

Sometimes, I'm afraid, you cast a book aside because it is too realistic. Have pity on, and patience with, this letter, and in any case read it through, even though you may think it a bit much.

My dear Theo,

As I wrote to you from The Hague, I still have one or two things to discuss with you now that I am back here again. It is not without emotion that I think back on my short trip to The Hague. When I arrived at M[auve]'s, my heart was beating quite hard, because I was thinking to myself, is he going to try to fob me off with fair words too or am I going to find something different here?

And well, what I found was that in all sorts of practical and friendly ways he helped and encouraged me. Mind you, not by approving of what I did or said all the time, on the contrary. But if he says to me, "This or that is no good," he immediately adds, "but just try it this way or that," which is a different matter altogether from criticizing for the sake of criticizing. If somebody says, "You have this or that illness," that's not a great deal of help, but if he says, "Do this or that and you will get better," and his advice is reliable, then you see, he has told you the truth, and, and, it's a help as well.

Anyway, I came away from him with some painted studies and a few watercolours. They are not masterpieces, of course, yet I really believe that there is some soundness and truth in them, more at any rate than what I've done up to now. And so I reckon that I am now at the beginning of the beginning of doing something serious. And because I can now call on a couple of technical resources, that is to say, paint and brush, everything seems fresh again, as it were.

But – now we have to put it all into practice. And so the first thing I must do is find a room large enough for me to keep at a proper distance.

As soon as he saw my studies Mauve told me, "You are sitting too close to your model." In many cases that means it's virtually impossible to achieve the proper proportions, and so that is definitely one of the first things I must attend to. I simply must find a large place to rent somewhere, be it a room or a shed. And it won't be all that terribly expensive. It costs 30 guilders a year to rent a workman's cottage in these parts, so I reckon that a room twice as large as one in a workman's cottage would come to, say, 60 guilders. And that's feasible.

I have already seen a shed, but it may have too many drawbacks, especially in wintertime. But I could work there, at least when the weather is a bit milder. And then there are models to be found here in Brabant, I think, and not just in Etten but in other villages too, should objections be raised here.

However, though I am very fond of Brabant I still have a feeling for figures other than the Brabant peasant type. Thus I still think Scheveningen is beautiful beyond words. But I happen to be here, and most probably it works out more cheaply here. In any case, I have promised M. to do my best to find a good studio, and besides, I must start using better paint and better paper now.

For studies and sketches, though, the Ingres paper is excellent. And it works out much cheaper to make my own sketchbooks in various sizes from that than to buy the sketchbooks ready-made.

I still have a small supply of Ingres paper, but if you could include some more of the same kind when you send those studies back to me, I should be greatly obliged to you. Not snow-white, but rather the colour of unbleached linen, no cold tones.

Theo, what a great thing tone and colour are. And those who fail to learn to have feelings for them will remain far removed from real life. M. has taught me to see so many things that I used not to see and one day I shall try to tell you what he has told me, as there may well be one or two things you do not see properly either. Anyway, I hope we'll have a good discussion about artistic matters some day.

And you cannot imagine the feeling of liberation I am beginning to have when I remember the things M. has told me about earning money. Just think of how I have been muddling along for years, always in a kind of fausse [false] position. And now there is a glimmering of real light.

I wish you could see the two watercolours I have brought back with me, for you would realize that they are watercolours just like any other watercolours. They may still be full of imperfections, que soit, I am the first to say that I am still very dissatisfied with them, and yet they are quite different from what I have done before and look fresher and brighter. That doesn't alter the fact, however, that they must get fresher and brighter still, but one can't do everything one wants just like that. It will come little by little.

However, I need those two drawings I did, for I must be able to compare them with the ones I am going to do here, in order to keep the standard at least up to what I did at M.'s. Now although M. tells me that if I muddle along here for another few months and then go back to him, say in March, I shall be producing saleable drawings on a regular

basis, I am still passing through a fairly difficult period right now. The cost of model, studio, drawing and painting materials keeps going up and I'm not earning any money yet.

To be sure, Father has said that I needn't worry about any unavoidable expenses, and he is pleased with what M. himself has told him and also with the studies and drawings I brought back. But I still think it is quite dreadful that Father should be out of pocket as a result. Of course, we hope it will turn out all right later on, but still, it is a load on my mind. For since I have been here Father has made really nothing at all out of me, and more than once, for instance, he has bought me a coat or a pair of trousers that I would really rather not have had, although I needed them, but Father should not have to be out of pocket because of that. The more so as the coat or trousers in question don't fit and are of little or no use. Well, here is yet another *petite misère de la vie humaine*.

Besides, as I told you earlier, I loathe not being completely independent. For though Father doesn't expect me to account literally for every cent, he always knows exactly how much I spend and on what. And though as far as I am concerned I have no secrets, I still don't like showing my hand to people. As far as I am concerned even my secrets are not secrets to those with whom I am in sympathy. But Father is not someone for whom I can feel what I feel for, say, you or Mauve. I really do love Father and Mother, but it is quite a different feeling from the one I have for you or M. Father can't feel for or sympathize with me, and I can't settle into Father's and Mother's system, it is too stifling and would suffocate me.

Whenever I tell Father anything, it goes in one ear and out the other, and that certainly applies no less to Mother, and similarly I find Father and Mother's sermons and ideas about God, people, morality and virtue a lot of stuff and nonsense. I too read the Bible occasionally, just as I sometimes read Michelet or Balzac or Eliot, but I see quite different things in the Bible from what Father does, and what Father in his little academic way gleans from it I cannot find in it at all.

Now that the Rev. Mr. ten Kate has translated Goethe's Faust, Father and Mother have read it, for since a clergyman has translated it, it cannot be all that immoral (???qu'est ce que ça? [What's that?]). But they see it as no more than the disastrous consequences of an indelicate love.

And they certainly understand the Bible no better. Take Mauve, for example. When he reads something profound, he doesn't immediately come out with: that man means this or that. For poetry is so deep and intangible that one cannot define it systematically. But Mauve has a keen sensibility and, you see, I find that sensibility worth a great deal more than definitions and criticisms. And when I read, and actually I don't read all that much and then only a few writers, men whom I have discovered by accident, then I do so because they look at things more broadly and generously and with more love than I do and are acquainted better with reality, and because I can learn from them. But I really don't care for all that twaddle about good and evil, morality and immorality. For to be sure, I find it impossible always to tell what is good and what is bad, what is moral and what is immoral.

Morality or immorality brings me back willy-nilly to K. V. Ah! I wrote to you at the time that it was beginning to seem less and less like eating strawberries in the spring. Well, that is indeed the case.

Forgive me if I repeat myself, but I don't know if I've already written to you exactly what happened to me in Amsterdam. I went there thinking, perhaps the no, never, ever will thaw, the weather is so mild.

And so one fine evening I trudged along the Keizergracht looking for the house, and indeed I found it. And naturally I rang the doorbell and was told the family were still at dinner. But then I was told to come in all the same. And all of them were there, including Jan and that very learned professor – except for Kee. And there was a plate in front of each person, but no extra plate. This small detail struck me. They had wanted to make me think that Kee wasn't there and had taken away her plate, but I knew that she was there, and I thought it all a bit of a farce or charade. After a while I asked (after the usual small talk and greetings), "But where is Kee?"

Then J. P. S. repeated my question to his wife, "Mother, where is Kee?"

And Mother, the wife, said, "Kee is out."

So for the moment I inquired no further, but chatted with the professor about the exhibition at Arti which he had just seen. Well, then the professor disappeared and little Jan disappeared and J. P. S. and his spouse and yours truly remained alone and squared up to each other.

J. P. S. took the floor, as clergyman and Father, and said that he had been on the point of sending yours truly a letter and that he would read that letter out.

First, however, interrupting the Rev. or Very Rev. gentleman, I asked again, "Where is Kee?" (For I knew she was in town.)

Then J. P. S. said, "Kee left the house the moment she heard you were here." Now I know a few things about her and I must make clear to you that I did not know then nor do I know now with any certainty whether her coldness and rudeness are a good or a bad sign. This much I do know, that I have never seen her so apparently or actually cold and stern and rude to anyone else but me. So, staying perfectly calm, I did not say much.

"Let me hear the letter then," I said, "or not, I don't much care either way."

Then came the epistle. The document was Very Reverend and Most Learned and so did not really amount to anything, but it did seem to say that I was requested to cease my correspondence and advised to make energetic efforts to put the matter out of my mind. Finally the reading came to an end. I felt just as if I had been listening to the clergyman, after his voice had been doing a sing-song, saying amen in church. It left me as cold as any ordinary sermon.

And then I began and said as calmly and civilly as I could, well, yes, I had heard this kind of argument very often before, but what now? – et après ça [and after that]? J. P. S. looked up then...indeed, he seemed faintly alarmed that I was not completely convinced that the utmost limit of the human capacity to think and feel had been reached. According to him, no 'et après ça' was possible any longer.

And so we continued, and every so often Aunt M. would add a peculiarly Jesuistical word, and I got a bit steamed up and for once I did not pull my punches. And J. P. S. did not pull his punches either, going as far as a clergyman could. And although he did not exactly say 'God damn you,' anyone other than a clergyman in J. P. S.'s mood would have expressed himself thus.

But you know that I love both Father and J. P. S. in my way, despite really detesting their system, and I shifted my ground a bit, and gave and took a little, so that at the end of the evening they told me I could stay for the night if I wished.

Then I said, "Thank you very much, but if Kee walks out of the house as soon as I come calling, I don't think this is the right moment to spend the night here. I'll go to my lodgings."

And then they asked, "Where are you staying?"

I said, "I don't know yet," and then Uncle and Aunt insisted on taking me themselves to a good cheap hotel.

And my goodness, those two old people went with me through the cold, foggy, muddy streets and they did indeed show me a very good and very cheap hotel. I absolutely insisted on their not coming and they absolutely insisted on showing me. And, you see, I found something very human in that and it calmed me down a bit.

I stayed in Amsterdam another two days and had another talk with J. P. S., but I didn't see Kee, who spirited herself away every time. And I said that they ought to know that though they wanted me to consider the matter over and done with, I for my part was unable to do so. And to that they continually and steadily replied that I would learn to understand things better in time.

I saw the professor too, again a few times, and I have to say he improves upon acquaintance, but, but, but, what else can I say about the gentleman? I told him I wished he might fall in love one day. There you are. Can professors fall in love? Do clergymen know what love is?

I read Michelet's *La femme, la religion et le prêtre* the other day. [The correct title is *Du prêtre, de la femme, de la famille.*] Books like that are filled with reality, but what is more real than reality itself and where is there more life than in life itself? And we who are doing our best to live, if only we lived a great deal more!

Time hung heavily on my hands those three days in Amsterdam. I felt thoroughly miserable and found all that grudging kindness of Uncle's and Aunt's and all those discussions very hard to take. Until in the end I began to find myself hard to take as well and said to myself, "You don't want to get melancholy again, do you?" And then I said to myself, "Don't let yourself be browbeaten."

And so it was that on a Sunday morning I went to see J. P. S. for the last time, and said, "Look here, dear Uncle, if Kee V. were an angel, then she would be too exalted for me and I don't think I could stay in love with an angel. If she were a devil, I shouldn't want to have anything to do with her. In the present case I see in her a real woman, with feminine passions and whims and I love her very much indeed and that is a fact and I'm glad of it. As long as she doesn't become an angel or a devil, then the present case is not over."

And J. P. S. couldn't add much to that and even said something about feminine passions, I don't quite know what he said, and then J. P. S. went off to church. No wonder one grows hardened there and turns to stone, as I know from my own experience.

And so, as far as the person in question, your brother, is concerned, he refused to allow himself to be browbeaten. But that didn't alter the fact that he had a browbeaten feeling, as if he had been standing too long against a cold, hard whitewashed church wall.

And yes, if I may say so, my dear fellow, it is a little risky to remain a realist, but Theo, Theo, you are a realist yourself after all, well, please put up with my realism! I told you that as far as I am concerned even my secrets are no secrets, well, I am not taking that back, think of me what you will, and whether or not you approve of what I did does not really affect the issue.

I continue – from Amsterdam I went to Haarlem and spent a very enjoyable time with our dear little sister Willemien and went for a walk with her and in the evening I left for The Hague and ended up at M.'s at about seven o'clock.

And I said, "Look here, M., you were supposed to come to Etten to try to initiate me, more or less, into the mysteries of the palette. But it occurred to me that that would take more than just a few days, so I have come to you, and if you agree I shall stay here for about four to six weeks, or for as long or as short a time as you like, and then we shall see what is to be done. It's a bit impertinent of me to ask so much of you, but, well, j'ai l'épée dans les reins." [I am under great pressure.]

Anyway, then M. said, "Have you bought anything with you?"

"Certainly, here are a few studies," and then he said many, far too many, kind things about them, but he also made a few, far too few, criticisms. Well, the next day we set up a still life and he started by saying, "This is how you must hold your palette." And since then I have done a few painted studies and then later two watercolours.

So that is the summary of the work, but working with one's hands and head is not the whole of life.

I still felt chilled to the marrow, that is, to the marrow of my soul, by the above-mentioned imaginary or non-imaginary church wall. And I said to myself, you don't want to let that fatal feeling browbeat you. Then I thought to myself, I should like to be with a woman for a change, I cannot live without love, without a woman. I wouldn't give two cents for life if there were not something infinite, something deep, something real.

But, said I to myself then, you said "she and no other" and now you want to go to another woman? But that's unreasonable, isn't it, that's illogical, isn't it?

And my answer to that was: who is the master, logic or I, does logic exist for me or do I exist for logic, and is there no reason or sense in my unreasonableness or my lack of sense? And whether I do right or wrong, I have no choice, that damned wall is too cold for me, I need a woman, I cannot, will not, may not, live without love. I am only a man and a man with passions, I must have a woman, otherwise I shall freeze or turn to stone or, in short, I shall have let things browbeat me.

I had in the circumstances, however, fought a great battle with myself and in that battle some of the things I believe concerning one's constitution and hygiene, that I have come to know more or less through bitter experience, gained the upper hand. One cannot forgo a woman for too long with impunity. And I do not believe that what some call God and others the supreme being and others nature, is unreasonable and pitiless, in short I came to the conclusion: I want to see whether I can find a woman.

And, my goodness, I didn't have to look all that far. I found a woman, by no means young, by no means beautiful, nothing special if you like. But perhaps you are a little curious. She was fairly tall, and strongly built, she didn't have the hands of a lady, like K. V., but the hands of a woman who does a great deal of work. But she was not coarse or common and had something very feminine about her. She reminded me of some quaint figure by Chardin or Frère or perhaps Jan Steen. Anyway, what the French call "un ouvrière" [a woman worker]. She had had many cares, you could see, and life had been hard for her. Oh, nothing refined, nothing out of the ordinary, nothing unusual.

Tout femme à tout âge, si elle aime et si elle est bonne, peut donner à l'homme non l'infini du moment, mais le moment de l'infini. [Any woman, at any age, if she loves and is a good woman, can give a man not the infinity of a moment, but a moment of infinity.]

Theo, for me that faded je ne sais quoi, that something over which life has passed, has infinite charm. Ah! For me she did have charm, something of Feyen-Perrin, of Perugino. See here, I am not quite as innocent as a "bec blanc" [greenhorn], much less a baby in a cradle.

It was not the first time that I was unable to resist that feeling of affection, that special affection and love for those women who are so damned and condemned and despised by clergymen from the lofty heights of their pulpits. I do not damn them, I do not condemn them, I do not despise them.

See here, I am nearly thirty and do you really think that [I] have never felt the need for love? K. V. is even older than I am, she has also known love in the past, but she is all the dearer to me for it. She is not inexperienced, but neither am I. If she wants to hold on to an old love and have nothing to do with a new, that is her affair, but if she insists on doing that and cold-shoulders me, I shan't stifle my energy and my mental powers on her account. No, I refuse to do that, I love her but I will not allow myself to become frozen and my mind crippled because of her. And the spur, the spark we need, is love, and not mystical love either.

That woman has not cheated me – oh, he who takes all such women for cheats is so wrong and has so little understanding. That woman was good to me, very good, very dear, very kind, in a way I shall not even tell my brother Theo, because I strongly suspect that my brother Theo has had a similar experience. Tant mieux pour lui. [So much the better for him.]

Did we spend much money? No, because I didn't have much, and I said to her, "Look here, you and I don't have to make ourselves drunk to feel something for each other, you had best put what I can spare in your pocket." And I wish I could have spared more, for she was worth it. And we talked about everything, about her life, about her

worries, about her misery, about her health, and I had a more exhilarating conversation with her than, for instance, with my learned, professorial cousin Jan.

Now I am telling you these things not least because I hope you will realize that though I do have some sentiment, I don't want to be sentimental in a silly way. That I want *quand bien même* [all the same] to keep some warmth and vitality and my mind clear and my constitution sound in order to be able to work. And that I conceive my love for K. V. in this light, that for her sake I don't want to get down to work feeling melancholy and will not allow myself to be thrown off course.

That is something you will understand, you who have written something on the question of hygiene in your letter. You mentioned the fact that you haven't been enjoying good health lately – make every effort you can to get better again.

The clergymen call us sinners, conceived and born in sin. Bah! What confounded nonsense that is. Is it a sin to love, to feel the need for love, not to be able to live without love? I consider a life without love a sinful and immoral state. If there is anything I regret then it is that period when I allowed mystical and theological profundities to mislead me into withdrawing too much into myself. I have gradually come to change my mind. When you wake up in the morning and find you are not alone but can see a fellow creature there in the half-light, it makes the world look so much more welcoming. Much more welcoming than the devotional journals and whitewashed church walls beloved of clergymen. She lived in a modest, simple little room lent a quiet grey tone by the plain wallpaper, yet warm like a picture by Chardin, a wooden floor with a mat and a piece of old dark-red carpet, an ordinary kitchen stove, a chest of drawers, a large, perfectly simple bed, in short, a real *ouvrière's* home. The next day she had to work at the washtub. Fair enough, I should have found her no more charming in a purple camisole jacket and a black skirt than I did now in a dress of brown or reddish-grey. And she was no longer young, perhaps the same age as K. V., and she had a child, yes, life had left its mark and her youth was gone. Gone? – *il n'y a point de vieille femme* [there are no old women]. Ah, and she was strong and healthy – and yet not coarse, not common.

Are those who set such great store by distinction always able to spot the distinguished? Good heavens, people search high and low for what is right under their noses, and I do too, now and then.

I am glad I did as I did because I can think of no earthly reason that would keep me from my work or cause me to lose my good humour. When I think of K. V., then yes, I still say, "she and no other," then I still think as I did in the summer about "looking for another girl in the meanwhile." But it isn't since yesterday that I have been taking a warm interest in those women whom the clergy condemn, despise and damn, indeed my love for them is rather older than that for Kee Vos. Many times when I walked the streets all alone with time hanging heavily on my hands, half sick and down in the dumps, with no money in my pocket, I would look at them and envy the people who would go with one, and I felt that those poor girls were my sisters in respect of circumstances and experience in life. And, you see, that is an old feeling of mine, and goes deep. Even as a boy I would often look up with infinite sympathy, indeed with respect, at a woman's face past its prime, inscribed as it were with the words: here life and reality have left their mark.

But my feeling for K. V. is quite new and something quite different. *Sans le savoir* [without realizing it], she is in a kind of prison, she too is poor and cannot do as she pleases, she feels a kind of resignation, and it is my belief that the Jesuitisms of clergymen and devout ladies often make a greater impression on her than on me, Jesuitisms which, precisely because I have acquired some *dessous de cartes* [inside information], no longer have any hold on me now. But she is devoted to them and would be unable to bear it if the system of resignation and sin and God and I know not what else, proved to be vain.

And I don't think it ever occurs to her that God may only appear once we say the words, those words with which Multatuli ends his prayer of an unbeliever: "Oh God, there is no God." You see, for me that God of the clergy is as dead as a doornail. But does that make me an atheist? Clergymen consider me one – *que soit* – but you see, I love, and how could I feel love if I were not alive myself or if others were not alive, and if we are alive there is something wondrous about it. Now call that God or human nature or whatever you like, but there is a certain something I cannot define systematically, although it is very much alive and real, and you see, for me that something is God or as good as God. You see, when in due course my time comes, one way or other, to die, well, what will keep me going even then? Won't it be the thought of love (moral or immoral love, what do I know about it?)

And good heavens, I love Kee Vos for a thousand reasons, but precisely because I believe in life and in something real I am no longer as given to abstractions as before, when I had more or less the same ideas about God and religion as Kee Vos seems to have now. I am not giving her up, but that spiritual crisis with which she is perhaps struggling must be given time, and I am prepared to be patient about it and nothing she says or does now makes me angry. But while she cherishes and clings to the old, I must work and keep my mind clear for painting and drawing and for business. So I did what I did from a need for affection and for reasons of mental hygiene.

I am telling you all this so that you won't think that I am in a melancholy or abstracted, brooding mood. On the contrary, most of the time I am fiddling around with and thinking about paints, making watercolours, looking for a studio, etc., etc. Old fellow, if only I could find a suitable studio!

Well, my letter has become rather long, but there you are. Sometimes I wish that the three months before I can go back to M. were already over, but as it is they may do me some good. But do write to me now and then. Is there any chance of your coming here this winter?

And believe me, I shan't rent a studio, etc., without first finding out what Mauve thinks. I shall send him the floor plan, as agreed, and he may come and have a look at it himself if need be. But Father must stay out of it. Father is not the man to get mixed up in artistic matters. And the less I am involved in dealings with Father, the better I get on with him. I must be free and independent in very many respects, that goes without saying.

I sometimes shudder when I think of K. V. and of her burying herself in her past and clinging to old and dead ideas. There is something fatal about it and, oh, it would not diminish her if she were to change her views. I think it quite possible that there will be some reaction, there is so much that is healthy and spirited in her.

And so in March I shall go back to The Hague and, and, to Amsterdam as well. But when I left Amsterdam that time, I told myself: under no circumstances will you become melancholy or allow things to get you down, letting your work suffer just when you have started to make some headway. Eating strawberries in the spring is indeed part of your life, but it is only one short moment in the year and right now it is still a long way off.

And so you envy me for some reason or other? Oh, my dear fellow, no need for that, since what I seek can be found by everyone, perhaps even sooner by you than by me. And oh, I am so backward and narrow-minded in many things, if only I knew exactly where the trouble lay and how to go about putting it right. But alas, we often do not see the beams in our own eye.

Write to me soon and try to separate the wheat from the chaff in my letters. If there is some good in them, some truth, tant mieux, but there is, of course, much in them that is more or less wrong, or exaggerated perhaps, without my always being aware of it. I am anything but a man of learning, and I am so amazingly ignorant, oh, just like so many others and even more so than others, but I am unable to judge that myself and can judge others even less than myself, and am often mistaken. But we pick up the scent as we wander about and il y a du bon en tout mouvement [there is some good in every movement] (I chanced to hear Jules Breton say that, by the way, and remembered the remark).

Incidentally, have you ever heard Mauve preach? I've heard him mimicking several clergymen – once he preached about Peter's boat. The sermon was divided into 3 parts: 1<sup>st</sup>, was he given the boat or did he inherit it? 2<sup>nd</sup>, did he purchase it in installments or by taking out shares? 3<sup>rd</sup>, had he (dreadful thought) stolen it? Then he went on to preach about "the Lord's good intentions" and about "the Tigris and the Euphrates" and finally he mimicked J. P. S. marrying A. [Anna Carventus, Vincent's cousin] and Lecomte.

But when I told him that I had once said during a discussion with Father that I believed that even in church, even in the pulpit, one could say something edifying, M. agreed. And then he mimicked Father Bernhard: "God – God – is almighty – He has made the sea, He has made the earth and the sky and the stars and the sun and the moon, He can do everything – everything – but – no, He is not almighty, there is one thing that He cannot do. What is that thing that God Almighty cannot do? God Almighty cannot cast out a sinner."

Well, goodbye, Theo, write soon, a handshake in my thoughts, and believe me,  
Ever yours, Vincent