

Letter 419b
Nuenen, c. 7 August 1885

Dear Theo,

The thing in our conversation that makes me utterly disconsolate was that, when I said I was afraid that you would have a hard nut to crack during the current year, you answered that “you had observed I should like to see this happen, that you see quite clearly that you cannot count on me, and that you know all right that I shall reward you with stinking ingratitude.” This is not true, and I am disconsolate that you see it that way. Let me give you this hint: don’t consider this painting business of mine a burden, and don’t treat it in a stepmotherly way, because it may prove to be a little lifeboat when the big ship is wrecked. My hint is now, and will be in the future: Let’s try and keep the little boat trim and seaworthy, whether the tempest comes, or my uneasiness proves unfounded. At present I am a tiny vessel which you have in tow, and which at times will seem to you so much ballast. But this – I mean the ballast – you may leave behind by cutting the towrope, if you like...But I, who am the skipper of my tiny vessel, ask in this case that – far from having the towrope cut – that my little boat be kept trim and well provisioned, in order that I may do better service in times of need.

If you doubt the good faith of this request, then the only thing for me to do is to repeat it even more urgently. For I perceive that in the matter of my colour bill my little vessel is leaking here and there. However, I am trying to stop these leaks to the best of my ability, and I have not lost my self-command yet. Neither am I desperate. But considering that both of us may be overtaken by the same tempest, I am speaking concretely and, as far as I can see, in our mutual interest.

I can summarize your answer to my question thus: it may be that there will be a tempest, but even in that case don’t count on repairs or provisions, and bear in mind that under the pressure of certain circumstances I may feel obliged to cut the towrope.

This answer I must accept, but only as long as it is not aggravated by doubting my good faith.

However, with this letter I cry out to you once more that my request for reinforcement may prove to be in both our interests, and I do not make it out of selfishness, as you suppose. That in case of a tempest, I shall be willing, and perhaps able, to be of some use and service to you, but that this will be impossible if my own vessel is swamped (a thing I try to prevent) before the critical moment. This, however, is a thing I seek to stave off myself, but I should not cry out to you without necessity. I am not afraid in the midst of danger either, but I try to be ready at the moment of distress.

It may be that you don’t think it reasonable of me to insist on my – and I should much prefer to say our – little painting business becoming the centre of a larger business which we might undertake together later on; but I for my part persist in claiming that something will and shall come of it, if only we remain sufficiently united.

If I haven’t the same ideas as you, don’t suspect me of bad faith or of evil intentions, either toward you or toward those at home. With regard to those at home I do nothing that I have no right to do, seeing that I refrain strictly and permanently from interfering in their affairs, or from obtruding either my advice or my questions, and remain absolutely on my own ground – and that I even keep back my opinions of their affairs, as in point of fact we do not understand each other’s interests.

And to you I speak, and I shall go on speaking, as one person dealing in pictures to another person dealing in pictures, and I will not trespass on the other territory.

And the question I started discussing with you is that however great the depression may be, and however much trouble we shall have to take, we must try energetically to push forward the little painting business that belongs to you as much as to me.

I say it may be a lifeboat which may be of use to you in the tempest, although I don’t wish for this tempest any more than you can wish for it.

Goodbye.

Ever yours, Vincent