

Threshold



1.

TWO BROTHERS, ONE APARTMENT, PARIS, 1887

*There was a time when I loved Vincent
very much, and he was my best friend,
but that's over now.*

—Theo van Gogh to his sister Willemien, March 14, 1887

THEO'S BROTHER VINCENT has been living with him for just over a year, and Theo cannot take it anymore.

It is “almost intolerable for me at home,” he writes to their sister Wil in March 1887. Even though Theo has moved them to a larger apartment, this one still feels too small to hold Vincent's outsized personality and Theo's desperate need for quiet. He's dying to tell Vincent to move out, but he knows if he does, Vincent will just be more determined to stay.

Dogged. Contrary. Stubborn. Vincent.

Theo van Gogh is the manager of Goupil & Cie, a successful art gallery on the fashionable Boulevard Montmartre in Paris. Theo is good at his job, but it's terrifically frustrating for him right now. The owners of the gallery want him to sell paintings in the traditional style because they're popular and bring in money. Though Theo certainly needs to make money—he has to support himself *and* Vincent *and* help their mother—he wants to sell art that is truly exciting to him, paintings by the Impressionists and their

crowd, friends of his and Vincent's: Émile Bernard, Paul Gauguin, Claude Monet, and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec. Soon maybe even paintings by Vincent himself.

But these modern painters don't bring in enough money, so it's a constant battle with his bosses. Theo *has* convinced them to let him set up a little display of Impressionists on the entresol. The entresol is not the ground floor, and it's not the first floor. It's the floor in between. It's as if the paintings are there, but not quite yet, a glimpse into the future. It's a start. But he spends his days working hard and comes back to the apartment at 54 Rue Lepic exasperated and exhausted. What he needs at home is rest and *peace*, but instead he gets VINCENT.

Theo loves his brother's brilliant mind, his gregariousness, even his fiery temperament. Vincent can be a good antidote to Theo's own inwardness and tendency to melancholy.

But after so many months of the cold Parisian winter spent indoors with Vincent, Theo is a wreck both mentally and physically. A few months back, in December, he'd actually been paralyzed—he couldn't move at all for a few days. Although Theo knows he can't blame his bad health on his brother, to get better he needs a break from Vincent's gusts, his squalls, his constant talking and lecturing.

And, to make matters worse, lately Vincent has been furious at *him*. "He loses no opportunity to let me see that he despises me and I inspire aversion in him," Theo tells Wil.

A portrait done of the brothers now would be sizzling with streaks of red-orange paint.

WHEN VINCENT AND THEO were young, growing up in the village of Zundert in the Netherlands, their father, a pastor, had written a special prayer. All

the Van Gogh children had to memorize it and recite it when they left home:

“O Lord, join us intimately to one another and let our love for Thee make that bond ever stronger.”

Theo has valiantly been living up to that prayer. He’s been Vincent’s best friend for most of the last fifteen years, since they made a pledge to each other on a walk. And through many ups and downs, and storms, for the past seven years, Theo has been giving Vincent money for paint, pencils and pens, ink, canvases, paper, clothing, food, and until he moved in, rent.

On March 30 Vincent turns thirty-four; May 1 Theo will be thirty. They’ve made it this far in their journey together—how can Theo kick him out now?

VINCENT AND THEO VAN GOGH look a lot alike: They both have red hair, though Vincent’s is redder, Theo’s more reddish blond. Vincent has freckles; Theo does not. They are both medium height—around five feet seven—but Vincent is broader, bigger; Theo slighter, thinner. They have pale blue eyes that sometimes darken to greenish blue. They are definitely brothers.

But they couldn’t give more different impressions.

Vincent in his workman’s clothes spends his days painting, outside if it’s not too cold or inside the apartment. He is covered with Parisian soot and grime, overlaid with splatters and spatters of paint: ochre, brick red, lemon chrome, cobalt blue, green, black, zinc white.

He doesn’t bathe often, which is typical for a nineteenth-century man, but it’s even less often than he *should*. He *stinks*—of body odor, dirt, food, paint, turpentine, wine, and tobacco. He usually has a pipe in his mouth, though he has very few teeth left, and those that are left are rotten.

And yet Vincent looks healthy: he's robust, sturdy, and vehemently alive. Passion pours from him, as if the world he's trying to capture is inside of him, bursting to come out.

Theo is tidy, well-dressed in a suit, looking very much the proper Parisian businessman. His features are finer, more refined. He would be handsome if he weren't so sick: he's thin and pale; he looks as though the life is being sucked out of him. He feels that way, too.

IN MANY WAYS, Vincent's move to Paris has been good for both brothers. Thanks to Theo's influence, to the artists he's met, and to his own tenacious work, Vincent's paintings are better than ever: they are imbued with color and light and Vincent's own particular style.

And Vincent has given Theo more of a life. He'd been lonely in Paris, *so lonely*, and now, even though he doesn't have a wife and family, Theo at least has a circle of friends through Vincent. For that he is grateful. So even though he's desperate, Theo doesn't kick out his brother. Yet.

In April, Theo acknowledges to another sister, Lies, that he's been ill, "particularly in my spirit, and have had a great struggle with myself." If he were well, he could deal with Vincent.

In fact both brothers do better when there is sun and warm air and hours spent outside. The Parisian days are getting longer—by minutes, anyway. If only spring would arrive! But there's still too much gloom outside and in.

Gloom *and* fire.

It's as if there are two Vincents, Theo has told Wil. He intimately knows both sides of his brother. Sometimes Vincent is ebulliently happy and kind, sometimes furiously angry and difficult. He has a huge heart, but he's stubborn and argumentative.

THRESHOLD

Vincent argues not only with Theo, and with himself, but also with friends and people he admires. One cold and fiery night in the near future, Vincent will fight with another roommate. And that argument will end in blood.



Entresol

A GLIMPSE INTO THE FUTURE



2.

TWO BROTHERS, A HOSPITAL BED

*I*T IS A YEAR and a half later, the end of December 1888. Vincent is no longer in Paris; he is in Arles, a town in the South of France, living with a painter friend.

Theo is in Paris, happier than he's ever been.

The brothers are separated by almost five hundred miles.

The day before Christmas, Theo receives a telegram.

Vincent is gravely wounded.

Theo goes to his brother at once, on the night train from Paris to Arles. The journey takes sixteen hours. When Theo arrives at his brother's hospital bed, Vincent is barely conscious. He's got a bandage wound around his head to stop blood seeping from a severed ear.

The brothers talk as Vincent drifts in and out of consciousness. He is sometimes delirious. It is not certain he will live.

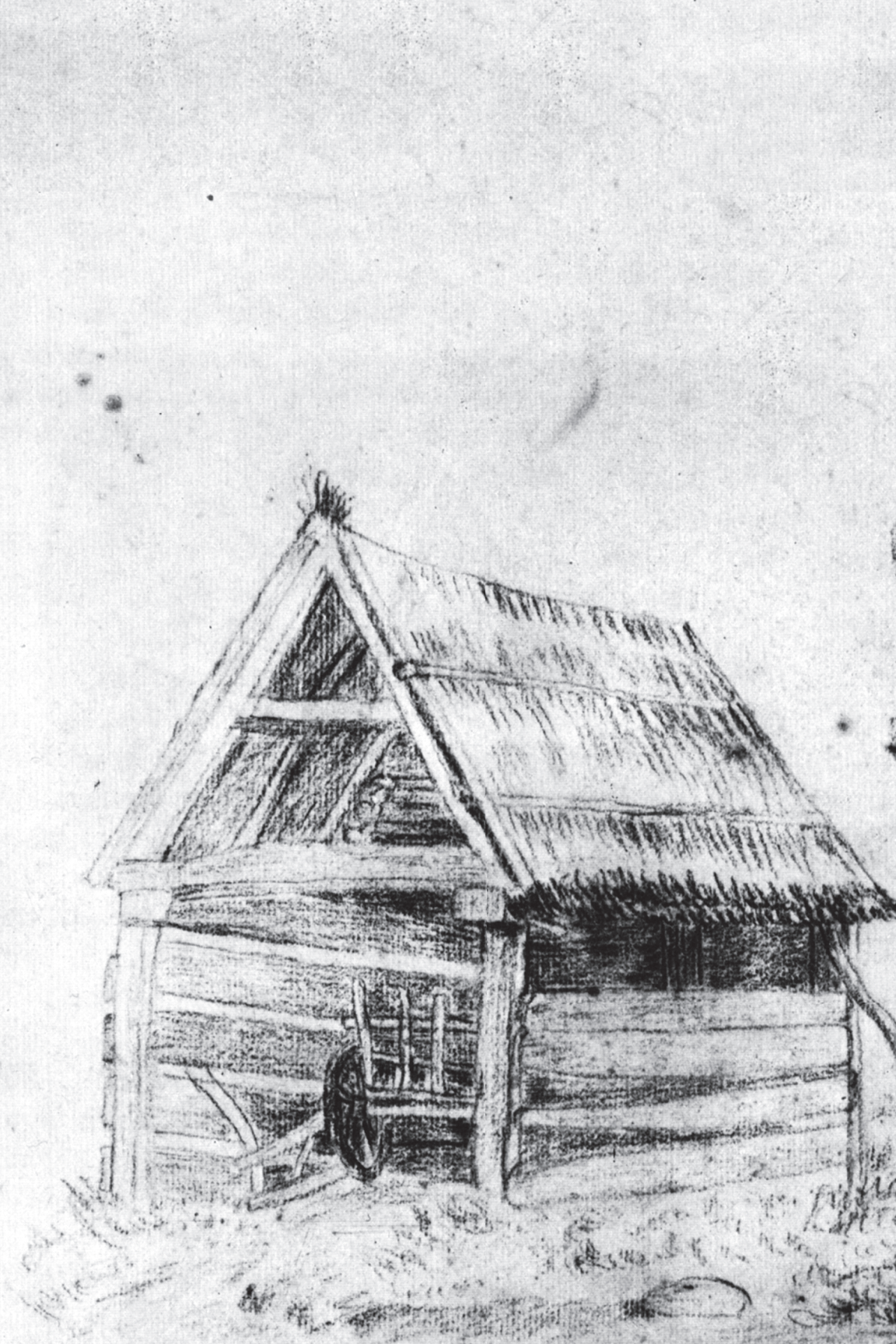
Theo is bereft. He lays his head next to his brother's on the pillow.

Vincent feels Theo next to him. Almost drained of life, he is

VINCENT AND THEO

transported back to their childhood in the Netherlands, to their small town, to a time he remembers as simple and pure and beautiful, a time when the two brothers shared an attic room, a life, a future.

He whispers into Theo's ear, "Just like in Zundert."



GALLERY ONE:

Beginnings

1852-1872



3.

TWO VINCENTS

VINCENT AND THEO'S FAMILY began with death.

There was an older brother.

Their mother, Anna van Gogh-Carbentus, gave birth to her first child on March 30, 1852. The baby was stillborn. *Levenloos*, the Dutch word for lifeless, is written on the registry in the Zundert town hall. Next to this the father signed his own name: Theodorus van Gogh. There is no name recorded for the baby.

But they *had* given him a name: Vincent, after his father's father, and they buried him in the cemetery next to the church where Theodorus was the pastor. He was the first stillborn baby to be buried in that cemetery.

Anna and Dorus lived in the parsonage right next to the church and cemetery, and there, in their bedroom, exactly one year later on March 30, 1853, at eleven in the morning, Anna gave birth to another baby boy, this one alive and healthy.

They named *him* Vincent, too. The eldest son, named after his father's father, like his dead brother. His middle name was Willem, after his

mother's father. Theodorus registered this baby, too, in the Zundert town hall. The serial number happened to be twenty-nine, just as his dead brother's had been the year before. But this time there was a name filled in: Vincent Willem van Gogh.

And, unlike his dead brother, Vincent Willem van Gogh was baptized, three and a half weeks later, on April 24. Although according to the Christian faith this ceremony gave him a clean slate, he did not have a blank canvas on which to paint his life. The first Vincent was always there, in the family history and on the gravestone in the churchyard right next door:

VINCENT VAN GOGH 1852

SUFFER THE LITTLE CHILDREN TO COME UNTO ME, FOR SUCH
IS THE KINGDOM OF GOD.

It's almost as if there were two portraits, side by side, two Vincent van Goghs. One stayed a newborn, frozen in time, while the other grew from a baby to a toddler, to a freckled, red-headed little boy.

But there was just one painting—of the eldest, the son upon whom, traditionally, parents placed their hopes. The first baby Vincent is a *pentimento*, a ghostly image under the second Vincent's portrait, the picture of a child who might have been.

Often the first painting is covered up completely, gone forever, never to appear. But the portrait of the first Vincent will become more and more visible as the living Vincent grows up.

4.

THOSE DAYS

AFTER VINCENT CAME FIVE more babies, all born healthy and at home: Anna (1855); Theodorus, called Theo (1857); Elisabeth, called Lies (1859); Willemien, called Wil (1862); and fourteen years after Vincent, the youngest, Cornelis, called Cor (1867).

The house at 26 Markt was tiny, and with each new baby, more crowded. But Anna and Dorus didn't mind; they wanted their family to be close now, and forever.

The closer they were, the easier it was to preserve their own values. The Van Gogh home and church community was a small island of Protestantism in the much larger Catholic community of Zundert, and all North Brabant, the province in the southern Netherlands where they lived. Reverend Van Gogh and Anna felt strongly about bringing up their children with a sense of duty, charity, and morality. They were determined to insulate them from what they thought of as the rougher and wilder Catholic community. Dorus wrote the family prayer to embody their values and hopes for their children: that they should be joined intimately to each other and

that their love of God would make the familial bond strong, always.

Anna and Dorus van Gogh placed as much importance on this world as the next and valued hard work. They wanted to bring up their sons to be self-sufficient. And they raised all their children not only to help those in need but also to revere culture, society, reputation, and all the niceties that came with it.

They felt strongly that their children should be well educated in both the arts and the sciences; they saw God as a father who educated people through people. So although they wanted Vincent, Anna, Theo, and the younger siblings to adhere to their values, they did not want to close them off from the world. To encourage them all to learn about the world and develop their talents, Anna and Dorus had magazines and newspapers delivered to the house.

The Van Goghs' parsonage was fancier and more decorated than most other village houses. They had fine furniture, and Anna filled their home with flower cuttings from the garden and nearby fields. Since Anna was an excellent artist, and specialized, like a lot of women of the time did, in painting flowers and plants, she hung her own beautiful botanical watercolors on the walls. She also crocheted and embroidered, and her handiwork was on display around the house.

Dorus reserved the biggest room in the front on the first floor for his duties as the pastor. That's where he held meetings, Bible study, coffee hour after church on Sundays, and catechisms when the church was too cold in the winter. The front room had its own fireplace, floors made of pine instead of the usual tile, and wallpaper.

Aside from the public part of the house, the only other luxury was the privy in a shed attached to the house; the Van Goghs didn't have to walk outside to use the bathroom. The rest of 26 Markt was a simple and cozy home for Vincent and his sisters and brothers. Lying wounded and sick in that hospital bed in Arles years later, Vincent could see the parsonage

vividly, the details of his childhood home indelibly etched in his mind's eye, a particularly rendered painting, staying the same always.

"I again saw each room in the house at Zundert," he wrote to Theo, "each path, each plant in the garden, the views round about, the fields, the neighbours, the cemetery, the church, our kitchen garden behind—right up to the magpies' nest in a tall acacia in the cemetery."

The front part of the house was at least 225 years old when Dorus moved in. (He wasn't yet married when he became Zundert's pastor.) Other parts of the house were old, too, but had been added later as needed. It was narrow—the first floor of the house was only as wide as two windows and a door. Dorus and Anna slept in the middle room on the first floor. From there you could go down to the basement or up to the second floor. The second floor was even narrower than the first, essentially an attic, the house tapering under a slanted roof. It was in a room under the eaves that Vincent slept, and Theo, too, when he was old enough, the two brothers in a bed under the eaves, their heads together.

Eventually all the children slept on the second floor, and a maid, and later a governess, Dorus and Anna putting up walls to divide already small rooms into smaller ones. Pa wrote his sermons in another room under the eaves, a room filled with books and prints that Vincent would always remember.

IN THE MORNINGS the children climbed out of bed and went downstairs to the back room for breakfast, maybe a cup of hot chocolate. This room had a well pump, a fireplace, an oven, and a stove. When he was cold, Vincent would wrap his arms around the stovepipe to get warm.

It was in this room that the family spent most of their time: they ate their meals, played games, and read novels and fairy tales together in the evenings. The room faced the yard and overlooked the long, sloping

garden, which was filled with flowers: bright red geraniums, sweet-smelling mignonette, and purslane with red, orange, yellow, and pink blossoms. The garden had fruit trees, too, and berries, herbs, and pea vines in one corner. A beech hedge fenced in the garden. There were more vegetables, including potatoes, in a larger vegetable garden farther behind the house, next to a field of rye. A hired gardener helped them with the harvest. The family kept three goats, too.

When it was warm enough, Vincent and Theo and their sisters Anna and Lies played in the kitchen garden. They ran, climbed, and dug in the sandy dirt, building sand castles as if they were at the beach. Vincent invented games for the younger children, and one day they had so much fun that they declared the most beautiful rosebush in the garden now belonged to him, a thank-you gift.

The happy intimacy of his childhood home stayed with Vincent forever. Wounded in Arles, hovering in that space between life and death, his head was filled with “primitive memories of all of you, of those days.”

5.

NATURE'S ROOTS

WHEN DORUS HAD MOVED into the house at 26 Markt in 1849, Zundert was a market town thick with commerce, a gateway into the Netherlands from next-door Belgium. Carriages, carts, and wagons carrying merchants, goods for sale, and travelers—the outside world—passed by the parsonage every day. Stagecoaches and mail coaches changed horses at the market square, just down the street. Servants gathered at the town pump to get water and gossip. On many days the square jammed with so much traffic that nothing could move. Townsfolk complained about the congestion, the noise, and when it was dry, the dust clouds the traffic stirred up, making the air so thick and dirty they couldn't open the windows of their houses.

On Sundays, when the square was much quieter, the constable read the village news on the steps of the town hall, followed by the clerk, who read the legal news from the notary's office.

By the time Vincent's name was entered into the ledger in the town hall, his existence recorded and announced, a railroad had diverted some of the traffic away from Zundert. With fewer travelers passing through, the

town quieted down a bit, though the parsonage fronted on the main street, which was still crowded and busy.

And yet Vincent and Theo always thought of themselves as country boys because the back of the house was on the edge of town, and Zundert was surrounded by “black fields with the young green wheat,” fields of rye and corn, and heath-covered moors.

A boy could walk out through the garden gate and straight into fields of rye, and beyond that into meadows strewn with wildflowers to pick, pine forests to ramble in, and streams to follow. Vincent loved to wander, to discover, to collect. He often left home with a fishnet and a bottle, and came back with treasures from nature: a bird’s nest or an egg, stones, and unusual wildflowers that he had a knack for finding when no one else in the family could. He especially enjoyed catching beetles and water bugs from the streams, but above all else, he was passionate about collecting itself.

Though Vincent mostly walked alone, Theo often rambled with him, once he was old enough and allowed to go. He didn’t have Vincent’s passion for collecting, nor did the other children. But they always wanted to know what treasures their big brother had found, crowding around him to see his trophies when he came back through the garden gate.

After showing Theo and his sisters what he’d got, Vincent would go to his little attic room to organize his collection and mount the bugs. He’d carefully pin them in a box, which first he’d lined with clean white paper. And then he’d neatly label the insects with their Latin names.

“Copying nature absolutely isn’t the ideal,” Vincent wrote to Theo when he finally found his way to being a painter. “But knowing nature in such a way that what one does is fresh and true—that’s what many now lack. . . . You will say, but everyone has surely seen landscapes and figures from childhood. . . . Question: did everyone who saw them—heath, grass-land, fields, woods—also love them, and the snow and the rain and the storm?”

GALLERY ONE: BEGINNINGS

Vincent knew and loved nature in all her moods.

When he was a lost young man, he would walk for miles and miles without money or food, the rain pouring down on him. He would sleep outside, in the cold, and in the heat.

Years later he would paint under the hot sun day after day for hours and hours to capture fields, flowers, the sun itself. He battled the fierce mistral winds in the South of France, only giving up when his easel would not stay anchored.

Nature was part of him; its extremes part of his very being.

He would rush to a storm to see it up close, to be inside it.

Vincent adored a good storm.

His parents did not.