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Louise: The Story so Far

Wings Over Delft

Nearly two hundred and sixty years before Izaac Abrahams was born in 1910, a master painter, Jacob Haitink, who lived in the tiny town of Delft in Holland, undertook to paint the portrait of a sixteen-year-old Dutch girl, Louise Eeden. He did so against his own best judgement because he knew that if he failed to capture this girl's illusive beauty it would destroy him. But he did succeed, just as she succeeded in capturing the heart of his young apprentice Pieter. When the portrait, probably his finest work, was nearing completion, the Master prophesied that one day, long after they were all dead, Louise Eeden would live again in the hearts and minds of people who saw her portrait.

The Rainbow Bridge

And so it happened. Certain people, who had the eyes to see, were indeed so captivated by the girl in the portrait that she became real for them, and shared in their lives. Gaston Morteau, a young French hussar, who rescued her painting from a Dutch canal, had Louise as his riding companion as he crossed the frozen Rhine and journeyed south through France. Young Pierre, his cadet – too gentle for a soldier's life – turned to her portrait to tell her of his fears, and of his heart's

yearnings. Then there was Colette, the girl who was destined to become Gaston's wife. There was also the Count du Bois, in whom dark forces stirred, so that not only her portrait, but Louise herself were put in jeopardy.

When her portrait was sold to a Jewish pedlar in exchange for a few trinkets, Louise was ready to move on.

After *The Rainbow Bridge* ...

In the Jewish pedlar's family, Louise found herself valued: first as an investment, then as a work of art, and then as a companion to Mitsu, the teenage son of the family. When the family were forced to flee France, following a local pogrom against the Jews, they crossed the border into Switzerland. It was with Mitsu that Louise saw mountains for the first time, and stood on a bridge, watching the pearl-green glacier-water creaming over the rocks of the riverbed. For several years they shared each other's interests and activities.

Mitsu had hoped to get an apprenticeship as a clockmaker, but soon found that the clockmakers of Switzerland kept a closed shop and did not take kindly to strangers. Then one day, desperate for work, he undertook to mend his landlady's piano and discovered that he had perfect pitch. His ear could tell him to the tiniest turn of the tuning key if a string was in tune or not. With Mitsu's new-found skill, the fortunes of the Abrahams family changed. Mitsu's descendents all had good or perfect pitch and followed his trade as piano tuners. They graduated from pubs to parlours, to drawing rooms, to concert halls. But they also migrated, inching eastwards towards Austria and ultimately to Vienna, the music capital of the world. Here, David Abrahams and his brother Rudi divided the great concert halls and salons between them. Though they were too busy to pay more than passing attention to the portrait that had hung on their walls since they could remember, Louise never

felt neglected; she had a place in their lives, even if it was now a passive one. Then, in 1910, baby Izaac was born to David and Judit, and Louise was to find herself called back to action by an imperious demand from a most unexpected quarter ...

CHAPTER 1

The Performer

It was a spring morning; a light breeze stirred the muslin curtains in front of the open windows of the Abrahams' apartment in Vienna. Motors passed, horses clopped, and carriages occasionally clattered on the cobbled street below. Trams hissed and clanged over the nearby crossing. Izaac Abrahams, aged three months, stirred restlessly in his pram; his nurse Lotte had placed it facing the wall with instructions for him to 'go to sleep!' But Izaac had no intention of going to sleep; he had just learned to put both of his big toes into his mouth at the same time, and was in urgent need of an audience.

For some time now he'd been examining an object on the wall above him. The image was a bit fuzzy because his eyes didn't focus well on distant things yet. His view of the world was, therefore, mostly made up of shapes and colours. There were shapes that didn't move and on which no amount of charm had any effect, then there were shapes that did move, and therefore had to be entertained. For these he reserved a repertoire of gurgles, squirms and smiles, or if these failed, a variety of cries, roars and wails.

Nothing was moving now so he turned his attention back to that thing on the wall above him. For some reason he felt it had potential; there was a shape inside it that intrigued him; he gathered himself to work on it.



Louise felt Izaac's attention on her as a flow of energy, a small dynamic focus in the already sunlit room. At first glance there didn't seem to be anyone else present, but energy was clearly coming to her from somewhere. She was out of practice and was bothered that she could see no source for this attention. Izaac, however, sensed her growing interest and tried an exploratory:

'Ba?'

She looked down in surprise. Two large eyes, inky pupils bright with curiosity, were staring up at her picture. She had to smile. To her amazement he smiled back, tentatively it is true, but a smile nonetheless.

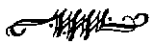
'Well, who are you?' she asked herself. He wriggled – she smiled; he tried a gurgle – she smiled again; they could go on like this. Now he tried her with his word again, repeating it in case she hadn't heard.

'Ba ... ba?' Now Louise laughed outright. That was all the encouragement he needed. He lifted both legs in the air and whumped them down on the bed.

What followed was a gala performance of all the tricks that Izaac knew, the climax of which was, of course, putting both big toes in his mouth. He concluded the show with his own tumultuous applause. Louise joined in, it didn't seem to bother him that her applause was silent; he was a very engaging creature. The effect of all this attention was, of course, for him to start again. It was when he started on his third performance that Louise began to get a little desperate. She had no experience of babies; she was afraid of encouraging him and equally afraid of stopping him. Fortunately at this moment Lotte appeared.

'*Ach Liebchen, du bist so* fröhlich!' Little one, you are happy!

She picked him up and turned her back, leaving Louise with a glimpse of a triumphant small face looking at her over Lotte's shoulder.



As the days, weeks and months passed, Louise became genuinely fascinated with Izaac, and she could see him growing, not just in body but in mind. It was like watching frost patterns growing on a windowpane; tiny branches thrusting out, dividing, spreading until they met and became part of a network that was a small human being. Because the music room, where her picture hung, was where he was put to rest in the afternoons, Louise had him to herself. Sometimes he would be content to watch the shifting light on the ceiling. On other occasions his urge to show her what he was seeing was so strong that she would find herself seeing the world through his eyes. When a bumblebee landed on his pram and then spread its wings, unfolding them like transparent fans, and flew off with a buzz like a hornet, she experienced anew his surprise and amazement at the phenomenon of flight. Then the vision would fade, and it might be weeks before he felt compelled to share some other experience with her. How was it that this little fragment of humanity had such complete command over her?

But, now that Izaac had co-opted her as an audience for his dress rehearsals for life, Louise joined in with enthusiasm. It was she who first saw him rise up from his stomach like a caterpillar until he formed a hoop and then, miraculously stand. She also saw him take his first steps, and later heard the cries of joy from the next room when he gave his first public display of this new skill. Months stretched to years. For long periods Izaac would appear to forget about Louise. Then something would arise and he would urgently require an audience. On

other occasions he would go out of his way to avoid attracting her attention.

It was young Mitsu (Izaac's great grandfather) who had reinstated music in Louise's life, when he had reassembled his landlady's piano in Switzerland, and in doing so had discovered his perfect pitch. As the three generations of piano tuners had worked, struggling to establish themselves, there had always been a piano, harpsichord or other instrument in bits in the parlour. Later, as the family flourished, and there were workshops to which these poor wrecks could be banished, there would be new or borrowed instruments for the family to play on. None of them played the piano professionally but they were enthusiastic amateurs making music for the love of it. Also it went down well with clients to hear short pieces played when the tuning was done. Inspired perhaps by the music in Vienna, or even to get away from pianos for an hour or two, the family turned to strings. Soon there were violinists, viola players, or cellists in the family ready to play the duets, trios and quartets that they loved. As they always played in the parlour, Louise was in on their performances and on their practising too. It was as if they enjoyed having someone to play for, often positioning themselves so that they could play to her portrait.

She had become used to their Jewishness as well. Sometimes observant, more often not, they struck her as being very comfortable with their God. Their main observance seemed to concentrate on the ancient traditions that welded the community together. On Friday nights, in particular, music and tradition were melded together on the eve of the Jewish Sabbath. She would look forward to these evenings with relish. One evening, however, things did not go quite to plan.

CHAPTER 2

Of Cats and Viols

It was the turn of the Abrahams family to host the other members of the *Tuning Fork Quartet*, first to music, and then when the sun had gone down, to join their Sabbath dinner. Every week they would gather in one or other of their homes to play, mostly quartets and trios, with lots of enthusiasm and equal toleration of each other's mistakes. As the afternoon wore on the music would get less demanding, steins of foaming beer would appear beside their chairs, and any piece that ended with all of them still playing, and still together, would be greeted with a cheer.

'At least we look like a real quartet,' laughed Uncle Rudi, who was their first violin. He was completely bald, with a head like the pointy end of an egg, and a beard that flowed out generously over his violin. He had to tuck his beard in, in case it got tangled up with his bow. Uncle Rudi's son, Nathan, who played second fiddle, was a medical student, while Uncle Albert, their viola player, was neither an uncle nor a Jew, but became honorary ones on Fridays. Father played the cello, and the piano if needed. Today, however, they had a very special guest, an old friend of the family, none other than the great Madame Helena Stronski, still one of the most sought-after solo violinists out of her native Poland.

She had arrived towards the end of their session, sweeping in like a ship under full sail in a billow of diaphanous scarves.

She was a large woman, once strikingly beautiful, now inclined to weight and to ruff and gruff to hide a heart alloyed equally of steel and gold.

'Don't stop, don't stop!' she called as the music faltered, 'I love it. This is what I've come for, real music on the hoof.'

The quartet, however, rose to a man, not the least offended. She offered both cheeks to her host David Abrahams, and the same honour to Uncle Rudi. She gave young Nathan a hearty shake of the hand, and let Uncle Albert kiss the back of it. Having dealt with them all in accordance with her code of intimacy, she declared: 'Well gentlemen, what will we play?' From Uncle Rudi's music stand she picked up a sheet of the music they had been playing. 'Good heavens, dears, this is far too difficult for me.' She searched deeper among his sheets of music. 'Here ... this is much more my standard these days.' They all burrowed through their music, eager as squirrels, while she surveyed the room with a smile of content. This was what she loved; people making music together. But they would all enjoy it more if they could play something within their ability.

Judit, Izaac's mother, came in, holding her guest's violin case and leading a boy of about three and a half by the hand. He was wearing a sailor suit; his eyes round in awe at the sight of their visitor.

'This is Izaac.' They shook hands solemnly. 'You will play for us, won't you? Izaac would love to hear you,' said Judit.

'Humph,' said the great lady, looking down at Izaac. 'I bet you'd prefer to be pulling the cat's tail? Makes the same sort of sound if you think about it.' She gave him the nearest thing to a wink that a great lady can make and turned to Uncle Rudi. 'Rudi, all right if I double up with you on the first violin?' Uncle Rudi made to rise. 'No no no, don't get up, I'll read over your shoulder.' She put her violin case on a chair, opened the lid and folded back the silk scarf that was wrapped around the

instrument. It lay for a moment in its case like a freshly opened horse chestnut in its husk. Izaac leaned forward for a better look. 'It's very, very old,' she explained. 'It was made by Stra...di...var...ius, I call it Strad for short.' She took up her bow. 'And this is the cat's tail. It looks all floppy now, so we'll tighten it up like this.' She turned the tiny mother of pearl nut on the end of the bow until the hairs were tight and straight. 'Now, all I need is my rosin and we are ready.' She showed him how she rubbed the rosin on to the hairs of the bow. 'So, where will I put it? I could put it on top of Uncle Rudi's head?' Izaac was still a little awed.

'Wrong shape, my dear,' said Uncle Rudi.

'Uncle Rudi's a little-ender, isn't he Izaac?' she laughed, and dropped the rosin back into her case. 'Lead off when you're ready, Rudi,' she commanded.

The home team launched into the first movement of their quartet tentatively, as if shy in the presence of the maestro. To begin with, she appeared just to be playing very softly, a mere shadow of Uncle Rudi's lead, but as they got used to her presence she began to play with them, leading them, nudging them, and a subtle transformation took place. They seemed to relax, their bow strokes became longer and they were moving better in time. They found themselves glancing at each other with secret smiles as they passed the notes and phrases back and forth between them. *Her* magic seemed to be flowing through their fingers and into their bows. When it came to Father's entry on the cello, the deep notes of the instrument rang out rich and sweet. His eyebrows shot up with pleasure. When they paused between movements they didn't chat, as they often did, but sat held in a trance. They approached the dramatic finale like ships entering harbour in a line, swinging up into the wind and dropping anchor as one. Only when they turned to applaud their leader, did they realise that Madame

Stronski had stopped playing, and that their triumphal finale had been all their own; she had her fiddle under her arm and was applauding them.

While the musicians were recovering, happily congratulating each other on this or that entry, Madame Stronski adjusted her scarves, which always seemed to be about to fall off, but never did, and took up a position near the piano. She raised her bow and launched into the first notes of a piece of music that none of them had heard before.

At her first notes Izaac Abrahams whipped about like someone stung. He had been accustomed to music since babyhood. Father would practise his cello in the evenings, and Mother played the piano in the afternoons, when she thought no one else would hear her. He would go about his business, arranging animals from his ark, putting them in fields outlined in dominoes, building castles from bricks, or stalking the cat. From time to time the music would inspire him to perform acrobatics and other things. Unfortunately people engrossed in making music tend not to notice other people's performances, so Izaac would have to contrive his own audience. The animals of his ark would be arranged in appreciative rows and performed for, but their attention span was short. After they had been knocked over a couple of times he would dismiss them. Then he would turn his attention to the picture on the wall and would perform for the girl in the green dress. She could be relied on for the correct level of applause; she understood him. On this occasion, when the quartet had finished and everyone else was preoccupied, he had treated her to headstands, and he was doing this when Madame Stronski started to play her solo.

Izaac had never heard music played by a maestro. He had never heard a bow bite into the strings as if the note to be played had existed in the air, expectant and impatient ever

since the composer had first conceived it. His small body became rigid; two powerful forces were running through him like competing electric currents. The first, a sustained vibration, came from the music, the outward flow of something both beautiful and terrifying. The second came from his own sense of affront. He, Izaac, was the performer in this house! This was his territory. That Cloud Woman, the one with all the billowing scarves who talked about cats, was his competitior. He stamped his foot in temper.

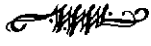
As if sensing his challenge, the Cloud Woman half turned towards him; the violin gave the smallest dip of acknowledgement, her eyes glinted, but she played on. How dare she! He stood his ground, small, dark and sturdy. But Izaac had no defence against music like this, not in the hands of a master. In minutes he was overcome. The music penetrated every fibre of his small body, running like liquid silver into his bones where it hardened into something both brittle and sensitive. When the Cloud Woman finished playing, Izaac was the only one in the room who did not clap; neither did he turn somersaults.

Madame Stronski observed Izaac's reaction and had a pang of conscience. She had noticed his sudden rigid attention when she had begun to play. It was a compliment, and what musician can resist the compliment of complete attention? So, she had played for him, a personal message of power and beauty, an example of musicianship that she was delighted she still had in her. But had she laid a trap for him? Oh, Helena, she said to herself, what have you done? Perhaps there was still time to get the genie back into the bottle. She pulled herself together and called out to Izaac's father:

'Come David, soon Judit will be lighting your Sabbath candles for our dinner, let's play a round for Izaac before he goes to bed. How about '*Pani Janie*', as we call it in Poland, '*Frère Jacques*' in French, what is it in German?' They laughed and

told her, '*Bruder Jacob!* But with variations!' They smiled as they bent for their instruments. 'Rudi, you begin. Then Nathan, then Uncle Albert, you, David, and then me. One, two, three.' Uncle Rudi started playing the simple tune. Then, while he played on, Nathan started, beginning again so the tune was overlapping on itself. Uncle Albert came in on the viola, followed by Father on the cello, and last of all came Madame Stronski. Now they were all playing and the tune became a little symphony. Faster and faster they played until they all had to give up in laughter. The double doors opened and Mother stood there smiling. Dinner was ready. With a sweep of scarves Madame Helena laid her violin in its case.

'Judit, I'm starving,' she said, and led the way into the dining room, while Izaac was picked up by Lotte, and carried off to bed.



Voices rose and fell behind the double doors that separated the dining room from the music room. Dinner was progressing at a leisurely pace. Next door in the music room, Izaac, in pyjamas, was edging silently along, hugging the wall under the picture where he thought the girl inside it wouldn't see him. This wasn't a performance, it was more like a commando raid, and she had a habit of making him uneasy about his plans.

He was also apprehensive about the Cloud Lady. Her reference to cats had disturbed him; he still had scars from the time he had given their cat a loving hug. His interest was in her violin; he wasn't sure whether it was alive or not, so he must be careful. Uncle Rudi and Nathan both played violins, but clearly these were just toys when compared to the Cloud Lady's instrument. It, he had decided, was the key to her performance. If *he* could tame it, then *he* would turn everyone's head and make their legs go wobbly as his had just done.

He could see the chair with her violin case on it, a tongue of the scarf she had wrapped around the instrument peeped from under the lid. Even the case had a special magic; it was old and scarred, the only bright thing about it was a scarlet hotel sticker on the lid with a picture of a dancing clown. He was afraid of it now, but the more he looked the more strongly it drew him, filling his vision until his feet had no alternative but to move. The case lay on a chair at chest-height to him. He reached out. The lid was unclasped; he lifted it cautiously, alert in case the violin might spring out at him. The silk was soft on his hands, but so had been the cat's fur. He parted the folds, and there it was – the violin. The grain of its wood seemed to pulse with life. He reached out cautiously and touched the polished surface. It wasn't cold like the marble floor in the hall; it was warm. He decided that it was probably alive. When he ran his fingers across the strings, they murmured back at him the familiar notes he heard whenever his uncles tuned up. Perhaps it liked him. He got it firmly by the neck and lifted; it was lighter than he expected, but when he tried to put it under his chin he found that his arms were too short. He looked around for the bow. The silly woman had called it a cat's tail – nonsense – it was a sword. Uncle Rudi called *his* a sword and used it to duel with Izaac and the toy sword he'd been given for his birthday. There were two bows in the lid of the case; he put the violin on the floor behind him so he could pull properly. But the clip holding the bow was old and the bow came away in his hand. Izaac reeled backwards, waving it above his head for balance. For a moment his backside wavered dangerously above the violin before thumping down on the floor only inches away from it.

Louise, observing from the confines of her picture, was in an agony of apprehension as this saga developed, but all she could do was watch. Izaac did a swash and buckle or two to

save face and then examined his prize. The hairs were floppy. He remembered that the Cloud Woman had had the same problem. He was good on technical details and he found the small mother-of-pearl nut on the end of the bow and turned it. That made it worse. He made a couple of rather angry swipes in the air and then got the direction right and the hairs tightened. Now he turned his attention to the violin. The music he was about to play was already loud in his mind. As he couldn't manage to put the violin under his chin, he laid it on his knees with the thin end away from him and prepared to play.

Izaac knew that the place where the music came from was where the strings were held up on a wooden little bridge. So, gripping the bow by the middle, and still thinking more of a sword than of a bow, he thrust it lustily into the gap between the strings and the fiddle. To his surprise and amazement the creature let out a most terrible screech, not at all the music that Izaac had expected. He looked at the impaled instrument in horror; he hadn't meant to hurt it. An unnatural silence had fallen over the house; it gave him a sense of urgency. There was only one thing he could do, and that was to pull out the offending bow A second appalling shriek rang out. He heard the clatter of knives and forks, the cries of 'Izaac'. They were coming for him. However he still had the violin, and even to a three year old, possession is nine tenths of the law. All he needed was a little time to tame the creature.



An appalling, jarring screech cut through the quiet conversation about the dining room table. In the shocked silence that followed, only the flames of the Sabbath candles dared to move, shifting in the summer air from the half open door into the music room. Forks were arrested on the way to mouths; knives were held poised.

'What on earth was that?' breathed Father.

'The cat?' wondered Mother.

'A violin?' said Uncle Rudi. A second screech rent the air.

'Izaac!' burst out as one voice from around the table. There was a clatter as the entire company dropped their cutlery onto their plates and headed for the door.



At any other time the sight of all four members of the Tuning Fork Quartet trying to get through the dining room door at the same moment would have had him in stitches, but today Izaac meant business. When eventually they uncorked and burst into the room towards him he waved his bow menacingly. Their expressions changed to horror as they all realised that what Izaac had on his knees was not one of their own violins but the priceless Stradivarius. They faltered to a man, held back by the thought that at a wrong move from them Izaac might do literally anything. They were hopping around him like vultures when a cry rang out from the door.

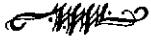
'Stop. Leave the boy!'

The four men fell back, walking on the tips of their toes in an agony of apprehension. Izaac had a momentary glimpse of the Cloud Lady standing like a fairy godmother in the doorway. This was his moment. He lifted the violin as if to fit it under his chin as Uncle Rudi did, but that's where things had gone wrong last time; his arms were too short. He was aware of the expectations of the audience gathered about him; it was clearly up to him to entertain them, but whether with a solo performance or a full-scale tantrum he wasn't sure. The Cloud Lady was standing above him, but for some reason she seemed to be encouraging him. At that moment he remembered how Father held his cello. So, still sitting, he spread his legs wide and put the bottom of the violin on the carpet. He exercised his

right arm, remembered how his father played and took a cello-like swipe at the strings. It was not a success; the bow slipped and skittered across the strings, but fortunately the noise was deadened by his grip on the neck of the instrument. The Cloud Lady bent down and gently guided his left hand so that he was holding the violin by its shoulder; now the strings were free. As he drew back his arm, he could feel her fingers over his on the bow, light but firm. Now at last the magic he had been looking for was flowing through him. His bow found the lowest of the four strings, the G string. As if of itself it began to move and the full rich tone of the open string sang out.

The next three seconds would prove to be Izaac's most enduring musical memory, the moment when he realised that it was *he* who was making this magical sound. And what a sound! Not just a single note but the countless other notes and harmonics that make the sound of the violin unique. His mind, like a well-prepared plot of land, was ready for this and he would remember the moment as minutes not as seconds. Half a bow was all that his reach would allow but he used every inch of it and sustained that note to the very end.

Now came the applause, but Izaac was too shocked and dumfounded even to acknowledge it. He dropped the bow as Madame Stronski swooped forward and lifted the violin from his hands. Without saying a word he rushed out of the room, past his mother, and buried his head in the neutral starchiness of Lotte's apron.



Some hours later, when the visiting members of the *Tuning Fork Quartet* had departed, still laughing at the incident, Madame Stronski came back into music room to collect her violin. For a moment she shed her merriment and turned to Izaac's parents.

'About your little Izaac ...'

'Oh, we're so sorry. We hope he didn't ...' they exclaimed in unison.

'No, my dears, it's for me to apologise. I'm very much afraid I have woken a monster in your little fellow. Hopefully he will get over it and become a banker or keep bees, but if he takes an interest in the violin, keep him away from it till he is six or more. Then send for me, and I will help him if I can.'

She gathered up her things and turned to leave, looking around the room with affection. Her eye was caught by the portrait of the *Girl in the Green Dress* hanging on the wall. 'You know, this really is a little gem, have you told me where she came from?' she asked, sailing up to look at it closely.

'Oh, Louise? She's been in the family, passed down from father to son, ever since we had to flee from France at the beginning of the last century.'

Madame Stronski shook her head. 'I would say she had broken a few hearts before that,' she said and she sighed: 'You won't believe this, but I was once as slender as her. Look how she challenges us! I'd like to think that I looked like her when I told the Academy selection board in Kraków what I thought of them. Lot of old fuddy-duddies, misogynists to a man. "*The concert platform is no place for a woman.*" Pah! I told them. So I came to Vienna instead. I still miss Kraków though,' she sighed.

She smiled at the portrait and said: 'Look after my little protégé for me, won't you.' Then, gathering her scarves about her, she left.