

DAVID DENNY
Gauguin's
Razor

December 23, 1888, Arles, France

Neighbors

The entire nasty interlude with Monsieur Van Gogh came to a head the day the other crazy drunk stepped off the train—the one they call Gauguin. More than once the constable was called to escort the pair from Ginoux's café back to the butter-yellow house of Place Lamartine, from which erupted all manner of threats and accusations and fistfights.

Only later did we discover that Van Gogh had wooed him here with promises of sunflowers and tobacco, women and booze. Perhaps, like all advertisement, it was merely artful exaggeration. Yet Gauguin swallowed the bait and allowed himself to be reeled in.

There is no need for us to overstate our case. Any reasonable person would object to their flagrant disrespect for the law. Oh, there were a few days there at the start when the two of them gleefully lugged their easels to the edge of the fields and returned at dusk with bright splotches of paint in their beards. Those days seemed peaceable enough for all concerned.

They were not to last. Perhaps it should be said that one cannot really blame Gauguin, who grew weary, as did we, of Van Gogh's moods—the brooding clouds of anxiety and obsession, the lightning strikes of jealousy and anger. Let us be frank, where Monsieur Van Gogh is concerned, it is much easier to live with the pictures than with the man himself.

All praise to the distant brother for keeping him in oils and brushes. His daily bread, however, came from us. The women of Arles fed him the way you would a caged animal—to keep him from striking.

We were not surprised when on that December night one of them dripped blood through the streets. No one knows exactly what happened. To this day, most of us think Gauguin drew his razor. It would not have been out of character. But young Rachel received the wounded matador's offering, spreading the tall tale of self-mutilation.

The tragedy was followed by three days of hard rain. Within the yellow walls we heard weeping and splintering wood. When Gauguin boarded the train for Paris, we prayed Van Gogh would follow. Yes, we signed the petition

to evict. Any reasonable person would have. We would each of us rather live with the pictures than the man.

One cannot really blame Gauguin. And surely we ourselves are not to blame for the problems of that red-headed madman. Some people manage to carry their troubles lightly. Some seethe with a restless fury that cannot be subdued. Over at the asylum in Saint-Rémy they said there were nights when he howled at the moon and ate paint. So many now think of his talent as a blessing; truly, it may have only been the husk of a curse. Certainly no one who met him expected him to grow old. The haunted, swirling colors in his sky tell you he would die young.

Rachel

I was behind the drawn curtain in the parlor with my Tuesday regular, who had brought us a bottle of plum brandy. We heard a fracas out in the street, which turned out to be Vincent's righteous neighbors shouting insults. When he came to the door, Madame Larousse placed her hand on Vincent's chest and spoke a few kind words to try and calm him. But his mind was in a state that words couldn't reach.

His face was streaked with tears and his sweater was ripped; it hung around his waist in shreds. Seeing the blood, Madame sent Cherie to fetch Dr. Rey. With eyes lowered, Vincent handed me a gift wrapped in newspaper. Naturally, I unwrapped it. When I realized what it was, I fainted. Our houseman, Monsieur Rainer, caught me and laid me on the divan.

When I came to, Vincent was pacing in front of the fireplace and Dr. Rey was just hanging up his hat. Monsieur Rainer offered me more brandy. "Vincent," I said. "Why?"

"Gauguin is leaving! He said he won't remain in Arles. Too provincial. And I am . . . I have . . . driven him away with my . . . my fits."

"Come here, my darling." He laid his head in my lap. Vomit came into my throat. I laid my scarf over the bloody flap of what remained. While Dr. Rey knelt and examined the wound, I turned my head away. Madame shoed the crowd. The young constable arrived with his notebook. Madame told him what she knew; he jotted notes. I breathed the way the midwife had taught me, to keep from fainting again.

But I fainted anyway, and Monsieur Rainer carried me upstairs, laying the folded newspaper on the table beneath the window. By morning the blood had dried, and it looked something like the mushrooms the monks gather in the forest.

I have never told anyone where I buried it.

* * *

Thereafter when I spotted Vincent, he couldn't make eye contact. Always his head cast down, his nervous hands like birds at his side, his shuffling gait. He was a man to be pitied, not a man to be adored.

The last time I saw him, he was headed toward the fields one morning, easel on his shoulder like a soldier's rifle. He spoke of wheat like waves on the ocean and of a road that melted into the sun. He told me he was a crow, pecking at leftovers after harvest. He spoke that way when the curse was upon him. There was no succor for him in such moods. He said to me, "You were Gauguin's favorite."

When I reached out to touch the wound, he knocked my hand away and crossed the avenue. I might have followed, but Madame Larousse had sent me to fetch flowers for our table. I watched him walk away in that crooked way he always walked, as if half of him wanted to turn and the other half to go straight.

Gauguin

My dear Bernard,

I am leaving for Paris tomorrow to settle some matters with Theo van Gogh, who has sold three of my paintings. Apparently someone other than Monet and Renoir are now able to move the public. I will deliver six more canvases, all completed under great stress, with Vincent arguing with me through each stroke of the brush.

I cannot remain in Arles one moment more. The weather here is dreary, the mistrals cold and wet, and the town, such as it is, with the exception of one lovely whore, filled with dolts. The madness that visited Vincent in Paris has now taken up permanent residence in his skull. Our friend suffers in body, mind, and spirit. Worse, he has become a most pitiful object of ridicule and derision: the wicked urchins of this province follow him through the streets, pelting him with stones and provoking him to fits

that I can only describe as demonic. The morning after the worst of these episodes, he became catatonic, unable to talk or eat, like a wounded animal cowering in the corner of its nest. Or like a house cat who crawls beneath the bed to die. I will recommend to Theo that he commit his brother to an asylum for his own safety.

Three nights ago we went to the local café for absinthe. Vincent had been on edge all day, and I thought a glowing glass of the green fairy might bring relief. He hurled his glass at me because of a comment I made to the owner's wife. You know the sort of comment I mean. I say things all the time. This was nothing out of the ordinary. We have both painted this woman's portrait, and I assumed that we had shared her in jest and goodwill, like an amiable whore. But I must have struck a jealous vein, and we ended up exchanging words. Perhaps we exchanged more than just words, for we found ourselves tangling in the street outside. I subdued him and returned to the café to further pursue my prey. Bernard, you know me when I am on the scent; I cannot be distracted or waylaid.

The next morning, Vincent was escorted back to his ridiculous yellow house by a uniformed fool, a bandage wrapped around his head as though he had just returned from the Prussian front. It is lucky you did not join us here after all. I will tell Theo what you said, Bernard, about how some of the young doctors have begun to specialize in maladies of the soul; perhaps there is hope for Vincent yet.

As for me, I have had my fill of "civilization." In spring I hope to depart for warmer climes, preferably Madagascar. Surely the future of painting is in the tropics, and I grow increasingly weary of domestic burdens. Travel is the only thing to jar me from this malaise. The savage will return to the wild. Why not join me?

Roulin

I never understood Vincent's love for Gauguin. The man was like a looming hurricane; when his havoc came ashore, it swept away every human feeling in its path. Many here said the same of Vincent, but not my Augustine and not my children and not me. He loved Augustine's fish stew, appearing at the kitchen window whenever the pot was on the stove. The portraits were his only way of repaying her for all the meals he devoured after my postal satchel

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was empty and after his hands began to ache from a day of furious strokes. This was our way with him: Augustine kept him fed; I kept him drunk. Before Gauguin arrived, many was the night I propped him up and hobbled him homeward.

But Gauguin—Gauguin would leave him sleeping in the street for the constable to find. There is no doubt Gauguin cut him, probably aiming for the throat.

Sometimes Vincent had me read Theo's letters aloud. Normally they soothed him.

But on the morning of that fateful day, the letter set him to pacing. Usually news of a wedding in the family is received with joy. But Vincent was shaken, agitated. If I had to guess, I'd say he feared that a wife would mean fewer visits from Theo, and fewer parcels of his precious art supplies.

To make matters worse, when Gauguin awoke, he came outside holding one of Vincent's canvases. "If you could only learn how to hold your brush," he mocked, "these mangled sunflowers might make sense." Vincent wrested the picture from his grasp and set it back on the easel.

Late that night Dr. Rey appeared at our door. I was already awake, having heard the commotion down at Place Lamartine. He gave my Augustine and me some laudanum to see Vincent through, and we passed the hours of darkness at his side until dawn.

Augustine settled the children and nursed Vincent, while I dosed him.

* * *

I am bigger than Gauguin, and I have no fear of him. I only wish I had hustled him away sooner. I was at the

I am haunted at length by voices and delusions and violent impulses . . .

station collecting the mail from Paris the day he left. He jostled past me with Vincent's pipe in his teeth. I said to him, "Good riddance to bad garbage, thief." He snorted with a superior nod as he boarded the train.

The women of Arles called Gauguin "the beast." He looked the part and played it well, flaunting the conventions of village life. A man of appetites, he lived to drink and fight and fuck. Theo knew this well and cautioned his brother. But Vincent loved all creatures with a pure heart. And Theo—well, Theo was his junior. There are truths you can't hear from the lips of a brother, and there are secrets you can't confide in a brother's ear. But you can speak freely to a friend over absinthe . . . secrets passed between friends are a sacred trust, and I will keep Vincent's confessions to my grave.

Vincent

Dear Theo,

It will no doubt settle your worries to know that I have attained some measure of serenity here, due in no small part to Dr. Peyron's insights about the nature of my malady—a kind of epilepsy that strikes the brain like a storm of fireworks, then leaves one paralyzed in a stupor for days afterward. The knowledge that mine is a disease that may be treated rather than a torment of my own dark choosing is a balm to me. The regimen here at Saint-Paul's of regular if unremarkable meals, fresh air, and twice-weekly baths has set me on a steady course. Here there are no spying neighbors, no street boys throwing rocks and taunts, no police, and no creditors. I have been allowed to set up

a small studio in one of the vacant rooms, and in the past twelve days I have begun a flurry of new pieces.

I am presently at work on a study of a starry sky above the sleepy town of Saint-Rémy. While at work this afternoon, I unconsciously reached for my phantom ear and the disaster with Gauguin sprang to life again in my mind. Instead of reliving the tragedy anew, I looked through the window bars at the sky and thought of the Japanese monks, how they would simply enter the landscape and dwell there until the luminous spirit that animates all nature awakened their vision. I felt released from my obsession, and I returned my brush to the swirling strokes of a looming cypress, a dark echo of the flames burning in my sky. I have been staring at these trees since I arrived—the valley below is rife with them—but I have not truly *seen* them until now. Theo, it is as if I have been given a glimpse into eternity, so vivid is the pulse that moves through me. Dr. Peyron speculates that this state is a consequence of my epilepsy. When I said to him that I have always had this odd level of vision, in varying degrees, since our childhood in Zundert, he explained that I likely was born with the condition and recent stresses have called it forth in full measure.

But these brief ecstasies are fleeting. In the worst of it—when I am haunted at length by voices and delusions and violent impulses—I fear I may never recover equilibrium. And in these times I reach across the dark abyss for your open hand. It is to you, my dear brother, that I owe all the good, if any good at all, that has entered my otherwise tormented life.

My deepest congratulations and good wishes to you and Jo upon your marriage. I hope to be able to visit your new apartment and perhaps hang this new picture in a place where it would bring you both joy. Thank you for the parcel of colors; please send more when possible, already my supply grows sparse.

Theo

My Dearest Jo,

This has undoubtedly been the hardest day of my life. The carpenter spent the morning building Vincent's coffin in the little room here where he had his studio, while the mortician was in the next room preparing my brother's body for burial. I spent those hours sorting through some

of the new paintings, which I displayed around the billiard room here at the Auberge Ravoux, where we held the service. The room reeked of carbolic acid.

I was comforted by a few devoted representatives from our mutual circle of friends: Émile Bernard, Lucien Pissarro, the dealer Tanguy, and Dr. Paul Gachet, who treated my brother's wound. Gauguin was conspicuously absent. I cannot help but trace the beginning of Vincent's final struggle to Gauguin's stay in Arles two years ago.

I will never forgive myself for failing Vincent. You say I shouldn't blame myself and I love you for wanting to protect me from guilt, but he was my brother, my flesh and blood. Why was I able to sell Gauguin's work, and Monet's, even Cézanne's, and not the splendid and unique work of my own dear brother? He wanted nothing more than a taste of their success, to be appreciated for the advances he made, and I wanted nothing more for him. Perhaps what he told me once is true after all: "My paintings will mature quietly like fine wine in a cellar." I cling to this hope for his sake.

Your brother Andries was a great help to me today. Together he and I led the procession to the burial site, a sunny spot amid the wheat fields. The entire company stood in the sweltering midday while Gachet said some words. We poured in the dirt. Gradually, the gracious company left me alone on the heath to weep. I lost track of time. Eventually Andries fetched me as evening fell. He had already accompanied our guests to the train station. Tonight I have eaten a few bites and drunk some of the wine that Ravoux's daughter brought to our room. Andries and I will complete a few final tasks tomorrow and return to Paris the next day. Kiss little Vincent for me. I am gladder than ever we named him after his uncle but pray that his life is brighter and happier than that of his namesake.

Looking through Vincent's meager belongings, among the half-spent paint tubes and the still-wet canvases, I came across an unsent letter to Gauguin. In it my brother muses upon creation as a failed study made by the great Artist on a bad day, resulting in a world teeming with the beauty that only a master could evoke, but damaged by his hurried strokes and ruined attempts at innovation, leaving us disappointed and wanting to see more of his work in order to judge it fairly. While our father would never approve of this theology, I cannot help but see it as Vincent's gentle

attempt to forgive God for the broken life he produced. He ends the reverie by saying, "We must not take this life for anything but what it is and go on hoping that in some other life we'll see something better than this."

David Denny's fiction has recently appeared in *Narrative*, *New Ohio Review*, and *Red Wheelbarrow*. His books include the short story collection *The Gill Man in Purgatory* and the poetry collection *Some Divine Commotion*, both available from Shanti Arts. He lives in Silicon Valley and teaches writing at De Anza College. More information: www.daviddenny.net.