

Letter 212
The Hague, 6 July 1882

Dear brother,

I received your letter with enclosed 100 fr., and thank you most kindly for it. I want to write you at once because I think it is well to explain a few things to you and in all seriousness, because it is important that you know and understand them well. So I hope you will read this letter patiently and at your ease, for so much depends on it for me. Tomorrow morning I am going back to the hospital, and I shall be able to lay my head down peacefully if I know that you are informed about everything as explicitly and clearly as the distance allows. I wish you were here so much more; then I could show you everything and talk things over with you. But let us hope it will happen in August.

Before beginning to write about various other things, I want to tell you that the part of your letter describing Paris by night touched me very much. Because it brought back to me the memory of when I too saw "Paris tout gris," and was struck by that very peculiar effect with the black figure and characteristic white horse which gave the full value to the delicacy of that unusual grey. That little dark note and that toneful white are the key to the harmony. But by chance, while I was in the hospital, I was greatly impressed by an artist who describes this "Paris tout gris" with a master hand. In *Une Page d'Amour* by Emile Zola I found some views of the city so superbly painted or drawn, quite in the same mood as the simple passage in your letter. And that little book prompts me to read everything by Zola; up to now I knew only a few short fragments of his works, for which I tried to make an illustration – *Ce que je veux* and another fragment which describes a little old peasant, exactly like a drawing by Millet.

There is something confoundedly artistic in you, brother; cultivate it, first let it take root, and then let it branch out. Don't give it to everybody, but keep it seriously for yourself; think it over, and don't consider it a misfortune if, through this thinking, it concentrates itself and takes a more or less important place in your activity. But perhaps I am venturing on forbidden ground, so no more about it for today.

One more thing, there is "colour" in your short description which is palpable and visible to me, though you did not carry your impression through till it assumed a more robust form, and stood visible and palpable to everybody. The real throes and anguish of creating begin at the point where you drop the description; but you possess a damn good creative intelligence. Right now you can go no further because you don't believe in yourself in this respect; otherwise you would jump the ditch, that is to say, you would venture further. But enough of this; there is a *je ne sais quoi* in your description, a fragrance, a memory, for instance, of a watercolour by Bonington – only it is still vague, as if in a haze. Do you know that drawing with words is also an art, which sometimes betrays a slumbering hidden force, like small blue or grey puffs of smoke indicate a fire on the hearth?

I certainly appreciate what Father and Mother did during my illness – you know that I wrote you about it at once – likewise, I appreciated Tersteeg's visit. However, I did not write at once to Father and Mother about Sien or the like, but only kept them informed of my recovery with a few words. And this is why: something of what happened last summer and last winter seemed to put an iron barrier between the past and the present.

I did not intend to ask Father and Mother for their advice and opinions in the same way as I did last year, because it was then proved to me that there is a decided difference in our thoughts and views on life. However, it is my greatest longing to keep peace, and to convince Father and Mother that they would do well not to oppose me, thinking me a person who is always dreaming and incapable of action – and that they would be mistaken if they thought I regarded things so impractically that it would be necessary for them to "guide" me.

Look here, Theo, believe me I do not say this in bitterness, despising or depreciating Father and Mother – or in self-praise – but only to prove to you this fact: Father and Mother are not the people who understand me – neither in my faults nor in my good qualities – they cannot realize my feelings – it's no use arguing with them. What is to be done now??? This is my plan, which I hope you will approve of. I hope to be able to manage so that I can save 10 or 15 guilders next month. Then – but not before – I shall write Father and Mother that I have something to tell them. I shall beg Father to make another trip here at my expense, and to come and stay with me for a few days. Then I shall show him Sien and her little baby, which he will not expect – and the neat house and studio full of the things I am working on – and I myself quite recovered by then, I hope.

I think all this will make a better and deeper and more favourable impression on Father than words or letters. In a few short words I will tell him how Sien and I struggled through the hard time of her pregnancy this winter – how faithfully you helped us, though you only heard about Sien afterward; that she is

invaluable to me, first, by the love and affection which circumstances created between us, and second, because from the beginning she has devoted herself to helping me in my work with much good will, intelligence, and common sense. So that she and I sincerely hope that Father will approve my taking her to wife. I cannot say otherwise than “taking her,” for the ceremony of marriage is not what makes her my wife, but it is a bond which already exists – a feeling that on both sides we love each other, help each other, and understand each other.

And as to what Father will say about my marrying, I think he will say, “Marry her.”

I wish Father could get a fresh, clear impression of a new future for me, that he could see me here in surroundings quite different from what he possibly expected, that he could be quite reassured about my feeling for him and might have good courage for my future and forget the business of putting me under guardianship or supervision. See, Theo, I know of no shorter, no more honest way or means to redress quickly and practically the good understanding between us than the ones I’m writing you about. Write and tell me what you think of it.

Also, I do not think it superfluous to tell you once more, though it is difficult to say it, what I feel for Sien. I have a feeling of being at home when I am with her, as though she gives me my own hearth, a feeling that our lives are interwoven. It is a heartfelt, deep feeling, serious and not without a dark shadow of her gloomy past and mine, a shadow which I have already written you about – as if something evil were threatening us which we would have to struggle against continuously all our lives. At the same time, however, I feel a great calm and brightness and cheerfulness at the thought of her and the straight path lying before me.

You know I wrote you a lot about Kee last year, so I think you know what went on in my mind. Don’t think that I exaggerated my feelings then; I had a strong, passionate love for her, quite different from that for Sien. When I unexpectedly learned in Amsterdam that she had a kind of aversion to me, that she considered my behaviour as coercing her and refused even to see me, and that “she left the house as soon as I entered it” – then, but not before, that love for her received a death blow. And I only perceived this when I awoke to reality here at The Hague this winter.

I then felt an inexpressible melancholy inside, which I cannot possibly describe. I know that then I often, often thought of a manly saying of father Millet’s: Il m’a toujours semblé que le suicide était une action de malhonnête homme. [It has always seemed to me that suicide was the deed of a dishonest man.]

The emptiness, the unutterable misery within me made me think, Yes, I can understand people drowning themselves. But I was far from approving this, I found strength in the above-mentioned saying, and thought it much better to take heart and find a remedy in work. And you know how I put this into practice. It is hard, very hard, aye, quite impossible to consider last year’s love an illusion, as Father and Mother do, but I say, “Though it will never be, it might have been.” It was not illusion, but our viewpoints differed, and circumstances took such a turn that our paths diverged farther and farther, instead of coming together. This is what I think of it: my clear and sincere thought is, It might have been, but now it is no longer possible. Was Kee right in feeling an aversion to me? Was I wrong in persisting? I declare, I do not know. And it is not without pain and sorrow that I recall and write about it. I only wish I could understand why Kee acted that way, and also why my parents and hers were so steadfastly and ominously against it – less by their words, though certainly by them too, than by their complete lack of warm, live sympathy. I cannot soften these last words, but consider it a feeling of theirs which I want to forget.

Now, as things are, it is like a large, deep wound which has healed but is still sensitive.

Then last winter could I feel a new “love” immediately? Most certainly not. But is it wrong that those human feelings were not extinguished or deadened within me – and that my sorrow awoke within me a need for sympathy for others??? I think not. So at first Sien was to me only a fellow creature as lonesome and unhappy as myself. However, as I was not discouraged, I was then just in the mood to be able to give her some practical support, which at the same time helped me stand fast. But gradually and slowly it became different between us – a real need of each other, so that she and I could not be separated – our lives became more and more united, and then it was love.

The feeling between Sien and me is real; it is no dream, it is reality. I think it is a great blessing that my thoughts and energy have found a fixed goal and a definite direction. It may be that what I felt for Kee was a stronger passion, and that she was in some respects more charming than Sien; but certainly not that my love for Sien should be less true, for the circumstances are too serious, and everything depends on doing things and being practical, and this has been so ever since the beginning, when I met her.

Theo, I am now obliged to touch on a subject which will perhaps be painful to you, but which will possibly make you understand what I mean. In the past you also had an “illusion,” as Father and Mother call it,

about a woman of the people; and it was not because you could not have chosen that path in life that nothing came of it after all, but because things in general took another turn. Now you have adapted yourself to life in another social station and are solidly situated, and if you should want to marry a girl of your own station, it would not mean a new “illusion” for you. You would not be admonished; and though nothing came of the first affair, something would certainly come of a new love affair, and you would be successful. As I see it, it would not be at all the right thing for you to take a woman of the people – for you the woman of the people was the so-called illusion – for you reality has become finding a woman of the same station in life as Kee Vos.

But for me the opposite is true; my illusion (although I do not think this word or this definition the least bit appropriate or correct either in your case or in mine) was Kee Vos – reality became the woman of the people.

In many respects there is a difference between your case and mine. Your failure happened when you were twenty years old, mine happened last year; and although you as well as I may have been in for an illusion, or failure, or whatever it was – I really have no idea what to call it – this does not alter the fact that there is something real for you as well as for me. For I am definitely of the opinion that neither of us is fitted by nature to remain a bachelor.

What I want to explain is this – what exists between Sien and me is real; it is not a dream, it is reality! Look at the result. When you come, you will not find me discouraged or melancholy; you will enter an atmosphere which will appeal to you, at least it will please you – a new studio, a young home in full swing. No mystical or mysterious studio but one that is rooted in real life – a studio with a cradle, a baby’s crapper – where there is no stagnation, but where everything pushes and urges and stirs to activity.

Now, if anybody should come and tell me that I am a poor financier, I shall show him my domain. I have done my best, brother, to take care that you will see (and not only you, but anyone with eyes in his head) that I aim at and sometimes succeed in doing things practically. How to do it. This winter we had the woman’s pregnancy, my expenses for getting settled; now the woman has been confined, I have been ill for four weeks and am not yet well. Notwithstanding all this, the house is neat and bright and clean and well kept, and I have most of my furniture, beds and painting materials. It has cost what it has cost – indeed, I shall not minimize it – but then your money has not been thrown away. It has started a new studio which cannot do without your help even now, but which is going to produce more and more drawings, and which is full of furniture and working materials that are necessary and retain their value.

Well, boy, if you come here to a home full of life and activity and know that you are the founder of it, won’t that give you a real feeling of satisfaction – much more than if I were a bachelor living in bars? Would you wish it otherwise? You know my life has not always been happy, but very often miserable; and now through your help my youth has returned and my real self is developing.

I only hope that you will keep this great change in mind, even when people think it foolish of you to have helped me and to continue helping me. And I hope that you will continue to see the germ of the next drawings in the present ones. A little time in the hospital and then I set to work again, the woman posing for me with the baby.

To me it is as clear as day that one must feel what one draws, that one must live in the reality of family life if one wishes to express that family intimately – a mother with her child, a washerwoman, a seamstress, whatever it may be. Through constant practice the hand must gradually learn to obey that feeling. But to try to kill that feeling – that strong wish to have a household of my own – would be suicide. Therefore I say “Forward,” notwithstanding dark shadows, cares, difficulties – alas, often caused by the meddling and gossip of people. Theo, know it well – though I keep out of it, as you rightly advise me to do, it often grieves me to the heart. But do you know why I do not contradict them any more and why I keep out of it? Because I must do my work, and all that gossip and worry must not cause me to deviate from my path. But I do not keep out of it because I am afraid of them or because I am at a loss for an answer. Also, I often notice that they do not say anything when I am present, and even pretend they never said anything.

As to you, since you know that I keep out of it so as not to make myself nervous and because of my work, you will also understand my attitude and not think it cowardly of me, won’t you?

Do not imagine that I think myself perfect or that I think that many people taking me for a disagreeable character is no fault of mine. I am often terribly melancholy, irritable, hungry and thirsting, as it were, for sympathy; and when I do not get it, I try to act indifferently, speak sharply, and often even pour oil on the fire. I do not like to be in company, and often find it painful and difficult to mingle with people, to speak to them. But do you know what the cause is – if not at all, of a great deal of this? Simply nervousness; I am terribly sensitive, physically as well as morally, the nervousness having developed

during those miserable years which drained my health. Ask any doctor, and he will understand at once that nights spent in the cold street or in the open, the anxiety to get bread, a continual strain because I was out of work, the estrangement from friends and family, caused at least three-fourths of my peculiarities of temper, and that those disagreeable moods or times of depression must be ascribed to this. But you, or anyone who will take the trouble to think it over, will not condemn me, I hope, because of it, nor find me unbearable. I try to fight it off, but that does not change my temperament; and even though this may be my bad side, confound it, I have a good side too, and can't they credit me with that also?

Now tell me if you approve of the following little plan for telling Father and Mother and bringing about a better situation. I haven't the slightest desire to write about it or go and talk about it, because then I should relapse into my old failing, namely putting it in such a way that they would be hurt by some expression or other. Well, I think when the woman comes back with her baby and I am quite recovered and back from the hospital and the studio is in full swing – then I would like to say to Father, Will you visit me again now, and stay a few days with me to talk some things over? And then as a little gesture, I should enclose the money for the journey. I do not know of a better plan.

Adieu, thanks for everything, a handshake and believe me,

Yours sincerely, Vincent