

Letter 268a
The Hague, 12 February 1883

Dear Brother,

Although I wrote you yesterday, I want to add a few words today, first, to thank you for your letter and the money. But at the same time because I am alarmed at your patient's symptom of being "somewhat low-spirited."

Perhaps it is only my imagination, and if so, tant mieux; nothing would please me more, for if there is no melancholy worth mentioning, and if it disappeared of its own accord, it would be that much better. But if it continues and you see that something's the matter – and speaking for myself, I think this will prove to be the case – then be careful, for then I think it is more serious, and the only useful physician will be not the doctor but yourself.

If the low spirits and restlessness persist, I am afraid the reason is that the patient – notwithstanding all proofs of loyalty, and precisely because of all you have done for her – is tortured by the thought that sooner or later she will have to part company with you.

We are brothers, aren't we, and friends, and we may tell each other unreservedly what we think; if I should act indiscreetly in telling you what I think, please forgive my indiscretion. For such matters may take a very distressing turn – and very quickly, too – if one does not act in time. In particular, the patient is morally so weak and overwrought and exhausted – although externally she may appear calm – that, in my opinion, she is passing through a mental crisis which is much more serious than if only the body were affected.

Therefore, if that little cloud of melancholy persists, if there is a je ne sais quoi to interfere with the peace of mind which is absolutely necessary for her recovery, if it appears that she is thinking of something which she does not put into words, then, as I see it, there can be no doubt that just because of her weak and overwrought condition, she is mortally afraid – I repeat, mortally afraid – because of the uncertainty whether you love her or not.

In her heart there is an agitated, seething sea of love, but she will not put it into words for the very reason that unless you say so unreservedly and plainly, she will doubt whether you love her or not.

This hidden anxiety may be so strong – although it is possible that the little cloud of outward melancholy is very small indeed, and hardly perceptible to you, and even less so to strangers – this anxiety may be so strong that recovery is impossible, and serious consequences may be expected if her mind is not set at ease on this point à tout prix. I know quite well that for discretion's sake you might not want to speak at once, but prefer to wait until the recovery is complete, and she is free and quite herself.

Or it might be that you do not want to repeat yourself, and you might think, I have done enough to make it clear to her that I am her friend and that she may count on my doing everything in my power to help her. Yet I repeat, if the low spirits continue – and more than anything else this makes rest absolutely impossible, and without rest, no recovery – talk to her again, as your heart dictates.

Dear brother, I am not speaking at random, but from my own soul and my own experience. This I can tell you about the case. When the woman was delivered of the child and the very difficult confinement was over, she was mortally weak, but for the moment her life was saved and the baby was alive and quiet. Twelve hours after the confinement I went to see her, and found her completely exhausted. When she saw me, she sat up in bed and became as cheerful and lively as if nothing had happened, and her eyes were radiant with love of life and with gratitude. And she wanted to recover, and she promised me she would. (As your last letter showed, you have discovered for yourself how necessary it is to insist on such a promise – and how necessary it is to want to recover. You have judged correctly.)

But – a few days later I received a note from her which I did not quite understand, and which disappointed me; it contained something about "she supposed I had probably taken another woman, etc." – in short, very queer and even absurd, as I myself had not quite recovered, and had left the hospital only a short time before. At any rate it was clear enough for me to understand that she was mentally confused and very upset. I went to her, immediately, that is, as soon as I could; I was not allowed to visit her on weekdays, so it was on Sunday, a week later. I found her looking as though she had withered – literally like a tree which had been blasted by a cold, dry wind, its young green shoots withering; and to make things complete, the baby was sick, too, and looked shrivelled. According to the doctor the baby was suffering from jaundice, but there was something else the matter with the eyes, as if they were blind, and the woman, who had not got jaundice, looked yellow, grey, I don't know what. In short, all this had happened within a week, and apparently – I know of no other expression for it – blighted and withered her so much that it gave me a shock.

What was to be done? How had it come about, and what was there to be said? She herself told me she could not rest, and it was clear that she had become thoroughly melancholy – without any reason at all, without anything having happened since the preceding Sunday.

Well, I thought, something must be done about it, and although I did not know for sure what the trouble was, I took a risk.

I acted as if I were cross and said, Look, is this the way you keep your promises? And I made her repeat the promise that she would recover, and I showed great discontent at the baby's being sick, and I told her it was her fault, and I asked her what that letter of hers meant – in other words, as I saw her condition was abnormal, I myself spoke in an abnormal way, that is, sternly, whereas I felt nothing but a deep pity. The result was something like an awakening, as of a sleepwalker, and before I went away – not, of course, without having changed my tone – I once again let her renew her promise that she would get well et plus vite que ça!

Dear brother, from this moment on she recovered quickly, and after a short time I took her and the baby out of the hospital. Because of this the baby had a pretty long bout of ill health – perhaps because during the first few days the mother was thinking more about me than about her child – but of course at present the baby is as healthy as a young rabbit, and just like such a young rabbit, he is looking brightly out of his clear eyes which were at first completely closed. When I came to take the woman home, I waited for her in the little hospital waiting room; suddenly as she came in with the baby in her arms, a heart-rending pathos such as Ary Scheffer paints it, or Correszco, came over her.

I repeat, if I am mistaken in thinking that in your patient's case there is also confusion or an inner struggle (of course, unjustified), so much the better; but if the signs of melancholy persist – let her promise once more she will get well, and show her unmistakably that you insist on her getting well, and that you cannot live without her. You see, sometimes a certain reticence prevents us from saying such a thing because it sounds egotistic, but don't feel embarrassed in this case, because it means saving her, and for that reason it is not egoism. For if two persons share their feelings to such an extent that they cannot be easy and calm in their minds when alone, egoism is out of the question, for then these two need not become one, they are one already. Only – this must be put into words, and with a sick person that craving for a real unbosoming may be such a necessity that recovery depends on it.

And still I go on talking about this (don't take this going on amiss – for I feel obliged to tell you to the fullest extent what my opinion in this matter is); for days I have been imagining your patient to myself (but perhaps incorrectly – of course I can't know for sure; there are certain things which one can't help connecting with each other) as being necessarily in a condition similar to that of this woman of mine during the days following her confinement.

I have been imagining this ever since receiving your letter in which you describe the operation, and I may say I have been disquieted by it all the time. And when I read she was somewhat low-spirited, I couldn't help writing about it. Almost from the very beginning – every time I tried to get a clear insight into the state of your patient's mind – taking into consideration that the series of calamities she has encountered cannot but have bewildered her – I thought her condition beyond the reach of any other remedy than love in the fullest sense of the word.

Without you I figure she is lost; I cannot think of any rescue, any renewal of the future, for her without you. And although I have discovered in your letters some expressions from which I see, at least which seem to show, that as for the future, you are in doubt about whether she for her part will love you forever and ever – I myself have only one opinion about this, which is that she loves you; and as far as you are concerned, I have only one question to ask, Did you tell her that you love her forever and ever, or have you been somewhat silent about it, either out of reticence or because you were afraid to hurt her?

Of course I am speaking about these intimate matters (which on the whole I consider so intimate that I should never speak about them unless there were a clear reason for it) only because I see this resemblance between the cases of your patient and mine:

1. Both had to undergo a dangerous operation, and both were, notwithstanding the chloroform, not wholly quiet during the operation.
2. Both were, shortly before the operation, severely shaken by anxiety and tension and perturbation of mind, and had to undergo moral sufferings which were almost more than the nervous system can stand.
3. Rest for body and soul is absolutely necessary for both of them in the interest of recovery and readjustment.

I think these resemblances are important. And now that you have mentioned a sort of melancholy, I believed it would be profitable for you to hear how it became very serious in my patient's case, even

alarming and dangerous, and this within only a few days, and how – after her mind had been set at ease by the very security of a new love which made her gain hope and confidence in the future – she very soon recovered physically, at least, from the operation.

As for me, before that time I had reassured her as emphatically as I could that I should never leave her – less by words, however, than by doing whatever I could for her, but nevertheless in words too.

Notwithstanding this, doubt and restlessness arose in her mind – but they disappeared as soon as I did my best to reassure her again.

May I remind you that I raised certain objections because in your earlier letter you hinted at having mentioned a job – I already had some nebulous misgivings then – and now you write about the first signs of melancholy – well, this is what I feared.

I hope quite unnecessarily – but if the melancholy persists, and the restlessness too, and the *je ne sais quoi* which is interfering with her recovery – then my opinion is that a renewed assurance of your love and loyalty will ease her mind and enable her to get well again – yes, I truly think her life may depend on it.

Adieu, my dear fellow, I have written this to the best of my knowledge, and prompted by an unfeigned sympathy and a deep interest – but this you of course know, and it is my earnest desire that things turn out favourably. Once more, thanks for your letter and what you sent. Without my meaning it, my letter about “somewhat low-spirited” has grown to such a size that there is no room to write anything else. Believe me, with a handshake and my best wishes,

Yours sincerely, Vincent

[Written at the top of the letter] Until today every night or morning when I woke up, my eyelids were stuck together because of the discharge, but last night for the first time both eyes were all right. Otherwise nothing was apparent except for the whites being somewhat muddy and bloodshot and what they call bags (?) under the eyes, but this is as good as gone, too.