

Letter 339b
Drenthe, c. 3 November 1883

Theo, of late I have been unable to refrain from turning my thoughts to a few things. "Coming events cast their shadows before," and "We know not what a day may bring forth," as the English say. Enough, I myself have a presentiment that it will come to pass that you will leave Goupil & Co. because G. & Co. is unsupportably arrogant, and will do mean things, and in a word, they will do their utmost to make staying on impossible for you.

At least this is the story of the honest fellow's leaving – those who could not stay with Goupil & co., however much they were attached to the firm. Just wait and see how things turn out, but do not flatter yourself with the belief in reconciliation. Theo, as for me it is true that I have never been able to abandon the belief in reconciliation in the thousand occurrences of life, but my experience tells me – even if there is every reason to make it up, and if there is much harm in failing to make it up – yet my experience tells me that in most cases it does not occur.

So, my dear fellow, it may well happen that one bright morning in the near future you will find yourself uprooted after a gale which suddenly assumes a huge violence, and that you will feel deeply shaken; my dear fellow, a thing like this is horrible, and may lead to your doubting whether your heart is in your commercial job.

Then be wise, you, then be sensible, and listen to what I tell you about the thorny little path of painting, which at first leads to all sorts of humiliation, etc., but which for all that will eventually lead to a more lasting victory and a more definite peace than commerce can ever give.

You and I are brothers, and what is more, friends, and if misfortune should happen to tighten these ties and knit us closer together, I should see so many favourable sides to this that the whole thing would appear to me anything but a misfortune.

Theo, at times I think that for an artist the utmost poverty would be bearable (and productive too) if only he were not alone. I assure you that this presentiment that you will not stay on at Goupil's has remained with me all the time, since I wrote you for the first time: "Coming events cast their shadows before," notwithstanding the fact that I forced myself to think, It will not happen; he will stay on. And at the same time it has become an idée fixe of mine that you will feel so uprooted, so disoriented, so defeated that as for standing behind another counter you will simply say, "I can't do it," "It would certainly be a failure," "I am no longer fit to be a dealer," "It was possible at Goupil's, as I had been there from my youth onward, but now I'll have done with it." There, my presentiment tells me that this is approximately how you feel at heart.

In this case I see nothing reckless, nothing unpractical, nothing foolish in our wanting to feel our energy, to feel ourselves. Let our love of art inspire us with a foi de charbonnier, inspire us to say what others have said before us, and will say after us, namely, Though circumstances may be ominous, and though we may be very poor, and so on, yet we have one thing to cling to tenaciously – painting, of course.

Certainly I feel a great deal of what you say. Namely that in the interest of so many things you feel in your heart the inclination to throw yourself into business again, not primarily for your own pleasure but for the welfare of others.

Dear brother, it is not at all necessary to give up your endeavours to keep all who belong to our home on their feet. On the contrary – although until now I did not think I had the right to put in a word – the present state of affairs induces me to make the proposal to divide things we are engaged in among all the people at home, among Father, Mother, Wil and Marie. And we ourselves should understand one thing thoroughly: that it is our duty to co-operate, and that because of the calamity at Goupil & Co. we are faced with a number of years in which we must "stoop to conquer."

During these years we must aim at you and me in the end earning as much money together as you now do all alone. And although the interval may be something of a "bad passage" for all of us, we must try to make up for it by a little cordiality and love between us.

I do not see any good coming of your forcing yourself to undertake new work against your inclination; on the contrary, I foresee it would end in all-round failure.

But you must have Foi de charbonnier – and start out boldly with the idea: Painter.

I am afraid, my dear fellow, that if you engage in new things, in the first place you will waste your time; in the second place, it will turn out a failure, because the shock of being uprooted will prove too strong for you, and in the third place you will lose more than you gain. Should you insist on taking this road, and once more engage in business affairs in Paris, America or elsewhere, I should quietly let you have your own

way, but on the back of this page I have uttered my presentiments clearly enough so that you can decide for yourself whether I take a wrong view of things; to me it is pretty clear that these consequences are highly probable.

Well, dear fellow, what I advise you is something quite new. Foi de charbonnier in art, instead of saying (and to me it is twaddle), I can't do anything, I am not an artist, do not attribute qualities to me that I do not possess, and all that rubbish. I tell you this is a delusion, and now, my dear fellow, things are so serious, and your future and mine are so terribly dependent on them that you must not take it amiss if I tell you a little baldly that the right thing to do under the circumstances is to undertake painting with the foi de charbonnier.

And at home they must understand one thing – namely that whatever we do, you and I will always bear today's purpose in mind, which is to see things through not only for ourselves but for all of us. But that the old way is barred to us, and that we shall have to create a new one, and that what we need is their silence about it and their not disturbing us – on the contrary, their coming to our aid if there should be need for it. Our project ought to be respected at home, and not frustrated. Look here, old fellow, I cannot speak otherwise. I have not a moment's rest, because I must not inspire false hope by saying that the other things will come right.

Perhaps, or rather, assuredly, we were mistaken in not starting on it sooner, but this mistake is understandable on account of our education and the influences we were submitted to; but this is all the more reason to get to work now with a steadiness and a resolution which I doubt we should have had at our disposal in our younger days. So it appears to me that we must concentrate our whole energy on painting with the utmost singleness of purpose – it being the raft that will take us safely to shore after the shipwreck – undertaking it in all cheerfulness.

Adieu, old fellow, with a cordial handshake,

Yours sincerely, Vincent