

Letter 350
Nuenen, 25-28 December 1883

Dear Theo,

Last night I came back to Nuenen, and I must tell you at once what I have on my mind.

I packed my painting materials, studies, etc., at The Hague, and sent them here, and Father and Mother having cleared the little room, I am already settled in that new studio, where I hope I shall be able to make some progress. Then I must tell you that I have seen the woman, and that we have decided more definitely than ever to live apart, at least so that the world cannot justifiably find fault with it.

Once separated, we shall remain so, but we regret not having chosen a middle course after all, and even now an attachment remains which is too deeply rooted to pass away.

I now have to say a number of things that I shall not refer to after this – which you may take any way you like – which you will be free to think over or to dismiss from your mind – that's no affair of mine – decide for yourself.

Know then that I look back on your visit of last summer, on our conversations at the time, and on what resulted from them with deep regret. Time has passed over it, but on looking back I cannot deny that in my opinion we did not act rightly. And now I look upon your words and yourself somewhat differently, and I cannot think of you with exactly the same feelings as in the past.

The fact is that now I see more clearly that you and others seemed to wish I should part company with her. I do not doubt your good intentions.

The decision lay with me, and if I did what I think was wrong, you are not the first I should reproach with it (I reproach myself first), but then you second. The levers that were applied to my mind, so that I lost my self-command – in which you were concerned at least to a certain extent – were firstly, that touching upon an infinitely tender affair of the past, which disturbed me, and secondly, your saying that perhaps “my duty” would force me to part.

Well – if what you said then were an isolated occurrence, I should not feel induced to refer to it – but it tallies too much with the opinions of others with whom I disagree for me to regard your opinions as wholly independent. I accepted your point of view – although I suppose with intentions quite different from what you imagine, concerning which time will clarify certain things for you that it would be premature to discuss now.

You pointed out a certain case to me in which “it had worked,” namely that a certain man had left a certain woman.

This may be true in itself – very true even – but in this case it was not relevant, look, to her and me that is another matter. And I have taken the liberty of thinking over “whether it has worked.” And, my friend, this is exceedingly doubtful.

I can tell you that the woman has behaved well, has worked as a washerwoman to earn a living for herself and the children, so that she has done her duty, notwithstanding great physical weakness.

You know that I took her into my house because, at her confinement, things had happened which made the doctor at Leyden advise her to stay in some quiet place, for her own sake and for that of the baby.

There was anemia, and perhaps the beginning of consumption; well, as long as I was with her, she did not grow worse, but in many respects stronger, so that several ugly symptoms disappeared.

But now everything has changed for the worse, and I fear for her life; and the poor little baby too, whom I cared for as if he were my own, is no longer what he was.

Brother, I found her in great misery, and I am in great sorrow over her. I know, of course, that it is more my own fault than anyone else's, but you too might have spoken differently.

Now that it is too late, I understand better some fits of temper in her, and some things which I thought she did wrong on purpose I now see as nervous symptoms, done almost unconsciously.

Just as she told me on more than one occasion afterward, “Sometimes I do not know what I do.”

For me, as well as for you, there is an excuse in the fact that one does not know to what extent such a woman can be relied upon, and in the financial obstacles besides – but we should have chosen a middle course, and if we could still find it – though it will be difficult to find now – it would be more humane and less cruel. However, I did not want to give her hope, and I have encouraged her and tried to comfort and fortify her on the path which she follows now, living alone, working for herself and her children. But my heart goes out to her in the same great pity as it used to do, a pity which has been alive in me all these past months, even after our separation.

Well, our friendship, brother, has received a bad shock from this, and if you were to say we certainly did not make a mistake, and if it should appear to me that you are still in the same frame of mind – then I

should not be able to respect you as much as in the past. Because at the time I respected you for the very fact that, at a moment when others cut me because of my being with her, you were the one to help me keep her alive. I do not say there was no need for a change or a modification, but – I think we, or rather I, have gone too far.

As I now have a studio here, more than one financial difficulty is less ruinous perhaps.

I will end by saying: Please think it over – but if your state of mind remains the same as last summer after what I have said, I cannot feel the same respect for you as in the past. For the rest, I have resolved never to speak another word with you about the possible change in your circumstances and your career, for it is as if I see two natures in you, struggling within your breast – a phenomenon I perceive in myself too, but it may be that some problems are solved because of my being four years older, problems which in your case are more or less in a state of ferment. Think over what I have said, that would be excellent – but you can also dismiss it from your mind. However, for my part I wanted to speak frankly about it, and I cannot conceal my feelings from you.

As to my opinion how far one may go in a case of helping a poor, forsaken, sick creature, I can only repeat what I told you already on a former occasion: infinitely.

On the other hand, our cruelty can be infinite too.

With a handshake,

Yours sincerely, Vincent