

Letter 318
The Hague, 2 September 1883

Dear Theo,

Thanks for your letter and the enclosure. I want to answer it at once. What you write may be true – we have already talked it over, I often thought so myself – that if the woman were obliged to leave me, to shift for herself, she would stay straight. But as she has two children, it's a very difficult case, but what shall I say? – it is something which she is bringing about herself, but which the circumstances bring about even more. I underline the latter.

Do you know what I have done? Today I had a quiet day with her. I talked it over with her seriously, explaining to her fully what my situation is, that I must go away for my work, and must have a year of few expenses and some earnings, in order to make up for a past that has been rather too much for me. That I foresaw that if I stayed with her, I should very soon be unable to help her any more, and should get into debt again here, where everything is so expensive, and there would be no way out. So that, in short, she and I must be wise and separate as friends. That she must get her people to take the children, and that she must look for a job.

And it is so evident that I cannot go on here that even she understands it. And as we are both hard up at present, and make things worse by staying together, we agreed to separate for a time or forever, depending on how things turn out. I add "or forever," because she has in her children, and I in my work, an object to live for, "quand bien même," and we shall have to do things against our will, and perhaps we shall not be able to be as good as we might wish.

I told her, "perhaps you will not be able to stay quite straight, but go as straight as possible; I will try to do the same, but I know beforehand that my course in life will be far from safe."

So I said, "As long as I know that you are trying your best and are not losing hold of everything and that you are good to the children, as you know I have been to them – if only you act so that the children always find a mother in you, though you are just a poor servant, though you are just a poor whore, with all your damned faults, you will always be good in my eyes. And though I do not doubt for a moment that I have the same kind of faults, I hope I shall not change in this respect, that when I see a poor woman with a swollen belly, I shall always try to do what I can to help her." I said, "If you were in the same condition as when I found you, well, you would find your home with me – a shelter in the storm as long as I have a piece of bread and a roof over my head; but now is different, the storm is over, you can go straight without me, I think – well, you must try to. For my part, I must also try to find a straight path, I must work hard; you do the same." That's the way I said it.

Oh brother, you see how it is, we would not part if we didn't have to. I repeat we would not part if we didn't have to. Haven't we forgiven each other's faults time after time, and made it up again? We know each other so well that we can see no evil in each other. Is it love? I do not know, but there is something between us that cannot be undone.

As to what must be done now – you see I do not want to waste my time either, I want to work on, straight on, vigorously – as to painting, I want to do what must be done. I know that I cannot be wrong in this, that is to say, I do not know what the result will be for her or for me if I pushed on vigorously, but it will certainly turn out better if I cut myself a path alone than if we both came to a dead stop by staying together and frustrating each other.

Now to get back to the subject of Drenthe.

Can you find a way for me to get the money to go there alone? Perhaps I could leave the furniture here, renting a corner of an attic from my landlord.

But the sooner the better. I want to be free of that heavy rent, you see, and I want to leave here as soon as possible. It is necessary for my work. Drenthe, Katwijk, Brabant, never mind which, to live with a farmer for a time, far, far away in the country – far away, alone with nature.

And then I must paint a great deal, and be able to spend a little more on painting materials.

I have talked everything over with Van der Weele again. He spent an afternoon in the studio, and has seen my studies one by one; we have corrected several of them together, so he could show me some points of technique.

Well, he has given me some useful hints. And one of these days before I leave, he will again devote some of his time to showing me a few things.

Wisselingh also came to see me one morning. It was very pleasant – he said I was more advanced than he expected – we lunched together and talked about old times.

He encouraged me greatly, so did Van der Weele, but the painting cannot be avoided. I must – let me say it frankly – try to paint a hundred serious studies. You see I must carry this through. And those studies must have practical subjects too. Characteristic bits of nature. Wisselingh will buy something from me some time, perhaps very soon, and we agreed that this autumn already, or toward winter, when I have been quite in the country for a time, I shall send him something, and shall continue to do so, so that he will keep in touch with me whether he buys or not.

I said to him, “Write me about what I send you, then I will continue in the line you think you can use.”

As to C. M., I sent him more than twenty studies, so I think he cannot be dissatisfied – besides, he can exchange them for others later. As you haven’t much to spare yourself, I want to suggest that you explain the thing to him – that it would be good for me to go to the country to paint on regularly for a time. That we shall try to do so without his help, but that it would be of such great importance if, in case of need, he did not entirely withdraw his help in the future.

You see, there is no possibility of making both ends meet and yet doing what the work demands as to painting. A farmer in Drenthe charges a guilder a day for board and lodging. In the beginning I should like to keep in touch with the woman as much as possible, and send her a little money; but even so the cares will be less heavy. The studio must be dispensed with for a time, the furniture stored in a corner of a garret until better times. And then, without luggage, without company, on the road to study. Write me soon what you think of it. I wish you would write what you think as soon as you read this letter.

Tomorrow I will give my landlord notice, and arrange with him to store my things here somewhere.

The woman is going to look for a job. And meanwhile I am working as hard as I can. As to my going somewhere else, I shall wait for your letter, and then we shall see what we can do. I hope it will be a way to overcome the difficulties. Adieu, boy, all good wishes, have some luck in business, believe me,

Yours sincerely, Vincent