

VINCENT'S WOMEN

By

Donna Russo

Other Works by Donna Russo
(written as Donna Russo Morin)

Gilded Dreams

Gilded Summers

The Da Vinci's Disciples Trilogy:

Portrait of a Conspiracy

The Competition

The Flames of Florence

The King's Agent

To Serve a King

The Glassmaker's Daughter

The Courtier of Versailles

Birth: Once, Upon a New Time

*For all who have loved...
...and suffered for it.
You are not alone.*

Author's Note

Hundreds of the nearly thousand letters between Vincent van Gogh and his brother Theo, now considered one of the greatest documents of the human experience, were used to help construct this novel, its narrative, and dialogue, especially the dialogue of Vincent himself. Johanna van Gogh-Bonger's diaries and her correspondence with Theo van Gogh were utilized along with the journals and memoir of Paul Gauguin. An article published in the *American Journal of Forensic Medicine and Pathology*, Dec. 2020, was used to postulate its ending.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

The van Gogh Family:

THEODORUS 'DORUS' VAN GOGH 1882-1885; Pastor; Vincent's father

ANNA CORNELIA CARBENTUS VAN GOGH 1819-1907; Vincent's mother

VINCENT VAN GOGH 1852-1890

VINCENT WILLEM VAN GOGH 1853-1890; Painter

ANNA CORNELIA VAN GOGH 1855-1930; Vincent's sister

THEODORUS 'THEO' VAN GOGH 1857-1891; Art Dealer; Vincent's brother

ELISABETH 'LIES' HUBERTA VAN GOGH 1859-1936; Vincent's sister

WILLEMINA 'WIL' VAN GOGH 1862-1941; Vincent's sister

CORNELIS 'COR' VAN GOGH 1867-1900; Soldier; Vincent's brother

JOHANNA 'JO' GEZINA BONGER VAN GOGH 1862-1925; Teacher, Translator, Writer;
Theo van Gogh's wife.

JOHANNES PAULUS STRICKER: 1816-1886; Theologian and Biblical scholar; Uncle to
Vincent van Gogh by marriage. Father to Kee Vos.

VINCENT 'CENT' VAN GOGH: 1820-1888; Art dealer; Uncle to Vincent van Gogh

HER

EUGENIE LOYER: 1854-DOD Unknown; with her mother, ran a boarding house and
kindergarten in London.

MADAME ESTERE DENIS: DOB-DOD Unknown; wife of a farmer and Vincent's landlord in
the mining town of Petit Wasmes.

CORNELIA "KEE" STRICKER VOS: 1846-1918; Vincent's maternal first cousin.

CLASSINA 'SIEN' HOORNIK: 1850-1904; Seamstress, cleaning woman, prostitute.

MARGARETHA "MARGOT" BEGEMANN: 1841-1907; Van Gogh family neighbor in
Nuenen, the Netherlands.

(EUGÈNE HENRI) PAUL GAUGUIN: 1848-1903: French Post-Impressionist artist.

SISTER EPIPHANY/MADAME DESCHANEL: DOB-DOD Unknown; Mother Superior of the cloister at Saint-Paul-de-Mausole (asylum for the mentally ill).

MAURGERITE GACHET: 1869-1949; Daughter of Doctor Paul Gachet

I cannot, I will not, I may not live without love.

Vincent van Gogh

JOHANNA BONGER VAN GOGH

1924

The Netherlands

“You think you know him. You don’t. You think you know what happened to him. You do not.”

“Mother!”

My son sputters. Tea spills as he drops his cup and saucer on the curly-legged table beside him.

He rises to his feet and kneels before me.

His father’s greenish-blue eyes bore into me. I sigh from the comfort of them.

I cup his face in my veiny hand. His face, long like his father’s as well. But capped by the startling red hair of his Uncle Vincent.

“I am not long for this world. I feel it, my son,” I say. I know. Of that, there is no fear. Only of what I leave behind. “And when I am gone you will learn the truth. I’d rather you learned it from me.”

It’s not well done of me. To dive into it. My son and I were speaking of his work and mine. In mine, it is there. The string, the true thread of such surprising colors. The colors of women, of love, and of lust.

“Now, Mother...,” that long head shakes. I can’t stop my grin from forming as his shaggy hair shakes. He’s in need of a barber. I look at this young man as a child, I know. But he is that. My child. My only child.

“It is all right,” I assure him. Trying desperately to for it is my truth. “I am almost ready. I will be with your father, with both of them, again.”

I may be the widow of Theo van Gogh, but the two of us were never truly alone. Vincent was always a part of us.

I rise. Old bones creak. I groan.

My son, Willem, as he likes to be called, rises, and takes my arm. I lead him into my study.

Vincent’s art covers my walls, piles in corners. The Van Gogh family letters—some I’ve translated for I speak many languages; some I’ve read but not yet translated—stalagmites of varying sizes at various places. The odd pairing of my husband’s old, carved desk with the straightly cut modern chair behind it can barely be seen.

“This will all be—”

“You know I have little interest in all this,” Willem says, sounding like a child.

“Yes, yes,” I tut. “I know your mind bursts only when it sees numbers...your engineering.”

Now I hear Willem chuckle softly. He knows the true depth of my pride.

He helps me sit on one side of the beige brocade settee. I pat the other with an expectant look.

The time is drawing closer. I find it harder to swallow. I have no time for preamble. There is no time. I tire so easily these days.

“You will read my diary.” Once more I startle him. Unintentionally so. If there is a proper way to do this, to confess others’ sins as well as my own, I do not know it.

“Your diary?” He turns to face me. “I never knew you kept one.”

He is curious now. I’ve presented him with a puzzle. Perhaps it will help.

“I’ve kept one almost the whole of my life.” My gaze drops into my lap. “Save for the time I was married to your father.” A marriage that lasted not even two years.

Would he ask why I didn’t write during those years? I hope not. The answer is a tangle of love and despair.

No, it is better I tell him. Tell him the all of it. No matter how it will test me. How it may hurt. I will tell him the truth. I will pray he loves me still.

“There is the story of your uncle, of Vincent van Gogh, the story that the world has taken as truth.”

Willem has always worshipped the uncle—the man he was named for—that he knows only from my memories. The ones I’ve shown him.

“They say he went mad because of a certain kind of disease.” I try not to blush. I lose the battle. “It is not what caused his madness. They say he cut off his ear for a prostitute. He did not cut it off for her. It may be that he did not cut it off himself.

“And they say he killed himself.” I bang my moist hand on the fabric between us.
“He...did...not.”

Willem gasps, flinches. I feel the cushion below me flutter with his jerky movements.

“But how can...why have you not—” He tries to interject.

I pay attention to none of it. I can't. For once begun, this spewing of truth cannot be stopped. I can only hope he will be my son—that I will live in the same place in his heart—when the telling is done. I am, at last, ready.

ANNA CARBENTUS VAN GOGH

1853-1864

Groot Zundert, The Netherlands

1

She held the squalling baby in her arms, one not of this world for more than seconds. Her grasp on him obligatory, loose and low. Its feel like that of the March wind.

“A fine, healthy baby you have there, missus.” The plump midwife wiped her hands of the blood and viscous fluid upon a rag. “What will you be calling him?”

Anna looked down at her second-born son wiggling in her arms. The fuzz upon his head the red clay color of the Carbentus family, her family. She gained no pleasure from it. Disappointment chilled her heart; she wished he resembled his father as their first child had.

“Vincent. It is Vincent.”

“But—”

“Anna, are you sure?” Her husband Dorus stood in the doorway, his first glimpse of wife and son in his eyes. The white collar of his profession encircling his throat. “Is it wise, for you, for our son? This one lives. Should it bear the name of the one that did not?”

“It is Vincent,” Anna said. That and no more.

Months later the parsonage house echoed a repetitive refrain.

“Missus, the babe needs you.”

“I am needed elsewhere at the moment.”

The first Vincent had only been in the ground three months when Anna asked for the resumption of marital relations. She did not ask for the pleasure of it. She rarely thought of the pleasure. It was her duty. Duty, one of the commandments inculcated into her as a child. One not forgotten.

Dorus had thought it too soon. He'd agreed with the doctor. The midwife. She'd heard them talking but dismissed their words.

She had been lost for a time after she had lost him; days lost in her chair by the window, rarely moving, hardly eating. The maid would place a full plate before her; Anna would send it away, equally as full. She floundered beneath a dark, churning current. Unsure herself if she could rise above it.

Yet Anna never spoke of her pain. The depth of it. Her melancholia a family trait. One that dared to tremble her stiff upper lip. She could not—should not—speak of it. It was what she had been taught. It was what she would teach; the choking, proper silence that had been engrained in her since birth. She trapped it all within, prodigiously learning the ways of the Carbentus family. But oh how it churned in her gut, her mind. Her tempest confined, no matter the pain, just as she had been taught.

No one ever taught her how to cope with the death of a child.

In the three months after the birth and death of the first Vincent, Anna paid little attention to visitors. Made few visits. She often sat at the piano for hours, playing the same gloomy tune. Again, and again.

Dorus, a reverend three years her senior, knew. She could see his knowledge of her in his eyes. He knew her want was not of him but what he could give her. Anna thought of another child not only as a panacea to her pain but as a replacement for what she had lost.

If only it had worked.

After the second Vincent's birth, she stood in the shadows still. Lived in them. And they in her. Much like the parsonage itself.

With buildings two stories taller than the parsonage flanking it, the sun, the light, no matter how bright, struggled to find its way in. One long single hallway lay beyond the front door. In a contiguous line, unbroken by any window, it bound the formal front room to the single dark back room where the family lived, then carried on to the small kitchen at the end. Just beyond lay the washroom and barn. In the barn, the only loo.

Anna would often stand at one end of the hallway, searching its long, dark depths. At times, she thought if she began walking down the gloomy path, it would just continue on and on with no end in sight. She'd be lost forever. Anna carried a candle when she traipsed down it; day or night. Just in case.

After Vincent, the children kept coming. Three boys and three girls would be born in twelve years. A strange precision of births. All six born between mid-March and mid-May.

Anna loved all her children. What mother did not? She did not love them all the same. She did not deny it nor apologize for it. She mothered them all, each in their own way, nonetheless.

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“Vincent,” Anna called to her young son from the shadows of the open front door. Nicely for others could hear. She hid her plain face and fading red hair in the darkness of the threshold. She hid her darkness.

He was there again, in the street in front of the parsonage, playing with the children of merchants, of peasants. The same dirt and dust that covered them shrouded him.

“How many times have I said that you are not allowed to play with the street children?” Inside the parsonage, with the door closed, she spoke as she pleased. She snapped out the words through curled lips. “Do you refuse to listen, or do you not understand?”

Five-year-old Vincent stared up at his mother. Did she see fear or anger in his hardened eyes? He said not a word; gave her no clue.

“You will ruin the family name associating with those dirty urchins.”

Their good name; a cross high up on a main wall.

Vincent remained mute. Silence was an argument in itself.

“If we could do whatever we wanted,” she warned him as she warned all her children, “unharmful, unseen, untroubled... wouldn't we stray further and further from the right path?”

The child gave her not a word to whip him with.

“To the kitchen, Vincent,” she instructed. The words hissed out between her teeth. “You will scrub the floor. With your hands. On your knees.”

Vincent went without complaint. If only he had complained.

Anna watched as he silently walked away from her to do as she bid.

In her mind, she screamed at him, screams whose truth she denied, *Talk back at me, I dare you. As I long for you to do. Light the fuse of my ire; allow it to burn openly before it consumes me.*

*

In the wintertime, Anna tutored her children. The rudiments during the day, family history while gathered around the stove after dinner. And reading, books upon books; Dickens a favorite and not just at Christmas time.

No matter the season, Anna preached to her children as her husband did his congregation.

“Duty above all other things.” So fine did Anna try to cling to these words, she embroidered them for when they—and she—needed reminding.

In the housebound winter months, duty came in the form of making gifts. Embroidery and knitting for the girls. Woodworking and pottery for the boys. Every one of them learned to draw. Some better than others.

During fair months, they all worked in the garden. Long and narrow like the parsonage itself, the garden lay behind the barn, hemmed in by beech hedges. Dorus cared for the trees and the grape and ivy vines. Anna tended the flowers. Each child tended to their own small plot. Vincent chose a swath of land far from the others. Her youngest, Wil, planted nearly on top of Anna’s own. How anything grew in that child’s stultifying air, Anna did not know. She could barely breathe in it.

“Lay your seeds even and straight,” Anna instructed them repeatedly. “It is how we learn the normal life more and more...make your paths even and straight.”

Most days, weather allowing, they walked. One hour precisely in the middle of the day. Dorus in his top hat; Anna on his arm. The children and their governess the ducklings that followed. From the dusty streets to the fields. It was their right, as she believed it. Working people never had the luxury of a mid-day walk.

“He is lagging behind. Again,” Anna often hissed in her husband’s ear.

“Come along, Vincent,” Dorus would call out, dutifully, to his eldest son. Vincent would shuffle his way up to them. The family portrait they formed was perfect, in Anna’s eyes, once more.

Anna was an artist. Their lives were her canvas. She painted perfection upon their days. A thin coat was all she could manage. She painted the parsonage with color; the colors all faded to grey in the emotionless household.

What didn’t fit perfectly was a sliver of wood just under the skin. She plucked and poked at it with her sharpest needle. She tried to remold it—him—in her image of perfection. A constant, frustrating attempt.

She instructed them daily. She rarely, if ever, touched them. Anna lived by her own commandments of pleasantness and duty.

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The rushing March wind carried the promise of spring. Anna could not feel its caress.

She sat at the piano, and though the morning rain had passed, she played its ponderous song again and again. Anna played so long, she did not realize the children were returning till she glimpsed them through the window at her side, till she heard flits of giggles.

Some of them skipped. Some roiled toward home. Lastly came Vincent. Head hung between his shoulders where it seemed to live. Shuffling at his lethargic pace.

From her window she watched him stop as she had so often. Stop at the grave of her first Vincent. He stared at the headstone, face puckered.

He could not grieve whom he had not known. He could not mourn as she did. Yet pain lay slathered on his face. Where did it come from? But truly, did she care?

Another March brought that day upon them again. A sparkling, early spring day. Vincent turned eleven.

They had taken their daily constitutional, heading home through the back wheat fields. Dorus was not among them. He often traveled to those in the distant reaches of his parish. It was a sick parishioner, a dying one, that and only that would take him away on this of all days.

“Can we walk by the garden, Ma?” The second Vincent’s voice dared intrude on the darkness she reveled in. He asked it of her every year on his birthday. On their birthday. It was the birthday of two Vincents and the anniversary of one’s passing. Both could be honored. Should be.

There were two routes to the backdoor of the parsonage. One led through the garden. The other through the cemetery.

Anna’s feet kept their rhythm and direction.

They stopped at the gravestone.

“Pray,” she commanded her children. All did save the living Vincent. He did not clasp his hands. He did not close his eyes. He stared at the stone. He never prayed at the gravestone that carried his name, his birthdate.

“The world is a place where disappointments will never cease. It is full of troubles and worry. Learn to endure,” Anna preached to him, commanded.

“Learn to endure,” Lies, the middle girl, mimicked her mother, muttering as she often did.

Vincent did not clasp his hands. He did not close his eyes.

“Until you pray, Vincent, we will not leave.”

His brother, Theo, sidled closer, bucked shoulders with him.

Anna ticked her tongue at Theo. His was such a kind, sweet soul. But she would not allow any child to overrule her.

“You will pray, Vincent.” It was not a command now. It was fact.

Vincent closed his eyes. His arms hung by his side. It was all he ever gave her on this day. Strangely no tantrum came, as it did so often from this Vincent.

“Come, children. We must celebrate Vincent’s birthday.”

But which Vincent she meant, none could fathom.

“I worry about Vincent,” Dorus said one night when they were alone. With six children, they weren’t alone often. Only when they put their heads upon their bed pillows or woke upon them.

“Why?” asked Anna. A single, ambiguous word. Its ring, annoyance. She had just lain the weight of her body and her burdens upon the ticking. She reveled in the relief. Must it be further delayed?

“He does not play with his brothers and sisters as he used to.”

“Doesn’t he?” Anna knew her husband’s tone. The notes of serious concern in it. A tone she rarely disregarded. But it was of Vincent, and she was so very tired. Anna allowed her eyes to close. She tried to keep her ears open.

“They were all playing jump the ditch in the garden this afternoon, but not Vincent,” Dorus explained. That tone tightened.

“Was he there?”

More and more of late, Vincent liked to wander in the wheat fields. As she thought of it, even in the haze of half-sleep, she remembered Vincent used to bring Theo with him. He rarely did anymore. She said nothing of that to her husband.

“He was. Vincent was there. Sitting under the arbor. Reading and scribbling while they jumped and laughed.”

The bed sagged and joggled her as Dorus lay beside her. Anna hoped it portended the end of the conversation.

But Dorus continued. “It is unhealthy for him to be so separate from them. So removed. Unhealthy for him and them.”

“You are surprised by this?”

The child had been a challenge since birth. Always needing. His were not the only prickling needs, but the sharpest. Anna had stopped saying so to Dorus. He was just a babe, he would say. All babes need differently, he would say.

Dorus continued. “Of course, I am. Especially his detachment from Theo. They have been so close. The lad is hurt by it.”

His words dispersed the thickening fog of her sleep. Anna could not—would not—allow Theo to be hurt.

Where Vincent was shy, Theo brimmed with cheer. Where Vincent rebelled, Theo conformed.

“I remember watching Vincent with T...Theo.” Tugging sleep slurred Dorus' words. “Watched him teach Theo how to build sandcastles and shoot marbles.” Dorus yawned. Sleep tempted away his worry. He did not relinquish it easily. “No more. I...I see that no more.”

“Sleep now, Pa,” Anna, nearly there, encouraged. “I will see to it.”

With the assurance, Dorus gave in to slumber.

With her husband's slumber, Anna sighed into her own.

Her last thought before it took her was, *I will see to it. I will see to Theo.*

*

Anna had only to wait for a few days to pass to see to it. To study the interplay of her two oldest sons.

As she and some of the children worked in the garden, as others played in it, Vincent stepped out of the back door. Anna waited. He didn't join in the garden tending. He didn't join in the games. He made for the path that led out of the garden and into the fields.

Theo, squatting beside her to drop seeds into the rows she made, saw Vincent too. Watched him, then jumped up and chased after him.

At the edge between there and nowhere, Theo's call stopped Vincent.

"May I come too?" Anna heard one call to the other.

Theo ran until he caught up, shorter legs scissoring. They were too close to yell; they spoke too softly for Anna to hear. She watched them, red and blonde hair aglow in the summer sun. Expressions of desire and denial on their faces.

Theo kicked at rocks and dirt and anything in front of him as he returned to his mother's side. Anna said nothing as if she had seen nothing, as Theo took to his knees beside her, picking up his packet of seeds.

Birds cawed as they chased each other about. Their chirps like the giggles of the other children playing in the garden. Cicadas buzzed in the glory of the heat.

Where Theo once placed each seed with delicate precision, he now threw them. Tossed them away into the dirt without care or concern.

"You must find peace and joy within yourself," Anna finally spoke to Theo. The words on her tongue tasted sweet. "We cannot look for it in others."

Theo looked up to her face, then to the path upon which Vincent had wandered away.

"But don't you think we should please others? Be pleasing to them?" The pale eyes that pierced from his brother's face, glowed from Theo's. "We must please others. We must," he chanted.

Even Anna's stone core crumbled a bit at the onslaught of his words. The sadness in them and on his face.

“Dearest Theo,” she wiped a spot of dirt from the apple of his cheek, “We cannot always please others. No matter how hard we try. But know this, you are a spring flower to us. Even in the depths of winter.”

The boy glowed once more. He reached into the open rows of dirt and gently spaced the thrown seeds into their proper place.

Vincent returned to the parsonage just as the family readied to sit down to dinner.

Anna watched. Anna waited.

They all sat. Grace was said. They passed the food around. Their discussions had not yet begun. The moment was ripe.

“My angelic Theo helped me so much to prepare this fine repast,” Anna declared. “I did not even need to ask.”

Dorus grunted, smiling as he chewed a mouthful. “Our pride and joy. That you are, my boy,” he said.

Vincent ate quickly and left the table.

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“It is just you and I today, Vincent.” Anna took up her sketchbook and box of pens and pencils. A tick of her chin demanded that her son do the same.

“Really, Ma?”

She could have easily heard the exuberance in her son’s voice. She did not.

“Yes, your brothers and sisters are visiting their friends.” Was an eleven-year-old too young to hear notes of impatience? All her children had friends among those families she deemed worthy, only the well-to-do. All save Vincent. She never bothered to question why. On

this day, she knew only that she was glad for it. She needed him alone to tell of the fate that awaited him.

They walked to the fields in silence. Vincent's legs scissoring to keep up with his mother's plunging stride. He was long-legged and deep-dimpled. His red curls sprang thick from his large head. The dimples rarely showed. They needed the invitation of a smile. Few ever came. He could have tried to smile more, to her mind.

They settled on the back of the abandoned wagon in the abandoned field where wildflowers and spindly trees lived. As the sun moved higher in the sky, the shadows diminished upon their pages. Bird song shouted in their silence.

"Rise up," Anna instructed her son. A moment of curiosity. Vincent sketched hunched over his pad as if postulating himself.

Vincent did as he was told. Anna looked upon his work. Silence came again. This one a different sort.

"You have rendered those flowers well," Anna commended, if flatly. "Try smudging the edges with your finger. It will give them a softer aspect."

Praise and expectation were a marriage in this van Gogh family.

If he smiled, she didn't see it. She did see him do exactly as she instructed.

Silence companioned them once more.

"I like doing this, Ma." He lifted his head. He did not do so often.

"Sketching?" Anna kept her gaze on her own pad. She missed the adoring gaze gifted her. Would she have seen its truth even if she had?

"Yes...just the two of us."

The scratching on her pad ceased. She heard his quickened breathing in its place. She closed her sketchbook with a snap.

“Come. I must begin preparing supper.”

Vincent’s head dropped once more, but his eyes found the sun, still high in the sky.

She did not tell him that which she came to tell him.

Nor would they ever sketch alone together again.