

Letter 213
The Hague, 6 July 1882
Thursday

My dear Theo,

It is now the evening before I go back to hospital again, and I don't know what they are going to tell me there – perhaps I'll only be in for a short while, perhaps they'll bring out their probes again and I'll have to keep to my bed for days.

That's why I am writing once again from home. It is so quiet and peaceful here in the studio right now – it is already late – but it is stormy and rainy outside – and that makes the calm inside even greater.

How I wish you had been here with me during this quiet hour, brother – how much I should have shown you. The studio looks so much like the real thing, or so it seems to me, plain grey-brown wallpaper, scrubbed floorboards, muslin stretched on slats across the windows, everything bright. And, of course, the studies on the wall, an easel on either side and a large unpainted wooden work-table. The studio gives on to a sort of alcove, where the drawing boards, portfolios, boxes, sticks, etc. are kept, as well as all the prints. And in the corner a cupboard with all the pots and bottles and on top of that all my books.

Then the little living room with a table, a few kitchen chairs, an oil stove, a large wicker armchair for the woman in the corner by the window overlooking the yard and the meadows that you know from the drawing, and next to it a small iron cradle with a green cover.

This last piece of furniture is something I cannot look at without emotion – because a man is gripped by a strong and powerful emotion when he sits down next to the woman he loves with a baby in the cradle beside them. And although it was a hospital that she lay and I sat next to her – it is always that eternal poetry of Christmas night with the infant in the stable, as the old Dutch painters conceived it, and Millet and Breton – a light in the darkness, a brightness in the middle of a dark night. And so I hung the large etching after Rembrandt over it, the two women by the cradle, one of them reading from the Bible by candlelight, while the great shadows cast a deep chiaroscuro over the whole room.

I've hung a few other prints there, all of them very beautiful, the Christus Consolator by Scheffer, a photograph after Boughton, *Le semeur* and *Les bêcheurs* by Millet, *Le buisson* by Ruysdael, splendid large wood engravings by Herkomer and Frank Holl, and *Le banc des pauvres* by De Groux.

Now then, in the small kitchen I have only the barest necessities, but such that if the woman recovers before me she will find all the essentials and be able to get a meal ready in 10 minutes, in short, such as will show her, when she steps into a house which has flowers in the window where she will be sitting, that someone has been giving her a great deal of thought. And upstairs in the large attic, a big bedstead for the two of us and an old one for the child, with all the bedding in good order.

But please don't think I bought all this in one fell swoop. We had already started buying a few bits and pieces here and there during the winter, although at the time I didn't know how things would turn out and where we would finish up. And the result is now, thank God, that this little nest is ready for her after all her pain.

How her mother and I have been exerting ourselves these last few days, especially her. And the most difficult thing was the bedding, everything made or altered by ourselves – we bought straw, sea-grass, coarse linen, etc., and stuffed the mattresses ourselves in the attic. Otherwise it would have been too expensive.

And now, after having paid my old landlord, I still have 40 guilders left out of what you sent me. True, I have to pay 10 guilders of that tomorrow to the hospital, but for that I'll get food and medical treatment there for 14 days. So that this month, although it includes the full cost of moving and settling in and Sien's return after her confinement with all that entails, the cradle, etc., I shall be able to manage without your sending me more than the usual.

On est sûr de périr à part, on ne sauve qu'ensemble [United we stand, divided we fall] – I believe this saying to be the truth and I base my life on it, might that be a mistake or a miscalculation?

You see, brother, I think of you a very great deal these days, in the first place because everything, all that I have, is really yours, my lust for life and my energy, too, for I am able to get going now with your help and can feel my capacity to work flowing back.

But I think of you so often for another reason, too. I remember that only a short while ago I came back to a house that was not a real home – not full of warmth as it is now – where two great voids stared at me night and day. There was no woman, there was no child, and though I do not believe there was any the less grief, I do believe there was less love. And those two voids kept me company to left and right, in the street, at work, everywhere and always. There was no woman, there was no child.

Look, I don't know if you've ever had that feeling which sometimes forces a sort of sigh or groan from one when one is alone: oh God, where is my wife, oh God, where is my child – is being alone really living? Thinking of you, I'm sure I'm not mistaken in supposing that some of this same melancholy is in you, too, perhaps less passionately and nerve-wrackingly than in me, but nevertheless to some extent and at certain moments. And I don't know whether you will approve of it or not, whether you will judge it right or wrong of me, when I tell you that now and then that is how I think of you.

This much, however, I believe about you, and this much I know about myself, notwithstanding my nervousness, that in both our characters there is a foundation of serenity – serenity *quand bien même* [despite everything], so that neither of us is unhappy, our serenity being based on the fact that we truly and sincerely love our trade and our work, and that art occupies a large part of our thoughts and makes life interesting. So I most certainly do not want to make you melancholy, but only to explain my conduct and philosophy of life by dint of something in your own temperament.

And that brings me to Father – do you think Father would go on being cold and finding fault – beside a cradle? You see, a cradle is not like anything else – there is no trickery about it. And no matter what Sien's past may have been, I know no other Sien than the one from last winter, than that mother in the hospital whose hand pressed mine as we looked with tears in our eyes at the baby for whom we had both been toiling all winter.

And look here – *entre nous, soit dit* [just between us] – without sermonizing – if there is no God, there is nevertheless one very close by somewhere, and one feels His presence at moments like this. Which is tantamount to saying something for which I would happily substitute the straightforward statement: I believe in a God, and that it is His will that man does not live alone but with a wife and child, if everything is to be normal.

And it is my hope that you will understand the way I have behaved and take it for what it is, namely natural, and that you will not think of it as tricking me or being tricked. And, my dear fellow, when you do come – and if you can, come soon to have a look – then please take Sien, just as I do, for a mother and an ordinary housewife and for nothing else. For that is what she really is and in my opinion all the better for having known *le revers de la medaille* [the other side of the coin].

The last thing I did was to get a few plates, forks, spoons and knives – for neither Sien nor I had any until now. I thought, 3 people, so 3 sets, but then I had another thought – an extra set for Theo or for Father when they come and have a look. So your little spot by the window and your place at our table are ready and waiting for you ... So, I only want to say – you are definitely coming, aren't you...and Father as well? I thought it sensible and tactful of you not to have spoken about it to Father and Mother as yet – now the confinement is over and the flowers are out again – and it was better for Father and Mother not to be mixed up in it before now. I mean, I thought it best to keep the thorns to myself and to let Father and Mother see nothing but the rose. Thus when the woman is back and I am better, I should like to talk about it in the way I told you, so should they ask you anything now, you could well drop a hint. Goodbye, good-night,
Ever yours, Vincent