An Infamous Infatuation

Anna Smitshuizen was baptized on March 28, 1751, in the Reformed Church of Alkmaar, a small town some forty kilometers northwest of Amsterdam. As only one family with that surname appears in Alkmaar’s population records in the relevant period, we are sure it is hers. The fact that her parents had two Annas baptized poses a slight problem. They had conferred the same name on their first child, in February 1744. Their second was a son, born in April 1745. The “child of Gerrit Smitshuizen,” mentioned in the burial register on December 14, 1745, must either be the boy or the first Anna. It is reasonable to assume it was the daughter, which led the parents to use the name Anna again in 1751. Moreover, had the later murder victim been born in 1744, it is less likely that she thought Van Gogh too old for her or that her neighbors in 1775 referred to her as a girl. In Amsterdam everyone called her Annaatje, a diminutive for Anna. This conveyed the same sense as Annie in modern English, which will be her name here.

The lower Rhineland was the original home of Annie’s parents. Her father, Gerrit Smitshuizen, was born in Xanten, her mother, Jannetje Kluiten, in Meurs. They had followed the footsteps of thousands of migrants who traveled to Holland each year from the western and northern parts of the Empire in search of work. Among them were many young women, looking for employment in domestic service. Jannetje was probably such a lone migrant. She brought no witnesses to the publication of the banns; the record mentioned that her mother lived in Meurs. Bride as well as bridegroom listed an address in Alkmaar, where Jannetje possibly worked as a servant girl. We can easily imagine the young man and
woman meeting in this provincial town and, with their shared regional background, becoming attracted to each other. Since Gerrit’s father lived in Amsterdam at the time, it means that the bridegroom, too, was independent at an early age. They married in Amsterdam on February 17, 1743, but they remained residents of Alkmaar. Gerrit was twenty-three and Jannetje twenty, a young couple by early modern standards. Apart from the three children already mentioned, they had a daughter in December 1746 and a son in July 1754. On October 18, 1757, Jannetje Kluiten was buried at age thirty-four. Annie was six then.

Whereas Annie’s parents occupied the lower edge of the statistical curve of marriage ages, her father was a conformist with respect to another preindustrial custom. It was common for widows and widowers, especially for widowers, to remarry rather quickly. Among the lower-middle classes, family, household, and workshop overlapped. The death of a husband or wife left a vacancy for which the surviving partner had to find a solution. A long period of mourning was a luxury. These economic concerns overrode possible feelings of affection or loyalty to the first partner. Gerrit Smitshuizen was in such a situation. We know he had a wig maker’s shop in the 1770s, and he probably worked in that occupation at the time of his wife’s death. In any case, he had four young children to care for. Gerrit’s second wife was an Alkmaar maiden, Catharina Cramer. They published the banns on December 25, 1757, and married on January 8 of the next year. Catharina’s fertility outdid Jannetje’s. She bore eight children in all, including two sets of twins. According to the records, only two of her offspring died young. Unless the registration of child burials was incomplete, the Smitshuizens were a large family. Catharina died in childbirth after giving birth to the second set of twins, in February 1766. Four months later Annie’s father took Bes Pieters van Slooten, a maiden from Hoorn, as his third wife. This marriage remained childless. Bes either was infertile or she successfully persuaded her husband to use contraceptive techniques.2

From almost age seven, Annie lived with a stepmother. Soon the latter had her own little children demanding most of her attention. As Annie grew up, Catharina undoubtedly entrusted minor tasks in the household to her. It was a source of irritation now and then. Some said Catharina was too severe on Annie; according to others, Annie was a little slow, which led Catharina, out of parental duty, to admonish her to act more diligently. Contemporaries agreed that children rarely were content with a stepfather or stepmother; the “sympathy of the blood” was lacking. The saying was that a mother would beat her child for a fault, whereas a stepmother would merely chide her child with words; however, the chiding
of the second gave more offense than the beating of the first. In this view, the stepparents, dutiful and conscientious, carried no blame, but the stepchildren had a critical attitude. The reality, as revealed in court records, could be different. If a family had children from two beds, this was often a source of marital conflict. For example, a husband reproached his wife that she gave the best food to the child from her first marriage. Annie was a daughter from her father's first marriage. Possibly, her stepmother reproached him for being too lenient toward his daughter. Such conflicts were bound to influence her character development. Perhaps they implanted the idea that she could get her way by setting up people against each other.

Annie got another stepmother when she was fifteen. With her she had less frequent contact, because at a young age she became a domestic servant in the house of an apothecary, close to her parental home. With so many mouths to feed, it is understandable that her father let her go, and she still lived nearby. Getting bored in Alkmaar, however, Annie tried her luck in Amsterdam. She arrived there shortly before her twentieth birthday.

We have moved now beyond the information contained in Alkmaar's population records. As it happens, an anonymous author published Annie's biography about a year after her violent death. It is a fictional account, in the popular form of a conversation in a barge, where several passengers piece together the story of Annie's life. A brief evaluation is necessary. Can we identify its author and, more important, is there any truth in this biography?

In the preface, the author explained his motive for writing the book. Van Gogh, he said, is widely known, due to his extravagant way of life and the extraordinarily long procedures in his case, but hardly anyone knows who Annie Smitshuizen was. The author wished to fill that gap. Attention to the victim set the tone. Without fully condoning her behavior, let alone prostitution, the biography was sympathetic to Annie. It mentioned Van Gogh a few times only, with a negative tenor, which took away all doubts his sympathizer might have had: Hoefnagel had written the biography. Of Van Gogh's enemies, he was the only one diabolic and clever enough to accomplish this. He knew at least something about Annie, because he had spoken to her several times in the spring of 1775. Moreover, he had lived in Alkmaar for some time, and his wife was from there. In the biography, the two most distinguished passengers in the barge were an Amsterdam couple calling each other Frans (or Fransje) and Elisabeth. Although Frans was merely Hoefnagel's second Christian name and his wife was
called Jannetje, Van Gogh’s sympathizer identified the fictional couple as the notorious hack writer and his wife.

Another contemporary source, however, denies Hoefnagel’s authorship of the biography. According to this source, the hack writer was away on a trip at the time. After Annie’s death he had published nothing about her or Van Gogh’s case, even though Van Gogh thought so. With two conflicting voices, it is hard to tell. Some elements in the biography remind the reader of Hoefnagel: the opening, with a condescending depiction of two female Jewish beggars; the mimicking of outlandish speech; the introduction of an atheist, whom Annie despises. For the rest, the book’s style is different from Hoefnagel’s pamphlets. Possibly he wrote this biography, but we cannot tell for sure.

In a repertory of crime books, Buijnsters, a specialist of Dutch eighteenth-century literature, ascribes Annie’s biography to an even more famous hack writer: Franciscus Lievens Kersteman. The basis for this is the book’s last page, where passenger Frans says his initials are FLK. It seems to fit perfectly, even though Kersteman’s wife was not called Elisabeth. However, his authorship is simply impossible. Annie’s biography appeared when Van Gogh was still in jail, thus before April 1778, when he was executed. Kersteman had been imprisoned in Rotterdam early in 1773, and it was only in November 1778 that he was allowed to earn his income with translating work. For five and a half years he had had no pen in his hand. The initials FLK were a mystification by our unknown author. Such mystifications were common. Take, for example, a pamphlet that appeared in the fall of 1773, commenting on the contract some Amsterdam actors had signed in Rotterdam. Its title began with “Rare Dream Dreamt by Master Franciscus,” and it identified this man as the heir of the famous astrologer Ludeman. Kersteman was widely known as Master Franciscus and the follower and biographer of Ludeman. As late as 1792, the year of Kersteman’s death, the author of a comic almanac found the combination of Master Franciscus and Ludeman attractive enough to put it on the front page. If it was so common to abuse Kersteman’s alias, the initials on the last page of Annie’s biography have no particular significance. Either Hoefnagel wrote the book or a third hack writer did.

Did the author simply invent Annie’s life? At least one firsthand source, Van Gogh’s published confession, was available to him and all his contemporaries. The author had a barge passenger occasionally refer to this confession, which made the whole account sound more authentic. He also had information about some events in Annie’s life in late 1774 and in 1775, not mentioned in Van Gogh’s confession. The latter’s sympathizer,
while quibbling about the details, confirms that these events took place. For example, both authors agree that Annie had a grandfather living in the old men's home in Amsterdam and that he died a natural death shortly before her violent one.\textsuperscript{11} Annie's biographer knew that she grew up with a stepmother, but he was wrong in assuming that her father still lived with his second wife. That is about all. Annie's supposed experiences from her arrival in Amsterdam until she met Van Gogh are unconfirmed by other sources, and they convey the impression of literary invention. In particular, one very long passage about a gentleman who tried to seduce her appears as a figment of the imagination, inserted to give body to the story. Essentially, Annie's biography is a work of fiction.

As long as we realize it is fiction, there is no problem. We can take the story of Annie's years in Amsterdam as an account of how her life might have been, beginning with a statement true for all young women who migrated from a provincial town to the metropolis.

According to Annie's fictional biography, she did not come to Amsterdam with a firm intention of earning her income as a prostitute. To continue in her former occupation was a logical start, and she had hopes of doing better soon. During her first domestic service she lived in the home of her employer, but when the contract expired she looked for another arrangement. The days of traditional, paternalistic relations between masters and mistresses and domestic servants were over in Holland. Many journeymen, too, lived apart from their bosses. Enterprising women specialized in mediating between domestic personnel and potential employers. Female servants often stayed with such a broker woman, going to their place of work in the morning and returning at night. Many girls preferred this arrangement, even though the broker's dwelling was a more humble place than their employer's residence. They enjoyed the freedom. Artisans and other young men frequented the home of the broker woman, which meant ample opportunities for courtship. Although not procurresses, these broker women were of low repute. They encouraged the girls to steal from their masters or mistresses, people said, and on Sundays, when the servant allegedly went to church, she visited her patroness to discuss new intrigues. One of these women contracted Annie, after which one job quickly followed another. The rent she owed to the broker woman was high, however, and she had to take more and more of her linen to the pawn shop.

Annie realized she should leave the mediation circuit, but this was difficult. Precisely because she lacked her own chest of linen, no respectable master or mistress would hire her. It was a catch-22. With dishonorable activities she could earn enough money to retrieve her goods from the
pawn shop, but with a dishonorable reputation she was unwelcome in a respectable household. Her neighbors thought her a virtuous girl yet, but already she knew people who cared little about chastity. Hesitatingly, she made her first steps into night life. Shame always diminishes over time, especially if one remains poor. The only way out was to find a procuress who introduced her to a house where girls of pleasure worked. She found such a woman and entered one of the city’s secret brothels. Called The English Haystack, it was ostensibly a tavern serving punch, but in the back rooms the clients could take their pick. Annie had the choice of becoming a “young lady” or a “maid.” The former type had to be available to everyone, including Walloons, Frenchmen, and Jews. She refused to lower herself that much, so she became a maid. Also to her credit was her sober attitude. She liked brandy now and then, but she only got intoxicated when clients offered her too many drinks. As a “maid,” she received no fine clothes from the house, but in simple dress she looked better than many a “young lady.” Several clients preferred her over these dressed-up puppets. It caused irritation with the madam, who attempted to win her over to become a young lady after all, in vain. After six months, Annie left the house.

Now Annie had definitely started on a career of prostitution. She traversed the whole city, staying in one house of ill repute after another. These were not classy brothels, so her earnings remained meager. Only occasionally, she had the luck to pick up a strayed libertine, who spent money more lavishly. Poverty diminished her scruples. Soon she offered her services also on Sundays and in houses frequented by Jews. Sometimes, however, she was able to supplement her income with honorable work such as washing or cleaning. Once, she managed to get a job as a domestic servant again, at the outskirts of the city near the Leiden Gate. Unfortunately, the family who hired her found out she had been a prostitute, whereupon they promptly dismissed her. The passengers in the barge, still busy telling this story, understood perfectly the catch-22 situation. The citizen of Alkmaar: “By expelling her, these people cast her back onto the road of vice. I would never have done that; I would have given her a chance, because otherwise I would have felt guilty about her later fate.” The gentleman from Amsterdam: “I really don’t think so; you would have dismissed her immediately after discovering her previous conduct.” The skipper: “That is certainly the most sensible course of action. If otherwise, what would the people in Alkmaar say, Sir, if you had a lady of pleasure in your house?” In late-eighteenth-century Holland, middle-class men were allowed to have sentimental feelings, hoping that a fallen
girl might find rescue, but the prevalent code of honor, with its strict
demarcations, prevented them from putting their feelings into practice.

During her life of vice, Annie met an older woman from her native
town. She had also been a prostitute, but now, approaching fifty, she
worked as a charwoman. She had managed to seduce a younger man, a
journeyman tailor named Samuel, into marrying her. Samuel had con-

sented out of laziness, hoping his wife could earn a double income.
Although also a native of Alkmaar, he spoke with a strange, childish
accent. Because the couple was unable to live from her charring, the man
had to take up tailoring work. This changed when his wife introduced
Annie to their home. From then on Annie stayed with them, adding her
income to the ménage à trois. At night, the tailor’s wife acted as procuress,
praising Annie’s charms to interested men. During the day, the wife con-

tinued as a charwoman. Samuel could indulge in his laziness now. The
three shared the only bed in the room, and when the wife left for work in
the morning, you can guess what happened. The tailor’s wife pretended
ignorance, especially since Annie’s earnings started to improve. She could
afford nicer clothes now, had several steady clients, and her looks became
ever prettier. Even without blanching her face, thus giving it a lighter
color, she looked more graceful than ever before. The trio moved to a
nicer room in the same house, and they bought a new bed and some fur-
niture. This allowed Annie to receive clients of a slightly better sort. It
appeared as if the house would soon become a renowned “pricking place.”

Just when business was thriving, discord tore the threesome apart. The
tailor’s wife no longer concealed her jealousy of her husband’s affair with
Annie. For his part, Samuel was jealous of Annie’s clients. He fell ever more
in love with her and resented seeing her receive men in their home. He
blamed his wife for the situation. More than once, he threatened to kick
her from the room, along with the clients she recruited. Annie gradually
took his side, which caused the business to slow down. Regretting this, the
tailor’s wife scolded her husband and Annie, who retaliated with violence.
Samuel swore that, if his lover had to leave, he would go with her. Annie
left indeed. For a moment, she thought of trying her luck in domestic ser-
vice again, but she was too well known as a prostitute to find employment
other than in a brothel. Meanwhile, the tailor and his wife got into heavier
quarrels, whereupon he finally left her. He rented a room in the Jordaan
quarter, where Annie soon joined him. From then on, Annie and Samuel
lived together as if they were husband and wife.

As before, it was her task to supply the household’s income. Annie alter-
nated offering her services in brothels and visiting a few wealthy clients in
their homes. The latter included a wine merchant and a glazier. The tailor, still too lazy to work, had no option but to acquiesce in the situation again. Sometimes, he acted as her pimp. As Annie had started her career in vice as a simply dressed girl, this remained her image until the end. Her whore’s name was “Anna the Maid.”

This fictional story can be concluded with a look at Annie’s portrait, at the frontispiece of her biography. She is dressed like a servant girl indeed, wearing a decent cap, but a portion of her neck is nude. Her face is somewhat chubby. The caption reads: “Anna Smitshuizen, former lover of J. B. F. van Gogh, born in Alkmaar.” Perhaps the engraver, like other curious visitors, had seen Annie’s body when it was publicly displayed in the hospital before the autopsy. Alternatively, he invented her looks. It is time to return to confirmed events.
A few things are certain. Annie worked as a prostitute during most of her stay in Amsterdam. After The English Haystack, she lived for a time with the widow Sluiter, alias Mother Jeys, a madam from the Jordaan quarter. Annie's relationship with the journeyman tailor is beyond doubt. All sources mention the same address that they shared and the fact that he was married to another woman. Confirming that he and his wife came from Alkmaar, Van Gogh's sympathizer had Annie and the tailor cohabiting since 1774; according to Annie's biographer she met the tailor and his wife as early as 1772. The man appeared in Van Gogh's written and printed confessions simply as "the journeyman tailor." In a letter to his lawyer, Van Gogh once referred to him as Samuel van Beek. Van Gogh's sympathizer mentioned his name twice, calling him Samuel Ramsbeek. This journeyman tailor remains a shadowy figure. Strangely enough, the court never questioned him as a witness, even though he played a key role in the events leading to Annie's death. Was the apparatus of justice unable to trace him? Did they find him unimportant after all? It is one of the mysteries in our case.

When Van Gogh woke up on the morning of Thursday, January 12, 1775, it seemed just another day. Since business was lax, there was no need to rise early. He had some surgery to perform later that day. Van Gogh lived in a simple room in the house of Barend Moreu, near the Rokin in the city center. An artisan who made felt slippers, Moreu was a man of modest means. His wife was illiterate. The couple could use the extra money they obtained by keeping a boarder, and they had empty space available since their three children had left the parental home. Moreu and his wife occasionally did minor favors for Van Gogh, like passing on messages, a common thing to do for boarders. In a sense, the couple acted as surrogate parents. It gave Van Gogh pause for thought: Now that he was approaching forty, what had life brought him? After two unsuccessful courtships, he still lived as a bachelor. His acting career had been abortive, his jobs as a clerk temporary, his surgery without a license. Since he was an unofficial practitioner, procurers and prostitutes constituted a prominent part of his clientele. The appointment he had later that day was in a brothel. Located on a canal called the Oudezijds Achterburgwal, near the Old Men's Home, the brothel was run by a certain Geertruyd van Kesteren, widow of Thomas Wolters, whom everyone knew as Black Truy. The hairdresser, who combed the hair of the beautiful ladies of the house, had recom-
mended Van Gogh to her. He was to give the whores a regular checkup, and sometimes he wrote letters for the madam.

Annie worked for Black Truy from late 1774 onward. She was present in the house that day, probably because she, too, needed a checkup. When she caught Van Gogh’s eye, his heart stood still for a moment. Never before, he thought, had he seen such a beautiful young woman. Immediately, irresistibly, and totally, he fell in love with her.15

In love at first sight—those were his own words. What did it mean to Van Gogh when he said he was in love with Annie? Exactly to feel what he felt, to penetrate his innermost thoughts and emotions, is impossible. We do know his subsequent conduct. He had nothing but Annie on his mind; he did everything only to be in her company. Whenever she seemed to back off, he was sad. He wrote poems for her, of which only a few lines have survived. And he wrote a passionate plea with his own blood to persuade her to marry him. It is obvious that he wanted her and no one else. But if he ever confided his view of true love to paper, it has not come down to us. We depend on contextual evidence about the emotional standards of his day. Contemporary writers defined love as consisting of four elements: the conviction that another person has certain merits; a desire to possess the object of one’s love; a feeling of benevolence that causes the lover to do good to the loved one; a longing to unite oneself with the loved one. This was a very intellectual definition and a middle-class one at that. The writers who made it warned that a marriage based on physical attraction alone was doomed to failure. Pure lust led to jealousy and, worse, to crime. The writers favored a “soft passion,” agreeing that a stable love thrived on a “chaste flame in the heart.”16 All this sounds much more Biedermeier-like than the heavy and intense passion experienced by Van Gogh. But then, no one is simply the product of his cultural environment. Undoubtedly, Van Gogh was influenced by the emotional standards available to him, but they blended with his personal life experience. Deep down, his feelings of love remain elusive.

We do know that Van Gogh linked love and marriage. He intended to propose to Annie, but he first made inquiries with her colleagues in the brothel. Had he only been aware of the well-known solidarity among whores, a contemporary remarked. They wished Annie the best, so they painted an overly flattering picture of her. Obviously, she worked in the house, but she was a newcomer to vice, they said. A gentleman kept her as a courtesan but on a meager allowance, which obliged her occasionally to supplement her earnings. Believing this, Van Gogh proposed to Annie. He offered to pay her debts to the madam, so that she could leave the
brothel and marry him. However, if she decided to consider his proposal, she had to admit that she lived with Samuel. She did and consented on the condition that she would continue to live with Samuel in their room in the Jordaan quarter until May. It was impossible to separate from him at an earlier date, she claimed. Many men would have backed away at this condition, but Van Gogh agreed. To the madam he paid the amount Annie owed her for clothing and rent. At nearly twenty-four, Annie’s prospects for raising her social status looked bright.

For his part, Van Gogh realized he had proposed to a prostitute. This step took him to the edge of the domain of respectability. He hoped he could persuade her to lead a decent life. To his own conscience, Van Gogh rationalized his dubious step with reference to his past. Twice he had been deceived by women he thought virtuous. This time, deception was out of the question, since he already knew that his loved one was a whore. To the rest of the world, he was able to claim respectability because he had bought Annie’s “freedom” and intended to make her a proper wife. He gave her a written promise of marriage, with a seal of twelve stivers.17

Annie’s motives to consent to Van Gogh’s proposal are more elusive. None of our sources even hints that she immediately requited his love. Possibly, she was motivated by the prospect of becoming a respectable married woman. But was she ever sincere about that? Her insistence on staying with the tailor until May invites suspicion. Was it really so difficult to separate from him right away? On the other hand, Van Gogh had little to offer her instead. Quite probably, paying her debts had already strained his finances. He had no money left to pay her rent if she moved to another place. His own room was too small for two persons, and moreover, living together before marriage meant a bad start on the road toward respectability. It was not simple naïveté, then, which made Van Gogh agree to Annie’s condition. Soon, however, he had every reason to worry.

On a day in early March, when Van Gogh was with his fiancée, they heard a knock on the door. Her former madam appeared, accompanied by two big fellows, demanding back two guilders from Annie. She had kept them the other day, Black Truy said, but they belonged to her. The madam had come deliberately at a time when she expected Van Gogh to be in, which was why she had the bodyguards with her. Annie claimed she had taken these two guilders as compensation for a French cap of hers, which got lost in the brothel, but in the end she returned the money. Mad at her former madam, she made Van Gogh promise he would no longer practice surgery in that brothel. For his part, he had to conclude that she, too, had recently been there, but he kept quiet. Later that month, Annie
disappeared for three days. Upon her return, she admitted to having stayed in another brothel, called The Rotterdam Purse. To her fiancé, she insisted she had only helped the madam with washing, starching, and ironing.\textsuperscript{18} These incidents make us wonder whether Annie ever intended to alter her life course. The tailor was the man she really wanted, which obliged her to keep on earning an income as a prostitute. She had simply been contented to take advantage of Van Gogh in January when he offered to pay her debts to Black Truy, but she did not intend to do a favor in return. Or she used him as a decoy, to ease her family in Alkmaar into believing she was finally returning to the path of virtue.\textsuperscript{19} This interpretation makes Annie a rather callous person.

An alternative interpretation is that Annie, although acting primarily from economic motives, was sincere after all. Van Gogh had made her believe he was a man of some substance and dignity, a boon to her. Subsequently, when she discovered this to be a false image, she began to have doubts. Her biographer suggests it happened that way. If we want to believe him once more, it was the tailor, understandably jealous, who opened her eyes. Van Gogh's fine clothes, his self-assured appearance, and his commanding voice had impressed the simple artisan at first. When Van Gogh increased the frequency of his visits to their room, the tailor began to feel uncomfortable. He made inquiries around town, and one day he came home all excited, shouting to Annie, “You thought you were to marry a gentleman? I know him now; he is the man who courted that Lizette last year, a rogue and a naked dog.” Supposedly, Annie answered, “He may be a naked dog, but he wants to marry me, while you are keeping me as a whore.” That settled the matter for the moment. The tailor kept a low profile once more, because Van Gogh threatened to denounce him to the court as an adulterer.\textsuperscript{20} Meanwhile, Annie had celebrated her twenty-fourth birthday.

The odd engagement was bound to generate serious trouble sooner or later. When exactly Van Gogh and Annie had their first quarrel is unrecorded. In his words, they drifted apart now and then, but he made peace with her each time, hoping she would mend her ways. While still living with the tailor, she had promised to have no sexual relations with him, but Van Gogh received reports to the contrary. On what intimate knowledge, we may wonder, were these reports based, since everyone knew they shared a room in the first place? In May, when Annie finally left the tailor, the situation failed to improve. She first moved in with a friend, a certain Roelofe Cornelisse, and later with Mother Jeys. Van Gogh did not know that Roelofe was also a prostitute, nor that mother Jeys had
kept a brothel. He soon discovered that both were active in the vice trade. Annie simply refused to change her lifestyle, it seemed. Her fiancé reproached her anew; repeated quarrels and reconciliations followed. Van Gogh’s suspicions only increased, while his obsession for Annie rose to unprecedented heights. He began spying on her.

On Sunday afternoon, May 21, Van Gogh knocked on Annie’s door in vain. She had promised to accompany her fiancé on a tea visit to his cousin. Rather than visiting his cousin alone, Van Gogh waited for Annie until 11:30 at night. The next morning she showed up at his place when his mother was there, so he could only reproach her later. Meanwhile he had ordered a porter to take a fake message to Mother Jeys, that the lady of the house where Annie had been the previous night requested her to be there again at 2:30 in the afternoon. The ruse seemed to work. While Van Gogh was hiding in a bar close to Annie’s place, he saw her passing by, dressed up nicely. He followed her at a distance and, indeed, she went straight to that notorious brothel, The Rotterdam Purse in Nes Street. In a small pub at the corner, Van Gogh found another hiding place. He inquired with a few customers if they knew the girl in the white jacket and the red lacy skirt, who had just entered the house at the opposite side. To explain his interest, he pretended to be her cousin, on a mission on behalf of the family acting upon negative rumors about her conduct. Faithfully, some customers replied they had often seen her entering that place but rarely leaving it. To see her leave, in the company of one or more clients, was precisely what Van Gogh was waiting for. As on the previous day, his patience was put to a severe test. At eight P.M. he still stood at his watch post, leaning over the pub’s lower door, when an acquaintance happened to pass by. The acquaintance was no less than his inveterate enemy, Nicolaas Hoefnagel.

The writer had decided to take a walk after dinner. He spotted Van Gogh from a distance, while the latter had his attention focused completely on the house on the other side of the street. Van Gogh did not recognize his enemy until he stood right in front of him, and it was too late to turn around. An unpleasant conversation ensued, in which Hoefnagel accused Van Gogh of being the author of a recent libel. He denied this, trying to look past his opponent's face, at the door of The Rotterdam Purse. It was no use. The heated conversation had caused commotion in the pub, and Van Gogh felt obliged to leave his watch post. Once more, he had failed to collect definite proof that his fiancée was continuing in her horizontal profession. When he saw her later, she denied it as usual.21

In the same week, the tables suddenly turned. Until then, it had always
been Annie’s conduct that lay at the root of their quarrels. She had nothing to reproach him for, except that he had pretended to be wealthy. Now his name was all over town. The libel to which Hoefnagel had alluded opened with a dedication to “the myopic lover from the cave of Gog Magog.” It was clear to every insider whom this dedication was mocking: “Excuse me, Sir, how did it come about that your third girl already gave you the sack; you know, this Annie, who went with this tailor before. Good for you that you are a quack, because of your blue shin, which you have bumped so blue three times that it can hardly be cured. That happens when you play the great pretender. But may I advise you, if you take another sweetheart, you better confess right away who you are; perhaps she takes you out of pity then.”22 Annie was astonished. It was the first time she realized that her fiancé was a notorious man, and now her name was in print along with his. Annie felt ashamed. She definitely wanted to do what the pamphlet supposed she had already done, but she lacked the nerve to confront her fiancé in person. On Wednesday, May 24, she wrote him a note saying “thank you, but it’s over.”23

As expected, Van Gogh refused to accept the sack. Directly upon receiving the note, he rushed out to see Annie and found her home. He succeeded in softening her heart. The note, she now said, had been a means of testing his devotion to her. That was the kind of quasi-religious language that Van Gogh understood. He saw Annie as a supreme goddess who subjected him to severe ordeals at times.24 As long as he survived the ordeals, he came out for the better. The next day, Ascension Day, they paid a visit to his mother in the village of Ouderkerk, a few miles from Amsterdam along the Amstel river. To her they formally announced their wedding plans.

The phrase about testing his devotion had its own peculiar meaning in the context of the 1770s. Words like these equally fit into the context of courtly romance, taking us several centuries back. In a courtly novel a noble lady might give an assignment, as a test, to the knight who loved her. But as already explained, for such a knight love did not mean constantly being in the company of the woman he adored. To the contrary, the assignment would often be to fight an enemy of the castle where the lady resided. The knights of courtly romance conformed to the homosocial pattern of life, prevalent for so long. With Van Gogh this was entirely different. Although he had reluctantly consented to Annie’s temporary stay with the tailor, he wanted to be in her company as frequently and as long as he could. This was something new—love meant romantic devotion to one’s beloved and to do various things together. The observing
writers of midcentury had advocated this same kind of love, but expressed in marriage. Novelists, too, were writing about it and the trouble it might cause if there was no prospect of marriage. Van Gogh expressed the new kind of love in a tortuous courtship. That is, he now thought that he and Annie definitely were to become husband and wife.

After the visit to his mother, Van Gogh took the initiative to find a new room for Annie. He needed less time than three years earlier, when he did the same for his patron, Ockers. Already on the 26th he got word about a widow who planned to move to the countryside for a while. He immediately went to see her, accompanied by Annie. When the widow learned that the couple was to marry soon, she promised to make her room available. Later that day, Annie heard that her grandfather had died. This caused a delay in making further arrangements for the room, in one way or the other. Some said that Annie sincerely mourned her grandfather. According to others, she cared little about him and welcomed his death as an excuse. Supposedly, she went straight to The Rotterdam Purse, wearing rented mourning clothes during the intervals when she was not working.

She and Van Gogh had an appointment with the widow on Sunday, the 28th, to set a date for moving into the room. When he came to pick her up at Mother Jeys's, she was not in, which obliged him to see the widow alone. The widow served him a cup of tea, and as they waited for Annie, Van Gogh became confiding. Unfortunately, he explained, his fiancée let him down too often, making him seem a fool. However, he was delighted that she could move into this room. Until now, she had lived with bad people, who set her up against him. Those days were over. Hearing these words, the widow had every reason to be skeptical. After three hours, without Annie appearing, Van Gogh left in distress. Soon he arrived at The Rotterdam Purse for another round of spying. Shortly after midnight he thought he saw Annie leaving the place with three men, but it was too dark to be sure. The next day Annie claimed she had been in the old men's home, to make arrangements for her grandfather's funeral.

On the same day they got word that another acrimonious libel against Van Gogh had appeared. Understandably, it made Annie even more anxious about her fiancée's notoriety. Upon her suggestion or his own initiative, they agreed to refrain from seeing each other for a while. Van Gogh went off to see his brother, who lived in the village of Vreeland, some twenty kilometers to the southeast of Amsterdam, just across the Utrecht border. He promised Annie to stay there for two weeks. Delighting in her freedom, she turned milder toward him, as evidenced by two letters that have survived. The first, dated June 2, opened with “dear friend.” She
promised to write again, instructing him to address his letters to the room at Barend Moreu’s, where she would pick them up. “Don’t worry, everything will turn out right,” she wrote, referring, no doubt, to the commotion the pamphlets had caused. The heading of the second letter, dated June 6, was “dear lover, J. B. van Gogh.” She announced she would soon move into the widow’s room “and then I will at once tell you my heart, because I bring over much with me.” The words, from the pen of a young woman with little education, sound ambivalent. “I cannot write it to you,” she continued, “but trust my word. . . . The note you have sent to be inserted in the newspaper, I like it that you defend yourself, because the whole town is full of it. But the printer cannot do it without a note from the HO. . . . I remain, with respect, your faithful lover.”

The pamphlets that had so upset Annie numbered three in all, dated May 10, 19, and 26, 1775. Unfortunately, the first has not survived. From the second, we know that the one of May 10 was a belated reply by Hoefnagel to four “thieves of honor” who had attacked him the previous November. Whatever caused the delay in replying, it had given him the opportunity to change his mind about the engraver whom he had called king of the Pygmies in an earlier libel and for whom Van Gogh had worked in 1774. The engraver suddenly had become an honest citizen, in whose house Van Gogh had shamelessly shown his “calimanco face.” Calimanco was a cloth fabric often used to make men’s underwear. That is all we know about the first pamphlet’s contents. Its appearance probably passed unnoticed by Annie and her fiancé.

The second pamphlet was an anonymous “letter” addressed to Hoefnagel but preceded by the dedication already cited. Obviously, the author knew both Hoefnagel and Van Gogh. They were enemies now, he wrote, but they had been friends and they could become friends again, as soon as it was to their mutual advantage. Strangely enough, the enemies accused each other of having written the pamphlet. According to Hoefnagel, Van Gogh had deliberately mocked himself, in order to make the readers believe the author was someone else. He had performed the same trick with the packets of excrement sent around the previous year. This argument by analogy is hard to accept. Can we imagine Van Gogh so masochistic as to publicly mock his own person and his love for Annie? Moreover, had he been the author, he could have masked this more conveniently by omitting any reference to himself.
Neither is Hoefnagel a likely candidate for the authorship of this libel since it threw nothing but dirt at him. The libel exposed him as a corrupt writer, who first threatened to publish ugly rumors about people and then accepted money for refraining from it—an accusation echoing Weyerman’s case. The anonymous author ridiculed Hoefnagel and his pretensions in every possible way. Among other things, he alluded to an ambition that many people knew the writer had cherished: When Jan Wagenaar, the official historian of Amsterdam, died in 1773, Hoefnagel had expected the city fathers to appoint him to this function. His enemies considered it a convincing proof of his megalomania. The libel closed with a verse, calling its target a coward, a rascal, a lunatic, and a host of similar words. Van Gogh never read this pamphlet carefully, obsessed as he was with the opening dedication. Otherwise it is inexplicable that he referred to the whole series of pamphlets simply as Hoefnagel’s libels.

The authorship of the pamphlet of May 26 is plain. Its heading read, in large capitals, “reply by Nicolaas Hoefnagel to the baron from the cave of Gog.” A long series of epithets followed, referring to past events in Van Gogh’s life and, for want of information, mostly unintelligible to us. We do understand fired actor, runner of messages, traitor, slanderer, misshapen cuckold, and presumed dealer of dung. Thinking his enemy had written the libel of May 19, Hoefnagel threw his entire supply of venom at him. He admitted he had always despised Van Gogh, from the moment this man entered his house to betray his patron. With success Hoefnagel managed to outdo the author of the earlier libel in mocking Van Gogh’s affair with Annie: “He asks himself how it came about that his third girl gave him the sack. Well, I know the answer to that. I don’t believe you can find anywhere in Europe such a dirty Venus nymph who has a soul lowly enough to marry the slanderous Doctor Cobbler. I even trust that the most vulgar shivering ladies, who cruise the streets on a Winter night with a little fire pot under their cotton dresses, consider themselves too good to mingle with this mender of old trousers.”

The libel further dealt with the various allegations made in the preceding one. Hoefnagel denied them all. He was angry in particular at the suggestion that he extorted money from people under threat of publishing about them. Van Gogh hoped to become a writer, Hoefnagel continued, but he would never succeed. In vain, he had tried to get some poems published. Other passages referred to episodes in Van Gogh’s past, in particular one during his period as a ship’s surgeon: On the isle of Curaçao they had falsely taken him for a murderer; the scaffold had been erected already when everything turned out to be a great mistake. The court there would
have done the Republic a great service, Hoefnagel added, if they had ordered Van Gogh broken on the wheel. As yet, the hack writer was ignorant of just how ominous his words were.

The series of libels had dealt a serious blow to Van Gogh’s reputation. In the idiom of honor, he stood on the wrong side of the line now. Until May 1775, Amsterdammers knew him as a clerk for hack writers and minor artists, while they remembered his affair with the notorious Lizette. From now on, they associated him fully with the infamous world of prostitution. He had willingly proposed to a prostitute, and she had only made a fool of him. Even the ugliest whores scorned him—such a vivid message caught on. Furthermore, he was an impecunious interloper, a bungling amateur in several occupations. His desperate attempts to become a poet or writer were doomed to failure. It was a highly unfavorable image, and Van Gogh did little to improve it. There is no indication that he ever managed to publish a defense. Although Hoefnagel’s other enemies were less inclined to share his view of Van Gogh, a large part of the public adopted the negative image. Most important, his public humiliation fueled Annie’s doubts about the engagement.

The break was not final yet. On June 8, Annie moved into the room that her fiancé had arranged for her. The address was along a canal, the Herengracht, an unlikely place for an ordinary girl. Although eighteenth-century Amsterdam knew no segregation into class-based neighborhoods, the Herengracht was inhabited chiefly by rich burghers and patricians. It contrasted markedly with the Jordaan quarter, where Annie had lived with the tailor. However, although she moved to a better place, she did not live far above her rank. Each part of an Amsterdam house had its own status. The ground floor, a meter or so above street level with a stone stair leading to the main door, was the “front stage.” As one moved up to the attic, the apartments increasingly had a “backstage” character. Many upper floors were divided into sections, with whole families crowding into one small room. Annie moved to such an upstairs room. The house stood at the corner of an alley, with a shoemaker occupying the first floor. Annie’s room was on the front side of the attic, which also had a back room. In between lay a small corridor leading to the stairway. There was a door between the attic and the stairway, which could be locked from the inside. Incidentally, the house was only a few blocks from the site of the old theater in which Van Gogh had acted.
Paradoxically, in this house selected as a safe haven, Annie and Van Gogh drifted further apart. In that process, her neighbors played a crucial role, which calls for a brief introduction. The only man among them was Teunis Jansen, a porter. He will be called by his first name, a typically lower-class variant of Anthony. Next, there was his sister, Maria Jansen, widow of Willem Jager. Teunis and his sister shared the back room opposite to Annie’s, being the oldest occupants of the attic. The third person was Truy, in full Geertruy Elisabeth Muller, widow of Pieter van der Loos. She lived around the corner and worked as a charwoman, which brought her to Annie’s room almost daily. Her adolescent daughter, Johanna Helena van der Loos, often assisted her. So we have Teunis, his sister, the
charwoman and her daughter, and . . . the widow who had occupied Annie's room. Already on June 23, she returned to the city. The records do not disclose where in the countryside she had been, but clearly she was dissatisfied with the place. With her former room taken by Annie, she moved in with Teunis and his sister in the back room. Her full name was Dina Eykens, widow of Dirk Stroom. She will be referred to as the widow, which the court clerk did as well, even though two of the other women shared that status. She, the charwoman, and Teunis were able to write their names, although the latter signed somewhat clumsily. Teunis's sister and the charwoman's daughter were illiterate.33

Van Gogh had promised to stay with his brother in Vreeland for two weeks. During this period, Annie moved into the room at the Herengracht. There is an ambiguity in the records as to the date of her fiancé's return to Amsterdam. A statement by his landlady suggests it was rather soon. She was talking to Van Gogh in his room some time after Pentecost, she said. When she saw a knife with a white bone handle lying on a chair, she recognized it as one of the sharp knives with which her husband cut felt. Asked why it lay in his room, Van Gogh replied he had permission to take it. He had lost his own knife while traveling to Vreeland. Ever since he had been at sea, he was accustomed, like a sailor, to always having a knife with him. From then on, Van Gogh carried the felt cutting tool in his pocket, ignorant yet about its final use.34 Pentecost was on June 4, so the landlady's dating suggests he returned to Amsterdam shortly after Annie moved to the Herengracht. Van Gogh himself, on the other hand, said he returned from Vreeland on June 24. Significantly, all events in and around Annie's room for which we have exact dates occurred from the 24th onward. The number of undated incidents, however, suggests Van Gogh also was in Amsterdam in mid-June. Probably, his return on the 24th was from a second visit to his brother.

While living at the Herengracht, Annie continued to see her former lover, the tailor. Self-assuredly he visited her in the room where her fiancé thought her safe. It was a source of repeated conflicts. Sometimes the tailor appeared when Van Gogh was there or vice versa. When the two rivals stumbled upon each other, they always quarreled. Twice, Van Gogh beat the tailor. It was of little help, since Annie obviously still favored him. She even managed to make her fiancé agree to a peculiar solution. They drilled a little hole in the door of her room, into which they put a small wedge. Whenever Van Gogh came upstairs, he removed the wedge to see if the tailor was there. If he noticed a man in the room, he was to back off. It was an ingenious idea from Annie, since it facilitated receiving other
men as well. She continued working as a prostitute, for which Van Gogh, suspecting this, reproached her time and again. How else could she have paid her rent and the charwoman? There are no indications that Van Gogh paid it. He was even more upset when he noticed that Annie's neighbors started to side with her. They prevented him from contacting her, usually saying she was out.

Annie's relationship with Teunis and his sister remained distanced for a while. They were often away, he in his porter's station and she doing washing and starching in other people's homes. Annie first confided in Truy, the charwoman, who came to clean her room every day. Truy could not help noticing that the engaged couple often had words, especially when she wanted him to leave and he refused. After one of their quarrels, when he had finally left, Annie talked to the charwoman. She admitted she disliked the idea of marrying Van Gogh, for which she gave three reasons. He was a little too old for her, he lacked a proper job, and he had a bad name. With the last she referred to his tarnished reputation as a consequence of Hoefnagel's libels. There was little Van Gogh could do to change it. He could do nothing about his age, fifteen years older than she, but never mentioning it, he refused to see it as a problem. To the question of how to earn a proper income, they had found an answer. The idea was to move to Alkmaar, where Van Gogh would assist Annie's father, now fifty-five, with wig making. That is, Van Gogh thought they had agreed on this; he even envisaged them eventually taking over the shop. Given her attitude, it is unlikely that Annie ever intended this seriously.

On Saturday, June 24, Van Gogh returned from a visit to his brother, entering the town with the opening of the gates. Because he thought it too early to visit Annie himself, he asked his landlady to go ahead. When she arrived at eight, she found Annie sitting at the coffee table in her nightgown, with a “caddishly clad fellow” beside her. Although Annie tried to make the man understand he should leave, he was still there when Van Gogh arrived half an hour later. Incidents now quickly followed each other. The next Monday morning Annie and Van Gogh, reconciled once more, went out shopping together, while the charwoman cleaned her room. Just as they returned, the tailor walked down the attic stairs. Van Gogh immediately seized him by his coat, asking him what business he had up there. He replied he had wanted to speak to the young lady. Annie preferred to flee to the street, while her fiancé started another fight with his rival. With his hands or with words, he persuaded the tailor to leave. Then Van Gogh vented his anger on the charwoman, who first refused to open Annie's door and, when her daughter did, allegedly hurled at him, “I
shit on you.” While mother and daughter attempted to push Van Gogh out of the room, Annie returned. Of course she succeeded in softening his heart again.\(^\text{37}\) Not for long. In the afternoon of the following day, Tuesday, June 27, the widow sat alone in the back room. Half asleep, she suddenly woke up from a loud noise. She heard yelling and furniture tumbling in the front room and went over to see what happened. First, Van Gogh caught her eye, moaning and crying. Annie had said a thousand awful things to him, he complained, and then she had severely beaten him with tongs. He had done nothing to her. The widow’s entrance only encouraged Annie to continue scolding her fiancé, challenging him to beat her with the tongs in turn. He refused. Instead, he requested the widow to plead for him with Annie. As the widow had no idea what to say, it was again Van Gogh himself who tried to hush her up with sweet words.

It was simply a bad day for him. A little later, with the widow still present, someone knocked on the door. The widow noticed Annie shuddering, and indeed it was the tailor. He walked straight to Van Gogh, knocked him on the chest and asked, “Do you want to come with me?” Interpreting the invitation as a challenge to some kind of duel, Van Gogh replied this did not suit a man of his standing. He ordered the tailor to leave the room, but the latter refused to back off so easily. It was time for another plea to the widow: “Madam, please, take my side, for this is a married man; his presence here is improper.” Without a reaction from her, another fight between Van Gogh and the tailor ensued. As they were wrestling, Annie slapped Van Gogh in the face. Then the widow finally intervened and persuaded the rivals to stop fighting. To seal the peace, all four of them drank a cup of tea together.\(^\text{38}\) This was a respectable imitation of the reconciliation ritual common among knife fighters, who instead of tea shared a jug of beer or wine in a tavern. Van Gogh, though he had a knife, was no knife fighter.

From the various incidents recorded, the widow emerges as the most neutral person vis-à-vis the quarrelling couple. This is understandable, since she was around for less than a week. The charwoman and her daughter were the first to side with Annie in trying to rebuff Van Gogh. Teunis and his sister, not fully in the picture yet, were to confront Van Gogh on the fateful day of June 29. No doubt, the quintet was motivated by their understanding of neighborly assistance. They had concluded that Annie was unhappy with Van Gogh, so they wished to help her in keeping him out of her way. They sided with their neighbor against an outsider, as millions of preindustrial villagers and city dwellers had done before them.
Perhaps Van Gogh, as a modern individualist, was ignorant about traditional neighborly assistance. He experienced the quintet's actions as a deliberate conspiracy. He thought that, deep in her heart, Annie really wanted to marry him, but that her neighbors incited her to the contrary. His naiveté was plain already, but we have to conclude that he was also a little paranoid.

Van Gogh's sympathizer, who wrote about his case later, faithfully adopted the idea of a conspiracy, referring to the quintet as “the cabale.” He added a number of unsubstantiated accusations. Teunis, for example, supposedly wanted beautiful Annie for himself. He got hold of copies of the libels, about which he made jokes in her presence, which increased her dislike for Van Gogh.

Van Gogh was more than just naive; he was a naive romantic. He voiced his romanticism most tellingly in the document he wrote with his own blood on the night of June 28, with which this book began. The likely source of his attitude to love and life—his experience with the world of actors—has also been discussed. Yet, still another source has to be taken into consideration. Van Gogh’s romantic longings inevitably remind us of the literature of his day—not the work of the hack writers he knew, with all their cynicism and ultimate respect for bourgeois values, but the sentimental novels that were the new fashion of the age. English writers, such as Richardson and Sterne, enjoyed great popularity in the Netherlands. Two Germans, Goethe and the Reverend Johann Martin Miller, would soon take the lead. The latter’s sentimental novels, published between 1776 and 1780, came too late to inspire Van Gogh’s love for Annie. What about Young Werther?

No probate account of Van Gogh has survived and, in any case, probate accounts seldom specified the titles of books. We can only speculate about Van Gogh’s reading habits. Possibly, he was familiar with Richardson's novels. Clarissa was well known in Dutch translation. The publisher of the Dutch translation of Goethe’s Werther advertised the book as an enjoyment for tender hearts, comparable to Clarissa. The Dutch edition of Werther appeared in 1776, and it took a few years before the book became popular in the Netherlands. Van Gogh can only have read Werther in the original German edition, which came out in the fall of 1774. He knew German well enough. Without a craze yet to draw his attention to the book, he possibly discovered it out of an interest in this type of novel. His romantic person-
ality makes such an interest plausible. Later critics of Werther complained that sentimental readers completely identified with the main character. No doubt, Van Gogh conformed with their view. Like Werther, he felt an intense and pure love, impossible—although for other reasons—to come to fruition. In his blood letter he spoke of the sentence of life or death, proclaiming his wish to die if Annie no longer wanted him.

The observing writers from the middle class, guardians of respectability, espoused an ambivalent attitude toward sentimental novels. They wavered between admiration and concern. Since the 1760s they positively valued tears and expressions of sentiment, in their own peculiar variant though. The philanthropist, moved by compassion for the miserable, was their true hero. They advocated a responsible and restrained sensibility, that of the mature man who ultimately controlled his passions. The cult of sentiment inspired by contemporary novels, these moralist writers warned, could easily lead to excess. Sensibility might degenerate into malady. Although women were particularly susceptible to this danger, the malady caught young men, too. They developed an unhealthful preoccupation with writing love letters or composing sentimental poems about nature and death, they lost all sense of reality, they firmly intended to commit suicide when their love had turned hopeless, and all the while they did nothing to assist the really needy. That was the wrong type of sensibility. As a source of such excesses, moralists condemned Werther in particular. Its protagonist failed to control his love feelings, and he indeed killed himself in the end.41

Van Gogh was no longer a young man. When they thought of excesses, the observing writers never had someone like him in mind. Van Gogh was one individual among his contemporaries. The uniqueness of his case lies in the peculiar combination of old and new elements. He partook of the new sentimentalism of his day, which meant that he embraced cultural modernity. The object of his unconditional love, however, was a prostitute. This linked his case to traditional notions of honor and respectability, certainly in the eyes of average Amsterdamers. Whereas the newest literature was a source of inspiration for his love, his crime would generate the usual, age-old warnings about whores leading men onto the road of vice. For their part, sentimental novelists avoided this peculiar combination of old and new. Their heroes and heroines, however strong their passions and however abundant their tears, remained gentlemen and ladies.42 We have to return to the world of actors to find sentimental persons of a less elevated standing.

One more intriguing parallel exists between Werther’s love and Van Gogh’s love. Werther and Lotte, his friend’s wife, obviously had no sexual
relationship. About sex between Annie and Van Gogh the records are equally silent. As her sincerity about the engagement is doubtful, we may also doubt whether she ever wished to sleep with her fiancé. They never lived together, whereas she was living with another man during most of the time they were engaged. In June, according to the testimony of Teunis and his sister, Van Gogh visited Annie almost daily, but the two neighbors always saw him leave at night. To his mother and his landlady, he introduced her as a decent girl, which to them meant a virgin. The possibility remains that, while keeping up appearances, Van Gogh secretly had sex with Annie a couple of times. The only allusion to sexual contact is the passage in his blood letter stating his conviction that she was pregnant with his child. The court ignored this passage, and he himself never raised the issue again. Annie’s autopsy report mentions nothing about a pregnancy. Quite probably, it was just a fantasy he indulged in on the night he wrote the letter.

Van Gogh had a medical reason to be reticent with pressing for sexual contact. He suffered from a condition that contemporaries loosely denoted as a breuk (rupture). They meant a kind of hernia, a rupture of tissue in the abdomen or groin, from which men suffered in particular. An operation was very risky, and physicians as well as surgeons shrank from it. Only self-styled masters in this art offered their services at fairs. Even a successful operation had its consequences, as the author of a textbook published in 1733, made clear. He proudly described his technique for treating a rupture without removing the testicles. In some cases, however, castration was unavoidable. Without a successful operation, his condition caused the patient no less trouble. Because of the malfunctioning of the tissue, the bowels tended to sink, pressing down the scrotum, which sometimes hung on the patient’s knees. Obviously, this disease was a severe handicap to sexual intercourse. Van Gogh had incurred two such ruptures during his last voyage. They had robbed him of three-quarters of his former strength, obliging him to avoid any exertion. In June he lay ill for a few days, because “both his ruptures had opened up.” When Annie heard about it, she rushed to his bedside to comfort him: an easy opportunity to be nice without having him meddle in her affairs.

On Thursday, June 29, 1775, Van Gogh got up early in the morning. He had gone through a sleepless night. His eyes were fixed on the drawer containing the letter he had written with his blood. The moment of truth had come. Now he must read the letter to Annie and hear her pronounce
either the decision to spare his life or his death sentence. He had no idea it would take him the whole day.

At 8:30 in the morning Van Gogh arrived at the house on the Herengracht for the first time that day. Finding the front door open as usual, he hesitated for a moment. Then he went inside. When he climbed the stairs to the attic, Teunis and his sister awaited him, saying Annie was out. They took Van Gogh into their own room, where he insisted on waiting for her. At nine o’clock another person came upstairs, a woman named Johanna Leeman. She owed money to the widow, who occasionally made caps for her, and she had some business with Annie. Let us consider the next events from Johanna’s point of view. As she approached the door of the back room, she glimpsed a hand closing it from the inside. When she identified herself, the person opened the door again and, to her surprise, Van Gogh let her in. She inquired into the whereabouts of the widow and if they knew Annie was in. They were both out, Teunis and his sister replied. The sister made a quick signal indicating she should wait. Then Van Gogh left. A little later, someone opened the door of the front room slightly, and a voice asked, “Is he gone?” Now they admitted Johanna into the front room, where she met the widow, Annie, the charwoman, and her daughter. When Johanna started to argue with the widow about the price of the caps, Teunis’s sister admonished them to be quiet, because Van Gogh might come back. They continued their negotiations in the back room, where the two other occupants joined them.

Later that morning Van Gogh returned. He walked straight to Annie’s door and removed the wedge from the hole in it. Thinking he wanted to force his way in, the watchful Teunis approached him. He warned Van Gogh to refrain from using force, or else he would have to throw him out of the house. Van Gogh explained about the hole and the wedge, adding this was with Annie’s permission, but Teunis was unimpressed: “I don’t care; if you don’t stay away from that door, I will kick you down the stairs.” Johanna, still present, heard Van Gogh wail back, “My dear man, if you knew how close I was to this woman, you would pity me with all your soul.” It only made Teunis angrier: “That is none of my business; you can make anything good with your mouth.” Johanna decided to intervene with an admonition of her own: “If you consort with whores, you get what you deserve.” With two people hostile toward him, Van Gogh left the house for the second time.

A final scene Johanna witnessed appears rather mysterious. A while after Van Gogh had left, a gentleman, dressed in black, arrived in the back room. To the widow he handed over a paper sack with a few ducats,
ordering her to give it to a certain young gentleman and to tell him it came from his mother. The man in black exchanged a few words with the widow, and then he read a poem. Teunis filled a glass and offered it to him. None of the others ever referred to this incident, and Johanna's purpose in reporting it remains unclear. It conveys the impression of a scene from a novel. Already, Johanna had couched Van Gogh's plea to Teunis in language reminiscent of sentimental literature: he had spoken with tears in his eyes and in a moving tone. Like a minor character in a novel, Johanna disappeared again.

How many visits did Van Gogh pay to Annie's place in vain that day, being told each time she was out? He himself said he went there often, claiming he had spotted Annie in the window once. Since it was about five minutes on foot from his room to hers, he probably walked up and down. He arrived again at four in the afternoon, when Teunis and his sister were drinking tea together in their room. This time, Annie really was out. As the two siblings had their own door wide open, they heard the visitor coming upstairs and saw him knocking on Annie's door. For once, Teunis could say in truth: "Van Gogh, Annie is not home." He replied that he had to speak to her and suggested that Teunis or his sister should ask Annie at what time she was ready to see him. Van Gogh left once more, soon followed by Teunis going to his porter's station. His sister passed on the message when Annie came home at five. Surprisingly, Annie asked her to tell Van Gogh that she expected him at nine that night. Did the two women consider nine P.M. a safe time, because he would have to leave soon? Were they in a mild mood for a moment? Or had Annie finally decided to tell him it was over for good?

A little later, Teunis's sister went out for some business, taking the opportunity to pass by her brother's porter's station. She reported what Annie had said. Again a little later, Van Gogh arrived at the porter's station. Of course he promised to be at the Herengracht house at nine o'clock sharp. Glad at finally having an appointment, he stated his purpose: He wanted to read a letter to Annie, so he hoped that Teunis, his sister, and the widow would be there, too. Teunis replied he wished to stay out of their quarrels, but Van Gogh insisted on his presence. If Teunis refused to come, Van Gogh would pick him up from his room. Did he realize he was collecting witnesses to his own crime?

The tormented lover punctually arrived at nine P.M. at the home of the woman he adored. If he had taken dinner in the meantime, his appetite had probably been less than ever. Annie was in her room as promised, alone. Since they had agreed on the time, he refrained from the ritual with
the wedge and knocked on her door. She let him in. He explained he had something very important to tell her, that he had written it down, that he intended to read it to her, and that he wanted the neighbors to hear it too. In other words, he had been deadly serious when he told Teunis a few hours earlier they should be present. There can be no mistake: Van Gogh wanted an audience. He had been an inconspicuous extra when he played in the theater in the 1760s. This was his finest hour. Now he would be the principal actor in the drama of his own life. He himself had written the script for the first act. If only the play would end well! Together, Annie and Van Gogh went to the back room to collect the audience. The widow, Teunis, and his sister followed them to the front room. They saw him take a piece of paper from his pocket, and he started to read. Imagining himself on stage with thousands of spectators, he declaimed the entire text in a loud voice—from “in nomen . . . adorable object of my purest love,” through “pronounce . . . the final sentence,” to “beloved soul guardian, your tender loving lover.”

If the widow, Teunis, and his sister were familiar at all with sentimental literature or plays, this piece of writing failed to touch them. At least, their later reaction sounded rather ironic. They were not sure they had completely understood the text, they said, but the gist of it was that he wished to persuade her to lead a decent life and to marry him. Annie’s immediate reaction was worse. She knew his style of writing, but she hated it ever more. Absolutely not, she declared; marriage was out of the question, and she no longer wanted to have anything to do with him.

It had been, according to his own statement, his ultimate attempt to win her over, and she had pronounced the sentence of death. But even now, Van Gogh refused to accept it was true. As so often before, he started to plead with her. The others’ presence, on which he himself had insisted, served to sustain his paranoia. In his perception, Annie went against her heart, and her neighbors were the wicked advisers. He heard them say all kind of things: Annie ought to reject a man who caused so much trouble every day; if she wanted a decent income, why didn’t she take up domestic service again? And so on. Teunis, on the other hand, later claimed he had asked her to think it over and see if they could make it up. That sounds strange, too, in view of his wish, expressed a few hours earlier, to stay out of their conflict. What matters is that Annie had made up her mind, whatever the neighbors said. She wanted a complete break. To Van Gogh she proposed an exchange of notes setting each other free. Desperately, he tried to dissuade her from the idea, all the while hearing the other three screaming, “do it, do it.” Then he wrote:
I, the undersigned, confess that, *vi coactus*, I must violate my heart, and in spite of its tender feelings, I surrender the object that I swear, in spite of all opposition, to love forever, but that I have to leave now.

June 29, 1775. J. B. van Gogh.

He had intentionally used an ambiguous formulation. In particular, the insertion of the Latin clause *vi coactus* (coerced by force) was essential. It meant he considered the document null and void. With this idea he signed it, waiting for Annie to proceed with her note. Saying she was inexperienced at writing, she asked Van Gogh to do it for her. Indignantly, he refused to compose his own death sentence. He suggested instead that he would leave for a quarter of an hour, during which Annie could think it over once more. He entrusted his note to T eunis and went downstairs for a glass of beer. When he returned, Annie was as determined as ever. In her own simple words she had written her note.

Van Gogh: I, the undersigned, request in or out directly not to bother me, be it the one or the other, for I renounce you completely, where I am.

June 29, 1775. Anna Smitshuizen. Nothing can be changed about this.

Again, Van Gogh hesitated, although T eunis had given him back his note. Annie acted decidedly. “Here is mine; now give me yours,” she said. As they exchanged the notes, Van Gogh exclaimed: “Annie, Annie, think about it, realize what you are doing.” And she: “There is nothing to think about; the thing is finished.” Renewed pleas followed and, although Annie insisted he should leave, Van Gogh took a pipe from his pocket, put tobacco in it, lit it, and started to smoke. Meanwhile, the three neighbors went back and forth from Annie’s room to theirs. While smoking his pipe, Van Gogh wrote another note: “Cruel woman, shortly you will be released from me. Only a few moments of life have I left, and then you will witness my last gasp of breath. I die then, true lover until death of Anna Smitshuizen.” To Annie, he explained the note’s essence: If it was really over, he would kill himself before her eyes. T eunis, present again, intervened. Van Gogh’s words, he assured Annie, were as hollow as the wind, only meant to blackmail her. To her suitor he added that it was ten-thirty now; he had to close the door to the stairway and, if need be, he would batter the unwanted visitor down the stairs. At just that point, the charwoman arrived upstairs to bring Annie her washed linen. Van Gogh’s audience had increased to four.
The moment had come to inflict upon himself the death sentence that Annie had pronounced. He took the felt cutting knife from his pocket, proclaiming with a theatrical voice that he was ready to thrust it into his chest. His beloved should watch the scene from close by. With firm steps he walked up to Annie, who stood in front of a chair close to the wall. The charwoman, who had missed the previous acts of the play and failed to notice he had a weapon, thought he wanted to kiss her. Annie looked at the knife in his right hand. Without saying a word, she gently took his left hand. Van Gogh held the knife in a “contrary” way, not protruding as duelists did but pointed downward. One turn of his arm sufficed for the final act. Van Gogh was in a state of trance, feeling as if he had left the world already. He raised the knife and stabbed, but where? Within a second he felt warm blood flowing over his hand and wrist—Annie’s blood. The knife had penetrated her heart. Without realizing what he had done, he pulled it from her chest and threw it away. Annie first sat down on the chair, rose again and stumbled to the door. She fell to the floor in the corridor. Teunis jumped on Van Gogh, knocked him down, and dealt him a couple of blows. Then the charwoman screamed: “Oh my Lord Jesus, don’t bother with him, Teunis, care for her; she is bathing in her blood.” There was nothing he or the others could do. On the floor of the corridor, her head over the threshold of the back room, Annie had bled to death.

The neighbors stood perplexed for a while, unable to act. The charwoman’s daughter also had arrived, completing the quintet. According to her own testimony, she came just in time to see Annie die. Then her mother ran outside to look for night watchmen. Van Gogh just sat waiting in the corner of the room, half-conscious. He oscillated between realizing what he had done and sinking back into a trance of ignorance. He vaguely heard the others say Annie had died and exclaimed: “Annie, are you dead, that is good; if you are not for me, then another won’t have you either, certainly not a married pimp.” Did he want to implicate the tailor as co-responsible? His words shocked the neighbors. He wished to appear before a competent judge, Van Gogh continued, and die publicly for Annie. Meanwhile, the charwoman called out on the Herengracht for night watchmen. Three responded, whom she told to follow her to an attic where a girl had been stabbed. When the men arrived upstairs, they asked the people assembled in the corridor whom they should arrest. All five pointed to the front room: there is your murderer! When the watchmen entered the room, Van Gogh slowly rose. He meekly obeyed, as they took him by the shoulder and told him to come with them. They led him through the door, into the corridor. Something,
someone was lying there, he noticed. Focusing his gaze more sharply, he recognized her. For the first time, clearly, he saw Annie’s lifeless body. “Is she really dead?” he exclaimed in a tone of surprise, “then allow me to give her a kiss before I have to leave.” The watchmen rejected his request. Teunis was indignant: “What is it that you wanted to do?” And to the watchmen: “Just drag him away.” The charwoman snarled at Van Gogh: “Yeah, you, go away now; we will strike back at you.” The three men took the murder suspect out of the house and locked him up in the Amstel quarter’s watch house.

The improvised script had taken a fatal turn. The play featuring Annie and Van Gogh as the leading actors finished as a tragedy with an unhappy end. An infamous ending, perhaps, because not Werther but Lotte paid with her life. As notorious as the case was to become throughout the country, news of it probably never reached Goethe’s Weimar. And had he known about the case, it is a wild guess as to the nature of his reaction. It is easier to imagine the reaction of Dutch Calvinists at such plays gone wrong. They had always inveighed against luxury, extravagance, idle entertainment in general, and the theater in particular. A tragedy or a comedy, on stage or in real life, acting was sinful in itself. In Calvinist thought, acting was pretending you are a person different from who you really are. It was a form of cheating, invented by the master of deceit, the devil. Moreover, if you pretend to be someone else, who is accountable for your actions?

Thus, the Calvinist theory of acting comes close to the modern medico-legal notion of diminished responsibility or temporary insanity in criminal matters. In a modern court, Van Gogh probably would have received a less than maximum sentence on such grounds. Certainly, his attorney would have made a plea to that effect. Van Gogh had committed the act in a trance, agitated and full of conflicting emotions. Without realizing it, he put the Calvinist theory into practice. He pretended to be someone else, not the man struck by so many deceptions but a triumphant poet and lover. He had the principal role, but he suddenly found himself in the wrong play. Imperceptibly, it had changed from a romantic drama into a crime thriller.