

Letter 159
Etten, 18 November 1881
Friday evening.

Dear brother,

When I mailed my letter to you this morning, I had a feeling of relief. For a moment I had been in doubt – shall I tell him or not? – but on thinking it over, I came to the conclusion that it really was necessary. I sit writing to you now in the little room that is my studio now that the other room is so very damp. When I look around, I see the walls all covered with studies relating to one subject, "Brabant types."

So this is a work I have started, and if I were suddenly taken out of these surroundings, I should have to start anew on something else, and this one would remain half finished! That must not be! I have been working here since May, I am beginning to know and understand my models, my work is progressing; but it has cost me a lot of effort to get on so far.

And now that I have got so far, Father would say, Because you write letters to Kee and therefore make trouble between us (for this is the chief reason, for whatever they may say of my being too unconventional, or the like, it is just talk), because difficulties arise, I am showing you the door.

Isn't it too bad, and wouldn't it be ridiculous to stop a work that has been started, and is beginning to succeed, for that reason? No, no, it is not the way!

Besides, the disagreement between Father and Mother and myself is not so terrible, is not of such a nature that we could not stay together. But Father and Mother are getting old, and they have prejudices and old-fashioned ideas which neither you nor I can share any more. When Father sees me with a French book by Michelet or Victor Hugo, he thinks of thieves and murderers, or of "immorality"; but it is too ridiculous, and of course I don't let myself be disturbed by such opinions. So often I have said to Father, Then just read it, even a few pages of such a book, and you will be impressed yourself; but Father obstinately refuses. Just now, when this love took root in my heart, I reread Michelet's book L'Amour et la Femme, and so many things became clear to me that would have otherwise been riddles. I told Father that under the circumstances I attached more value to Michelet's advice than to his own, if I had to choose which of the two I should follow.

But then they bring up the story of a great-uncle who was infected with French ideas and took to drink, and so they insinuate that I shall do the same.

Quelle misère!

Father and Mother are very good to me in that they do everything to feed me well, etc. Of course I appreciate it very much; but it cannot be denied that food and drink and sleep are not enough for a man, that he longs for something nobler and higher – aye, he positively cannot do without it.

That higher feeling which I cannot do without is love for Kee. Father and Mother argue in this way: She says No, so you must resign yourself. I do not see the necessity of this at all, on the contrary. And I would rather give up the work just begun and all the comforts of this home than resign myself to not writing her or her parents.

Well, I write to you about it because at least my work certainly concerns you, for you are the one who has already given so much money to help me succeed. Now I am getting on, it progresses, I begin to see some light; and now I tell you, Theo, this threatens me. I ask no better than to work on quietly, but Father seems to want to put me out of the house, at least he said so this morning.

A strong word from you can perhaps settle this matter. You will understand what I tell you: In order to work and to become an artist, one needs love. At least one who wants sentiment in his work must first feel it himself, and live with his heart.

But Father and Mother are harder than stone in the matter of "means of subsistence," as they call it. If it were a question of marrying immediately, I should certainly agree with them; but now it is a question of thawing a "no, never never," and that a means of subsistence cannot do. It is quite another thing, a matter of the heart, and therefore she and I must see each other, write to each other, and speak to each other; it is as clear as daylight, and simple and reasonable. And indeed, I tell you (though they think me a weak character, a man of butter) that nothing in the world will make me give up this love. No delaying from day to day, from week to week, no silent waiting. The lark cannot be silent as long as he has a voice. What is to be done now?

Wouldn't it be foolish, Theo, not to continue drawing those Brabant types now that I am getting on with them, simply because Father and Mother disapprove of my love?

No – it must not be.

For heaven's sake, let them give in for once; it would be too foolish for a young man to sacrifice his energy to the prejudices of an old man. And really, Father and Mother are prejudiced in this.

No, brother, listen: it would be too bad if for this reason I should have to leave my work here and spend money elsewhere, where things would be much more expensive, instead of eventually earning a little money for a trip to Amsterdam. No, no, no, there is something wrong, it cannot be right that they want to put me out of the house just at this moment. There is no excuse, and it would thwart me in my work. So I cannot allow it.

What would she think if she knew what happened this morning? She is so tender and kind that it pains her to say one unkind word, but if one so soft, so tender, so loving as she is roused – piquée au vif! – then woe to those who are the cause of this anger. May her anger not be roused against me, dear brother. I think she is beginning to understand that I am neither a thief nor a criminal, but, on the contrary, am inwardly more quiet and sensible than I appear outwardly. In the beginning she did not understand this – at first she really had an unfavourable impression of me – but now, I do not know why, while the sky becomes clouded and overcast with quarrels and curses, a light rises on her side.

Well, boy, as soon as you send me the money for the journey, you will receive at once three drawings – "Dinner Time," "Lighting the Fire," "Almshouse Man." So send the money if you can, for the journey will not be entirely in vain. If I have only 20 or 30 francs, I can at least see her face once more.

And if you can, write a few words about that sentence of banishment, for I should like so much to go quietly on with my work here; that is what I should like best. I want her and her influence in order to reach a higher artistic level. Without her I am nothing, but with her there is a chance. To live, to work, and to love are really one. Well, adieu, with a handshake,

Yours sincerely, Vincent

One word from you, "from Paris," will weight the scale against prejudices.