He loved to exaggerate, and he sometimes drew hasty conclusions, so why should we take Pieter Blussé seriously when he claims that his unexpected meeting with Sophia Vermeer was love at first sight? Why should we believe him when he says that upon first seeing her he realised that God had intended them for each other? Before daring to give free rein to his love, however, he first inquired into the background and social standing of this girl, who seemed to be such an attractive match.

The meeting took place in the summer of 1770. The young bookseller Pieter Blussé, only twenty-two but already convinced—after a couple of failed attempts at matchmaking on the part of his father—that he would ‘never wear the harness of love’, set out for Rotterdam in the company of his sister. This time he unsuspectingly found himself in the hands of a female Cupid—his Aunt Noot—his Aunt Noot—for it was she who had invited Pieter’s sister Geertruida, his junior by six years, to spend the week of the annual fair in Rotterdam. Having casually suggested that Pieter come along too, she then arranged for them to attend a tea party at the Van Sprangs’ the moment they arrived. Mrs van Sprang, Aunt Noot’s niece, had just had a baby, and so could not chaperone her seventeen-year-old sister Sophia Vermeer. A female cousin of Sophia’s, who was also staying with Mrs Sprang, was likewise in need of an escort, so Aunt Noot suggested that Sophia and her cousin join Pieter and Geertruida. Pieter’s reluctance to oblige made no impression on her: ‘The message was delivered, but they replied that they would be waiting for us. I made my way there with leaden steps.’
Pieter's determination to remain aloof dissolved at the sight of Sophia. ‘Enchanted by her lovely face, fair figure and mild manners, my heart was, from the very beginning, inflamed with the purest regard and most tender affection for her.’ But the turbulent emotions to which Pieter succumbed did not prevent him from inquiring at the earliest opportunity into the background and fortune of this beauty. He must have been satisfied with what he found out. His aunt informed Pieter ‘as to her status and background’, and no doubt told him that Sophia was an orphan ‘from a distinguished family’. Her father had held the offices of magistrate, tax collector and secretary to the town of Zevenaar, as had his father and grandfather before him. Sophia’s mother, Elisabeth Geertruida Hecking, also came from a prominent family of magistrates and dike-graves in the area of Cleves.3

Pieter wasted no time in declaring his love: a mere three days after meeting Sophia he wrote: ‘Tired of concealing what was in my heart, I revealed with the greatest warmth that she was mine, that to love her and further her happiness would henceforth be my greatest source of worldly bliss.’ Pieter’s autobiographical notes do not tell us how Sophia reacted to his declaration of love, but Pieter’s first love letter to her, written immediately after his return from Rotterdam, reveals that their relationship had already passed the Platonic stage. Indeed, Pieter expresses the hope that he will soon be able ‘to enjoy again the privilege of pressing soft kisses on your lovely lips ... and to embrace you with the tenderest affection and delight, which neither my pen nor my tongue can describe’. Sophia, however, was far less inclined to make any promises. She preferred to wait and see how her guardians reacted. ‘My parents’, Pieter wrote to her, ‘have already approved of my choice and consider me fortunate if I should receive your consent. I have every reason for satisfaction and happiness, since your brother and my parents put comfort and courage into my heart. You alone have left me in doubt and sent me away disconsolate, and only in order to please your honourable guardians, whom you rightly regard as worthy parents and whose advice you seek in a matter of such importance.’4

Pieter’s parents had not wasted any time either. Scarcely a day after their son had declared his love for Sophia, they expressed their approval by paying an ‘official’ visit to Sophia and her sister and brother-in-law. The Van

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3 See the handwritten family tree of the Vermeer family in the Dordrecht Municipal Archives, BFA, unsorted, box 4; CBG, Vermeer file; J.B. Maris van Sandleingenambacht, Een hondertal Nederlandsche families (Nijmegen 1946) 164-69, 175-78, 294-95.
4 GAD, BFA, inv. 10, letter of 2 September 1770.