

## DISCOVERY IN DELFT

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A carillon concert is taking place on the market square in Delft. The setting sun shines like a red-tinged floodlight on the slender spire of the New Church, and casts a glow on its stained glass windows. About fifty people sit on wooden chairs in front of the old baroque Town Hall, its red shutters blending in with the clay-tiled roofs of the gabled houses bordering the square. I join the audience while the chimes ring out joyously over the ancient inner city and over the surrounding countryside.

What am I doing here? For the first time since our emigration to Canada, twenty-seven years ago, I'm back in Holland alone, without husband or children. I am out of touch with my country. Restless between large, fun-filled family reunions, I'm gripped by an indefinite yearning like those cravings during pregnancy when I don't even know what I'm craving for.

Travelling from Rotterdam to Haarlem I decided, on an impulse, to visit my birthplace Delft. Driving past the Technical Academy, changed beyond recognition, I discovered that the aluminum dome, dominating the flat countryside, is a nuclear reactor. Through unfamiliar residential areas I reached the old inner city of Delft, just in time for the carillon concert.

A cool evening breeze strokes my face and the quiet early evening atmosphere eases my spirit. The carillon's winsome, popular tunes change gradually into serious music,

and then - the majestic chords of an old Dutch hymn toll over the city. I sing silently but the words come to me in English. What were the Dutch words again? The bells vibrate around me while I search in my memory for the right words. The music lifts me, helps me to cross barriers. And suddenly I am eight years old again.

I'm visiting my grandmother. She lives in the "Huise van Christoffel Binnen Delft," an old monastery converted into a home for the aged. I put my suitcase in the guest room and run through long carpeted corridors, back to her room where she's waiting for me in front of the window on the second floor. A few elderly people sit in the sun in the large courtyard, enclosed by ivy-covered buildings.

We go for long, slow walks when I stay for a weekend. From the Papenstraat we stroll through the Choorstraat and we cross the "Oude Delft." Sparkles of sunlight play through the tops of high basswood trees, and dance on the dark green water in the canal. The reflections of the facades of Gothic houses wave sensuously in the densely flowing water. The carillon of the New Church on the market square plays "A Mighty Fortress is our God," and my grandma hums in tune with the chimes. A warm August sun caresses my face and the pungent smell of the canal surrounds me: smells of decaying fish, of turbid water, and of damp compost.

We turn in at Agatha's Square to visit the Prinsenhof, and enter the cool atmosphere of the cloister garden of the former St. Agatha's convent. High chestnut trees shade us from the sun. My grandmother sits down on a bench to listen to the chimes, and 'to the quiet,' she says. Her black walking stick with the silver knob leans against her good leg and she pulls her silver-grey sweater closer



Fig. 6

A quiet canal in Delft

to her thin body. She's always cold. She gazes over the convent wall at the tower of the Old Church on the "Oude Delft." Its high steeple, flanked by four turrets, rises high over the old Walloon Church in the cloister garden. Her brown eyes don't see me, or anybody else, and I wonder if she's back in Burgundian times. I'm running back and forth along the pathways, imagining that, long ago, she could have been a nun of St. Agatha, praying in the chapel,

or tending to the profusion of bright flowers in the garden. But why is she so slow?

Finally we enter the Prinsenhof, once the home of Prince William of Orange, presented to him by the town of Delft only a month before his assassination. I run up the slightly curved wooden staircase, turn, and come down slowly, retracing his last, fatal steps. My grandmother stands in the spot where Balthasar Gerards, the traitor, waited for his victim. She steps forward when I reach the end of the staircase and her eyes, burning with compassion and pain, meet mine.

"Here he fell," I say, looking at the worn, crude tiles in the hallway. I examine the bullet holes, framed behind glass in a wooden moulding. An old Dutch inscription is carved in the stone wall:

Hieronder staen de Teykenen  
der Koogelendaer meede  
Prins Willem van Orange Is  
Doorgeschoten op 10 July A 1584<sup>1</sup>

My grandmother dramatically speaks the prince's last words:

Mon Dieu - Ayez pitié de  
moi et de mon pauvre peuple. . .

I repeat the words after her and we translate them: "My God - Have mercy on me and my poor people. . ." I wonder if I will say something significant when I'm dying.

We leave the Prinsenhof and the year 1584. The sun greets us warmly but the carillon is silent. My grandmother

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<sup>1</sup>Underneath are the signs  
of the bullets with which  
Prince William of Orange  
was shot on the 10th of July 1584



Fig. 7

According to tradition the place where Prince William  
of Orange was assassinated

carefully walks over the cobblestones toward the Old Church on the "Oude Delft." She stops in front of the slightly leaning tower where, hidden from us, the "Bourdon" hangs in silence, waiting for a special occasion to ring out over Delft. The heavy bell weighs about nine thousand kilos.

"Ja. . .," my grandmother murmurs to herself and I nod. She thinks of the day, about a year ago, that Queen Emma, the second wife of William III was buried in the family vault of the House of Orange in the New Church.

"Remember? It was a white funeral. . .," she says. She'll never make me forget that day of the funeral procession which she watched from the living room window of an old schoolfriend.

That day was a civic holiday in Holland. I listened to the events, in Haarlem, stretched out on the living room rug in front of our radio. I hear it again: the reverberation of the oppressive booms of the Bourdon, like an overpowering bass drum dominating the pealing chimes of the carillon. In the background were the sounds of horsedrawn carriages, clattering like castanets through the streets of Delft, moving in procession toward the New Church. Again I hear the organ in the church playing the Dutch national anthem and hundreds of voices joining in the singing of the "Wilhelmus."

Did it happen the way I remember it? Did the congregation sing while the pallbearers carried the queen through the majestic, late-Gothic church where the diffused light filters through high arched windows? Through the nave they must have gone, reaching the choir where a heavy marble slab bars the access to the underground hall leading to the royal vaults. Did they carry her down the hollow-sounding stone stairway while the sacred tones of the organ swelled

and surged in an effort to accompany her in this last part of her journey into the cold crypt? At that moment I thought of my grandmother because she worshipped Queen Emma with a reverence that was almost mystical. Would I have remembered it at all without her high regard for the royal house?

A Mighty Fortress is our God - Een vaste burcht is onze God. The Dutch words of the hymn flow easily now. I say them silently, sentence after sentence, while floodlights suddenly illuminate the contours of the New Church, accentuating the darkness of the sky. I leave the market square and walk back to the car. My footsteps sound hollow over the "Oude Delft," and I think of traces of thousands of footsteps reaching back in time. The silent presence of history vibrates in the cool night air. A sense of permanence and stability invades me. Flashes of memory flood my mind; of lone walks along the beach of the North Sea in stormy weather, of long forgotten bicycle trips through the dunes, and of hikes through fields of flower bulbs with the warm spring wind carrying the sweet smell of hyacinths.

'Tomorrow,' I think, 'I'll start visiting all those places. This is my country. Mine forever.'