through into a storeroom.

In one corner a table covered with a blue cloth, an open letter, the tools of a lady's toilette laid out in careful disarray. A wooden lay figure (artist's dummy) draped in a bright yellow satin jacket. The picture setting.

Very carefully, anchoring her hand on the corner of the table, GRIET lifts the letter, dusts the cloth underneath and replaces it. She uses her fingers as she did with her father's clothes, moving along methodically, fixing, lifting and cleaning.

A sudden flash of movement alarms her. Then she realises it is a mirror, fixed on the wall above the table. She stares at herself. The light from the window makes her skin glow; she looks beautiful, transfigured. She turns away, embarrassed.

She avoids the painting for as long as she can. It is not large. But at last she has to look.

A woman stands gazing into the mirror as Griet did, transfixed, her pearl necklace forgotten in her hands. The light falls softly on her profile and on the objects littering the table in artful disarray. Her yellow satin mantle seems to glow.

GRIET stares, eyes wide in wonder. A chuckle.

GRIET swings round to find a LADY watching her from the doorway. She wears a stiff-bodiced black dress encrusted with shiny beadwork and a wide white collar. Under her starched cap her eyes are shrewd and amused.

Instinctively GRIET pulls her own cap forward. MARIA THINS chuckles again, puffs on a pipe she is holding in tobacco-stained fingers.

MARIA THINS

That's right, girl. You keep it to yourself in this house.

In spite of herself GRIET looks back at the picture.

MARIA THINS (CONT'D)

You're not the first to forget your manners in front of his paintings.

GRIET curtseys, a mumbled "Madam".

MARIA THINS (CONT'D)

Master Van Ruijven's wife.

MARIA THINS rakes the room with sharp eyes, gathering information.

MARIA THINS (CONT'D)

It's like enough - though I never saw so much in her.

GRIET looks from the painting to the setting. Although the objects lie on the table in the same way, the map on the wall and the window are almost the same, the effect is not.

GRIET

It's all... different. More...

MARIA THINS nods her head, then sighs.

MARIA THINS

Should have asked more for it too. Do you think it finished?

GRIET studies the painting. It certainly looks finished. MARIA THINS laughs harshly.

MARIA THINS (CONT'D)

Three months already. Another three before he's satisfied, no doubt.

GRIET'S eyes widen in surprise. Suddenly MARIA THINS is angry.

MARIA THINS (CONT'D)

Get along, girl. You're not paid to stand gawping all day.

GRIET hurriedly gathers up her cleaning things.

EXT. COURTYARD DAY

The courtyard is hung with white sheets, drying in the sun. GRIET is cleaning silverware, her hands and apron are black with tarnish, the cups and bowls beside her sparkle. She makes reflections dance across the walls for the children (also black-handed) to run after.

The GIRLS laugh and squeal, the BABY gurgles and tumbles after them.

CORNELIA is quickest, her red-gold hair brilliant in the sunshine. She leaps after the will-o-wisp of light.

CORNELIA

I'll catch it!

GRIET too is fascinated by the light, white flame across the white cloth, pale orange on the red brickwork, dazzling at the window.

Through the glass she catches a movement in the room above, the light flickers over the MASTER'S face.

GRIET lets the bowl drop from her hand, confused. She wants to pull her cap forward but her hands are dirty. The girls fall silent at once, CORNELIA glares.

CORNELIA (CONT'D)

You made us!

GRIET crouches to pick up the bowl. When she dares look up again the window is empty. The girls have disappeared.

GRIET

(Whispering)

Lisbeth? Aleydis?

Giggles from amongst the sheets. GRIET searches among the linen to find LISBETH and ALEYDIS happily making filthy hand prints on the clean sheets.

GRIET (CONT'D)

Stop that!

Seeing GRIET'S face ALEYDIS stops at once, old enough to know better. LISBETH still thinks it's a game. GRIET pulls aside another sheet to reveal CORNELIA. The sheet is smeared with grime.

CORNELIA

It's dirty now.

CORNELIA makes another hand print and laughs. In response GRIET slaps her, sharp on the cheek, a black smirch over the red. CORNELIA'S eyes widen in shock but she doesn't cry.

EXT. MEAT MARKET - DAY

MAERTGE and CORNELIA accompany TANNEKE and GRIET towards the grand façade of the MEAT MARKET; stone ox heads over the classical entrances.

INT. MEAT MARKET DAY

The Meat Market is bustling with housewives and maids buying meat. Porters carry bloody carcasses along the sawdust-strewn aisles. TANNEKE leads the way importantly to one of the smartest stalls, where the meat has been laid out with gruesome wit: a wreath of kidneys round a calf's head, a flower in its hairy ear. PAUL, the BUTCHER, watches them coming with a shrewd smile.

PAUL

What have you got for me, Tanneke?

TANNEKE

Paul. This is Griet, the new maid. She will fetch the meat now.

With an effort GRIET looks away from the jaunty calf.

PAUL

So Griet, what takes your fancy? Nothing's too good for this family.

PAUL winks at her. He is a handsome man with greying fair hair and a broad, cheerful face. GRIET hesitates, looks to TANNEKE. TANNEKE counts off the order on her stubby fingers.

TANNEKE

An ox tongue and a dozen chops.

PAUL

In the book again?

TANNEKE nods curtly, she hates this conversation. PAUL laughs, holds out the slab of tongue to MAERTGE and CORNELIA.

PAUL (CONT'D)

What d'you think girls? Best tongue in Delft, eh?

He sticks his own tongue out, MAERTGE and CORNELIA giggle. GRIET looks at the chops going into her pail, pulls one out, holds and sniffs it.

GRIET

This is not fresh. The Mistress wont like it.

The butcher looks at her in surprise, TANNEKE goes red. GRIET holds the meat out stubbornly. A long moment then PAUL smiles broadly.

PAUL

Pieter!

A young man comes over, wiping his hands on his apron. He is tall and broad-shouldered like his father, with golden curls, an easy smile. GRIET blushes and tightens her grip on the shopping pail as he looks at her then his father.

PAUL (CONT'D)

Get the parcel on the cart.

PIETER

But that's for... (Mistress Van der Velde.)

His father frowns. PIETER shrugs and brings over a parcel which PAUL unwraps and holds out to GRIET. She inspects the meat, nods curtly.

GRIET

That's better.

TANNEKE turns away crossly. Father and son exchange an amused, approving glance.

PAUL

We'll see you again, Griet.

INT. ENTRANCE HALL DAY

GRIET is sweeping the hall when she suddenly stops. Framed in the doorway she sees a MAN unloading a narrow wooden box. Plain and dark, like a child's coffin. VERMEER supervises from the stairs.

INT. STAIRS DAY

Carrying her cleaning things Griet cautiously goes into the studio.

INT. STUDIO DAY

The room is just as usual except that on a table, placed where the easel would normally stand, is the strange wooden box.

GRIET begins her cleaning, but her curiosity is too strong for her. She goes over to the strange box, a faint pretence at cleaning it as she examines it.

VERMEER (O.S.)

You want to look into it?

GRIET jumps back guiltily at the disembodied voice. VERMEER laughs and swings down from a trapdoor in the attic.

VERMEER (CONT'D)

A camera obscura.

The strange words mean nothing to GRIET but she is curious as he looks into the box, making adjustments. Satisfied, he steps back.

VERMEER (CONT'D)

Look into the glass.

GRIET moves jerkily forward and looks down at the glass plate inside the box. She sees nothing.

VERMEER (CONT'D)

Put this on. Over your head.

VERMEER takes his heavy cloak and gently drapes it over her, enveloping her in darkness. Like a jewel, an image is there in the dark, The painting, minute and perfect in glowing colours. Only the real woman is missing.

GRIET steps back in confusion, the robe falling to the floor. Her face is flushed, she drops to her knees grabbing at the cloak.

GRIET

I'm sorry, sir. I'll clean it straight away.

VERMEER takes it carelessly.

VERMEER

Never mind that. What did you see?

Griet Swallows. His questions seems to be asking for more than mere facts.

GRIET

I saw the setting.

He starts to fiddle with the box, adjusting angles. GRIET is fascinated.

GRIET (CONT'D)

But...

VERMEER

Hmm?

GRIET

How did it get in there?

VERMEER smiles. It is as though the sun is shining on her.

VERMEER

I was amazed when I first saw it.

He beckons her forward to look into the box beside him.

VERMEER (CONT'D)

Beams of reflected light from the corner pass through this lens and are bent onto the glass plate here.

GRIET strains to understand. With both of them leaning over the box the image can be faintly seen, a ghost. GRIET puts her fingers on the glass.

GRIET

Is it real?

VERMEER

It's an image - a picture made of light.

He starts to shut up the camera. GRIET is intrigued.

GRIET

Does the box show you what to paint?

VERMEER laughs, not unkindly.

VERMEER

It helps.

She frowns, confused. He is watching her now.

VERMEER (CONT'D)

You clean the table, Griet. Why are the things set on it as they are?

GRIET

For the lady. To look as if it were her dressing table.

VERMEER

More than that...

VERMEER moves impatiently, she wishes she knew the answer he wants. Suddenly he strides across the room and removes the silver bowl, stands the powder brush on its bristles. GRIET is startled; it's a kind of sacrilege to disturb the setting.

VERMEER (CONT'D)

Now, look again.

He holds the cloak over them both so that as they bend over the screen their faces are lit by the image on the glass. She is intensely conscious of his face next to hers, he is intent on what he sees. She makes herself concentrate. The image is there again, this time without the silver bowl at its centre.

GRIET

(hesitant)

It's darker. And the brush pokes up at the end.

A faint sound of approval from VERMEER.

VERMEER

The line is broken... You can see.

INT. CELLAR NIGHT

GRIET wakes with a start. It is dark, a spill of light from the trapdoor above. Wild SHRIEKS fill the house.

GRIET tumbles up the steps, still tying her apron, to find TANNEKE in the kitchen, blowing on the fire, agitated.

TANNEKE

There you are. Fetch some water, will you.
(Muttering) Blessed Mary, Mother of God...

More SCREAMS from the Hall, MARIA THINS' calming voice.

TANNEKE (CONT'D)

(hiding her fear)

Six babies. Why does she have to make such a racket?

EXT. COURTYARD NIGHT

GRIET pumps water from the cistern, cold water splashing into the metal pans, not loud enough to drown CATHARINA'S groans.

INT. CELLAR NIGHT

GRIET hides on the steps, hands over her ears.

INT. GREAT HALL DAWN

The CHILDREN crowd around their MOTHER and the new BABY (a BOY) on the bed. CATHARINA is radiant, pink-cheeked and smiling. TANNEKE looks proud and pleased, holding up little JOHANNES to see his new brother. A PRIEST rattles through a blessing, a MIDWIFE clears away bloody cloths. GRIET brings wine, hesitates in the doorway.

MAERTGE

Put it on, Papa! You must. There.

VERMEER crawls out from the embrace of his daughters. He is wearing a little velvet "paternity" cap decked with ribbons. His face is flushed, hair and clothes ruffled and messy.

MARIA THINS taps with her cane, startling GRIET, who stands aside at once. MARIA THINS watches her daughter and family, a wry smile. She has a folded note in her hand.

MARIA THINS

Take this invitation to the house of your master's patron, Pieter van Ruijven.

EXT. VAN RUIJVEN'S HOUSE DAY

A boat ferries GRIET towards an imposing Renaissance mansion, one of the grandest houses in town.

VAN RUIJVEN'S business occupies the quayside, a prosperous commercial bustle. The boat noses into the boathouse.

INT. VAN RUIJVEN'S GREAT HALL DAY

VAN RUIJVEN reads the letter, holding it up to the light from the window. He is richly dressed, with longish dark hair and a moustache hiding a weak mouth and chin.

VAN RUIJVEN

So, finished at last. And the baby too. Jan's brood mare. Hot-tempered is she, your mistress? Hard to handle?

He looks up from the note and runs his eyes over GRIET, so blatantly lascivious that GRIET cannot stop herself from blushing. She pulls the points of her cap forward. VAN RUIJVEN laughs.

VAN RUIJVEN (CONT'D)

She wants an answer, you'll have to wait.

He goes over to a carved desk, finds a quill and paper. GRIET gazes around the Hall, far grander than Vermeer's with several Vermeer paintings among others on the walls.

VAN RUIJVEN (CONT'D)

A very pretty picture.

VAN RUIJVEN is eyeing her. GRIET looks down in silence. He pours wine from a porcelain jug.

VAN RUIJVEN (CONT'D)

Are you thirsty?

GRIET is shocked, tries to hide it.

GRIET

No, sir.

VAN RUIJVEN

I wouldn't tell.

He smiles conspiratorially.

GRIET

No, sir.

He drinks and wipes his moustache, glances at CATHARINA's note.

VAN RUIJVEN

Hm, "Honoured guest". It was the old woman's idea to combine the birth feast and the viewing, no doubt. She's a tight fist.

He scrawls his reply and blots it as he talks.

VAN RUIJVEN (CONT'D)

I'm not turning out for small beer and biscuit, tell her. This brat and I deserve a proper feast. It's time they made a show, let the world know their worth. You have very wide eyes. What do they call you?

GRIET

Griet.

VAN RUIJVEN

Your Master's a fine painter, Griet. Finest in Delft, though I shan't tell him so. He has painted me. Perhaps that will be my epitaph.

He laughs at his own joke; a rich, powerful man of the world. GRIET has never met anyone like him.

VAN RUIJVEN (CONT'D)

Come, take a look.

He draws back the curtain to reveal a painting by his desk. GRIET has to move a step or two closer to look at it, closer to him too.

The painting, by Vermeer, is a drinking scene: in the foreground a young woman in a gorgeous red dress (the WOMAN from the Tavern) smiles towards us, while a gentleman (VAN RUIJVEN) gives her a glass of wine. Behind them in a shadowy corner another man, head on hand, is bored or asleep.

VAN RUIJVEN (CONT'D)

Look at that dress, you can almost stroke the satin. And the wine winking through the glass. It stank mind you, sour as vinegar by the end of each day - I had to send out for more.

VAN RUIJVEN (CONT'D)

My back ached, her hand shook so much he had to put the napkin there to save the dress.

GRIET looks at the painting, drinking in the detail, fascinated.
VAN RUIJVEN stands too close.

VAN RUIJVEN (CONT'D)

Can you see yourself in such finery, my dear?
She loved it you know: lace and satin tight against her plump little bubbies, heavy silk on her thighs, the gentlemen looking at her. My God, she was happy.

VAN RUIJVEN (CONT'D)

(Offering her wine again)

Sure?

VAN RUIJVEN leans towards her in conscious imitation of his painted self. She shakes her head.

VAN RUIJVEN (CONT'D)

It's a moral lesson, of course. There's Temperance in the window holding the reins; the peeled fruit, her silly smile, mouth gaping - only one way things can end.

He is right by GRIET now. She takes a step back.

GRIET

The letter for my Mistress?

VAN RUIJVEN drips scarlet sealing wax onto the back of the letter, presses his signet ring onto the molten blob.

VAN RUIJVEN

Take care, it is hot.

He holds out the note, so she must tug it from his plump, white fingers. Behind them the painting of VAN RUIJVEN and the GIRL.

TANNEKE (V.O.)

She thought she was somebody, all dressed up like a lady.

INT. COOKING KITCHEN DAY

The kitchen is full of smoke and steam as TANNEKE cooks, GRIET assisting her.

TANNEKE

Green as grass, mind you. Only worked there a few months before Master van Ruijven brought her over for the painting. Got her into his wife's finery, poured wine down her like he was forcing a goose, took her home the long way. Sure enough she was carrying his by-blow before the paint was dry.

She slams down the meat dish with a clang.

TANNEKE (CONT'D)

He thinks we don't know how to celebrate a birth, does he?

INT. GREAT HALL DAY

LINEN, CROCKERY, CUTLERY, PEWTER are all whisked out of chests or cupboards: washed, scrubbed, polished, ironed.

EXT. HOUSE DAY

GRIET scours the front door step with furious energy.

INT. COOKING KITCHEN DAY

TANNEKE tips jellied meat out of a mould, puts it in the STOREROOM alongside rows of other delicacies

EXT. COURTYARD DAY

GRIET hangs laundry to dry, including a fine CHRISTENING ROBE.

EXT. HOUSE DAY

MEN bring in furniture and hangings, their muddy feet marking the door step. GRIET scrubs it again, her back aches.

INT. GREAT HALL DAY

MUSICIANS tuning their instruments: FIDDLE and DRUM and PIPES. CATHARINA plays a melody on the fiddle, the others follow.

INT. ENTRANCE HALL/MARIA THINS ROOM DAY

More deliveries: baskets of FLOWERS and GREENERY. MARIA THINS takes money from her cash box for the umpteenth time. She snaps it shut. BANG, BANG at the door.

INT. WASHING KITCHEN DAY

GRIET goes to answer the back door. Everything aches and the hand she puts up to the latch is cracked and bleeding.

EXT. COURTYARD DAY

PIETER the butcher grins at her. GRIET stares back blankly, stupid with tiredness.

GRIET

Why are you here?

PIETER laughs.

PIETER

A nice greeting! When I brought the meat order just for you.

He gestures to a laden handcart behind him. GRIET hides her hands under her apron.

GRIET

Better carry it through.

PIETER

Not even a smile for my pains?

GRIET

Not today.

PIETER

Come on.

She shakes her head.

PIETER (CONT'D)

I'll put it in the book, then? Owed by Griet - one smile.

GRIET smiles at last but at that moment PIETER straightens up formally, his open face clouds, his hand automatically takes off his cap. GRIET turns and sees VERMEER watching from the dark interior, his grey eyes running past her to PIETER before he disappears inside. GRIET bites her lip.

EXT. HOUSE NIGHT

Lights blaze from the windows. Torches are set high on the wall to light the street. GUESTS arrive, the rustle of rich materials and glitter of jewels. Already the house is crowded, a bright thrum of voices over the MUSIC.

VAN RUIJVEN and his entourage arrive by boat.

EXT. COURTYARD - NIGHT

A pig spit-roasts in the backyard, a SMALL BOY sleepily turning the handle.

GRIET re-fills wine jugs from a barrel, carries them into the house.

INT. GREAT HALL NIGHT

The remains of a banquet are spread out on long trestle tables in the Hall, the fruit of TANNEKE'S labours - and of most of the bakers, pastry chefs and grocers of Delft. GRIET serves wine.

VERMEER sits at one end of the table, VAN RUIJVEN at the other with CATHARINA beside him.

She wears her green velvet dress, fat pearls gleam at her neck and ears, her blonde hair is piled high and held in place by beautiful tortoiseshell combs, inlaid with mother-of-pearl. She is still big from the pregnancy but there is a lightness about her now, her eyes darting this way and that, her laughter rising over the other voices, that makes it hard not to look at her.

The bundle that is the new BABY is passed from GUEST to GUEST along the table until he starts to yell in protest, when he is handed back, with much laughter, to his mother. CATHARINA coos over him gently, soothing him with a finger, but the WET-NURSE is standing by. Reluctantly she hands him over, the baby latches on greedily to the breast.

VAN RUIJVEN

Lucky whelp. Where's mine?

CATHARINA laughs bravely as he eyes her cleavage. MARIA THINS rises to her feet and taps a glass for quiet.

MARIA THINS

Friends and neighbours, our honoured guest Master Van Ruijven, Mistress Emilie. Not only are we gathered tonight to celebrate the safe delivery into this world, God be praised, of little Franciscus-

(Cheers and applause)

Our thanks to you all for so many kind presents - but also to rejoice at another birth: a new masterpiece from the hand of my son-in-law, Johannes Vermeer.

She pulls the cover from the finished painting, which is on an easel by the table. More applause, warm and genuine. No doubt that his talents are admired but VERMEER can only manage a tight formal smile of acknowledgement. VAN RUIJVEN gets to his feet and bows, taking the plaudits as his by right.

He walks this way and that before the painting, studying it with a great air of connoisseurship until the room falls quiet. His wife EMILIE VAN RUIJVEN (the subject of the painting), MARIA THINS and CATHARINA wait anxiously on his judgement. Only VERMEER sits still, shielding his painting hand with the other.

VAN RUIJVEN

Is this Indian yellow?

Vermeer nods.

VAN RUIJVEN (CONT'D)

Extracted from the urine of sacred cows fed only on mango leaves. You've glazed my wife in dried piss, eh?

General laughter.

VERMEER

It is the right colour.

CATHARINA flashes a look at her husband: Play the game. She motions GRIET to pour more wine.

CATHARINA

(Smiling) I cannot bear the suspense a moment more, Master Van Ruijven. Pray tell us what you think.

VAN RUIJVEN takes a stance in front of the painting, authoritative, proprietorial.

VAN RUIJVEN

I like it better when the sitter looks out from a painting - takes one's eye, so to speak. Hmm

His sharp eyes flick over the worried faces of VERMEER'S womenfolk. He smiles graciously.

VAN RUIJVEN (CONT'D)

Still, it is good. The colour and perspective true, the illusion perfect. Such skill lavished on my dear Emilie. Why it is almost as if she were thinking.

VAN RUIJVEN laughs. MARIA THINS leads more applause - of VAN RUIJVEN'S approval and discerning taste - as VAN RUIJVEN places a heavy purse on the table in front of CATHARINA. EMILIE sits passively - her husband is cruelly accurate - as GRIET pours wine for her.

MARIA THINS

(Quickly)

And have you considered a subject for your next commission? We cannot expect you to give up Emilie for so long again.

VAN RUIJVEN

Considered - it's already in hand. Didn't I tell you? A coming fellow from Amsterdam.

A palpable shock of disappointment from CATHARINA and MARIA THINS. VAN RUIJVEN chats on, enjoying their discomfort.

VAN RUIJVEN (CONT'D)

Trained with Rembrandt Van Rijn, though who hasn't these days. A Merry Company by Candlelight, candlelight being his forte. I have business there at present so it suits me well. And he takes a deal more care of his sitters than some painters I could name. Fresh coffee and cakes aplenty, good company and no stinting the wine flask.

MARIA THINS signals for GRIET to refill VAN RUIJVEN'S glass.

VAN RUIJVEN (CONT'D)

So, what will you daub next, Jan? Have you found inspiration up in that room of yours? Is there another patron in Delft with pockets as deep as mine?

An expectant silence. But there is no other patron and VAN RUIJVEN knows it. The silence grows awkward.

CATHARINA

For pity's sake you tell him, Master Van Ruijven. I swear I bring forth babies with less moaning than he the notion for a painting.

General laughter. VAN RUIJVEN stops GRIET, a hand on her arm and grins down the table at VERMEER.

VAN RUIJVEN

Here's what to paint.

VERMEER smiles politely.

VAN RUIJVEN (CONT'D)

I'd keep her company of course, offer my advice.

VERMEER

Griet. The wine.

VAN RUIJVEN lets her go.

VAN RUIJVEN

Look at her, man. How hard can it be to paint a pretty girl?

VERMEER glances at GRIET. GRIET is in turmoil; hating the attention yet hoping, in spite of herself, that he'll see something in her. But his eyes slide away.

VERMEER

I have not found a subject.

CATHARINA struggles to put on a brave face.

CATHARINA

Are you in this new painting, Emilie?

EMILIE opens her mouth, as if she might speak.

VAN RUIJVEN

The company is not fit. Besides she likes to stay home.

EXT. VERMEER HOUSE DAY

Rain drives along the canal and splatters the window panes as GRIET hurriedly pulls them closed from within.

INT. MARIA THINS ROOM DAY

LISBETH and ALEYDIS stare glumly out of the window at the rain pouring down; they both have racking coughs. CORNELIA is clacking the pieces on a tric-trac board, MAERTGE is trying to amuse the toddler JOHANNES with pat-a-cake games. CATHARINA paces to and fro failing to soothe the BABY.

CATHARINA

Cornelia, stop that noise.

GRIET leaves quietly.

INT. STUDIO DAY

GRIET can still hear CORNELIA arguing with the others downstairs. The perpetual, thin wailing of the BABY. She closes the door, pulls the curtain across.

The STUDIO is bare and cold. Only one thing has changed. A new canvas sits blank on the easel.

EXT. VERMEER HOUSE DAY

GRIET carries her pitchers to the canal. A few doors down the street BAILIFFS are hauling furniture from a house. A SERVANT comes out after them, holding her apron to her face. TANNEKE has come to see what's going on.

GRIET

What is it?

TANNEKE

Bankrupt. Three ships lost in a month they say.
The shame.

GRIET watches wide-eyed as more fine possessions are dragged out and loaded onto a barge.

An old GENTLEMAN and his white-haired WIFE come slowly out of the house. Stupefied by their misfortune. The OLD WOMAN tries to intervene to save some personal memento, a BAILIFF pushes her off roughly so she falls to the ground.

TANNEKE crosses herself, warding off evil.

TANNEKE (CONT'D)

God save us all. Watch out for Young Mistress - she hates to hear of money troubles. She'll turn spiteful at this, you mark my words.

INT. COOKING KITCHEN EVENING

TANNEKE, GRIET and the CHILDREN are eating their supper in apprehensive silence. The front door opens and shuts.

At once CATHARINA'S VOICE rises in complaint, a string of shrill accusations.

INT. COOKING KITCHEN - NIGHT

It's late and the two servants sit by the fire.

TANNEKE

One year it got so bad they had to sell some of her jewels.

TANNEKE rolls her eyes in delicious horror at the memory.

TANNEKE (CONT'D)

Phew! You can imagine how that pleased her. She went off like a thunderclap, crashing all over the house - I kept my head down I can tell you. Smashed half the china off the dresser, even went to spoil one of his precious paintings. Well, he's a temper on him too, for all he's so quiet. She's never set so much as a foot in the studio from that day to this.

GRIET listens, open-mouthed.

INT. COOKING KITCHEN/CORRIDOR NIGHT

The household has gone to bed. GRIET lingers by the dying embers of the kitchen fire. When she hears the door she gets up.

VERMEER comes in quietly, his cloak wrapped around him against the freezing night. His eyes meet GRIET'S for a moment before she looks down and he goes upstairs.

INT. MARIA THINS ROOM DAY

GRIET in her best lace collar. MARIA THINS counts out small coins into her hand. Far off a church bell ringing, then another.

MARIA THINS

Off to tell them all about us, eh.

EXT. GATES NEAR BRIDGE - DAY

GRIET returns through the gates and over the bridge to the poorer quarter. Home.

INT. CHURCH DAY

GRIET kneels beside FRANS between her FATHER and MOTHER. Their church is a modest place.

GRIET'S FATHER holds GRIET'S hand, caressing the callused, cracked fingers. *

A movement in the doorway. She looks up and sees PIETER. *

EXT. CHURCH DAY *

The family and PIETER outside the church. *

GRIET
 Father, Mother. This is Pieter, our butcher's son. The family's butcher.

PIETER
 Sir, Mistress. I am glad to meet you.

He pauses politely but none of the family are able to take up the conversation. He smiles encouragingly.

PIETER (CONT'D)
 I've lived in Delft all my life and not seen the half of it. So I thought to visit every church in the City and find the best.

MOTHER
 And how do you like ours?

PIETER
 Very well. So well I may stop my search here - if you'll let me, Mistress.

He addresses himself entirely to GRIET'S MOTHER, who is charmed by his good looks and good manners.

MOTHER
 (Laughing) By all means. Will you walk with us a little, Pieter?
 (They walk a few steps)
 So, a butcher. That's a good trade.

PIETER
 Griet is the hardest to please of all our customers.

MOTHER
 Aye, she gets that from me.

GRIET is annoyed at the knowing smile that passes between her MOTHER and PIETER. FRANS elbows her.

MOTHER (CONT'D)
(To FATHER)

There now I forgot! We must speak with Willem Jansson. Griet, you go on with Pieter here.

She whisks her husband and son away, leaving GRIET facing a grinning PIETER.

PIETER
Ah, Griet. Where's that smile you owe me, when I've been so clever as to track you down.

GRIET refuses to be impressed.

GRIET
You had nothing better to do.

The GOSSIPS are watching them, a handsome young man is not going to pass unnoticed. GRIET takes the arm he offers, holds her head up as she walks away.

EXT. CANAL DAY

Walking by the canal. There are other courting couples - for that's what they must be - prayer books under their arms, going home slowly. PIETER skims a stone. It bounces and bounces down the flat water, far beyond what seems possible. PIETER laughs, turning back to GRIET, arms wide.

PIETER
My lucky day.

GRIET'S arms are folded but she cannot resist answering his smile with her own.

INT. STUDIO DAY

GRIET looks round the empty studio, wanting to do something. The stretched canvas is as blank as before, the room bleak. She pulls back the last shutter, mottled cold light on the wall.

INT. MARIA THINS ROOM DAY

GRIET finds CATHARINA with her mother by the fire, heads together, talking in low voices. CATHARINA glares at GRIET, annoyed at the interruption.

CATHARINA
What is it?

GRIET
About the studio, Mistress.

CATHARINA
Yes?

CATHARINA rocks the baby's cradle, to show she is not being idle.

GRIET
Should I clean the windows?

CATHARINA rolls her eyes.

CATHARINA
You don't need to ask me such stuff.

GRIET
Only it may change the light.

CATHARINA pauses, considering this. MARIA THINS smiles wryly.
CATHARINA notices.

CATHARINA
(Sharply) Of course wash them.

INT. STUDIO DAY

Hard at work GRIET wrings out her cloth in a basin of water and wipes the windows. There are patterns of coloured glass, the light stains her fingers as she works; pale blue, rose pink. The same look of absorbed pleasure as when she cut the vegetables.

She is startled when she turns to rinse the rag and sees VERMEER standing stock still in the doorway.

GRIET
I'm sorry sir, I-

VERMEER
Stay as you were.

GRIET stands still, the rag in her hands. That small impatient gesture of his hand.

VERMEER (CONT'D)
Just now. At the window.

Awkwardly GRIET tries to go back to wiping the window. He points at the rag.

VERMEER (CONT'D)
Drop it.

She lets it fall. Dirty water splatters on the clean floor. After a moment she pushes the rag under her skirt with one foot. Looks at her left hand again. A sudden laugh of delight from VERMEER.

VERMEER (CONT'D)
You can go.

EXT. COURTYARD DAY

GRIET takes down laundry, frozen stiff into scarecrow shapes. From inside the thin keening of the BABY stops for a moment. GRIET breathes in relief, vapour curling from her lips. The BABY starts again, GRIET tenses. CATHARINA calls her.

INT. GREAT HALL DAY

It is gloomy in the big room even with candles lit. A small fire burns in the wide grate. The BABY grizzles fretfully, refusing to feed from the WET-NURSE.

CATHARINA is at her desk but she looks exhausted, nerves frayed. She frowns at GRIET as if she can't remember why she is here.

GRIET

You called me?

Something in the appearance of the maid; her scrupulous neatness, her starched white cap, her blatant youth, is deeply galling to CATHARINA.

CATHARINA

The child needs a draught. (To herself) My mother will not be content till one of them dies from her meanness. (To GRIET) You will go to the apothecary.

An errand CATHARINA always reserves for herself.

GRIET

Me, Madam?

CATHARINA

I suppose I should do everything! But I have to stay with the baby and besides it's cold and I believe I am falling sick too. (Impatiently) I will write what to ask for.

CATHARINA pushes aside loose papers to make space. Some fall to the ground and GRIET hurries to pick them up. Columns of figures, accounts, bills: CATHARINA snatches them back.

CATHARINA (CONT'D)

Can you read?

GRIET hesitates, her head dipping under the cap.

GRIET

I can follow my prayer book.

CATHARINA smiles. Starts to write; a big, bold hand, dipping the quill fast and splashing drops of black ink across the paper. She sands and folds the paper with a flourish.

CATHARINA

Coltsfoot elixir, hyssop and elderflower. Enough for both boys. You will need...

She looks through the desk for money. Finds only a few coins.

CATHARINA (CONT'D)

(agitated)

No, no, that's not it! To go on the Master's account.

She hands the note to GRIET, flushed with indignation.

INT. WASHING KITCHEN DAY

Anywhere away from a fireside is bitterly cold. GRIET shivers as she puts on her wooden pattens, wraps her rough woollen shawl tighter round her shoulders. The room darkens.

VERMEER

Griet.

She spins round. VERMEER has followed her in to the narrow space. He puts a hand out, as one might to calm a frightened animal, then lets it fall.

GRIET

Sir?

VERMEER

It's very cold.

She waits, tense at the sudden strangeness.

VERMEER (CONT'D)

Will you get something for me too?

VERMEER hands her a scrap of paper.

VERMEER (CONT'D)

Some colours. He knows.

GRIET

On your account, sir?

VERMEER is taken aback for a moment.

VERMEER

Yes. My wife need not know.

The exchange feels conspiratorial, guilty, reinforced by the dark and narrow space. He touches the edge of her shawl.

VERMEER (CONT'D)

(Vaguely) This is too thin. I have a cloak-

CORNELIA (O/S)

Can I come?

VERMEER shakes his head, coming out of the moment. He turns abruptly and pushes past CORNELIA who is peering inquisitively. GRIET tucks the paper into her shawl quickly, but not fast enough to avoid CORNELIA'S sharp eyes.

GRIET

No. It's too cold.

CORNELIA

What's that?

GRIET bites her lip.

GRIET

I have to get medicines for your brother. You don't want to get sick too.

But the evasion - the lie - hangs between them. CORNELIA'S eyes narrow, cat-like, accusing.

CORNELIA

You better hurry. We had a brother that died.

EXT. DELFT STREETS DAY

A single skater pushes a sled-barrow down the frozen canal, hunched against the biting wind. GRIET hurries along deserted streets.

INT. APOTHECARY'S DAY

Three steps down into the gloom of the apothecary's shop. GRIET shakes the snow off her shawl and looks around: the first time she has ever been in such a place.

All around the walls glass bottles and jars are filled with dark liquids or packed with dried herbs. A desiccated lizard dangles in mid-air. The atmosphere is smoky from a grumbling peat fire.

APOTHECARY

Well?

GRIET is startled. Peering into the corner by the fire she sees a tiny old man, as brown and wrinkled as one of his remedies. He is watching her curiously.

GRIET

My Mistress, Catharina Bolnes, sent me. The baby is sick.

She brings out the note and the old man scans it quickly and starts getting down different jars and bottles, weighing out herbs in his scales.

APOTHECARY

You must be the new maid. She spoke of you, I guessed you were pretty. Is she expecting again, that she sent you? This weather, eh.

GRIET watches his quick hands working, crushing and mixing the dried leaves.

APOTHECARY (CONT'D)

Cold cures where it don't kill.

The APOTHECARY ties up the packages neatly.

APOTHECARY (CONT'D)

There. My best regards to your Mistress. And Master Van der Meer.

GRIET reaches into her shawl and pulls out his paper.

GRIET

The Master...

The APOTHECARY opens it and finds VERMEER'S instructions. He frowns at GRIET.

APOTHECARY

He always gets this himself.

GRIET meets his eyes, blank to their prying.

GRIET

The weather.

APOTHECARY

Hm.

With another suspicious look at her he climbs a ladder to a high cupboard and unlocks it with a key chained to his belt. Clearly the pigments are the most precious things in his shop. He takes out dark glass jars, sealed with wax, stands them on the counter.

APOTHECARY (CONT'D)

A year's wages couldn't buy you these.

GRIET stares at the mysterious raw materials of magic.

APOTHECARY (CONT'D)

(approving)

He wants the very best, it's all that matters to him.

EXT. VERMEER HOUSE DAY

Bitter cold weather, the wind whips snow flurries along the frozen canals. Even so, one window is open up in the studio.

INT. STUDIO DAY

At first we see only over the model's shoulder; VERMEER painting, his face rapt with concentration. Moving round the camera reveals one of CATHARINA'S bodices, blue striped with yellow, then GRIET'S white cap. But the model is not GRIET.

Another GIRL, pale and thin, stands in the same pose, encased asexually in CATHARINA'S clothes.

INT. ENTRANCE HALL EVENING

GRIET is mopping the floor on hands and knees when MARIA THINS' black cane pins down her cloth. GRIET looks up, startled. The old woman studies her, a thin smile.

MARIA THINS

He's started a new painting. But you know that.

GRIET

Yes, Madam.

MARIA THINS is watching her sharply.

MARIA THINS

There's no buyer, he wont even let me see it.
But he's working again... It usually takes
longer.

CORNELIA runs in through the front door, dirty footprints on the clean floor.

CORNELIA

Grandmother, Aleydis won't give me-

MARIA THINS cuffs her sharply.

MARIA THINS

See what you've done, silly child! Now Griet
must do it over.

CORNELIA scowls at GRIET. MARIA THINS softens.

MARIA THINS (CONT'D)

There, poppet, get along and don't sulk.

INT. CELLAR NIGHT

Going to bed GRIET sees that her things have been disturbed. Her tile has been deliberately broken in half, she and Frans split either side of the jagged edge. She is very upset.

INT. MARIA THINS ROOM DAY

While the other girls bend diligently over their cushions and bobbins CORNELIA teases a kitten with the dangling threads of her lace work. GRIET, with a pile of mending before her, tries to concentrate. The kitten's claws snag in the delicate threads. CORNELIA laughs.

GRIET

You'll spoil it.

CORNELIA

I don't care.

She gets up, letting the cushion fall on the floor, pins and bobbins scattering.

GRIET

Pick it up.

CORNELIA

No.

The other CHILDREN are watching round-eyed. Gentle MAERTGE tries to make peace.

MAERTGE

(Pleading) Cornelia.

CORNELIA sneers at GRIET.

CORNELIA

You don't tell me what to do. You're only a servant.

GRIET gets up angrily and CORNELIA, scared and excited, hides behind the furniture.

CORNELIA (CONT'D)

Go away! Leave me alone! I didn't do anything.

CATHARINA comes hurrying in, the BABY asleep in her arms. CORNELIA runs to her, clings to her skirts as if for protection.

CATHARINA

What's the matter?

There is no answer, except CORNELIA'S plaintive snivels. CATHARINA pets her distractedly but the BABY has woken and starts crying again. CATHARINA glares at GRIET.

CATHARINA (CONT'D)

What's wrong with you? Be off about your work.

INT. CORRIDOR/STUDIO DAY

GRIET sees with relief that the STUDIO door is open. She steps inside and leans against it, shutting out the hostile world, the noise and clatter of everyday life. It is not till she is three steps into the room that she realises VERMEER is there, silent and still on his painting stool.

GRIET

I'm sorry, sir.

He waves her into silence, concentrated on his painting.

VERMEER

Stay.

GRIET waits awkwardly in the middle of the room.

VERMEER (CONT'D)

The lead-white needs re-filling from the cupboard.

GRIET opens the door revealing jars, pouches and pots of different pigments. She takes one of the larger pots and measures out white paste into the small dish on the table.

VERMEER seems to pay no more attention to her. She stands and watches, enthralled, as he mixes and thins the paint on the palette, making marks with a sure hand.

GRIET stares at the chilly MODEL standing uncomfortably at the window, trying to see what he sees. She looks back at the table and then, seized by an inspiration, she goes quietly to the cupboard. She looks through the jars until she sees the one she wants.

VERMEER comes over to the mixing table to re-fill his palette with white. He sees the other colour.

VERMEER (CONT'D)

I didn't ask for blue.

GRIET

Her skirt. I thought-

VERMEER

(Cold outrage)

Put it away.

He turns back to the easel. She is left at the table holding the little pot of blue.

EXT. CANAL DAY

GRIET walks along a parapet, at the end PIETER must jump her down. They are in a corner sheltered by a bridge. He keeps hold of her waist, slides one hand up to her neck.

PIETER

(Tender) Griet.

He moves closer, she tries to push him away, he laces his fingers through hers. She focuses on his hand: dried blood caked at the base of the nails. He smiles at her, starts to lift one side of her cap.

PIETER (CONT'D)

Let me see your hair.

She pulls the cap down, he tugs it up again, laughing.

PIETER (CONT'D)

What colour is it?

She pushes him off.

GRIET

(Lying)

Brown.

PIETER

Straight or curly?

GRIET

(A beat) Neither.

PIETER

Long? Very long?

He tries to pull off the cap again. She beats at his arms in deadly earnest.

GRIET

No!

He sees she is serious, lets his hands drop. She straightens her cap in silence.

PIETER

It was only a game.

GRIET

Mother will expect me home.

PIETER grins.

PIETER

She knows where you are.

GRIET shoots him a look of fury, outraged at the truth and shame of it.

INT. STUDIO DAY

GRIET cleans the picture setting, buffing the silver jug, her reflection distorted in the gleaming metal. She compares the setting to the painting. Areas are blocked in dark colours: the jug and bowl are red-brown, the girl's skirt is black. Dull, dead colours.

VERMEER

Griet.

VERMEER is behind her, his dark reflection overwhelming hers in the jug. He can't apologise, turns instinctively to the painting for support.

VERMEER (CONT'D)

Were you looking at it?

GRIET nods.

VERMEER (CONT'D)

Well?

GRIET hesitates, then blurts out her confusion.

GRIET

I don't understand. Nothing is the right colour.

VERMEER

Like the blue skirt? This is the base colour, it gives the tone, the shadow and light. When it's dry I glaze over with blue, but thinly so the black shows through.

VERMEER walks to the window and opens it wide.

VERMEER (CONT'D)

Look, Griet. Look at the clouds.

She steps to the window, he moves aside but still close enough to feel the warmth of his body. She stares intently at the puffy clouds and blue sky.

VERMEER (CONT'D)

What colour are they?

She frowns, it must be some kind of trick. Wants to speak but dare not. That impatient gesture.

GRIET

White?

She knows it was the wrong thing to say and can see he is about to dismiss her.

GRIET (CONT'D)
 No, not white. There are colours in the clouds.
 Blue, yellow, grey....

He smiles.

VERMEER
 Yes. Now you understand.

She doesn't, but she doesn't want to admit it. She steals a glance at him, his sombre face aglow.

VERMEER (CONT'D)
 Forget how the world is meant to be. Only look
 beneath. In the shadows.

Words frustrate him.

VERMEER (CONT'D)
 (A command) Look, Griet.

INT. COOKING KITCHEN DAY

GRIET stares out of the high kitchen window at scudding clouds, a pewter jug forgotten in her hands.

TANNEKE
 Thinking about your butcher boy?

She laughs, not unkindly, as GRIET blushes and goes back to polishing the jug.

EXT. DELFT STREETS/APOTHECARY'S SHOP - DAY

GRIET slips away from the Market stalls down the alley to the Apothecary's shop.

INT. STAIRS DAY

GRIET creeps up the stairs and slides through the studio door.

INT. STUDIO DAY

VERMEER is sitting, massaging his painting hand as he stares at the painting, no brush or palette to be seen.

GRIET
 (at length)
 Sir?

She holds out the little packages from the apothecary. He looks back at the drab reds and browns of his painting, already seeing what will be there.

VERMEER

Did you get the lapis?

GRIET finds a small lump of blackish stone (lapis lazuli).

VERMEER (CONT'D)

For the skirt. (An afterthought) You can mix the colours.

GRIET is excited, but also fearful.

GRIET

Mix the colours?

He is already pulling open his painting cupboard, taking out scallop shells, a wide copper bowl.

GRIET (CONT'D)

Sir, I haven't time. All the chores-

VERMEER

Make time.

GRIET

In here, sir? With you?

VERMEER makes his impatient gesture, then realises what she is saying.

VERMEER

No, no. Upstairs. Come.

In a corner of the studio is a wooden ladder leading up. VERMEER climbs up swiftly, leaving GRIET alone. Hesitating a moment she picks up the bowl and dishes and clambers after him.

INT. ATTIC DAY

A bare, bright room. The only furniture is a heavy table with a stone top, dipped in the centre and a cupboard with many small drawers.

VERMEER lays out the pigments with deft, delicate fingers. Dark powders and unpromising lumps of ore.

VERMEER

Cochineal...cinnabar...indigo...burnt umber... Lapis lazuli.

He hangs over them with the helpless love of the obsessive. GRIET watches in fascination.

He fishes narrow strips - "buckles" - of lead from a jar of brown liquid. They are furred with white powder which he scrapes into a dish.

VERMEER (CONT'D)

Lead-white.

A dark mash of grape skins and pips is spooned into the copper bowl.

VERMEER (CONT'D)

This will make verdigris.

From one of the packages he takes little black sticks.

VERMEER (CONT'D)

Bone black. You grind it with the muller, like this.

He takes a smooth egg-shape stone from the table, puts a piece of charred bone into the dip and quickly grinds it to a fine powder. Deftly he spoons it into a shell.

VERMEER (CONT'D)

Now, you try.

He puts another piece of bone in the hollow. GRIET picks up the muller and tries to do as he did. She finds it awkward, the stone slips in her hand, the bone flakes out of the hollow. VERMEER watches her intently.

VERMEER (CONT'D)

Twist from the shoulder.

He puts his hand over hers.

At the shock of his touch she freezes, her breath and his loud in the silence. His white hand on hers, outlined against the black powder. The seconds stretch. She recoils abruptly and the muller skids from her grasp across the table.

INT. COOKING KITCHEN/CORRIDOR NIGHT

GRIET sneaks through the house in the blue-grey before dawn. Through the room where TANNEKE and the WET NURSE are snoring. The BABY starts to cry and the WET NURSE stumbles out of bed to the HALL, TANNEKE moans at her. GRIET shrinks into the shadows as the disturbance spreads among the sleepers all around her.

INT. STAIRS -NIGHT

She climbs the stairs. Stops outside the studio door and feels above the frame for a hidden key.

INT. ATTIC DAWN

GRIET grinds and refines colours, sieving the ground dust through a muslin, absorbed in her work.

INT. GREAT HALL NIGHT

GRIET helps TANNEKE fold sheets into the linen cupboard. TANNEKE yawns theatrically.

TANNEKE

Lord, I'm that tired I can barely stand.

CATHARINA is preparing to go out, she is in high spirits. Her jewel box is open and she wears a wide white linen collar to protect her rich yellow mantle from her face powder. The girls are hanging around her, CORNELIA trying on her necklaces.

CATHARINA

Be careful, pigeon.

TANNEKE

How much longer is the wet nurse to be with us, Mistress?

CATHARINA doesn't look round from the mirror.

CATHARINA

I don't know. A month or so. Cornelia, no! Not my pearls.

CORNELIA puts back a heavy pearl necklace, takes an inlaid tortoiseshell comb from the jewel box. MAERTGE smoothes her mother's elaborately dressed hair, helping to pat the curls into place round her forehead.

TANNEKE sighs again.

TANNEKE

A month! Or more!

CATHARINA dangles a bright chain over the BABY'S crib fondly, laughing as his fat fingers grab for it.

CATHARINA

Ah, ah, greedy! (To TANNEKE) Franciscus is taking his rusk now but he still needs milk. Why? What is it to you?

TANNEKE

Oh nothing. She's eating us out of house and home for a start...

CATHARINA

She must eat well - for the baby.

TANNEKE

All I'm saying is, I can't cook twice as much and have no sleep at all. It's more than a body can stand, to be woken all hours by her coming and going.

CATHARINA holds up her pearl earrings and approves herself with a smile.

CATHARINA
Tell her to be quiet then.

TANNEKE
If I could move back to the cellar...

CATHARINA
Well, you can't. Griet has your place.

GRIET continues to fold linen quietly, hearing the unreasonable tone in CATHARINA'S voice at her name.

VERMEER kneels on the black and white tiles playing stones with little JOHANNES. Now he looks up.

VERMEER
Why not move Tanneke back?

The WOMEN all look at him in astonishment. He is not one for domestic detail. He throws the stones again, seeming unconcerned.

VERMEER (CONT'D)
Put a mattress in the attic for Griet. Tanneke can sleep soundly and Griet may clean the studio before she comes down in the morning.

CATHARINA, GRIET and TANNEKE take in the implications of this warily. He smiles wide-eyed, like Cornelia bent on mischief.

VERMEER (CONT'D)
Well?

Catharina plays for time, takes her necklace back from CORNELIA to put in her jewel box.

CATHARINA
My jewels! You always have my jewels up there to paint. She...

VERMEER comes to her, offering a key like a love token.

VERMEER
You lock up at night, open it in the morning.

He puts the key in her hand, CATHARINA weighs it up. She wants this key, this control, but... She glances over at GRIET surreptitiously. GRIET is frozen, waiting for her fate to be decided.

CATHARINA adds the key to the bunch at her waist.

CATHARINA

There. Are you satisfied, Tanneke?

TANNEKE throws GRIET a sour look, feeling the girl has somehow come out better than her.

TANNEKE

(Sulkily) Yes, Mistress.

VERMEER touches CATHARINA'S linen collar.

VERMEER

What is this? You've never worn it before.

CATHARINA

(Laughing) Only every time I go out. It catches the powder.

VERMEER

Hmm.

He is looking at her with his painter's eye, runs a hand over her cheek and jaw, watching the shadows.

VERMEER (CONT'D)

That's good. May I have it?

Tugging at the bow already. His fingers caress her neck. CATHARINA pushes him away cheerfully.

CATHARINA

No, Jan! We shall be late. Again.

INT. ATTIC DAY

GRIET wakes early. The sun is streaming through the attic skylight, church bells ringing over the town. A wonderful sense of freedom after the dark cellar.

She lays out her few precious things on a beam, puts her prayer book by the trapdoor.

She strains a pigment left to soak overnight, takes off her "painting" apron before climbing down to the studio.

INT. STUDIO DAY

The room is spotlessly clean and tidy. GRIET inspects the painting.

The girl's clothes and the objects all have their true colours now: the blue skirt shadowed with black; red just visible under the multiplicity of reflected colours in the bowl.

The girl in the painting wears not only GRIET'S cap, cowlng her face, but the wide white collar CATHARINA wore to powder herself. The effect is nun-like, a physical and spiritual separation from the body. A chair fills the foreground, adding depth to the composition.

GRIET frowns. Something is not right. She blocks different parts with her hands.

INT. STAIRS DAY

CATHARINA unlocks the door, the great bunch of keys jangling and knocking her hand. GRIET is waiting inside, eyes down. CATHARINA stands aside for her to leave, the girl goes by her without looking up, a murmur of acknowledgement.

CATHARINA looks into the empty studio, craning her neck to see something significant in the bare room.

INT. ATTIC DAY

GRIET is grinding pigment, her action now as smooth and easy as VERMEER'S, a quiet trance-like state. Interrupted by MEN'S VOICES.

MAN (O/S)

You might get your own and save my back.

GRIET freezes. They are coming into the STUDIO. Below her noises of moving furniture, a grunt as the MEN lift something heavy.

VERMEER (O/S)

Maria Thins suspects it a distraction.

MAN (O/S)

From painting? How could a painter ignore such an invent-

VERMEER (O/S)

From finishing.

They laugh. GRIET peers down into the STUDIO.

GRIET'S POV

VERMEER holds one end of the camera obscura, the MAN (VAN LEEUWENHOEK) the other. An extension, obviously home-made, has been put on one end and they are struggling to fit the whole contraption safely on the table.

INT. STUDIO DAY

VAN LEEUWENHOEK talks at top speed, ideas bursting out without time to catch his breath.

VAN LEEUWENHOEK

Did I tell you I ground a perfect lens last week? The very smallest distortion at one edge. Careful - I was awake a great part of the night at this; the new lens is not so well-secured as I wanted.

They lift the box but as they do so VAN LEEUWENHOEK catches sight of GRIET watching from the attic. He gasps and drops his end of the camera obscura with a crash.

VAN LEEUWENHOEK (CONT'D)

Aah! There's a girl in your attic.

VERMEER

The lens is off.

GRIET hides.

VAN LEEUWENHOEK

Confound it, the whole thing is out of true. What's she doing up there?

He starts disassembling the camera obscura as he talks.

VERMEER

Can you set it right?

VAN LEEUWENHOEK

Hmm.. I don't know... You see the bracket...no,no I believe it is only a little bent...if I... Hold that steady, yes, there it goes... I know who she is! Catharina complained at length - a brace of customers waiting - at the strain of running so large a household. I thought she was bragging.

VERMEER

Come down, Griet.

(to VAN LEEUWENHOEK)

If you kept your shop in better order you wouldn't have to listen to so much talk

VAN LEEUWENHOEK

It's the talk fills my shop - and with sickness in the town that's no small matter. I am not the only draper in Delft selling fine silk in five weights but I am the only one willing and able to converse on any subject under God's sun.

VERMEER (CONT'D)

(drily)

Hold forth.

VAN LEEUWENHOEK

So Griet, now we are on the level - Antony Van Leeuwenhoek, your servant - What were you doing in the attic? Spying for Mother Thins?

GRIET hesitates, this is her secret with VERMEER. But something in VAN LEEUWENHOEK'S face gives her confidence.

GRIET

Grinding pigments, sir.

VAN LEEUWENHOEK

Griet the Assistant, eh? What next? Have you taken a pupil at last? You won't teach me.

VERMEER

You have no aptitude. She can stand in if it's working. Over there.

Uncertainly GRIET takes up the pose of the model at the window.

The two MEN burrow under VERMEER'S cloak to see the image. They look more than a little absurd, a sort of lumpy pantomime horse.

VAN LEEUWENHOEK

A little more, stop, the other way, more more... there. D'you see the diffraction- ow, my foot.

GRIET'S lips curl upwards.

VERMEER

Stop that, Griet.

GRIET tries to look solemn.

VERMEER (CONT'D)

(Sharply) Don't think. You're spoiling the picture.

GRIET struggles to obey. VAN LEEUWENHOEK emerges from under the cloak, laughing.

VAN LEEUWENHOEK

You're a tyrant. Tell her next she may not breathe, your blessed picture doesn't. (Looking at the painting) What does it mean? Who is she?

GRIET holds her breath. VERMEER straightens up, turns away.

VERMEER (CONT'D)

No one. A vision I had.

They move away, leaving GRIET in the painting corner.

VAN LEEUWENHOEK

Why isn't Van Ruijven buying it? His pockets are deep enough surely, even if he never pays a bill till the next quarter but one. Did you quarrel?

VERMEER

He chooses a painter who offers wine and company.

VAN LEEUWENHOEK

Are you being stiff-necked, Jan? He's visited by every notable in the country - still waiting for my invitation - and your pictures are the pride of his collection.

VERMEER

He has good taste.

VAN LEEUWENHOEK laughs.

VAN LEEUWENHOEK

It isn't modesty holds you back! Make it up with him for God's sake.

VERMEER

It's not that he tells me what to paint and how; I know to sup with the Devil I must take a long spoon. No, it's why he wants them.

VAN LEEUWENHOEK lowers his voice.

VAN LEEUWENHOEK

That business with the maid? You're only a painter, Jan, not his confessor.

VERMEER

You know he offered to lend me more money?

VAN LEEUWENHOEK

Well, if you need some maybe I could-

VERMEER

It's not the money. He's greedy. The paintings aren't enough. He would be my Master.

VAN LEEUWENHOEK

He's used to having his way and you cross him,
that's-

The door opens abruptly and MARIA THINS stands there.

MARIA THINS

It's true then. You are here.

VAN LEEUWENHOEK

Mistress Thins. You look well. I have the black
satin-

MARIA THINS ignores him, turns angrily on her son-in-law.

MARIA THINS

You told me you were painting today.

VERMEER cradles his painting hand.

VERMEER

I am. I was.

She is too annoyed to be able to speak to him, switches back to
VAN LEEUWENHOEK.

MARIA THINS

Anthony, it's time you were on your way and pray
God you never have the burden of a family to
interrupt your interesting notions.

VAN LEEUWENHOEK bows to her.

VAN LEEUWENHOEK

Your servant, Mistress. Good Day Jan. Griet.

MARIA THINS looks thunderstruck as she realises GRIET, still in
the painting pose, has witnessed this scene.

MARIA THINS

What the Devil is she- Downstairs, girl. At
once.

GRIET hurries to leave. MARIA THINS turns to VERMEER again.

MARIA THINS (CONT'D)

(Hissing)

Joannis, in the Name of Christ - think! You are
not the only one in this house with eyes.

EXT. COURTYARD - EVENING

It is the end of the day. TANNEKE sits on a bench trying to
light a pipe. GRIET takes down the last of the laundry. CORNELIA
and MAERTGE are practising dance steps.

TANNEKE

No need for the Fish Market tomorrow, Mistress wants eggs.

She puffs at the pipe, drawing out the moment. Looks over at the two girls.

TANNEKE (CONT'D)

(lowered voice)

No, she cannot abide the smell when she's with child.

GRIET, arms full of baby clothes, can't hide her surprise.

GRIET

So soon?

TANNEKE is delighted to be first with bad news.

TANNEKE

As if there weren't enough mouths to feed already. But what can you do?

She looks up to the lit studio window significantly.

TANNEKE (CONT'D)

Men!

GRIET doesn't want to hear this.

GRIET

Did you never want children, Tanneke? Your own family.

TANNEKE

Dunno. Maybe I will, one day.

Again GRIET is taken aback. TANNEKE laughs.

TANNEKE (CONT'D)

How old did you think I was, then?

Wisely GRIET doesn't attempt to guess. If she did she might say forty.

TANNEKE (CONT'D)

Started with Old Mistress when I was fourteen. (Counting on her fingers) Year before Maertge was born. What's that, then?

CORNELIA

(Promptly, she must have been listening all along)

Twenty eight.

TANNEKE

Twenty eight. There you are.

GRIET is horrified but TANNEKE examines her beefy forearms and broad girth with some satisfaction.

TANNEKE (CONT'D)

It's the work does it. Few more years, you'll thicken up.

INT. COOKING KITCHEN/GREAT HALL NIGHT

GRIET must pass through the Great Hall to get to bed but dare not interrupt the scene before her.

CATHARINA sits at the delicate keyboard of a spinet, all her fretful energy released in the music, her hands floating over the notes.

VERMEER leans forward to turn the page for her, inhaling her scent. His hand caresses her bare shoulder. A deeply sensual, intimate moment.

GRIET sinks back in the shadows.

EXT. CANALSIDE - EVENING

GRIET playfully runs away from PIETER. He catches her and kisses her.

INT. STUDIO DAY

GRIET lays out colours for the day with absolute certainty and precision, glancing at the painting to be sure of what is needed.

She stops short, circles the easel, looking from different angles.

Very carefully and deliberately she drags the heavy lion-headed chair out of the foreground of the setting.

She looks at what she's done, astonished by her own boldness.

The key turns in the lock, she hurries to the door, breathless.

Instead of CATHARINA, CORNELIA is at the door, holding the heavy bunch of keys with pride. She eyes GRIET intently, taking advantage of her surprise.

CORNELIA

(Accusing)

What were you doing?

GRIET is wrong-footed, tries to keep calm.

GRIET
Where's your mother?

CORNELIA is peering into the studio over GRIET'S shoulder.

CORNELIA
She has a headache. You're to mind the little ones this morning.

EXT. HOUSE DAY

GRIET sits on the bench in the sunshine with baby FRANCISCUS on her knee. LISBETH and ALEYDIS are playing with their dolls, CORNELIA interfering in their game. MAERTGE is sewing.

VERMEER comes down the street, CORNELIA and LISBETH run to meet him. He goes into the house without looking at GRIET. She waits, tense.

INT. HOUSE NIGHT

GRIET carries her candle through the darkened house and upstairs. She stands outside the studio door, hardly daring to go in.

INT. STUDIO NIGHT

The room is neat and empty. No sign of work, the window closed, the cupboard locked. GRIET holds up her candle to see the painting. He has made her change, painted out the chair. GRIET stares, exultant, at what she has done.

INT. ATTIC DAY

GRIET and VERMEER are at work preparing colours; GRIET grinding bone black, VERMEER kneading a paste of precious blue lapis lazuli. VERMEER clears his throat.

VERMEER
Why did you move the chair?

GRIET pauses, not uncertain, but wanting to say rightly what she means.

GRIET
When you took the map from the painting of Mistress Van Ruijven - it was better.

She puts down the muller, thinking it through carefully.

GRIET (CONT'D)

The clear space below her arm, it balances the wall above now. She is not trapped.

She has finished and looks up at him for his reaction but he stands still and silent for a long time. At last he starts working again, GRIET picks up her muller too. Almost at once he stops.

VERMEER

So. I never thought to learn from a maid.

They are both very still, their hands next to each other by the bright pigments. His beautiful long, white fingers, so close to hers they can feel each other's warmth.

Then suddenly a clatter of footsteps and voices below; MARIA THIN'S voice, a warning tone.

MARIA THINS

Griet, are you up there?

INT. STUDIO DAY

VERMEER climbs down the ladder. MARIA THINS is at the door, her eyes flick anxiously up to the ATTIC.

CATHARINA fumes behind her, infuriated at her exclusion, her hair half-dressed.

CATHARINA

One of my tortoiseshell combs is gone.

It is an accusation not a statement.

VERMEER stands at the window, looking out. GRIET reads disaster in MARIA THINS' scowl. CATHARINA's eyes rest on a smear of scarlet madder on GRIET's arm. She draws herself up with fierce dignity. She is totally vindicated.

CATHARINA (CONT'D)

Perhaps now I will be listened to in my own home. She's nothing but trouble.

She sweeps her skirt round to go downstairs, MARIA THINS close behind, her clever, soothing words for once pass unheeded. CORNELIA'S face at the door, a brief triumphant smirk before she follows them. Suddenly GRIET understands.

GRIET and VERMEER are left alone in the studio. A painful silence, punctuated by the WOMEN'S VOICES from below.

VERMEER turns abruptly and crosses the room, not meeting her eyes. As he reaches the door:

GRIET
Master. I did not do it.

He hesitates, back turned.

GRIET (CONT'D)
(A whisper) Help me.

On his face, frozen in dismay.

INT. HOUSE DAY

The whole house in uproar: CATHARINA furious, CORNELIA crying, TANNEKE red-faced with indignation.

VERMEER goes from room to room, pulling back bed covers, sweeping stuff off shelves, the WOMEN squawking behind him like hens.

He finds GRIET'S tortoiseshell comb under CORNELIA'S mattress.

VERMEER
Cornelia!

INT. MARIA THINS ROOM DAY

It is MARIA THINS who takes up her cane while CATHARINA turns away weeping. CORNELIA'S face is white and defiant, her grey eyes like stone.

INT. GREAT HALL DAY

VERMEER and MARIA THINS sit at the oak table while CATHARINA paces to and fro, kicking her skirts out of her way. There is something a little unhinged, disturbing, about her anger, the way it controls her body, jerks her this way and that.

GRIET and TANNEKE stand and face the family, but CATHARINA acts as if GRIET weren't in the room.

CATHARINA
She's dishonest. Always sneaking around, skiving her work.

GRIET looks towards VERMEER, hoping he will explain, defend her. He is studying his boots. MARIA THINS glares at her warningly.

CATHARINA (CONT'D)
Tanneke has complained of it. Creeping upstairs all day long.

She bumps against the table in her anger, thumps it with her open hand. VERMEER half-reaches out to her. She stops abruptly, she might be going to hit him. MARIA THINS decides to take charge.

MARIA THINS

My daughter is right. There has been too much sneaking about.

Her tone includes her son-in-law in the charge.

CATHARINA

(A fresh outburst) I only took her out of charity. If I'd thought-

MARIA THINS cuts her off.

MARIA THINS

With another child due we need the extra help.

CATHARINA is quelled for the moment.

MARIA THINS (CONT'D)

Griet, fit in all your duties and do not slack or it will be the worse for you.

Her eyes are dark and beady, calculating, holding them all in her grasp.

MARIA THINS (CONT'D)

I shall invite Master Van Ruijven. Joannis must have a new commission. And it will have to be a big one, several figures.

VERMEER cradles his painting hand in the other protectively, but he neither speaks nor looks at any of them. MARIA THINS claps her hands, dismissing them all.

MARIA THINS (CONT'D)

Now back to work.

INT. MARIA THINS ROOM DAY

CATHARINA is very nervous, she brushes the GIRLS' hair, ignoring their protests.

GRIET helps MAERTGE into her first grown-up dress, of which she is shyly proud. MAERTGE will never be a beauty but dressed up, her hair curled and ribboned, she begins to look like a lady: only a couple of years younger than GRIET but already her life set on an utterly different course.

CATHARINA sees them together - the mousy, richly-dressed girl, the linen-capped maid who effortlessly eclipses her - and her mouth tightens.

CATHARINA

Maertge! Come here.

Obediently MAERTGE goes to her MOTHER. CATHARINA'S hands are still busy taming CORNELIA'S hair, she can think of nothing to keep MAERTGE with her.

CATHARINA (CONT'D)

Don't gawk your head like that, child. It's ugly.

MAERTGE droops instantly. CORNELIA pokes her tongue out at her sister, winces as CATHARINA tugs at her hair.

NOISE from outside, the guests arriving. They all run to look out of the window.

EXT. VERMEER HOUSE DAY - THEIR P.O.V.

VAN RUIJVEN, with his wife and daughter, arrives at the house in grand style on their barge. Their clothes are even richer, his voice booms louder than before. VERMEER, stepping forward to greet him, looks shabby in comparison.

INT. GREAT HALL DAY

As the honoured guests VAN RUIJVEN sits at one end of the table, his WIFE EMILIE on VERMEER'S right. VAN RUIJVEN meets CATHARINA'S eye with a lascivious grin.

VAN RUIJVEN

I swear you get lovelier every time I see you, Catharina. Do you paint yourself?

He laughs again, then licks a finger and rubs it on CATHARINA'S cheek, examines it for signs of make-up. As an afterthought licks it again, as if he had dipped it in honey. CATHARINA smiles at him, a woman of the world.

CATHARINA

One painter in the house is enough. Raising my children is all my pride.

VAN RUIJVEN

Ah, little Maertge. Filling out nicely, isn't she?

MAERTGE, sitting between her MOTHER and FATHER, quails at his attention, ears burning red.

VAN RUIJVEN (CONT'D)

All those girls, eh. Lads swarming round 'em like flies before long. If I were a few years younger...

GRIET serves EMILIE VAN RUIJVEN, as calm and silent as her painting.

MARIA THINS turns to VAN RUIJVEN with a smile.

MARIA THINS

A connoisseur in everything, Master Van Ruijven.
But you should be faithful to one mistress above
all others.

VAN RUIJVEN is intrigued.

MARIA THINS (CONT'D)

Art. Your name will surely be famed as one of
the great patrons, the Maecenas of Delft. With
your exquisite taste, your subtle understanding
of allegory and allusion-

VAN RUIJVEN laughs, head back.

VAN RUIJVEN

Damn, you could sell sour milk to cows, woman.
What do you want now?

MARIA THINS straightens the delicate white lace on her cuff.

MARIA THINS

A group painting. A family portrait perhaps...

She glances at VERMEER, knowing he won't like this. He
concentrates on helping MAERTGE.

MARIA THINS (CONT'D)

Yourself and Emilie. Your lovely daughter too.

No sign of interest from VAN RUIJVEN. MARIA THINS pushes
further.

MARIA THINS (CONT'D)

Or a Merry Company. Wine and a good meal on the
table; a still life with your friends all about.
(A beat) Music and dancing.

VAN RUIJVEN

Better, better.

GRIET serves MARIA THINS. CATHARINA puts a hand on VAN RUIJVEN'S
arm.

CATHARINA

It will have to be a Slow Measure if he paints
it.

VAN RUIJVEN leans closer to her, shamelessly ogling her
cleavage.

VAN RUIJVEN

That's the only dance I know.

They giggle together like smutty children. GRIET goes round to serve VAN RUIJVEN, head down, shoulders hunched, trying to be invisible.

VAN RUIJVEN (CONT'D)

There's truth in what you say, Maria, larded in with all those sweet words. It so happens your son-in-law is a damn fine painter, as good as any Amsterdam fellow I'd say-

He breaks off to take a mouthful of meat.

VAN RUIJVEN (CONT'D)

Ah, that's good. Fat Tanneke learnt to cook at last. What I mean is, I'll swallow your bait, the big picture, several figures, a Merry Company. But not a family portrait...

VAN RUIJVEN (CONT'D)

If I'm to put up with all those tedious hours of sitting I need something to rest my eyes on. I want her in the painting.

He reaches back with one arm and grabs GRIET, pulling her forward. VERMEER is on his feet. CATHARINA shrieks, VAN RUIJVEN releases his grip, still smiling. His sharp eyes are on VERMEER as he sinks back into his chair, the reaction noted.

MARIA THINS licks her lips, eyes darting from one end of the table to the other. VERMEER runs one fingertip round his wineglass till it sings.

VAN RUIJVEN (CONT'D)

A tavern scene, why not? That would make a change for you. Griet could serve me.

GRIET glances at CATHARINA, who is leaning forward, cheeks flushed, eyes burning, ready to explode in fury. VAN RUIJVEN stuffs another lump of meat in his mouth, enjoying himself.

VAN RUIJVEN (CONT'D)

So, what do you say? Can I have her?

INT. MEAT MARKET DAY

GRIET waits to be served. A fly crawls slowly over the meat. A huddle of WOMEN nudge and stare. GRIET looks away, mortified. There is no sign of PIETER. PAUL leans over to her.

PAUL

There's been talk of you.

GRIET flushes, her face tight.

GRIET

I've done nothing to be talked of.

PAUL shrugs.

PAUL
Van Ruijven's cook. Says you're to be painted
with her master. You'll have heard about him and
the maid that was painted before.

Agitated, GRIET stuffs the meat in the shopping pail.

GRIET
You shouldn't believe gossip.

PAUL laughs.

PAUL
Oh, I don't. Not the half of it. (A beat) I'll
tell Pieter you asked after him.

EXT. DELFT STREETS DAY

GRIET hurries back through the crowds, the girls trotting to
keep up.

PIETER
Griet! Wait!

PIETER hurries along the street after them. He has a carcass on
one shoulder, his apron is smeared with blood. Passers-by look
round in surprise.

PIETER arrives, breathless. Props the carcass on stiff hind
legs.

PIETER (CONT'D)
Did you hear what-

GRIET
I heard.

He waits for her denial.

PIETER
No smoke without fire, they say.

GRIET
Is that what you think?

PIETER
No. I... You're only a maid. What can you do?

GRIET bites her lip.

GRIET
I must get back. Tanneke...

She starts walking again, the GIRLS beside her. PIETER shoulders the carcass and comes after them.

PIETER

Griet! Don't walk away. Listen to me.

MAERTGE holds GRIET'S hand possessively, CORNELIA glares at him. He comes closer, lowers his voice to a murmur.

PIETER (CONT'D)

Remember who you are, Griet. Don't get caught up in his world.

She turns on him angrily.

GRIET

You listen to me, Pieter the Butcher. I am only a maid but I will never give in to Master van Ruijven.

PIETER

I don't speak of van Ruijven.

EXT. VERMEER HOUSE - DAY

GRIET hurries back to the house. Too late she sees VERMEER and VAN RUIJVEN talking by the canal and turns away.

VAN RUIJVEN

Hey, you. Girl. Griet. Come here!

GRIET turns slowly. VAN RUIJVEN comes up to meet her, VERMEER following reluctantly.

VAN RUIJVEN (CONT'D)

Where were you today, Griet? I missed you.

VAN RUIJVEN smiles sideways at VERMEER, winks at GRIET.

VAN RUIJVEN (CONT'D)

We both did. I tried to keep him amused but all I got for my pains was my face to the wall.

He leans close, confiding.

VAN RUIJVEN (CONT'D)

I hear you've been of great use to your Master, pretty Griet. All that grinding and stirring, eh.

VAN RUIJVEN is delighted at the effect of his jibes on GRIET and VERMEER.

VAN RUIJVEN (CONT'D)

Master and Maid - there's a tune we all know.
And you can practise it together, now we've made
our bargain, eh Jan. You won't forget, will you?

VERMEER shakes his head stiffly, like a puppet. EMILIE VAN
RUIJVEN and a teenage DAUGHTER come up behind them.

VAN RUIJVEN (CONT'D)

Good. You'll want to make a start on that before
we come again.

VAN RUIJVEN tucks his wife's arm into his. GRIET looks up at her
MASTER. His grey eyes slide past hers and away. He is angry. She
hurries into the house.

INT. STUDIO DAY

*

GRIET sweeps the studio; orange peel and crumbs mark VAN
RUIJVEN'S place among the chairs and instruments. The key turns
in the lock but it is not CATHARINA. VERMEER stands in the
doorway as if he too were unable, or unwilling, to come into the
STUDIO.

VERMEER

Griet.

He gestures to the painting corner.

Two tapestry-covered chairs have been arranged around the
harpsichord, a lute on one, a bass viol propped against the
wall. VERMEER busies himself at the table. GRIET looks at the
paintings on the wall, both taken from downstairs.

One is a landscape, trees and an open road into the distance.
The other is of a man and two women. The man is buying the young
one's favours from the old, he already has an arm round her.
[The Procuress, Dirk van Baburen]

VERMEER clears his throat and GRIET looks round, full of
foreboding, waiting for her instructions. But none come. He
simply sits and stares at her. And stares. His face wears a
familiar abstracted expression. Her eyes slowly fill with tears.
He is going to paint her.

She looks bleakly at the musical instruments lying around her.

GRIET

What should I...(pretend to play)?

VERMEER frowns.

VERMEER

No! I have already begun the group painting. You
are not to sit with Master Van Ruijven. That
much is agreed.

The tears that threatened before now spill down her cheeks.

GRIET

Thank you, sir.

VERMEER stands up abruptly, profoundly ill at ease.

VERMEER

I am to paint you alone.

INT. MARIA THINS ROOM DAY

MARIA THINS

My daughter must not hear of this 'other' painting.

MARIA THINS counts out coins while GRIET waits with the shopping pail.

MARIA THINS (CONT'D)

In her condition...

GRIET looks down at the coins in her hands.

GRIET

Ma'am. What of Master van Ruijven...

MARIA THINS fingers the handle of her cane.

MARIA THINS

It is to hang in his private cabinet, with a curtain over.

Gimlet eyes on GRIET to see how she takes this.

She turns to go back up her private staircase.

MARIA THINS (CONT'D)

He's no fool, mind you. And he won't be taken for one, so don't think otherwise. You're a fly in his web. (To herself) We all are. Joannis should have gone about it another way.

EXT. CANAL EVENING

GRIET'S sombre face reflected for a moment before the pitcher breaks the surface.

EXT. HOUSE EVENING

Carrying the pitcher in she meets VERMEER returning home, his cloak wrapped round him. He holds the door open. As she passes he murmurs in her ear.

VERMEER

Tomorrow morning.

She hesitates for a moment, heart racing. She can feel his eyes on her, the warmth of his body.

GRIET
I cannot. I have work...

VERMEER
Find a way.

He moves on into the house.

INT. STUDIO DAY

VERMEER
Look out of the window. Down at the table. Away.

He frowns. It isn't working.

Surrounding GRIET are all the "props" familiar from the paintings - The silver bowl and jug, the studded box, powder brush, an open book. CATHARINA'S yellow bodice hangs on a chair. GRIET is hedged in by things. VERMEER pulls things away, drags a different table carpet into place, pushes a chair across, frantically building walls between himself and her. GRIET watches.

GRIET
(Bravely)
These are ladies' things.

VERMEER
You want me to paint you with a mop in your hands?

He is closing shutters: slam, slam. The studio grows darker and darker.

GRIET
No, sir.

VERMEER
(Gentler) No. I don't know... (A beat) Perhaps the costume. What if...

He reaches for the yellow mantle. GRIET plucks up courage.

GRIET
I cannot wear her clothes.

VERMEER
(A beat) No.

He looks at her across the table.

VERMEER (CONT'D)

I am not to paint you as a maid. Or a lady. What then?

GRIET doesn't answer. VERMEER keeps looking. Suddenly he starts pulling everything away, chair, table, bowls and boxes, all swept away. Until there is nothing between them, she stands alone, in the last patch of light.

VERMEER (CONT'D)

There. I will paint you as I first saw you. Not a maid. You.

CLOSE ON: VERMEER'S broad brush painting the first shadow in the bottom corner, bone black and burnt umber. Powerful strokes obliterating the pale ground.

INT. GREAT HALL EVENING

GRIET reaches up on tiptoe to get a dish, white arm and neck at full stretch. CATHARINA sees her husband staring, spellbound.

CATHARINA

Jan. My necklace.

She holds up the ribbons of her necklace for him to tie. Looks at him in the mirror as he does so; a seductive smile, an oh-so-casual adjustment of her bodice to reveal more of her magnificent bosom. Quite unaware he ties the ribbons and walks out.

VERMEER

I'll be in the studio till dinner.

MARIA THINS watches from the fireplace, puffing silently on her pipe. CATHARINA sees GRIET in the background of her reflection.

CATHARINA

(Acid) Haven't you finished yet

INT. STUDIO DAY

VERMEER mixes lead-white with crimson lake: pale and buttery-soft under his palette knife. His hand drizzling in more linseed oil, the paint grows richer and creamier.

The brush poised to paint. VERMEER looks over to GRIET by the window, looking out. Clears his throat.

VERMEER

Look at me. Turn your head, not your shoulders.

She adjusts her position, seated, looking over her left shoulder, the light falling on her right cheek. Face enclosed by her cap, her mouth shut. She stares at the floor.

VERMEER (CONT'D)

Look at me.

Slowly she raises her eyes to meet his but can't hold his gaze. The brush still poised.

VERMEER (CONT'D)

Look at me.

Her eyes waver and meet his again. His brush blanks out the downcast eyes in the painting. He lets out a sigh, almost a shudder of pleasure.

VERMEER'S face, intent, alight. His whole being involved in the act of painting: nothing else in the world.

The brush on the palette, stroking the canvas. Now that he has it, there is nothing tentative about his painting.

The shadow of GRIET'S eyebrow, the intersection of curves across and down. VERMEER'S eyes drinking in every detail.

INT. VERMEER'S STUDIO - LATER

VERMEER is working on the cheek.

VERMEER

The point of your cap. Fold it back.

GRIET pushes the long point back onto her shoulder, revealing her jaw and cheek. She swallows, feeling exposed. Her lips are pressed tight. Her eyes waver and meet his again.

VERMEER (CONT'D)

I never sat so close before.

GRIET

How long have I been here, sir?

He changes brushes, continues to paint.

VERMEER

It doesn't matter.

GRIET strains to hold her twisted pose. VERMEER is staring at her again.

VERMEER (CONT'D)

Take off your cap.

GRIET reaches up then stops, her hand protective on the white linen.

GRIET

No, sir. I cannot.

VERMEER

Cannot?

GRIET drops her head.

In the painting behind her: The young woman, bare-headed, leans back in surrender, while the client and Madam, heads covered, press forward on her.

GRIET

Will not.

VERMEER

I need to see your face, the cap covers too much. There's some cloth in the storeroom.

GRIET goes into the little storeroom. There is no catch on the door, no need for one.

INT. STOREROOM DAY

There is a trunk of clothes in the corner; props for use in the paintings; cloths to cover the table; gentlemen's sashes; the trimmings from CATHARINA'S rich velvet gown. GRIET finds some strips of cloth and lays them in front of her.

She reaches up and unties her cap, releases an unruly mane of blonde hair.

She lifts one of the cloths to wrap round her hair, looks into the mirror. Sees a movement and turns to find him standing in the doorway.

Looking at her. Not at GRIET the Maid, but at her. The real, secret GRIET. Desire holding him transfixed in the doorway.

She returns his gaze, her hair tumbled round her face, lips parted, bold, liberated, naked.

The CHILDREN'S VOICES from downstairs. VERMEER backs away.

INT. GREAT HALL DAY

GRIET folds clothes into the tall wardrobe. The stiff blue bodice worn by the girl in the Pitcher painting. The yellow satin mantle, trimmed with fur.

CATHARINA sits by the fire with VAN RUIJVEN. MAERTGE and CORNELIA are working on an embroidery frame, though CORNELIA is far more interested in the conversation.

VAN RUIJVEN

Emilie enjoys sitting, God knows why. If only he'd let one do something else.

CATHARINA offers him the sewing on her lap. He pretends a few dainty stitches, hands it back laughing.

VAN RUIJVEN (CONT'D)

But you agree, or you'd be up there getting painted all the time. Why not, with such a good-looking wife?

CATHARINA falters, upset.

CATHARINA

I have the household to run, you know. I can't be forever up and down.

VAN RUIJVEN

There you are - "Life goes on". I mean God knows I admire the paintings, extravagantly - Christ, I pay enough for them - but I am flesh and blood, I must feed my grosser parts.

CATHARINA glances at the girls, wondering if she should send them out. They are bent studiously over their frame. GRIET stays dead still behind the wardrobe door.

VAN RUIJVEN (CONT'D)

Not to deny I may be consoled in a painting for what I cannot have in the flesh. Hunger is the best sauce, eh.

GRIET presses her face against the cool, starched linen.

VAN RUIJVEN (CONT'D)

If I had you against my private wall, for instance, painted by your artful husband, I could take pleasure at will in your charms and be none the wiser.

CATHARINA laughs as best she can.

CATHARINA

I never think painting so lively as when you speak of it.

VAN RUIJVEN takes a long draught of wine.

VAN RUIJVEN

You know I've a mind to go up and surprise him sometime - in the act.

CATHARINA

But you said yourself it's very dull.

VAN RUIJVEN

Oh, not with Emilie. When he's alone with some young beauty.

VAN RUIJVEN (CONT'D)

You must have noticed how he never bothers with old women. Only young and pretty ones. On their own.

He helps himself to another glass of wine. CATHARINA does her best to ignore his meaning.

CATHARINA

You'll have to wait then. He makes only one painting at a time, though my mother has often pressed him otherwise.

VAN RUIJVEN

(Smug) Indeed?

GRIET listens in terror.

CATHARINA

He claims he cannot hold two in his head, though when I consider all I must manage with the house and children...

VAN RUIJVEN secretly gives CORNELIA a sip of wine. She screws her face up in disgust.

CORNELIA

I like it.

VAN RUIJVEN gives her a squeeze.

VAN RUIJVEN

That's my girl.

They giggle and whisper together, both looking over at GRIET. CATHARINA looks up and catches CORNELIA taking another sip. She is shocked, though she tries to laugh it off.

CATHARINA

Master Van Ruijven, what are you doing?

INT. STUDIO DAY

VAN LEEUWENHOEK gazes quizzically at GRIET'S strange turban-like head gear.

VAN LEEUWENHOEK

What is she meant to be?

VERMEER

It is Griet's invention. Ask her.

VAN LEEUWENHOEK is struck by the casual intimacy of this. GRIET is trembling with the strain of holding her twisted pose. VERMEER scowls at the painting.

VAN LEEUWENHOEK

Whatever it is, it becomes you, Griet.

VAN LEEUWENHOEK wants to break the tension that thickens around the two of them.

VAN LEEUWENHOEK (CONT'D)

Jan, did I tell you of the meeting tomorrow?
Optics and lenses. You should speak on painting.

VERMEER

I have nothing to say.

VAN LEEUWENHOEK

The camera obscura then. You know more about light than anyone.

VERMEER

I know? Every painting I start again at the beginning, I'll never know.

VERMEER stabs a brush angrily towards a canvas propped on the table - the Concert painting.

VERMEER (CONT'D)

There's what happens when one pays heed to theory. A one-point perspective of nothing.

A myriad of chalk lines going this way and that. Small blocks of colour dotted disjointedly over the canvas.

VAN LEEUWENHOEK

It's promising. Do you have the small lens? I want to show it at the meeting.

VERMEER

I'll fetch it.

VERMEER goes out. VAN LEEUWENHOEK turns back to GRIET.

VAN LEEUWENHOEK

Rest a minute, why don't you?

Gratefully GRIET moves. VAN LEEUWENHOEK looks at her painting. He is startled by what he sees. [We, like GRIET, do not see the painting] His eyes flick from her to the painting and back.

VAN LEEUWENHOEK (CONT'D)

What is this? Not his usual manner. Not at all.
(A beat) It's for Master Van Ruijven, is that so? Mistress Thins will be pleased.

He hesitates, needing to warn her, wanting to be fair.

VAN LEEUWENHOEK (CONT'D)

Hmm. You do see his interest in you is partly because Master Van Ruijven... How should I put this?

GRIET frowns. He examines the painting again.

VAN LEEUWENHOEK (CONT'D)

He sees things as he wants them to be, perfected by him. Everything serves the painting, everything. He doesn't think of the consequences. You must.

He looks at GRIET, his eyes kindly, concerned.

VAN LEEUWENHOEK (CONT'D)

There's no bridge across this water. You understand me, Griet?

GRIET dips her head, but the head dress doesn't hide her face. She looks up again.

GRIET

I do not think he would hurt me, Sir.

VAN LEEUWENHOEK

(Gently) How much do you know of men?

INT. COOKING KITCHEN DAY

GRIET chops vegetables. A moment of reflection before she sweeps the pattern into the pot.

INT. STUDIO DAY

GRIET, utterly still in her pose, almost as if she were the painting. There is now a black drape behind her.

VERMEER sits at the easel, dissatisfied. Tries one brush after another, stands and stares at her, goes back to the painting.

VERMEER

Open your mouth.

GRIET

Sir?

VERMEER

Open your mouth.

GRIET is horrified. But what can she do? She licks her lips and opens them.

VERMEER (CONT'D)

Lick your lips. Again.

INT. GREAT HALL NIGHT

GRIET brings in a wine jug and glasses. Only MARIA THINS looks up, sharp-eyed.

VERMEER is going through CATHARINA'S jewel box, searching for something. CATHARINA moves slowly, easing herself off the bed, already heavy with the new baby.

CATHARINA

Jan, please.

He brings over the box, settles on a low stool and massages her feet between his hands.

CATHARINA is dressed in her fine velvet. She stifles a yawn.

CATHARINA (CONT'D)

I am so tired.

GRIET pours their wine, sets it in front of them.

VERMEER

Wear these.

He holds out her big pearl earrings, glossy white drops nesting in his hand. CATHARINA smiles, delighted by this attention.

VERMEER (CONT'D)

I must be there. The City Fathers have asked... There might be a commission... (Seeing the earrings) Ah... good. Look, Griet.

CATHARINA swings round.

VERMEER (CONT'D)

That point of light in the shadow of the neck, leading the eye.

CATHARINA

Jan!

GRIET'S eyes meet VERMEER'S. She sees that he has found what he needs. That he is pitiless. MARIA THINS sees it too.

INT. STUDIO DAY

VERMEER is arranging the setting of The Concert. The Concert painting, half-covered, has progressed considerably. GRIET hurries in.

GRIET

Sir. Do not ask this of me.

He knows exactly what she's talking about.

VERMEER

It is needed.

GRIET

My ears are not pierced.

He laughs at such a mundane excuse. But GRIET isn't laughing, she is angry.

GRIET (CONT'D)
I've done everything you wanted.

VERMEER
The composition - it's not balanced.

GRIE
(Stubbornly)
Sometimes you paint without a model.

VERMEER
You want me to imagine how the earring would look?

She wont give in.

GRIET
She will find out.

Nor will he.

VERMEER
This has to be, Griet. See for yourself.

He insists that she look as he uncovers her painting. GRIET covers her mouth in horror. WE SEE only her reaction.

GRIET
(A whisper)
Oh. You looked inside me.

EXT. DELFT STREETS DUSK

GRIET hurries along, her shawl pulled tight round her shoulders, head down.

INT. APOTHECARY'S DUSK

The APOTHECARY smiles when he sees it is her.

APOTHECARY
Well then. What will it be today? I set aside some lapis-

GRIET
It's- it's for me.

The APOTHECARY'S expression changes. He is sharp-eyed, he can see trouble in her face. His quick fingers continue to shred dried leaves into a leather apron.

APOTHECARY

Oh, it's that way, is it? (Reluctant) I have a draught if you want to bring it off.

There is more disappointment in his eyes than disapproval. GRIET takes his meaning.

GRIET

Oh no. No. I need something to numb the skin. I have money.

She pulls coins from her pocket. The OLD MAN scans her face again, goes off grumbling, knowing something's wrong.

GRIET goes to pull her cap forward, her finger tip touches her ear and stops there.

INT. ATTIC NIGHT

GRIET looks at the tiny vial of oil, tips some onto a handkerchief and rubs it onto her earlobe.

She heats a needle in the candle flame.

Clutching the needle in trembling fingers she stares into the mirror from downstairs. Her frightened face reflected in the candlelight.

FOOTSTEPS on the stairs. Into the STUDIO below. GRIET hides the needle and vial. MARIA THINS comes up through the trap door, breathing hard. She gives GRIET a long searching look.

MARIA THINS

Well, girl? What's to be done?

GRIET says nothing.

MARIA THINS (CONT'D)

You may fool the men with your downcast eyes. Master Van Ruijven wants his paintings and he will bear no more delay.

MARIA THINS' bony hand on the black cane trembles, for the first time she seems vulnerable, frightened even.

MARIA THINS (CONT'D)

I've protected you, for his sake and yours but if he crosses Van Ruijven over this he will lose him. Then what?

It makes her angry to be so helpless, begging a maid for help. She glares at GRIET.

MARIA THINS (CONT'D)

Flood water seeps under the door and the house comes down. I won't let that happen here.

EXT. COURTYARD DAY

GRIET hangs up sheets in the courtyard. Strong arms grab her from behind, pinning her arms by her side. A voice whispers thick and hot in her ear:

VAN RUIJVEN

Got you!

GRIET struggles silently, terrified, but VAN RUIJVEN is far stronger.

VAN RUIJVEN (CONT'D)

Hold still. I want to look at you.

GRIET writhes to get free, scared and angry.

He turns her round to face him, swathed in sheets.

VAN RUIJVEN (CONT'D)

Tell me, girl, how do you get on up there? Has he found his composition? Do you inspire him? Do you move him? Does the Master's brush unlock the secrets of your heart?

His tone is leering but his sharp eyes miss nothing. He can read Griet's face exactly.

VAN RUIJVEN (CONT'D)

No! Ripe as a plum and still unplucked.

VAN RUIJVEN is disconcerted, angry, he did not expect this.

VAN RUIJVEN (CONT'D)

What is he playing at?

She looks away, face hidden by her cap. He pulls is back roughly. A grunt of satisfaction as his hand tangles in her hair.

VAN RUIJVEN (CONT'D)

He made a bargain you know, he paints you at my pleasure.

He is right up against her again. She pushes him away, he grabs her wrists. GRIET writhes to get free, scared and angry. He holds both her wrists with one hand, yanks the chemise of her shoulder with the other.

VAN RUIJVEN (CONT'D)

I have waited long enough. What a great fool he is.

He paws at her skirts, her legs give way and she starts to fall. He twists one arm behind her back, forcing her up again.

GRIET'S eyes search desperately for something to stop him. In the shadow of the passage she sees someone watching.

CORNELIA. GRIET pleads with her eyes. CORNELIA returns her look, her face cat-like, impenetrable. She turns away slowly, deliberately, disappears. GRIET wants to cry.

VAN RUIJVEN is unbuckling himself, GRIET struggles harder, manages to free one arm, claw at his face. He snarls. They wrestle till he has both arms pinned again.

VAN RUIJVEN (CONT'D)

Don't fight me, girl.

Breathing hard he crushes her against the copper, grotesque reflections swim in front of her.

CATHARINA(O/S)

(Petulant) Griet. Griet!

She is coming along the corridor towards the back of the house. VAN RUIJVEN lets GRIET go, quickly straightens his clothing.

VAN RUIJVEN

Not a word. You'll lose your place. He'd never look at you again.

He steps out to meet CATHARINA, all smiles.

VAN RUIJVEN (CONT'D)

Ah, my dear. There you are. Your maid kept me with some cock and bull story.

INT. ATTIC DAWN

Cold dawn light. GRIET slides her finger through fine-ground rose madder, a red streak across the stone table. Her torn chemise waits to be mended.

EXT. COURTYARD DAY

GRIET pours water into the copper, every movement an effort, arms like lead. Someone grabs her from behind.

MAERTGE

Surprise!

GRIET spins round, ready to fight - to find MAERTGE and the other CHILDREN all smiling at her. MAERTGE has a package which she hands over shyly.

MAERTGE (CONT'D)

For your name day. I made it.

CORNELIA

I thought of the surprise.

A perfectly innocent smile. With trembling hands GRIET unwraps her present: a child-made lace collar.

GRIET

Thank you.

The CHILDREN clamour for her to put it on. She holds it up to her neck - there are bruises from where VAN RUIJVEN held her - and they admire her.

MAERTGE

You're beautiful.

CORNELIA

Take off your cap. Then you'll look like a lady.

That tell-tale smirk. GRIET pulls off the collar.

GRIET

I've work to do.

INT. GREAT HALL DAY

GRIET is on her hands and knees clearing the grate. MARIA THINS comes in hurriedly.

MARIA THINS

My daughter is out for the day.

She unlocks CATHARINA'S jewel box.

MARIA THINS (CONT'D)

Do it now.

She thrusts the open box towards GRIET, who is still wiping the smuts from her hands. Reluctantly she takes the pearl earrings out of their velvet nest. The seconds seem to crawl.

INT. STUDIO DAY

VERMEER watches GRIET, her partner in this slow dance. She takes off her cap, puts on the turban. Rubs the oil of cloves onto her ear lobe. Heats the needle in a candle flame.

She holds out the earrings.

GRIET

You do it.

Her eyes widen at her own boldness. He opens his mouth to speak then says nothing.

He steps up to the chair and takes the pearls.

Mixing oil into lead-white, oozing creamily under the sharp knife.

He touches her earlobe, she gasps. He rubs the soft flesh between his forefinger and thumb then pulls it taut and with his other hand pierces her skin with the needle. A scarlet globe of blood glistens on the white skin. He takes a breath, forces the twisted silver wire of the earring through the hole.

The pain is excruciating, her eyes brim with tears.

Laying on a grey ghost of paint among shadows, the under-layer of the pearl.

His fingers brush her jaw, gently trace the bruises on her neck. She closes her eyes, inhaling his smell.

A thick white clot of paint twisted off the brush in a moment for the highlight.

He blots the tears that spill down her cheek and rubs his wet thumb slowly along her lips, her open mouth.

Pale sable hairs across the crimson of her lips, a trail of white.

EXT. DELFT STREETS - NIGHT

GRIET pushes her way through busy streets.

INT. TAVERN NIGHT

The benches are crowded, a jostling, careless press. Admiring catcalls and whistles follow GRIET as she makes her way through the DRINKERS.

PIETER'S back is turned, he doesn't see her approach. His FRIEND nudges him and moves away. PIETER stares in frank astonishment.

PIETER

Griet!

She takes him by the hand and leads him out.

EXT. ALLEY DAY

A narrow alley behind the BEAST MARKET, the bellowing of CATTLE mixes into the background clatter. GRIET tugs PIETER after her, presses him against the wall. Pulls his face down to hers and kisses him passionately. He responds, bewildered but thrilled. She moves his hand to her backside, turning till she is against the wall. She closes her eyes. PIETER doesn't question his good fortune.

LATER:

PIETER watches as GRIET carefully adjusts her clothes, smooths her hair under her white cap. He pulls out a long wavy strand and kisses it, joyfully intimate.

PIETER

Sweet Griet.

She reties her cap. Her ear is bleeding a little.

PIETER (CONT'D)

Griet, don't rush away. Where are you going?

He grabs her by the shoulders so she must face him.

PIETER (CONT'D)

Leave that house, join me and Paul at the Market.

She meets his eyes levelly, very still.

GRIET

I have to go back

PIETER

I'll fetch your things. We'll send someone.

GRIET

No.

PIETER

Griet. Our own life. Answering to no one. Don't go. Marry me.

She puts a hand on his cheek, kisses him. Walks away.

He leans against the wall, head down.

INT. GREAT HALL DAY

GRIET drops the earrings in MARIA THINS' wrinkled hand. A whore and her madam.

CORNELIA watches from the bed, her cat-like eyes unblinking.

INT. STUDIO DAY

CLOSE ON: the raised lid of the harpsichord. GRIET cleans the studio, alone and silent. The Concert painting is on the easel, almost finished. The other - her painting - is propped against the wall, covered. She avoids them both.

VOICES are raised downstairs; an almighty row is brewing.

INT. STAIRS OUTSIDE STUDIO DAY

Feet tumbling up the stairs: CORNELIA'S little shoes leading, MARIA THINS' stick, CATHARINA slow and heavy.

INT. STUDIO DAY

GRIET braces herself. The door crashes open, a tidal wave of anger and distress.

CATHARINA

No, I will not be calm. Am I a child? Does no one speak the truth to me in my own house?

CORNELIA is snivelling, frightened by her MOTHER'S passion.

MARIA THINS

By all the Saints, if you would stop screaming for a moment I can expl-

CATHARINA

More lies. I don't want to hear any more of your lies, Mother. I have a right to know.

But, finding herself at last in the forbidden room, CATHARINA falls silent, afraid.

VERMEER is the last to enter, quietly, the eye of the storm. He meets GRIET'S eyes across the room.

CATHARINA recovers herself a little.

CATHARINA (CONT'D)

So. No more hiding now. Here I am. I want to see this painting.

VERMEER makes a weary gesture.

VERMEER

There's no point.

CATHARINA flares up again.

CATHARINA

No point! I am too stupid to look at a painting now.

A savage finger at GRIET.

CATHARINA (CONT'D)

She can't read! You know that?

MARIA THINS pulls forward a chair.

MARIA THINS

Sit down, you'll exhaust yourself.

CATHARINA ignores her.

CATHARINA

Why can't I look? What have you done?

VERMEER is by the easel, his accustomed place.

VERMEER

It's a commission. Gone in a few days. You need never see.

CATHARINA is laughing and crying. Sinks onto the chair in the middle of the room.

MARIA THINS

They're just paintings. Pictures for money. They mean nothing.

CATHARINA

(Desperate)

Is it true she wore my pearls?

VERMEER cannot answer. CATHARINA groans in anguish.

CATHARINA (CONT'D)

How could you? How could you?

She heaves herself up and stands in front of The Concert painting, breathing heavily, staring. Then she bursts out laughing.

CATHARINA (CONT'D)

He's backwards. Backwards. Look at him - fat arse spilling off the chair. My God, I'm not the only one that's been had.

MARIA THINS laughs too, her dry, cracked laugh.

MARIA THINS

That's right. He wanted a portrait and he got one.

CATHARINA

And there's yours, Mother.

She points at the old hag in the Procuress painting.

CATHARINA (CONT'D)

I always hated that picture and now I know why. My mother the whore-monger.

VERMEER

Catharina! Enough.

CATHARINA blinks, turns round slowly to him. A wide, dangerous smile.

CATHARINA

Why? Was painting enough for him? Was it enough for you? (A beat) Show me the other.

VERMEER

You'll make yourself ill.

VERMEER moves towards her slowly, cautiously. She stares at him with shining eyes, then quick as a snake, grabs a palette knife from the work table.

CATHARINA

Show me.

VERMEER faces her, arms wide, palms out.

VERMEER

Very well.

Never taking his eyes from her he lifts down the Concert painting and puts the other on the easel. Tenderly lifts the cover. Everyone cranes to look. GRIET, behind the easel, can see only their reactions.

VERMEER looks oddly peaceful, a work achieved. MARIA THINS glances at GRIET, her lips a thin, bitter line, her eyes warning silence. CATHARINA'S face sags, mouth agape.

CATHARINA

(A whisper) It's obscene. Everyone will see your... sin...

She gasps for breath. The words are torn from her.

CATHARINA (CONT'D)

(Anguished) Why don't you paint me?

VERMEER

Because you don't understand.

CATHARINA

And she does!

Her words hang in the air: the truth.

Suddenly she lunges at the painting with the knife. But VERMEER is too quick for her, grabs her wrist so hard it hurts, she cries out.

He is blazing, his fury all the more terrifying for its quietness. She goes limp in his grasp and he lets her go.

CATHARINA backs away, finds CORNELIA to cling to. A single glance of hatred at GRIET.

CATHARINA (CONT'D)

Get her out of here. Get out of my house.

GRIET has been waiting for this but even so it falls like a whiplash.

Her eyes seek out VERMEER, although she can hear CATHARINA'S in-drawn hiss of fury. He is infinitely sad, infinitely distant.

INT. GREAT HALL DAY

Wearing her Sunday best clothes, GRIET takes her aprons and caps from the linen cupboard. CATHARINA'S yellow mantle hangs there, silky smooth and glowing.

GRIET'S hand runs along the rim of the silver bowl, a last glimpse of its multi-fractured reflections.

INT. VERMEER HOUSE DAY

Carrying her small bundle, GRIET walks through the series of rooms. TANNEKE stands framed in the Cooking Kitchen doorway, arms folded. Left to manage alone again.

INT. CORRIDOR OUTSIDE STUDIO DAY

GRIET goes up the stairs and along the corridor to the STUDIO. The door is shut fast. She stands outside listening. Silence.

INT. STUDIO DAY

VERMEER sits on his painting stool, every nerve strained to listen, wanting her to come in but unable to call her. His painting hand is balled tight as a fist.

He hears GRIET'S footsteps leaving.

VERMEER is left alone in the studio, a blank canvas waiting on the easel behind him.

EXT. VERMEER HOUSE DAY

GRIET walks away from the house, her bundle under her arm. She wont look back.

INT. VAN RUIJVEN'S CABINET - DAY

VAN RUIJVEN sits alone in his cabinet with the painting of GRIET. It gives him no pleasure, after all. He draws a curtain over it.

EXT. DELFT MARKET SQUARE - DAY

GRIET walks across the great Market Square. Other people carry on with their everyday lives but the sound is muffled and distant; she is lost in her own world.

She stops on the brick star at the centre of the square.

INT. GRIET'S HOUSE DAY

GRIET sits in the late afternoon sun near the back doorway, finishing her headdress. Her wedding dress is laid out on the bed, other wedding preparations visible in the background.

TANNEKE appears at the door, out of breath.

A moment's silence as they size each other up.

TANNEKE

I've come to the right place then.

GRIET

Good Day, Tanneke.

TANNEKE

So it's true, you're to be married.

GRIET

Yes.

TANNEKE nods, taking it in.

TANNEKE

We use another butcher nowadays.

She searches in her apron pocket and brings out a small cloth wrapped package. She hands it to GRIET.

TANNEKE (CONT'D)

For you. I had to bring it myself - never mind that the dinner's left to spoil. Men!

She stops abruptly. GRIET holds the package gingerly, not daring to look at it.

TANNEKE (CONT'D)

Best be off then.

GRIET

I'll see you to the bridge.

TANNEKE

No need for that.

She turns away, her face working.

GRIET

Thank you, Tanneke.

Left alone GRIET uncurls the hand gripping the package. She takes a deep breath then undoes the layers of cloth, the familiar blue of the turban. And there, nestled in the folds of fabric, lie the pearl earrings.

GRIET holds up one pale globe, fathoming its meaning, her eyes shining with pent up tears.

FADE TO BLACK:

FADE UP ON:

A very slow pull back reveals the real painting: *Girl With A Pearl Earring*.

Cracked and aged but no less beautiful or immediate. A girl's face as brim full of emotion as if she were looking at us now.