

Letter 350a
Nuenen, late December 1883

Dear Theo,

Mind you, I mean what I say about the woman.

Mind you, all the disappointment that your visit of last summer caused me (more than you know) is something that does not count seriously with me – as far as I myself was concerned – but the other thing – namely finding her in such a condition that my heart melted in my breast – that – it will remain something insuperable between you and me – unless she can still be saved. At the time you were frivolous when uttering your words – you did not think over what you said, and evidently spoke on insufficient grounds – and what do I think about it? I tell you without reserve that you have this much in common with Father, who often acts in the same way, that you are cruel in your worldly wisdom.

Cruel, I repeat the word, for what can be more cruel than depriving such an unfortunate and withered woman and her little child of support. Don't think you will be able to delude yourself into the belief that it was nothing, or only my imagination. Don't think it will help you if you reason that it was only a question of a faded whore and of bastards. So much the more motive for deep compassion – which I showed for that matter.

I have only just noticed that during all that time you have not written a single word about her, and that you did not reply when I wrote you that I had heard from her.

And there are more things that I have only just noticed now, and because I notice them now, I no longer address you in the same tone as formerly.

Oh, I know that to a certain extent you did it with good intentions – I know how you always try to keep the peace with everybody (which I don't believe can be done) – I know that even in this case you probably haven't got the faintest notion that you did something that was not right – but being good friends with the world and following our conscience just don't go together – you do not give your conscience its due.

I also know that not everybody in my case and in my circumstances would dare contradict you, but granted that not everybody would do so, I for my part want to tell you that there is something in you that I object to, and that in general I warn you against your “politics.” Which I think too politic.

For I foresee later on (perhaps much later on) you will be sorry for many things you think right now. Why do I think so? For the time being I need not give a reason because you would not believe me.

The period of separation has spoiled most of what I had gained for her preservation, and this makes matters even more difficult. Can anything be done about it now? But in what way?

Truly, it is not a question of money alone, for the poor woman also misses myself too, the way I was to her and her children, that is to say, I had an affection for them, just as I now feel an equal and even greater affection for them.

What you wrote in a certain letter about “that I should render her and myself a disservice,” kindly take it back, bearing in mind the service you rendered her last summer, her, her children and myself – really you cannot be too silent about it!

Moreover, you presume in the letter in question, which contains the only reference to her that you have written since last summer – you presume that I should like to take “that person,” as you called her, with me to Drenthe. I should not be able to, even if I wanted to, because I haven't got the money for it.

As regards the money – brother – you will understand that I no longer take any pleasure in it, won't you? You do understand this thoroughly, don't you? I took pleasure in it because it served to keep not only myself but also these poor creatures safe.

This is a sad letter at the end of the year – sad for me to write, sad for you to receive (although you are at liberty to dismiss it from your thoughts; this is something you must decide for yourself), but it is worse for the poor woman.

Goodbye,

Yours sincerely, Vincent

I have received more news from her, for I sent her to a doctor, and now I have heard particulars about it. Further, brother, my answer to your intimation that a calamity which threatened you had been averted – you know that my answer was cool; in this matter I have no other answer than, “So much the worse for you, my friend.” Perhaps you will understand why later on. I do not say it would not have been a calamity, but... There are moments in life when it is better that the blow is dealt, even if it be a hard blow, rather than that one is forced into the position of one who is spared by the world, I think.

As for me, I am chained to misfortune and failure; it is damned hard at times, but never mind, for all that I do not envy the so-called fortunates and the ever successful, as I can see through it too much. Take “The Prisoner” by G r me – the man lying fettered is most certainly in an unpleasant situation, but to my way of thinking he is in a better condition than the fellow who has the upper hand and is harassing him. I tell you this in order to point out the extremes of certain conditions. I am far from confusing my own fate, for instance, with the terribly aggravated misery of the prisoner. Notwithstanding which, something of what I want to point out may be seen in our society.

As to me, I do not congratulate you on the fact that it may be expected that you will be able to keep the peace with certain authorities. It appeared to me that it was not superfluous to explain myself to you. You can interpret this precisely as you like.

I do not forget either that at first you had compassion for the woman in question. But the very fact that I was and am far from blind to her faults, and notwithstanding this tried and am trying to save her, ought to have induced you, I think, to respect my feelings more and to understand them better – in that case you would have been able to stand up for me more resolutely against those who knew less about it than you, and for me things would not have come to such a pass that I had to give it up.

Now I caution you, because perhaps it is not too late yet; if things become worse, the time for cautioning will be past.