

Letter 193
The Hague, 14 May 1882

Dear Theo,

If I am to succeed in giving you further insight into what I've already written you about, you must understand the root of it. And I must not put my visit to Amsterdam in a better light than it really was. But I begin by begging you not to think me impertinent when I contradict you. And before all this, I must thank you most kindly for the enclosed 50 fr.

It will be no use if I don't put it strongly. I would remain silent if you wanted me to give in to you, but I don't think you do, and perhaps you yourself will not think it unnatural that some things in life are less developed in you than your business sense, which I fully consider twice as good as mine, and I shall not readily risk telling you this or that is not so. On the contrary, especially when you explain things to me, I often feel you know better than I. But on the other hand, when it comes to love, I am often astonished at the way you think.

For your last letter has given me more food for thought than perhaps you realize. I think my mistake and the real reason for my being refused is this: when one is without money, of course one is of no account, so it was a mistake and shortsightedness on my part to take what Mauve said literally, or to suppose for a moment that Tersteeg would remember that I have had so much trouble already.

At present money is what the right of the strongest used to be. To contradict a person is fatal, and if one does, the reaction is not that the other party is made to reflect, but that one gets a blow with the fist. That is to say, in the form of, "I will not buy from him again," or, "I will not help him again."

This being so, I risk my head when I contradict you, but, Theo, I don't know how I could do otherwise; if my head must be cut off, here is my neck. You know the circumstances and know that my life or death depends on your help. But I am between two fires. If I reply to your letter: Yes, Theo, you are right, I will give up Christine, then first I tell a lie in agreeing with you and second, I commit myself to doing a vile thing. If I contradict you and you act like T. and M., it will cost me my head, so to speak.

Well, for heaven's sake, off with my head, if that's the way it has to be. The other thing is even worse. So here is a short memorandum, clearly explaining a few things which I think may possibly cause you to withdraw your help. But to conceal them so as not to lose your help seems to me an underhanded thing to do, and I would rather risk the worst. If I succeed in making you understand what I think you don't yet understand, then Christine, her child and myself will be safe. And in order to accomplish this, I must risk saying what I am going to say.

To express my feelings for Kee, I said resolutely, "She, and no other." And her "no, never never" was not strong enough to make me give her up. I still had hope, and my love remained, notwithstanding this refusal, which I thought was like a piece of ice that would melt. But I could find no rest. The strain became unbearable because she was always silent and I never received a word in answer.

Then I went to Amsterdam. There they told me, "When you are in the house, Kee leaves it. She answers, 'Certainly not him,' to your 'she, and no other'; your persistence is disgusting."

I put my hand in the flame of the lamp and said, "Let me see her for as long as I can keep my hand in the flame" – no wonder that Tersteeg perhaps noticed my hand afterward.

But I think they blew out the lamp and said, "You will not see her."

Well, it was too much for me, especially when they spoke of my wanting to coerce her, and I felt that the crushing things they said to me were unanswerable, and that my "she, and no other" had been killed.

Then, not at once, but very soon, I felt that love die within me; a void, an infinite void came in its stead. You know I believe in God, I did not doubt the power of love, but then I felt something like, "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me," and everything became a blank. I thought, Have I been deceiving myself?... "O God, there is no God!"

That cold terrible reception in Amsterdam was too much for me, my eyes were opened at last.

Enough. Then Mauve diverted and encouraged me; I threw myself into my work with all my strength. Then toward the end of January, after I had been thrown over by Mauve and had been ill for a few days, I met Christine.

Theo, you say that if I had really loved Kee, I shouldn't have done this. But do you understand better now that I couldn't go any further after what happened in Amsterdam – should I have despaired then? Why should an honest man despair – I am no criminal – I don't deserve to be treated in such an inhuman way.

Well, what can they do this time? It's true they got the best of me, they thwarted me there in Amsterdam. But I'm not asking their advice any more now, and being of age, I ask you, Am I free to marry – yes or no?

Am I free to put on a workman's clothes and live like a workman – yes or no? Whom am I responsible to, who will try to force me?

To hell with anyone who wants to hinder me.

You see, Theo, I've had enough of it all; think it over and you will understand. Is my path less straight because somebody says, "You have gone astray"? C. M. always talks about the right path too, just like Tersteeg and the clergymen. But C. M. also calls De Groux a bad character, so in the future I shall let him talk, my ears are tired of it. To forget, I lie down in the sand by an old tree trunk and make a drawing of it. In a linen smock, smoking a pipe and looking at the deep blue sky – or at the moss or the grass. This soothes me. And I feel just as calm, for instance, when Christine or her mother is posing, and I estimate the proportion and try to suggest the body with its long undulating lines under the folds of a black dress. Then I am a thousand miles away from C. M. and Kee and much happier. But – alas, then the worries come and I must either talk or write about money, and then it all begins anew. Then I think T. and C. M. would do so much better if they didn't bother about my "path," but encouraged my drawing.

You will say C. M. does, but listen to why his order has not been filled as yet.

Mauve said to me, That uncle of yours has only given this order because he was at your studio once; but you must understand that it doesn't mean anything and will be the first and last, and then nobody will take an interest in you. You must know, Theo, that I cannot stand such things; if such things are said, my hand drops as if paralyzed. Especially as C. M. has already said something about conventions, I believe. I have done twelve drawings for C. M. for 30 guilders, that is 2.50 guilders apiece; it was a difficult job, there was more than 30 guilders' worth of work in it, and I don't deserve having to consider it charity, or something like it.

I had already put a lot of effort into the six others. I had made the studies for them – and there it stopped. The effort over the new ones has already been made, so it is not laziness; but I am paralyzed.

I reason with myself, I won't pay any attention to it. But I'm nervous and such a thing does not go away, but comes back when I try my hand at them again; so then I must steer another course and begin another work.

I don't understand Mauve – it would have been kinder of him never to have meddled with me. What do you advise me to do – make the drawings for C. M. or not? I really don't know what to do.

There used to be better feeling among painters; now they try to devour each other, and are big personages who have villas and scheme to get ahead. I would rather be on the Geest, or in any grey, muddy and gloomy alley – there I am never bored, so I say, That's no place for me, I won't go there any more.

Thank God I have my work; but instead of earning money by it, I need money to be able to work, so that is the difficulty. When in a year – or I don't know how long – I shall be able to draw that Geest or any other street as I see it, with those figures of old women, workmen, girls, then Tersteeg, etc., will be very kind. But then they will hear me thunder, "Go to hell"; and I shall say, You deserted me when I was in trouble, friend, I don't know you, go away, you're standing in my light.

Dear me, why should I be afraid, what do I care about Tersteeg's "unsaleable" or "without charm"?

Whenever I feel depressed, I look at "The Diggers" by Millet and "Le Blanc des Pauvres" by De Groux, and then Tersteeg becomes so small, so insignificant, and all that drivel of his becomes so foolish, that my spirits rise, and I light my pipe and start drawing again. But if ever a "civilized" person should cross my path at such a moment, he might hear things which would sober him up.

You will ask me, Theo, if these things are also applicable to you. My answer is, "Theo, who has given me bread and helped me? I think you did, so it certainly is not applicable to you." But sometimes the thought occurs to me, Why isn't Theo a painter? Will that "civilization" ever begin to bore him? Won't he later regret that he has not left "civilization" for what it is worth, and has not learned a handicraft, taken a wife and put on the painter's smock? But there may be reasons for it which I cannot appreciate. I don't know whether you have yet learned the ABC of love. Do you think that pretentious of me? What I mean is, one feels best what love is when sitting by a sickbed, sometimes without any money in one's pocket. It is no gathering of strawberries in spring – that lasts only a few days, and most of the months are grey and gloomy. But in that gloom one learns something new; sometimes I think you know it and sometimes I think, He does not.

I want to go through the joys and sorrows of domestic life in order to paint it from my own experience.

When I came back from Amsterdam, I felt that my love – so true, so honest and strong – had literally been killed. But after death there is resurrection. Resurgam.

Then I found Christine. There was no time to hesitate or to defer. I had to act. If I do not marry her, it would have been kinder of me to have left her alone. But a chasm will be opened by this step; I decidedly

“lower” myself, as they say. But it isn’t forbidden, it isn’t wrong, though the world says so. I live as a labourer, it suits me; I wanted to before, but couldn’t carry it out then. I hope that you will continue to stretch your hand across the chasm to me.

I mentioned 150 fr. a month, you said that I should need more. Wait a minute, my average expenses have never exceeded 100 fr. a month since I left Goupil except when I had to travel. And at first I had 30 guilders at Goupil’s and later 100 fr. a month.

It’s true that during these last months my expenses have been higher, but I had to set up housekeeping; and I ask you, were these expenses unreasonable or extravagant? Especially if you know what those expenses included. And how often in those long years did I have much less than 100 fr. And if I sometimes had travelling expenses, haven’t I learned languages and developed my mind – is that money thrown away? Now I want to lay a straight path for my feet. If I postpone marriage, there is something crooked in my position which is repulsive to me. She and I will skimp and be as frugal as possible if only we can marry. I am thirty years old and she is thirty-two, so we are no longer children. As to her mother and her child, the latter takes away all stain from her; I respect a woman who is a mother, and I don’t ask about her past. I am glad that she has a child – it gives her exactly the experience she needs.

Her mother is very energetic and deserves a medal because she has supported a family of eight children for years. She doesn’t want to be dependent, she makes her living as a charwoman.

I am writing you late at night. Christine is not well, and the time for her to go to Leyden is at hand. You must excuse me if this letter is written badly, as I am very tired.

But after receiving your letter, I wanted to write at once.

The refusal in Amsterdam was so decisive, I was dismissed so cavalierly, that it would have been foolish to go on any longer.

But ought I to have despaired then, jumped into the water or something? God forbid – I should have if I had been a wicked man. I have started a new life, not purposely, but because I had a chance to begin anew and did not refuse it.

But now it’s different, and Christine and I understand each other better. We don’t have to pay attention to what people say; of course we don’t pretend to maintain any social standing. Familiar as I am with the prejudices of the world, I know that what I have to do is retire from the sphere of my own class, which cast me out long ago anyhow. But that’s all they can do, and they can’t go any further. Maybe I will wait awhile before we set up housekeeping together anyway, because the circumstances are too difficult; but if I marry, I will do it quietly, without giving notice to anyone; if any remarks are made, I shall not pay attention to them. As she is a Roman Catholic, the wedding will be even simpler, for then of course the church is out of the question; neither she nor I want to have anything to do with it.

You will say this is putting it bluntly – que soit.

I only know one thing – drawing; and she has only one regular job – posing.

I wish it were possible to take the house next to this; it is exactly the right size because the attic can be made into a bedroom and the studio is large and light – much better than the one here. But will it be possible? Even if I had only a hole to live in, I would rather have a crust of bread in my own home, however poor it might be, than live without marrying her.

She knows what poverty is, so do I. Poverty has advantages and disadvantages, yet we shall risk it in spite of poverty. Fishermen know that the sea is dangerous and the storm terrible, but they have never found these dangers sufficient to keep them ashore. They leave that philosophy to those who like it. Let the storm rise, the night descend – which is worse, danger or the fear of danger? Personally, I prefer reality, the danger itself.

Adieu, Theo, it is late; don’t be angry because of my letter; I am tired and yet I wanted to write. I wish you could understand it all and that I could express myself in a clearer and gentler way, but don’t be offended by it, and believe me,

Ever yours, Vincent

I believe, or rather it begins to dawn on me, that there might be a shadow of a chance that the thought, “Theo will withdraw his help if I contradict him,” is perhaps quite unnecessary. But, Theo, I have seen such things happen so often that I shouldn’t think less of you and shouldn’t be angry with you if you did, because I would think, He doesn’t know any better; they all act like that – from thoughtlessness, not malice. If I may keep your help, it would be something quite unexpected, good luck which I had not counted on, for I have lived with this terrible thought a long time, and Christine too, because I always told her, “Lass, I fear there will come a time when I shall be left quite without means.” But I did not tell it to you before the right

moment had arrived. If you let me keep your help, that would be a relief, a blessing so unexpected, so un hoped for, that it would quite upset me with joy; even now I dare not think of it, and I put away the thought with all my strength, even while I write you about it with a steady hand, not to show my weakness. What I experienced last winter at Mauve's hands has been a lesson to me; it has kept me prepared for the worst – a death sentence from you – namely that you stop your help.

You will say, But the help hasn't stopped – but I always receive it with certain reservations, thinking, He doesn't know yet what he will know one day; and I shall have no rest until the crisis comes, and I am prepared for the worst.

Now the crisis has come and I cannot decide, I dare not hope yet. I said to Christine, I shall be able to help you until you go to Leyden. I don't know how you will find me, with or without bread, when you come back from Leyden, but I will share what I have with you and the child. Christine does not know any details, nor does she ask for them, but she knows I shall be frank with her, and she wants to stay with me quand bien même.

Until now I have always thought it probable that you would drop me as soon as you knew everything. So I have lived from day to day with a dark fear of the worst, which I don't dare think myself free of yet. I have also worked from day to day, not daring to order more drawing or painting materials than I could pay for, not daring to undertake any painting, not daring to push on as I would have if I could have counted on Mauve's and Tersteeg's sympathy. I thought that though their kindness was superficial, their unkindness was more deeply rooted; in short, I took Mauve's words "that's all over" seriously – not when he said them (for then my face showed nothing and I braved it, like the Indians who say, "It doesn't hurt," when they are being tortured). But since I threw the plaster casts into the coalbin, he wrote me, "I won't have anything to do with you for two months." Well, personally I always thought, I can't expect anything from Mauve or Tersteeg, and I shall thank God if Theo will continue to send me what's necessary until I can bring Christine safely to Leyden. Then I shall explain it to him and say, stay – I have done so and so. Do you understand it -?

I am prepared for the worst – what's it to be? Speak plainly.