# Contents

# I

# Amstel

Now that I've walked for so long through these passages and rooms and know the portraits like old friends, now that I've been reading their correspondence, boxes full of it, day after day, voices are starting to sound. I knew this moment would come. I hear them from the walls and from the library, often whispering, sometimes shrill; one of them lisps, with his gold false teeth from seventeen hundred and something.

They join me in looking, I feel their eyes on me, and from the archive in the attic I hear them speaking, in thousands of letters and notes:

> To cook beet-chard one takes chervil, the first cut, beet, parsley, onions, which one scatters with wheat flour while chopping. Then into boiling water, with a little salt added, and lastly rice, a little wheat bread with it, and some butter.

I change domestic mores
Not for my sake but for yours
I had sworn never to love again
But on seeing you my thinking changed…

The Council of State will most likely fall to my Husband, and the Generality to Burgomaster Sautijn. Witsen has laid aside half his postmastership for Burgomaster Munter.

It suits us fairly well here up to now, although we do not attend any big parties. We have been once to the court, and that party was delightful.

After the many unpleasantnesses that you caused me once again yesterday and the day before […] by not in the least desiring to conform to the dictates of your duty, as a woman, to make the house pleasant for your husband during the time that he is there…

Dearest children, cuddle-bundles. I have just five minutes to speak to you and to ask you how you are doing with the bad weather. This morning it rained so tremendously here that we at the office could not see well enough to do our work…

When will you be coming? I long for that very much because it is already three weeks since I saw you. How many thrushes have you caught now? The thrushes that Papa sent us were very good.

Are you going to bed without even kissing me? And shall I just kiss you then?

In the main room, next to the piano from Napoleon's time, I hear a lingering voice singing the song on the music stand, *Rondeau de Gulnare*:

*Sexe charmant, j'adore ton Empire,*
*mon bonheur est de te céder…*

['Charming sex, I adore your Empire / It is my joy to surrender to you…']

I have held their books in my hands, their poems, their toys, a first draft of a letter to a much-loved aunt, in big, hesitant handwriting:

Dearest aunt,
I have been given a beautiful tea set by grandmama and little balls and I have been to a lake and a mountain when it was papa's birthday he lit fireworks and I made a drawing and my pocket money is used up. Bye dear Aunt I am your loving niece Anna van Lennep.
20 July 1814

Never will I forget standing here at the door for the first time and looking up. It had a distinguished face, this house, with cheeks of stone, high steps with two mouths and at least twelve eyes. There was something stern about it, but around the front door was a never-ending dance. The door, the ornate carvings above, the two lamps, left and right, all of it curling and turning, but on the roof suddenly things were the way they should be, the two chimneys sitting firmly and squarely enthroned above everything. The river, slow and languid, flowed past the embankment.

Inside I could smell coffee, along with a hint of wax polish, as I stepped into a wide hallway on the lowest floor of the house. On the tiled wall a peasant peacefully ploughed on, parrots screeched and chattered, the clock stood eternally at half past ten, and black hands held the light high. On the walls beyond were elongated engravings, here the IJ, with behind it the city in its golden years, all the façades, towers and ships' masts meticulously recorded, here a nobleman galloping beside the coach of a regal couple, proud on his rearing steed. A year: 1660.

My host showed me around. In an untidy side room stood filing cabinets full of eighteenth-century paper: cadastral drawings, bills of purchase, frozen neighbourhood quarrels. They

had to do with an estate in Hillegom, somewhere around 1730 or 1740, but no one had ever investigated properly. There were portraits on the walls, proud men, rigid women, children, all looking back at the painter, and next to them, at random, a nineteenth-century winter scene.

A family of rank carries a lot with it through time. This house has cupboards full of the past, silver egg cups, drinking glasses, antique pipe bowls and ivory toothbrushes – with a thousand holes where the bristles have rotted. There is Venetian glassware. A few narrow glasses belonging to the family's seventeenth-century ancestors are still here, thin and tall to spare those huge silk ruffs. There's a pomander, a handsomely worked little casket of ambergris that ladies once hung on a chain between the folds of their skirts to ward off lice and bad smells. Commemorative medals and titles conferred are heaped up rather haphazardly next to a diamond ring that belonged to Tsar Alexander I, a gift on a visit. '*L'empereur Alexandre à M. Van Winter, 4 Juillet 1814*.' In the library are thousands of drawings, as well as diaries, cat bells, letters: the stuff of several centuries gathered together and all still full of life.

Near the stairs a little girl shyly looks out at the world. She was born sometime in the mid-eighteenth century and she is stiffly laced, with a heavily wadded falling cap on her head – that was how rich children learned to walk. In her hand this doll-like child clasps a doll.

Above is the main room, the large living room that is a feature of every Amsterdam canal house. The windows are high and light, looking out on a garden with tall trees, box hedging, rose beds, hydrangeas and rhododendrons, an oasis of peace where sometimes a flight of exotic green parakeets chatters past, with an ancient play house for the children and at the centre a stern sundial.

From here the garden looks like a display cabinet. Long ago the trees were so artfully grouped, with such feeling for line and perspective, that today's observer has the sense of being on a small country estate, right in between the Amsterdam streets.

The saffron walls of the room are busy, covered with portraits of the family. 'Here we have Nicolaes Tulp,' says my

host. He's referring to one of his ancestors, the central figure in Rembrandt's famous *The Anatomy Lesson*, later one of the most powerful men in the city. In an early painting he's still young, with a small beard and a vehement look. Then comes his 1658 portrait, sitting in his big chair, majestic in black and in his eyes is a hint of irony: perhaps because for centuries he has sat facing his son, who, in contrast to his austere father, is dressed in the most colourful fabrics, with a huge wig that reaches to below his chest.

Here is Grandmother Tulp, having managed to find a place for herself on a side wall. She sits peacefully under a tree looking on as her grandchildren play golf, and next to her is the doctor's carriage belonging to her famous son. What strange coats of arms have been painted over it later, like stickers you might attach to a fridge. I'm given to understand they are the work of an unfortunate uncle sometime in the nineteenth century, a withered branch that never married. He had a hump and, so the story goes, as a child he fell eye-first onto a pair of shears.

It's never tranquil here; I can feel them looking over my shoulder. Behind me hangs a precursor to Byron, with burning eyes, a dark wig, a stubbly beard and thick chest hair. 'This is the womanizer of the house, Jan van de Bempden, late seventeenth century.' A small sixteenth-century panel by Pieter Brueghel the Elder depicts a lawyer. An engagement portrait is from a century later it would seem; oh, how sad she looks, captured for eternity, all for the sake of the money and the family. 'Wasn't this the Clifford girl?'

The house has more than forty rooms, with some two thousand prints, drawings and paintings. The archives, it is said, hold at least a hundred thousand documents. There are cupboards full of silver candelabra, damask table cloths and complete tea services – the cornflower design was particularly popular; 'If you were aristocratic nothing else would do.' Then there are all kinds of accompanying oddities, such as silver windmill beakers and other paraphernalia designed to get a seventeenth-century gathering under the table in no time.

My host steers me towards the basement, to the kitchen, the heart of the house. The beams are low, the fireplace high and wide, and the atmosphere switches back and forth, one minute nineteenth-century, the next the twenty-first. Here, day after day, coffee is drunk and lunch eaten – milk, cheese, chocolate sprinkles, jam in all varieties – and everyone comes to sit at the table: Annabelle, my hostess, her sons Jan and Bas, the restorers, staff of the archive, the secretaries and whoever else is in the house. Conversations jump about in all directions. 'Aha, that copperplate by Rembrandt is back, have you ever held such a thing in your hands?' 'Yes, it's an interesting work.' 'Good gracious, did Aunt Totie scribble on that as well?'

It is and remains a family home, this house of the Sixes – to be precise, the Hillegom branch of the Sixes – and the eldest sons are almost always called Jan. The series of Jans began in 1618 with the first Jan Six: cloth dyer, poet, art-lover, Amsterdam burgomaster, friend of Rembrandt and Joost van den Vondel. The current head of the household is the tenth Jan Six, his art-dealer son is the eleventh, and Jan the twelfth is here too, a glowing little boy in a buggy.

When I first got to know the house and the family more than a decade ago, the major restoration of the building had yet to begin. Everything had that down-at-heel look acquired by years of use, time had nestled in every grain of the wood and every crease of the carpet. It was a house replete with art and history, and at the same time a house in which children had run about, people had laughed and died, guests had been welcomed and quarrels fought out.

It was a house where the traditional festivals – St. Nicholas, Christmas, New Year, Easter – were celebrated as important family rituals until recently, where the appropriate clothing was worn (sailor suits were compulsory for the boys), where everyone knew his or her place. Yet also a house where the *pater familias* might throw a bucket of water over an all too brightly flaming Christmas tree and if by accident a splash landed on some distinguished forefather or other, no matter.

There is something enchanting about this house, a magic that, as I slowly discovered, has to do above all with the deep conti-

nuity that surrounds this family, generation after generation. Just imagine. There was a seventeenth-century Jan Six and he lived on as Jan Six in the Amsterdam of the eighteenth century, through his son, grandson and great-grandson. The family declined along with the city, but the nineteenth-century Jan Six picked up the threads again and reached great heights as an art historian, university vice-chancellor and one of the founders of the Rijksmuseum. In the twentieth century he became more businesslike: director of a brewery, an advertising man. Now he is in art again.

They still hang in the top passage and in the side rooms, all those manifestations of Jan Six. The first Jan, brilliantly painted by his friend Rembrandt at a turning point in his life, is wisdom and melancholy rolled into one, then his son, sixteen times a burgomaster, a typical eighteenth-century regent, bloated and heavily bewigged. After that a childhood portrait of the grandson, another Jan, dressed as a little emperor and surrounded by symbols: a flute, flowers – ah, the little boy lived only a few years. A second grandson Jan, an arrogant eighteenth-century gentleman, followed by a small silhouette of his son Jan, an unfortunate public servant under Napoleon. His daughter ran off with a bailiff's deputy and a century later they were still talking about her. Next comes his son Hendrik, who helped the family back onto its feet by marrying the daughter of an immensely rich timber merchant. Then the nineteenth-century Jan Six, a grey, rather melancholy man, a famous coin collector, and his son, a professor, a handsome fellow with a Sean Connery beard – but now we have stepped into the twentieth century.

There are the women, too: the robust matriarch Anna Wijmer, painted by Rembrandt; the gentle, pregnant Margaretha Tulp, married off to the first Jan; the hard faces of her daughters-in-law; the tempestuous Lucretia van Winter who in 1822, for the sake of money and status, had herself locked into a golden cage by Hendrik; and the pretty Hieronyma Bosch Reitz who, decades later, as 'Grootemoes', ruled this family until 1951.

It is a family of collectors and hoarders, and family portraits were never sold; that alone was unusual in these circles. Instead of being shared out among each generation like most Dutch inheritances, the paintings generally remained with the eldest son and as a result, this is the only family house in the world to have two Rembrandt portraits of forebears adorning the walls. The Sixes have kept other things together too: bone china, silverware, drinking glasses and a thousand other household effects large and small. As one member of the family wrote, 'It's fascinating to realize that today you're wiping your mouth on a damask napkin with which your great-grandfather's grandmother dabbed her own sweet face.'

All these things function as bridges; bridges through time, like the coin presented to the Amsterdam burgomasters on 27 July 1655 on the occasion of the inauguration of the town hall (later the Royal Palace) on Dam Square; bridges through space, like the dark-green jasper dish that the first Jan carried over the Alps in about 1643, returning from his travels in Italy. Bridges, almost on a par with holy relics, between heaven and earth, between mortality and immortality, like the beautiful ornamented box that lies in a glass case somewhere, containing two delicate locks of hair – no one any longer knows whose.

All the Sixes were children of their time. For centuries they were part of the machinery of the city and often, along with others, they had their hands on its rudder. They changed according to fashion and were forced to adjust to political upheavals, technological revolutions and a continually modernizing city. Sometimes they spun around like weathercocks.

Yet every generation carried the accumulated past with it. Literally, by caring for a house full of portraits, letters, pipe bowls, bald toothbrushes and seventeenth-century handkerchiefs, and figuratively, by cleaving to and cultivating certain qualities and talents, whether inborn or acquired through tradition. The artistic qualities of the seventeenth-century Jan Six keep re-emerging in later generations, right up to the present day. You come upon the business acumen of the eighteenth-century Jan Six time and again too.

'That's how it feels to me,' says the eleventh Jan Six. 'I've in-