

Letter 343  
Drenthe, 1 December 1883

Dear Theo,

Thanks for your letter and the enclosure. Your letter explains the reason for your silence to me. You thought that "feeling well off for the moment," I offered you an "ultimatum," like, for instance, the Nihilists might send the Czar.

Fortunately, for you and for me, there is no question of such a thing here.

However, I understand your idea now that I know it, but it is indeed the last straw. In the first place, I meant something quite different – I simply meant, "I wouldn't want to thrive if you were the loser by it" – I would not want to develop the artist in me if you had to suppress your artistic talent for my sake. I would never approve of your repressing the artist in yourself, no matter whose sake it were for, for the sake of either father, mother, sister, brother or wife. That was my meaning – perhaps nervously expressed, and in wrong terms – but I most decidedly meant no more, or nothing else.

You understand it now, don't you?

With reference to what I wrote in my last letter, it was occasioned by your silence, which was an absolute mystery to me, was inexplicable until I knew what was the matter. With regard to Marie, I had an answer before I received your letter, simply because I remembered what you wrote in the past about your meeting her, and I thought, This cannot but be all right, there can be nothing wrong with it. So my letter on the subject ought to be taken to mean, Brother, without any warning you seem to have left me out of things; if you did this on purpose I should think it a betrayal, but I cannot believe it, so "explain it to me" – that is, approximately; there was no other motive. And as for Lady Macbeth, you have rightly interpreted my meaning, it being no more than a general hint, and not even a question, but only meant to let you feel either it must be like this, or it is a misunderstanding.

But know this, brother, that I am absolutely cut off from the outer world – except from you – so that it made me crazy when your letter did not come at the moment when, far from "being well off," I was very hard pressed, though I did not mention it, because I feel I am rather above the cares that gnaw at my heart, which torture I can perhaps explain, but do not consider merited. Regarding "I should not want to thrive if another were the loser by it," I hope this, the real meaning of what you took for an ultimatum, will always remain my conviction, either in prosperity or in "agony." Your conclusion of my "being well off" was rather fatuous, or rash I think, though the fault must have lain in my way of expressing it, but certainly not in my mood.

I will tell you once more that, since I have been here, I have had to put my material in good order, I have had to get a supply of colours, I have had to make some trips, I have had to pay my board and lodging, to send something to the woman, to pay off some debts. All these things put together kept me very hard up, to use a mild expression. Add to this that particular torture, loneliness, and really you will no longer be able to imagine me "well off," either in the present or the past.

I say loneliness, and not solitude, but that loneliness – which a painter has to bear, whom everybody in such isolated areas regards as a lunatic, a murderer, a tramp, etc. etc.

Indeed, this may be a small misery, but it is a sorrow after all: A feeling of being an outcast – particularly strange and unpleasant – though the country may be ever so stimulating and beautiful.

But for the rest I only look upon it as a bad time, which must be got through, and which one can change but little oneself, that is to say, in the relations with people whom one would love to have as models, but cannot get.

Looking back, I see clearly enough now how it came to a misunderstanding between you and me. There was a moment when you were very melancholy and wrote me as follows: "My employers make the situation almost impossible for me, and I even believe they would rather dismiss me than let me resign" (the latter exactly my case at the time). And you said some things about the idea of painting at least not being uncongenial to you.

Well – then I told you frankly all my thoughts about the possibility of your becoming a painter; I said, "You can do it if only you want to, and I believe in you as an artist, from the moment you take up the brush," though nobody else might.

What I told you about this I said to you in order to make it clear that whatever misfortune – calamity – may overtake you in the future, to me the real misfortune is the one which prevents you from deciding on "a complete renewal" now. I am of the opinion that, if you, a human being, were overtaken by a catastrophe, you would be the greater man for it – with – with – with – a scar that always hurts.

In your case I assume it would lift you up and not pull you down, that hurt which only calamity can cause.

But your later letters are so different in tone and contents that now I say, "If your rigged ship is all trim, just stay on it."

However, I shall stick to what I said through thick and thin if a calamity forced you to enter into new relations with society. If this should happen, what I have to say is, Let it be the signal for a total change of profession, sooner than starting the same thing all over again.

But as long as you have your rigged ship, I do not advise you to put out to sea in a fishing boat. Although, speaking for myself, I should certainly not want that rigged vessel of Goupil & Co.'s back. At the time what I thought was, Calamity, burst out for Heaven's sake! And so on.

At first I did not know how to interpret the change in the tone of your letters. On looking back – remembering your somewhat melancholy but to me so touching letter, written at a moment when G. & Co. was treating you horribly unfairly (a moment I passed through in something of the same way) – on looking back, I say that I believe you took a different view of the moment at which I myself said to Messrs. Goupil & Co.: "If you are bent on inducing me to go, I shall not refuse to go." And that things have really calmed down, for good and all perhaps – and with your assent – que soit – I do not protest against it. Now I do not think it wicked of you – because I think in such a case conditions may be offered which really are acceptable, and I am convinced that you would not have accepted them if there had been anything dishonest in the acceptance.

But my saying something about "If you stay, then I shall refuse your financial support" referred to your saying, Let me stay where I am, for I must provide for those at home and myself (though you did not mention me) – a delicacy on your part not to mention me, which I had to return with delicacy on my part. I do not want that, namely such a sacrifice of yourself that you should stay there against your inclination for other's sakes; that is what you took as an ultimatum from me.

If you stay because you "take renewed pleasure in it," all right then, and I congratulate you on your newly rigged ship, though I for my part do not want to go back to it.

What you wrote me about Serret greatly interests me. Such a man, who finally produces something poignant as the blossom of a hard, difficult life, is a wonder, like a black hawthorn, or better still, the gnarled old apple tree which at a certain moment bears blossoms which are among the most delicate and most virginal things under the sun.

When a rough man bears blossoms like a flowering plant, yes, that is beautiful to see; but before that time he has had to stand a great deal of winter cold, more than those who later sympathize with him know.

The artist's life, and what an artist is, it is all very curious – how deep it is – how infinitely deep.

Because of your unaccountable silence, and because I connected it with possible new difficulties on the director's part, and because of the suspicion of the people at the inn, I wrote a note to Father saying that as I had not heard from you, I did not know what to think of it, and begging Father to lend me some money. I added that I was anxious both about you and about myself, especially when thinking of the future, and that I wished that you and I, as boys, had become painters then, and that I didn't see why we two brothers could not be painters yet.

So if Father should write you about it, you know how it is, but I myself (up to now, I have had no answer from Father), I shall write Father that your last letter has made it clear to me that for the moment G. & Co. has an influence on our family, a curious mixture of good and evil, but at all events, as it prevents much stagnation, the evil is for the moment not prevalent. That my heart knoweth its own bitterness is a thing which I think you understand, and in consequence will pardon.

"Ultimatum" – it is you who speak of it, not I (at least my meaning was something quite different) – if you want to take it that way, it is all right with me, but I shall not be the first to say it – nor was I. For the moment your interpretation anticipated my intention by a long stretch. I should possibly contradict you as little as I did Goupil & Co. in the past if you really wanted to carry it into effect. Then I should say you, not I, talked first of an ultimatum. If you want to interpret it this way, I shall not protest against this interpretation.

With a handshake,

Yours sincerely, Vincent

Brother, all my worst, vague anxieties have been quieted since your last letter; I mean that I have perfect confidence in you as a man.

I simply think you will get into certain financial difficulties in consequence of the trend of trade. Therefore I advise you, if you can economize, then by all means economize; if you can save up, then save up. At the moment I have nothing myself – but I shall try to rouse some interest in certain plans of mine – and in case

nobody should be willing to return to Drenthe with me later on, I may try to find some credit for the purpose of settling there. I am not affluent; I have nothing. For a long time I have seen you tottering financially – you have taken too much on your shoulders – now you think the future will redress it – what I think is that you will find the future hostile in Paris. Once again, if I am wrong, you can laugh at me, all of you – and I myself shall join in this laughter. If it is only my nerves that are deluding me, well then, it is my nerves – but I am afraid fatality is too effectively against you.

I shall be able to write you more calmly from home [Apparently he intended to go to his parent's house in Nuenen for a short time; but he did not go back to Drenthe, and stayed in Nuenen for two years].

There is certainly a field of action for me in Drenthe, but from the very beginning I must be able to undertake it somewhat differently, and have more financial security. I must calculate on a small scale; for now, for instance (I admit, of course, it's the first time you skipped a whole term entirely), the difference of 25 guilders is for me a thing that may well handicap me for another six weeks. I readily believe that you can't imagine this – you cannot know how again and again a number of difficulties, each very small in itself, makes a thing possible or impossible. For instance, last week I got a note from my former landlord, who more or less insinuates that he might appropriate the things I left behind (among which are all my studies, prints, books, which I could hardly do without) if I did not send him the 10 guilders I had promised him as payment for the use of a garret for my things and a debt of the woman's, which he had a doubtful right to claim, but I yielded on condition of an arrangement to store my things. Against New Year's I have still other things to pay. I still have to pay Rappard, and I saved all I could. In short, it is just the opposite of being "in clover."

It cannot go on the way it is now. I must try and find a way out.

Of course, I do not say it is your fault, but even last year I was not able to save more than I did. And the harder I work, the harder I am pressed. We have now arrived at a point when I say, For the moment I cannot go on.