

Letter 260
The Hague, c. 13 January 1883

Dear Theo,

Since I received your letter, what you wrote has literally filled all my thoughts. And I write once more because I am so full of it. In cases like this one is involved with a patient who is ill in body and in soul, so it is doubly serious; and financial help for the necessities of life is not enough to bring about complete recovery – the best and most efficacious remedy is love and a home. At least I felt this way last winter, and since then – now, for instance, I feel it even more, just because experience taught me what sentiment had already told me. To save a life is a great and beautiful thing, but it is also very difficult and requires great care.

To make a home for the homeless, yes, it must be a good thing, whatever the world may say, it cannot be wrong, and yet it is often considered a crime.

Involuntarily I have thought it over and said to myself – What will people say about it? Will it bring you into conflict with the world? This is also a question in my mind which I cannot answer, as I do not know enough about the circumstances yet. And there is another thing which is the real motive for this letter, which I want you to consider – though perhaps it has already occurred to you.

A thing like this takes a long time – of course I think it possible that you will soon see the effects of your good care, but the complete recovery in body and soul of such a severely tried constitution will take years. At this moment the woman and the children are sitting with me. When I think of last year, there is a great difference. The woman is stronger and stouter, has lost very, very much of her agitated air; the baby is the prettiest, healthiest, merriest little fellow you can imagine – he crows like a cock, and is fat and chubby even though he gets nothing but the breast.

And the poor little girl, you see from the drawing that the old deep misery has not been erased, and I often feel anxious about her, but still she is quite different from last year; then it was very, very bad, now she already is looking more childlike.

Well, though not exactly entirely normal, the situation is much better than I dared to hope last year. And when I think it over, would it have been better if the mother had had a miscarriage or if the baby had withered or pined away through lack of milk, if the little girl had become more and more dirty and neglected, and the woman herself had sunk into an almost indescribably miserable condition? – Well, when I see all this, I cannot doubt any more, and I say, Forward, full of good courage. Something simple, really motherly, shows itself in the woman – and as this gets stronger, she is saved. And how is this progress brought about??? Not by physicians, nor by extraordinary measures. By having the feeling of a home of her own, by a regular useful life. Not by sparing herself too much, for she cannot do that, but because the anxious heart finds more rest now, even under hard and tiresome work. With this thoroughly familiar case in front of my eyes, I come back to what I want to say, It seems to me that if you want to see good results, you must pay special attention to the surroundings of the woman whom you write about. It would be desirable for her to be elsewhere than in a dreary hotel room – she ought to have more home-like surroundings. You must consider this, for I think it's important; she must be diverted by very ordinary commonplace things which keep her occupied. Not isolated in a room, without intercourse with people – for her own good, and not because you want to keep her in the background or hide her. But it is necessary for her to avoid emotion and shocks as much as possible, and the sooner she returns to ordinary everyday activities and surroundings, the better.

Certainly, if you could take her into your house at once – I should not mention it. But I am afraid it is impossible, and you yourself could not approve of doing so all at once.

Loneliness or idleness is fatal; she must have a chance to talk with good people. I think that it would be delightful for her to be in a homelike atmosphere – for instance, if she could occupy herself with children. I think it rather a pity she has no child. I think it makes the case even more critical. Yes, in my opinion the most practical thing you can do is bring her into some homelike atmosphere. I think that your main thought at present is – This life must be saved – and that you unselfishly think more of her than of yourself.

Last year I could think of only one home for her, namely my own, and had I been able to act differently, I shouldn't have taken the woman into my house at once, in order to avoid the difficulties which could not be avoided now. But it's different with you, and perhaps you can temporarily take her (namely, the person whom you write about) somewhere where she is safe and quiet, till she has completely recovered. I am afraid her recovery will take a long time – besides, one need not trespass against the world's prejudices if it can be avoided. If it cannot be avoided, one should do what one knows is right: last summer I should have sinned against all possible prejudices – whatever their number – rather than leave the woman without home

or shelter. But in your case I think it can and must be done more discreetly, and if I were you, I should try to find a suitable home for her – not leave her alone in a room without intercourse with people – for her own good, the sooner she gets normal, ordinary activities and surroundings, the better.

My heart is full, and I think of you all the time; just now I made another drawing for which the woman posed.

I can tell you, boy, my experience of this year is that though there are hard, very hard moments of care and difficulty, it is infinitely better to live with wife and children than without – but it is always wiser to get to know each other first, it is more sensible and prudent. And I should have done the same if it could have been arranged, but there was no other home for her than mine. Well, one has to take the circumstances into account, and sometimes giving offence cannot be avoided. So I do not in the least want to advise you to give it up, but I do think we agree that it is better to be cautious with reference to the world, otherwise it may spoil things. So be careful. For the moment the recovery is the main thing, and the rest will follow. Wouldn't there be some one of your friends who would be willing to assist you and take her into his house for a time?

Perhaps a kind of hospital would be preferable – the ordinary or a private one, where she could have company. Perhaps all this is already settled, and I write about it just because I do not know anything definite. So if you should stick to your opinion that this person is the woman whom you want to devote your life to, I consider it a fortunate thing for you. And then it will be precisely this constant love which will make her bloom again.

I wish I knew when you were coming – if possible, bring the old studies with you. As to what I wrote you about sending me a little more money – yes, I am rather hard up and wish it were possible, but do not deprive her for my sake, and know well that because of what you wrote, I will try twice as hard to make progress, so that the burden may become somewhat lighter for you. But the difficulty is that hard work costs more money because of the greater outlay.

Write soon, for I long to hear from you. Rappard is recovering; I had a letter from him. I am very hard at work, always at all kinds of heads. Adieu. A handshake in thought,

Yours sincerely, Vincent