

Midnight Blue

Also by Simone van der Vlugt

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With Wim van der Vlugt

Fado e Festa. Een rondreis door Portugal

Friet & Folklore. Reizen door feestelijk Vlaanderen

Simone van der Vlugt received the 2006 Alkmaar Cultural Prize for her works to date.

Simone van der Vlugt

Midnight Blue

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Jenny Watson

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Glossary

Baller A worker in a pottery who rolls chunks of clay into balls ready for the potter to use on the wheel.

Batavia Capital of the Dutch East Indies on the island of Java. The city is now known as Jakarta, the capital of modern-day Indonesia.

Bontekoe Journaal A diary account of the voyage of the *Nieuw Hoorn*, an armed merchant ship, authored by the ship's captain, Willem Bontekoe. After setting off for Batavia in 1618, the *Nieuw Hoorn* was wrecked near Sumatra and the surviving crew endured a perilous journey in lifeboats to Batavia.

Gracht A gracht is a narrow, suburban canal and will be familiar to those who have visited or seen pictures of Amsterdam. Lined with streets and houses, *grachten* were important arteries for transporting produce and people in the past. Warehouses and private residences in Dutch cities had doors leading directly onto them.

Hindeloopen A town in North Holland known for its colourful decorated furniture. Hindeloopen pieces often have floral motifs similar to what you might expect on an old-fashioned gypsy caravan in the UK.

Polder A common feature of the Dutch landscape, a polder is a tract of land surrounded by dykes, usually used for agriculture. Often reclaimed marshlands or flood plains, polders generally lie below sea-level and the water levels within them have to be carefully controlled using sluices, ditches and other methods. This way of reclaiming farmland has been common in the Netherlands since medieval times.

Rigger A rigger is a slim, long paintbrush used for fine detail. The name comes from their association with nautical scenes, where they were used to paint the rigging on ships.

Small Beer Before Europeans had access to clean drinking water they commonly drank weak alcoholic beverages, which were less likely to make them ill than water from the well. Small beer could be bought or made cheaply and was drunk by everybody, including children, throughout the Middle Ages.

VOC The Dutch East India Company (Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie) was founded in 1602 to explore new territories in the Orient and establish trading routes for valuable commodities such as spices. The VOC was a company with shareholders and directors but also represented the Dutch government in negotiations and offered armed resistance to foreign powers.

Water Coach The 'water coach', pioneered in the 1630s, was one of the earliest forms of mass public transport. Like stage-coaches, these horse-drawn boats ran to a timetable but, being less dependent on traffic and good weather, were much more reliable. They had large public saloons where travellers could rest inside and chat during their journey and were used by people from all walks of life.

Weighing-house The weighing-house was an important public building in pre-modern Holland. Situated on or close to the market square, the weighing-house was where city officials would weigh produce sold at market on giant scales to establish how much tax was to be paid on it.

I

De Rijp, March 1654

The funeral was a week ago and I still feel more relieved than anything else. I know that's indefensible, that I should be grieving, but it's impossible.

I stand with my arms folded, gazing out of the top half of the kitchen door at the fields and meadows surrounding the farm, but don't really see them.

It should never have come to this. Looking back, I can't understand what came over me that night just over a year ago. For years I'd thought of Govert as just another man from the village, not someone I paid any particular attention to. I never really thought of him at all. Not that he wasn't attractive, in a certain way he was. The first time I really noticed him was at the village fair, when he pulled me up to dance and held me to him. I'd been drinking, of course I had been drinking, but not so much that I couldn't hear his heavy breathing or feel his body pressing against

mine, his muscular arms clasping me so tentatively.

With every turn our hips brushed and the grip with which he steered me through the other dancing couples tightened. It was an exciting feeling. I realised that he was in love with me. The off-putting way he stared at me whenever we passed one another, with that deeply furrowed brow of his, had been an expression of desire rather than disapproval.

Did I feel flattered by his attention? Had I turned down too many potential suitors in the hope of something better? Was I afraid of being left on the shelf? Or was I in love at that moment?

When he took my hand in his and led me outside to a quiet corner of the orchard I didn't protest.

Govert was happy when I told him I was pregnant, all set to marry me and start a family. As a widower of around forty and not without means, he was a fair prospect, even if he wasn't what I'd ever pictured.

Not that there was much choice now. One moment of madness at the fair, one moment of total lunacy, and my future was set. Gone was the chance to someday leave the village and start a new life, gone were my dreams.

The worst thing was that I now wondered what I'd even seen in him that night. Whatever it had been, the next morning it was gone too.

We were married a month later, and six weeks after that my pregnancy ended in a premature birth. The child, a boy, was stillborn. That was over a year ago too.

Now Govert himself is lying beneath the cold, dark earth. The only mirror in the house is turned to the wall and the shutters have been closed for weeks. Today I'm opening them again. I let the morning light stream in with

a feeling of utter pleasure. The living room, which was packed with visitors for days, is eerily quiet. I've lived in De Rijp all my life, and the support of relatives, neighbours and friends is heart-warming. Only my in-laws were notably absent. They probably find it hard to accept that I'm about to inherit all of Govert's property after only a year of marriage. It's understandable, but there's nothing I can do about it. And God knows I earned that inheritance.

I allow my gaze to wander around the room, from the round table next to the window to the fireplace and the furniture I painted myself. Sunlight falls on the flagstone floor and brings a little warmth. Not much, it's only the beginning of March. The smoke drifts along the beams hung with sausages and bacon and up into the loft, which is still half full of winter stores.

It's strange to have the house to myself, but I have no time to take it in. There's work to be done and with Govert gone there's even more than usual.

Even though I have a maid and a farmhand, there's plenty left for me to do. Every day's the same. I milk the cows, feed the pigs and chickens, tend the vegetable patch, churn the butter and make the cheese. I use the remaining time to wash and mend clothes, spin and weave and, very occasionally, to paint.

Now and then, when I glance at the shiny surface of a copper kettle, I catch a glimpse of my mother, braided hair under a white cap. She's always busy, always tired. I'm twenty-five but I feel just as old.

Just keep going, I think as I head to the barn to look in on the animals. The mourning period is only six weeks, not so long.

Jacob, the farmhand, has already started the milking. He greets me with a slight tilt of his chin. I nod by way of a reply.

‘I might be able to go and work for Abraham Goen,’ he says as I sit down on my stool.

‘That’s good.’

‘Now it’s only Jannet who has to find a job.’

‘It’ll all work out. If there’s nothing for her here, she’ll find something in Graft.’

‘When are you leaving?’ Jacob asks.

‘As soon as everything’s sold. The auction’s next week.’

Jacob nods. ‘Jannet would like the churn. Then she can make her own butter.’

‘I can’t give it to her. I’ve already promised it to my mother.’

‘Oh. Shame.’ Jacob pulls the full pail out from under the cow and stands up. The way he stands there makes me think he has something else to say, and I look at him expectantly.

‘About the boss...’

‘Yes?’

‘His brother’s been telling tales around the village.’

I stop milking. ‘What kind of tales?’

He hesitates.

‘What is it, Jacob?’ I say a little too sharply, sounding impatient.

‘I think you know,’ he says, and walks away.

Yesterday I made buttermilk curds. Today, for lunch I smear some of the slightly sour leftovers onto a slice of rye bread. Jacob and Jannet are sitting at the table too. We don’t say much, all three of us are deep in thought.

After the meal, I leave the work to them. I pull a pair of clogs on over my shoes and walk along the dyke towards De Rijk. The farm backs onto the circular canal around the Beemster polder, which is surrounded by marshy low-

lands. My parents' farm is on the far side of the village, and the quickest way there is to walk through it. I walk along Kralingergracht and onto the main street, where the shabby buildings give way to grand homes with green and red painted facades. Closer to the centre of the village there are even a few stone houses with stepped gables, which look like they've been left here by accident.

On the way, I say hello to people I know, who reply somewhat reluctantly. Are they avoiding me? Are people staring at me?

By the time I get to the Kleine Dam and the bustle around the weighing-house, I can no longer dismiss my concerns. People are throwing curious looks my way and whispering behind my back. Only one person comes up to ask how I am and whether it's really true that I'm leaving.

The people here are proud of their village, their families have lived here for generations. Leaving is unheard of, practically a betrayal. But the villagers always thought I was a bit odd, so my plans should come as no surprise.

'Are you getting rid of that dresser as well? The one you painted so nicely?' Sybrigh the wholesaler looks at me eagerly. 'I'd definitely take that off your hands.'

'The auction's next week,' I answer, and keep on walking with an apologetic smile.

I turn into narrow Church Street and leave the village. I can already see my parents' farm in the distance. I continue onto a muddy track and quicken my pace.

'Mart was just here.' My mother is rinsing out milk churns under the pump. In the pale winter light her face looks thin and old, and when she straightens she presses a hand to her back. 'He came to speak to you but he was yelling so much that I sent him away.'

I grab a milk churn and shove it under the pump.
‘He’d heard you were leaving. He was furious, Catrin.’
‘Why? Isn’t that up to me?’

‘Of course, but now? So soon after the funeral? Lots of people find it strange. You’ve got a farm, cattle, everything, and it’s all yours now. Men are lining up for you. Take Gerrit, if you two got together you’d both be rich.’

‘I’m moving to the city.’

‘To go and work as a housekeeper. Even though here you’re completely free.’

I sigh. ‘We’ve been over this so many times, Mother. I’m not planning to be a housekeeper forever. I want to save up, remarry and make a new life in town.’

‘Yes, I suppose that is what you’ve always wanted. When you were a little girl you were always desperate to come along when we took the cheese to market. I never understood why, the others were never like that. Four hours on a barge, just to get to town, and another four back.’

‘Crying because I wanted to stay.’

We look at each other and smile.

‘Well, you should do what you want to do. You’re not a little girl anymore, I can’t stop you,’ my mother says after a short pause. ‘It’s just...’

In the silence that follows I study her expression. ‘What is it?’

‘People are talking.’

‘People in villages always talk, that’s another reason I want to leave. I’ve had more than enough of all the gossiping and meddling.’

A look of resignation appears on my mother’s face. ‘I’ll miss you,’ she says. ‘But maybe it *is* better that you go.’

A week later everything is sold. Govert and I had been renting the farmhouse and land but the animals and furniture belonged to us. During the auction, which takes place on the farm's threshing floor, I see my possessions pass into other people's hands. The proceeds – around a hundred guilders – are welcome. They're enough to keep me going for a while and maybe set up a business. Perhaps painting pottery. That has always been a dream of mine. As a little girl I decorated furniture with beetroot juice. Later on, when I was given commissions by rich farmers and important people from the village and started decorating dressers and foot warmers for them, I used real paint.

'It reminds me of those colourful pieces they make up in Hindeloopen,' Cornelis Vinck, the notary said one day. 'You've got talent, Cat. You should try selling a few things up in town.'

‘I can’t sir. I’m not a member of the guild,’ I said.

‘At the annual fair in September out-of-towners are allowed to sell whatever they like. As long as they don’t set up their own business.’

In my scarce free time I started painting plates and footstools, which I did end up managing to sell quite easily at the fair.

From that day on I longed for the city.

I’ve only known a few villagers leave De Rijp and they were boys who signed on for VOC ships or went off to become whalers. In the neighbouring village of Graft, there was a girl who found a job as a housemaid in Alkmaar and that seemed like a good idea for me too. Of course, life as a housemaid is hard work, but at least I wouldn’t be stuck here with nothing but reeds and mud as far as the eye can see. Town is where things happen, there are amusements and diversions, the people there really live and I long to be part of it. I heard from Emil and Bertha, friends who live in Alkmaar, that a rich resident of the city was in need of a housekeeper. A few weeks ago, when I had to go into town for the cheese market, I walked over to Oudegracht to offer my services. To my astonishment and delight, I was hired on the spot.

I look around the barn, at the early morning light falling on the packed earth floor. The possessions which were packed and piled up here have been taken away by their new owners. All I have left are a few trinkets and some clothes.

Outside in the farmyard, my parents and brothers stand waiting in the morning mist. As the only surviving daughter, I could always rely on their care and protection and I see from the boys’ faces that they’re not happy I’m leaving.

There's a big age gap between Dirk, my oldest brother, and Laurens, left by a number of miscarriages and brothers and sisters who died young. Maybe that's why Laurie is the one I'm most attached to, we're the ones who had to make up for those losses.

Our parting is brief. I hug them all, my parents the longest. Laurie has to go to Alkmaar too and will be accompanying me. A good idea now that I'm carrying so much money.

'We'll see each other again soon,' says my father. 'I'm bringing a load up to Alkmaar next week.'

'See you then, Pa. You know where I'll be.'

Another kiss, a hug, and we set off. Laurie takes the duffel bag with my things under his arm and we walk along the East Dyke which leads to the quay. I look back a couple of times and wave to my family. My heart is full but I have no regrets.

It's a long journey to Alkmaar. Squashed in between the cargo, huddled together for warmth, we watch the polder landscape of flat, neatly laid-out fields and ditches go by. The heavily-loaded barge doesn't go particularly fast but I'm used to that. I've made this journey many times. I know every bend in the canal, every hamlet we pass. On some stretches there's hardly any wind and we make so little progress that the bargee has to use his pole. He pulls down on the bargepole with all his weight, works it into the mud at the bottom and levers the boat forwards.

I sit next to my brother and point out things I notice in the landscape. I don't get much response.

'So you're not coming back then?' says Laurie, just as I'm about to give up my efforts to start a conversation.

'Of course I will. Now and again.'

‘If I were you I wouldn’t stay in Alkmaar. Mart is turning the whole village against you.’

‘Do they believe him?’

‘I don’t know.’ He’s quiet for a moment, then says: ‘You could go to Haarlem or Amsterdam instead.’

Now it’s my turn to pause. ‘So far away?’ I say quietly.

‘It isn’t that far really. What I mean to say, Cat, is that you mustn’t let us hold you back. If another town is . . . better for you, that’s where you have to go. We know what’s being said about you is nonsense, but not everyone is convinced.’

‘I should have stayed in mourning for longer, cried more.’ I look up at my brother. ‘Is it a sin to be glad that someone’s dead?’

Laurie puts his arm around my shoulders and gives me a squeeze. ‘No,’ he says, ‘in this case I’d say it’s only human.’

We sail along the shore of Alkmaar Lake and pass the lock at Akersloot. Rays of sunlight pierce the mist, breaking up the grey haze and bringing a little warmth. A stiff breeze fills the sails and drives the boat through the waves. In the distance, the towers and city walls of Alkmaar are visible, and the gallows field.

A shudder goes through me when I see the sinister posts with their dangling corpses. I quickly turn my gaze to the hustle and bustle of the port further up by the Customs Tower, where incoming goods are weighed and taxed by the city authorities.

The broad expanse of the River Zeglis stretches out glistening in the sun ahead of us. On the banks on either side, swarms of people are walking towards the city, one man is driving a couple of pigs ahead of him. Carts lurch and crash over the potholes, a beggar only narrowly manages to jump out of the way of their wheels.

The barge moors up just outside the city walls. Laurie and I struggle to our feet and pay the skipper. A few minutes later, we cross the small wooden bridge leading to Tree Gate. We say goodbye at the Customs Tower. Laurie has an appointment in an inn on Brewer's Quay.

He looks at me uncertainly, as if he wants to say something but can't find the right words. 'Well Sis, good luck. I'll come and look you up next time I'm in town.' He hugs me tightly. 'Think about what I said.'

I kiss Laurie on the cheek and take my bag of clothes from him. We look each other in the eye for a moment, then smile and part ways. When I look back, I see my brother watching me. I wave and turn right.

Still a little stiff from sitting so long, I walk up River Street, holding my bag tightly. The canal is full of little barges and flat-bottomed boats, goods are being loaded and unloaded everywhere.

I make a beeline through the familiar streets to the other side of the city, where the cathedral towers over the rooftops. I go in through the door on Choir Street and wander through the gigantic apse with its pillars and stained-glass windows to the front, right up to the altar. I sit down on the front pew and close my eyes. For a while I just sit like that, listening to my own breathing and the irregular beating of my heart.

It is only when everything inside me has quieted down that I open them again. The silence hanging between the white walls and arches has a calming effect.

I clasp my hands together. The content of my prayers is the same here as in the village church in De Rijp but it feels different somehow – as if here, among the massive stone vaults, I will be heard more clearly. I don't know whether my entreaties make any difference. I don't feel any relief

yet. With my head still bowed, I leave the church. Outside I blink at the sunlight and stand dazed for a moment before allowing myself to be swallowed up once more in the bustle of the city.

Near the cathedral is the inn and tavern *The Thirteen Beams*, which is run by friends of mine. Bertha and her husband Emil do a roaring trade because their inn is the first one travellers come to when they enter the city from the west through Goblin Gate. It's a large building with a stepped gable and a wrought iron sign that swings merrily in the wind.

With cold, almost frozen hands, I open the door and heave a sigh of relief as the warm air washes over me. The small taproom is packed to the rafters. I make my way through the mass of people standing and sitting between me and the bar. Emil is pouring beer. Bertha is just walking off with two foaming tankards in her hands.

'Emil!' I shout, leaning across the bar.

'Cat! Hello! Lovely to see you. It's a bit busy right now but we'll catch up in a minute, okay?' he shouts.

I nod happily and whip around as someone puts their hand on my shoulder. It's Bertha. Her dark curls have worked their way out from under her cap to frame her face. 'There you are! Do you want something to eat?'

'I'd love something.'

Bertha disappears into the kitchen and comes back a moment later with a hearty-looking soup and a hunk of bread. I quickly find somewhere to sit. By the time I've finished eating, it's a bit quieter in the inn and Bertha comes to sit with me. She asks how the journey has been.

'Long and cold, but Laurie came with me,' I say. 'Can I sleep here tonight? I don't need to be at my boss's house until tomorrow.'

Bertha's looks solemn.

'What is it? Are you full? It doesn't matter, I'm sure I can go to *The Morien's Head*,' I say.

'You can stay here as long as you want, but I have bad news. The gentleman who wanted you to be his house-keeper, Willebrand Nordingen, died two days ago. He fell ill, something to do with his lungs. Of course he was quite old, but his death still took us by surprise.'

For a moment I've no idea what to say. This really is bad news. Not only for Nordingen, who seemed like a kind man, but for me too.

'What do I do now? I've sold all my things, given up my lease.'

'Then buy or rent a house here and look for another job.'

'There's nothing else I *can* do. I'm definitely not going back.'

'We'll help you,' says Bertha decisively. 'You can stay here until you get a place of your own and we'll ask around about a job for you. An inn is the perfect place to do that.'

It's reassuring to know I'm not alone, but it takes a while for me to accept that everything isn't going to go as planned. It's a good job I've got enough money to keep myself going for a while.

Emil comes and puts his hand on my shoulder. 'You'll find something,' he says. 'There's plenty of work in Alkmaar.'

3

I spend all week looking for work. I crisscross the whole city, from the grand houses along Mient Canal, the fanciest one in town, to the salt works on Oudegracht and the brewery on Dove Lane. I try my luck at the city orphanage on Doelen Street and the adjoining silk-weaving workshop, then at Saint Catherine's Cloister and various inns and taverns. I don't care what I have to do, cleaning, fetching and carrying, looking after the sick, as long as I have a job.

The end of the week finds me sitting across from Bertha in the inn, completely disillusioned.

'I didn't think it would be so hard to find work,' I say. 'There are jobs for men but it's much harder for women.'

'You could set up on your own. A small business of some kind.'

'Selling what? Pots and pans? The city's full of those already.'