

Letter 376
Nuenen, 2nd half September 1884

Dear Theo,

I must write you again to tell you that I have fair hopes the patient will recover, though I expect the consequences, in the form of nervous trouble, will prove serious and of long duration.

Much, much depends here on her surroundings and her family, who, in fact, cannot do her a better turn than to treat her kindly, as if nothing had happened, or if they cannot do that, just keep silent. Today I have had a long letter from herself, and her brother tells me he had also heard from her.

Dangers are threatening from two sides, Theo – on the one hand there may be the formation of a critical nerve disease, which may burst out in the form of multiple neuritis or encephalitis for instance. On the other hand there is the danger of melancholia or religious mania. But now, considering that the patient was treated immediately after the first symptoms, and that she is in an environment that is on ne peut plus suited to bringing a person in her condition around – she is the guest, private, of a doctor whom she has known for a long time, and his wife – for all these reasons there is reason to hope that a crisis in one form or another may be cut short or diverted or neutralized by timely intervention – in short, that the affair will fizzle out – which fizzling out would take the form of her remaining under the present treatment for a certain time and then returning, after having calmed down, to the usual way of life.

You will understand that the whole thing upsets me greatly when I tell you how, in that very letter I received today, she says that “not one of her family understands her real anguish of mind, that she tries to find distraction, but that she hardly succeeds in this, and that most of the time sits quietly in her room with a book or something or other that she has got from me.”

I am blessed if I know what to do about the B. family – at first they were extremely unkind to her – and even on the day of her departure they did not act lovingly or even good-naturedly, although in point of fact they did not know what it was all about. Through her brother I have let her sisters know that I was forced to advise them urgently to apologize to their sister for their groundless and malicious distrust and certain equally unfounded suspicions, which in the first place it was untimely for them to express and in the second place utterly erroneous and in the third place meant so many nails in the patient's coffin. This has been efficacious in that first her sister-in-law, Louis's wife, and second her sisters sent the patient a letter, the tone of which was a great deal more sympathetic and considerably gentler and kinder than their first communication. Louis B. himself – the only member of the family who knows all the ins and outs of that poisoning – although the others have their suspicions, but are regularly contradicted by me and Louis, who should know more about it – Louis B. on his part has from the first behaved practically, manfully and sympathetically toward her.

And as for you, if it should happen that one of the suspicious ones should try to pump you about the suicide attempt, well, don't let on that you have the slightest idea of it. But for that matter, I don't think anybody will – except perhaps Father and Mother.

You do understand, don't you, that, although I wrote you it reminded me of a passage in Madame Bovary, there is nothing here that had anything to do with the second Mme. Bovary, who is really the heroine of the book, but only of the first Mme. Bovary, of whom there is little more than how and why she died on hearing bad news about her fortune.

Here the cause of the desperation was not bad news concerning her fortune, but the way in which they reproached her, telling her that she was too old and that sort of thing. Well, within a short time, probably in a fortnight or three weeks, it will be decided whether or not a dangerous nerve disease will break out.

Goodbye, I am still quite upset by it. Don't speak about it to Father and Mother.

Yours, Vincent