



# The Unknown Van Gogh

The Life of Cornelis van Gogh,  
from the Netherlands to South Africa

CHRIS SCHOEMAN

The Unknown  
Van Gogh



# The Unknown Van Gogh

The Life of Cornelis van Gogh,  
from the Netherlands to South Africa

CHRIS SCHOEMAN



Published by Zebra Press  
an imprint of Penguin Random House South Africa (Pty) Ltd  
Reg. No. 1953/000441/07  
The Estuaries No. 4, Oxbow Crescent, Century Avenue, Century City, 7441  
PO Box 1144, Cape Town, 8000, South Africa

[www.zebrapress.co.za](http://www.zebrapress.co.za)

First published 2015

Publication © Penguin Random House 2015  
Text © Chris Schoeman 2015

Cover photographs: Cornelis van Gogh © Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam  
(Vincent van Gogh Foundation); man and train © iStockphoto.com/duncani890

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,  
stored in a retrieval system or transmitted, in any form or by any means,  
electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise,  
without the prior written permission of the copyright owners.

PUBLISHER: Marlene Fryer  
MANAGING EDITOR: Robert Plummer  
EDITOR: Lynda Gilfillan  
PROOFREADER: Genevieve Adams  
COVER DESIGNER: Monique Cleghorn  
TYPESETTER: Monique van den Berg  
INDEXER: Sanet le Roux

ISBN 978 1 77022 791 0 (print)  
ISBN 978 1 77022 792 7 (ePub)  
ISBN 978 1 77022 793 4 (PDF)

*To Nella, for sharing the journey with me*



# Contents

	The Van Gogh family tree .....	x
	<b>Introduction</b> .....	xiii
<b>1</b>	<b>Country roots</b>	
	Zundert .....	1
<b>2</b>	<b>Sermons and fairy tales</b>	
	Helvoirt .....	17
<b>3</b>	<b>The artist's brother</b>	
	Etten-Leur .....	23
<b>4</b>	<b>Family turmoil</b>	
	Nuenen .....	37
<b>5</b>	<b>An industrial city</b>	
	Lincoln .....	49
<b>6</b>	<b>The call of Africa</b> .....	59
<b>7</b>	<b>Across the veld</b>	
	Cape to Transvaal .....	69
<b>8</b>	<b>On the goldfields</b>	
	Johannesburg .....	79
<b>9</b>	<b>Vincent and Theo</b> .....	89

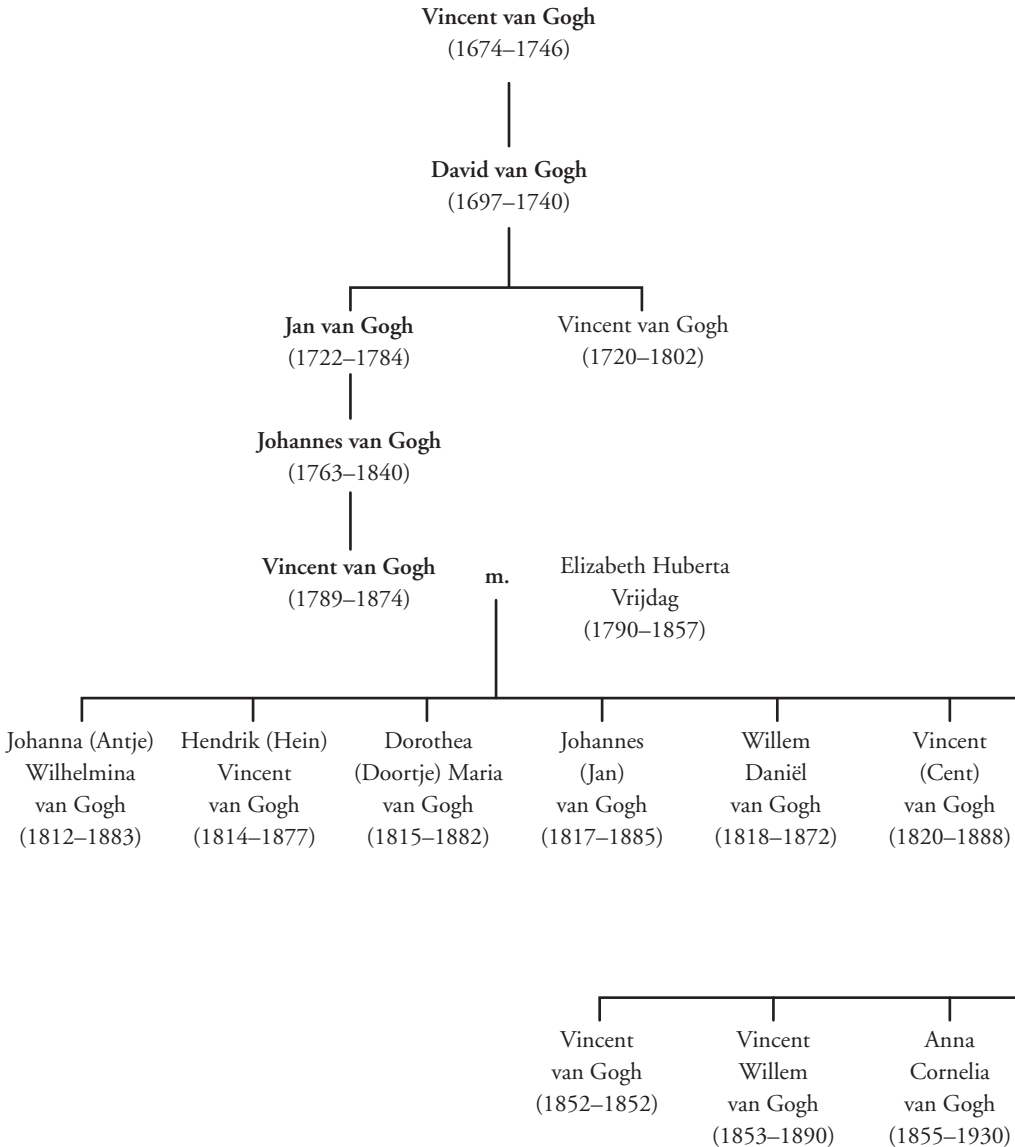
<b>10 A railway engineer</b>	
Elandsfontein .....	97
<b>11 Peace under threat</b>	
Pretoria .....	111
<b>12 An unhappy marriage</b>	
Pretoria .....	121
<b>13 Clouds of war</b>	
Transvaal .....	129
<b>14 A soldier on the front</b>	
Transvaal and Orange Free State .....	137
<b>15 A feverish end</b>	
Brandfort .....	149
<b>16 Cor's legacy and those he left behind</b>	161
<b>17 The end of the tracks</b>	171
Notes .....	175
Bibliography .....	199
Index .....	211

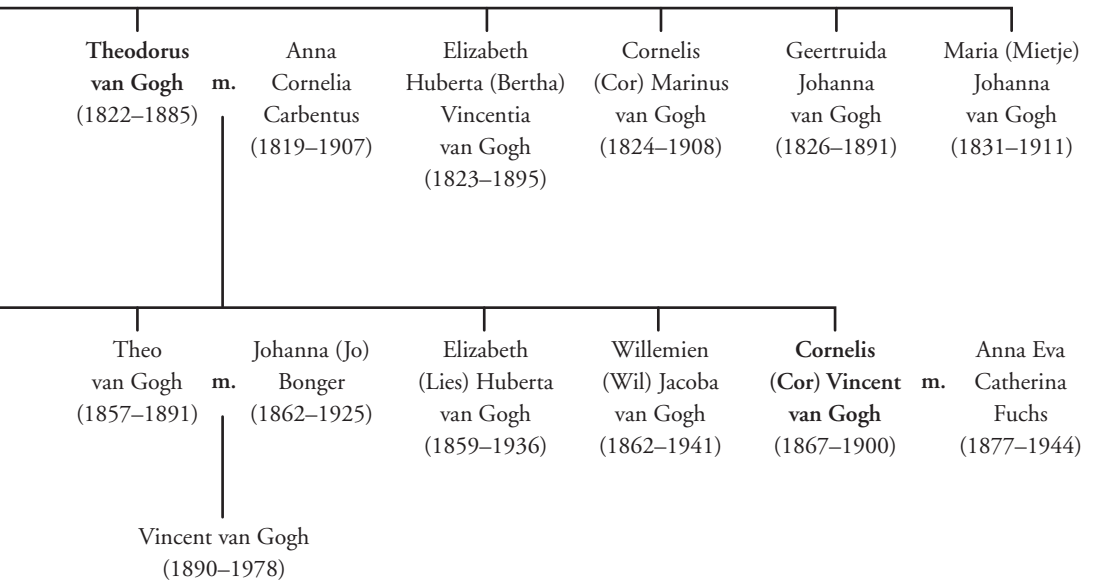
‘I think it’s very logical of Cor to go there ... [I]nstead of seeing one’s vital forces and natural, native energy evaporate in circumlocution, it’s possible that one might be happier far from our society.’

– Vincent van Gogh, on learning that his brother  
Cornelis had decided to move to South Africa

# The Van Gogh family tree

---







# Introduction

**M**UCH HAS BEEN written over the years about Vincent van Gogh's relationship with his family. The main focus usually falls on the artist's turbulent relationship with his younger brother Theo, who today lies buried next to him in the churchyard of Auvers-sur-Oise on the outskirts of Paris. Theo was the steady one, indeed the breadwinner, who provided financial as well as moral support to Vincent, continually encouraging him to remain committed to his career as an artist.

But there was a third brother – Cornelis van Gogh, known simply as Cor – who was fourteen years younger than Vincent, and ten years younger than Theo. Cor has slipped into the shadows of history, his life obscured by the achievements and activities of his older brothers. To this day, most people are ignorant of the existence of this third Van Gogh – despite Cor's story being integral to the family saga, and worthy of recognition in its own right. Indeed, from a South African point of view, Cor's story has a special significance, for a third of his life was spent in the southern part of Africa. While his older brothers lie buried side by side in Europe, Cor's final resting place is on the African continent, on the wide, windswept plains of the Free State – though there is not even a gravestone to indicate where.

The life of Cor van Gogh has been largely undocumented. A hand-

ful of magazine articles on aspects of his life appeared between 1981 and 1999; and five years later a short play, *Moe nie huil nie, moe nie treur nie*, was staged in Bloemfontein, Ghent and Amsterdam.

This book attempts to fill the narrative gap. *The Unknown Van Gogh* traces the trajectory of Cor's life from Holland to South Africa. Along the way, we witness his unhappy marriage and his eventual participation in the Second Anglo-Boer War, which led to his death at the age of thirty-two. Throughout Cor's story, we touch on the life of his more famous brother Vincent, since this is an especially significant thread in the family history.

Bringing Cor van Gogh's life out of the shadows was a challenging task, not least because of the paucity of correspondence – particularly in comparison to the abundant letter-writing of Vincent and Theo. The primary source of biographical information is the extensive collection of Van Gogh family letters in the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam. These provide insight into Cor's childhood in Brabant; his education; his working life in Helmond and Breda in the Netherlands, as well as in Lincoln in England; his move to South Africa; and his life in the Transvaal Republic while working in the gold-mining industry and for the Netherlands South African Railway Company (NZASM). The letters also record Cor's response (or lack thereof) following news of Vincent's suicide in France. Correspondence between the Van Gogh parents and their children ensured that the various family members kept up to date with events in one another's separate worlds. Much can thus be gleaned from these letters concerning not only Cor's life, but also his character.

In a letter to Theo, for instance, Vincent writes, 'I'm pleased that our brother Cor has grown bigger and stronger than the two of us. And he'll be stupid if he doesn't marry, because he has only that and his hands. With that and his hands, or his hands and that, and what

he knows about machines, I for one would like to be in his position if I had any sort of desire to be somebody.’ This kind of comment is revealing, as are the observations of Cor’s sister-in-law, Jo van Gogh-Bonger, who wrote to Vincent on the eve of Cor’s departure:<sup>1</sup>

[H]e is leaving with so much courage, with such good spirits – it is always sad to see someone go away for a long time, yet we all agreed that seldom has anyone departed in more favourable circumstances, with a greater chance of a happy future, for the unknown than he. Where he stands out above others is his down-to-earth attitude and innocence on the one hand, and his firm resolve and manliness on the other hand – he will be able to look after himself, about that I have no fear. And if good wishes for prosperity and good fortune mean anything – this will surely be guaranteed!

These letters also paint pictures of the places where the Van Gogh family lived. In letters to Theo, Vincent fondly remembers Zundert: ‘memories of times past came back to me, including how often we walked with Pa to Rijsbergen and so on, in the last days of February, and heard the lark above the black fields with young green wheat, the shimmering blue sky with white clouds above – and then the paved road with the beech trees’. Similarly, he recalls the family home: ‘I again saw each room in the house at Zundert, each path, each plant in the garden, the surrounding views, the fields, the neighbours, the cemetery, the church, our kitchen garden behind – right up to the magpies’ nest in a tall acacia in the cemetery.’<sup>2</sup>

Vincent’s personal correspondence comprises 819 letters, of which 651 were addressed to Theo; out of the total number of letters, he received 83, including 39 from Theo. No correspondence between

Vincent and Cor has survived, though there is little doubt that Vincent would have received a note now and then from '*broerke*' (little brother), of the kind Cor wrote to Theo, with news about his pet rabbit and the presents he had received at Christmas time. Cor was, in his own words, 'a bad letter-writer', and in later years had little contact with Vincent. Indeed, in October 1888, while working in England, Cor wrote to Theo, 'in fact, you are really my only brother'. A year later, while Cor was visiting Theo and his wife in Paris prior to his departure for South Africa, he did, however, receive 'an extremely warm-hearted letter' from Vincent – which seems to have been the last contact between the two brothers. Nevertheless, Vincent regularly asked after Cor in letters to his mother and Theo.

Little remains of the correspondence between Vincent and his parents, apart from six letters he wrote between 1876 and 1883, and eleven between 1889 and 1890. Although not a single letter from his parents to Vincent has survived, it is possible to speculate on the contents of the lost letters by examining the correspondence of other members of the family. As a young man, Vincent spent much time with his sister Anna, who was two years his junior, and while none of his letters to her have survived either, there is at least one from Anna to him – a short note she wrote while living in England, in December 1875. There is no trace of any correspondence between Vincent and his sister Elizabeth, or Lies as she was known, though in the last years of his life he was extremely close to his youngest sister, Willemien. In all, there are twenty-one letters to Willemien, with another three addressed to her and their mother jointly, all written between October 1887 and June 1890. (The original letters, written either in Dutch or in French, can be found in the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam. For the sake of clarity, I have deviated from existing translations of the letters.)

Archival documents in the possession of the Nederlandsche Vereniging voor Zuid-Afrika (NZAV) Library at Zuid-Afrika Huis, Amsterdam, the Transvaal (Pretoria) and Free State Archives, and the Anglo-Boer War Museum (Bloemfontein) provide valuable information regarding Cor's employment with the NZASM, his involvement in the Anglo-Boer War, his death, and his final will and testament. Up to now, little was known about his marriage, apart from the fact that his wife was Anna Fuchs, and that the marriage lasted only eight months. I nevertheless managed to trace Anna's sister's grandson, Duncan McGregor, to East Sussex in England. He was of great assistance in shedding light on Anna Fuchs's early life, her character and her second marriage. Similarly, Mrs Nora Wilson (née Bird) of Sandton, Johannesburg – Anna's cousin who had known her during her Pretoria days – provided insights into Anna's temperament and character.

During visits to various towns in Brabant, with its beautiful and tranquil landscape, I was able to trace the Van Gogh footsteps and, in a sense, go back in time to the family's nineteenth-century lives. Places I visited include Zundert, Cor's place of birth, as well as Helvoirt, Etten-Leur (frequently referred to as Etten) and Nuenen, where he lived with his family as a young boy. I also visited Helmond and Breda, where Cor went to school and worked as an apprentice, and Tilburg, where Vincent received his first formal art training as a youngster.

In researching the story of Cor van Gogh, within the broader context of his family's, I consulted a number of books, including Elizabeth du Quesne-Van Gogh's *Vincent van Gogh, herinneringen aan haar broeder*; Frank Kools's *Vincent van Gogh en zijn geboorteplaats: als een boer van Zundert*; B.J. Stokvis's *Nasporingen omtrent Vincent van Gogh in Brabant*; Ton de Brouwer's *Van Gogh en Nuenen*;

and Jo van Gogh-Bonger's *Memoir of Vincent van Gogh*. Among several articles I consulted, the following were especially useful: 'Van Gogh in Helvoirt' by Harrie Smulders; an anonymous article, 'Tuinman van dominee Van Gogh vertelt zijn herinneringen over Vincent'; and Jack van Hoek's 'Cor van Gogh'.

A special word of appreciation is due to the Stichting Studiefonds (Nederlands Zuid-Afrikaanse Vereniging) and the Van Ewijck Stigting, whose financial support made my visits to the Netherlands possible. I am grateful also to Isolde Cael of the Van Gogh Museum Library in Amsterdam; Guido van den Berg, Sief Veldtkamp, Corine de Majjer and Tinneke Dorr of Zuid-Afrika Huis in Amsterdam; Professor G.J. Schutte of the Stichting Zuid-Afrikaansche Spoorwegmaatschappij (ZASM) in Amsterdam; the South African Centre for the Netherlands and Flanders in Cape Town; the library staff at the South African Library in Cape Town and at the Special Collections J.S. Gericke Library at Stellenbosch University; and finally to Anglo-Boer War experts Professor Kay de Villiers in Cape Town and Dr Arnold van Dyk in Bloemfontein.

CHRIS SCHOEMAN

APRIL 2015

# 1

## Country roots

### ZUNDERT

THE TOWN OF Zundert, where Cor van Gogh and his two brothers and three sisters were born, lies in the Netherlands region of North Brabant, a few kilometres south of Breda near the Belgian border. To the north-west lies Etten-Leur. Beyond Breda, to the east, lies Nuenen, and to the north-east, beyond Tilburg, lies Helvoirt. These are the towns that formed the borders of Cor's life during his early years. He revelled in the surrounding landscape: green and flat, with many streams and dams, abundant fields of heather, pine forests, tall birches and weeping willow trees. Cor's roots were in these fields and forests, through which he frequently strolled. He was a true son of this beautiful region, a man of Brabant. But he would find his final resting place thousands of kilometres from here, on a continent far away.

Cor's surname probably derived from Gogh, a village on the German border, though by the sixteenth century the Van Goghs were already firmly established in Holland. At this time there was a Jacob van Gogh living in Utrecht, in a house known as 'the Owl behind the Town Hall'. Jacob's son, Jan, lived in another building called 'the Bible under the flax market' – he was a dealer in wine and books. He was also the captain of the Town Guard. To this day, the Van Gogh coat of arms consists of a bar with three roses.<sup>1</sup>

Cor van Gogh – together with his siblings Vincent, Theo, Anna, Elizabeth and Willemien – was descended from a well-known and respected family that dates back to the seventeenth century in the Netherlands. The first recorded direct ancestor of the family, Vincent van Gogh, was a theologian who held unorthodox religious views. He led the way for many who made a courageous contribution to the rise of Protestantism, and his name frequently crops up in succeeding generations. This Vincent was born and baptised in 1674 in The Hague. His son David was born in 1697. David's youngest son, Jan, became a goldsmith, while his oldest son, also named Vincent, was a skilled sculptor. The latter's art made him a fairly wealthy man – in contrast to his famous twentieth-century namesake.

Jan's son Johannes was born in 1763. By 1851, Johannes's own son, another Vincent – and later Cor van Gogh's grandfather – had become a pastor in the Dutch Reformed Church. He was based in Breda in the south of Holland, though his children, among them Theodorus, lived elsewhere in the Netherlands. Vincent married Elizabeth Vrijdag and together they had six sons and five daughters. Their second-oldest son, Johannes, reached the rank of vice admiral in the navy, three sons became successful art dealers, and two daughters married wealthy husbands. One of the sons in the art trade, Hendrik van Gogh, established a successful business in Rotterdam before moving to Brussels, where he managed a branch of the well-known Paris art dealership, Goupil & Cie.<sup>2</sup>

Another son, Cornelis Marinus, established a highly successful bookshop and art dealership in Amsterdam. In 1853, four years after starting out, Cornelis moved his business to Leidse Street; then, nearly twenty years later, he moved it again to 453 Keizersgracht on a canal between Leidsegracht and Leidse Street. Built in 1669, the premises are today a national monument. Much of the Van Gogh children's

reading matter came from this bookshop, which their uncle ran until his death in 1908.

Vincent and Elizabeth's fourth son, also Vincent, sold art materials in The Hague, and in time built up an art gallery that earned him sufficient prestige to be offered a partnership by Goupil & Cie. When Vincent moved to Paris, his manager, H.C. Tersteeg, took over the gallery in The Hague. Vincent's health was poor, however, and by 1851 he had retired to Prinsenhage.

Theodorus van Gogh, who was born on 8 February 1822, was the exception among his five brothers. Unlike them, he was not wealthy, choosing instead to follow his father into the Dutch Reformed Church. When the health of Reverend Vincent Abraham van der Burg, who had served since 1833, deteriorated, Reverend van Gogh appointed his son Theodorus as Van der Burg's successor. So, on 1 April 1849, Theodorus became the twenty-fifth minister of the congregation of Zundert and Rijsbergen. At that stage, the Reformed congregation of Zundert consisted of 114 members. The majority of churchgoers were local farmers and customs officials at the border post at Wernhout, while the rest came from surrounding villages or were travellers from Northern Netherlands.

For Theodorus, it was no easy task ministering to a congregation in a predominantly Catholic region. The congregation itself was poor, though close-knit. Still, by 1867 – the year of Cor's birth – it had shrunk to sixty-four. Theodorus was not known as a great preacher, but he gave freely to the poor, thereby depleting his own small stipend. He felt a strong call of duty, and during his time in Zundert worked hard to support the poorest of the poor. He represented the Société du Bien-Être, which he frequently called upon, using farms bought up by the Société to accommodate large Protestant families – thereby also expanding his own small congregation. Theodorus used

meagre church donations to help the poor, and with the assistance of a few wealthy people he distributed bread, oats and beans to the indigent. In this manner, he helped sustain the threatened congregation for twenty-two years.

The Reverend Theodorus van Gogh was popular with his congregation, and in Zundert he was affectionately known as '*die mooi dominee*' (the handsome minister). He had a broad forehead, wide eyes and a strong nose and chin. He was mild-mannered and friendly, yet also firm and clear in his convictions. As a Calvinist preacher, he was a disciple of the Groninger Richting, a Dutch theological movement that was opposed to the dogmatism of the orthodox Reformed Church.<sup>3</sup>

After two years Theodorus was sufficiently established and could afford to get married. He had never desired wealth and did not envy his brothers' prosperity; and though comparatively poor, he earned enough to feed and clothe a family. He married a woman three years older than himself: Anna Cornelia Carbentus. She was born in 1819 in The Hague, the second of nine children and the sister of his brother Vincent's wife. She was the daughter of a bookbinder, Willem Carbentus, who was known as 'the King's bookbinder' for his role in binding Holland's first Constitution. While the Carbentus family was respected and established, it did not enjoy the same standing as the Van Goghs.

Anna was only sixteen years old when her mother died, and she helped raise her younger brothers and sisters. A somewhat plain woman, Anna had a broad face, a low, protruding brow, deep-set eyes and wide cheekbones. She had a domineering personality, and a reputation for having a volatile disposition that at times bordered on hysteria.<sup>4</sup> Some of her children inherited these traits: the moodiness of Vincent van Gogh has been well-documented; and in 1902 her

youngest daughter, Willemien, was admitted to a psychiatric institution in Veldwijk, where she remained until her death thirty-nine years later. Anna's youngest son Cornelis – whom she affectionately called Cor – was later described by a family member and former colleague as '*heftig van aard*', or impetuous by nature. By the time Cor was born, Anna was already forty-seven years old.

This complex woman had many positive qualities too, however. Anna was a dutiful wife and gave her husband her wholehearted support. She took care of her own family, yet also found time to accompany Theodorus on visits to the congregation. Her daughter-in-law, Jo van Gogh-Bonger, remarks on Anna's 'cheerful and lively spirit',<sup>5</sup> which was never dampened by the monotony of small-town life. Indeed, until her death at the age of eighty-seven, Anna displayed a unique energy. After the death of her husband and the eventual demise of her three sons, Anna bore her grief with commendable courage.<sup>6</sup>

A particularly memorable characteristic was her love of nature – a quality that seemed to rub off on her children. Anna also had a talent for writing and was able to put her thoughts to paper in a simple, lucid manner. Van Gogh-Bonger states that one of Anna's favourite expressions was: '*Ek stuur net vir jou 'n klein woordjie*' (I'm sending you a little word), adding that, 'For almost twenty years [this] was an infallible source of hope and courage to me.'<sup>7</sup>

\* \* \*

Anna gave birth to her first child on 30 March 1852, but the baby was stillborn. He was to have been named Vincent, after his grandfather in Breda and his uncle in Princenhage. Anna, who was by then already thirty-two, found it extremely difficult to deal with this unfortunate event, which caused her enormous disappointment and

grief. The situation was no doubt aggravated by the fact that she no longer had access to the resources and facilities of a big city, and despite Jo van Gogh-Bonger's observations in this regard, Anna must surely have felt lonely and isolated without the support of family and friends. Furthermore, the people of Zundert were mainly peasants, whose dialect she understood with difficulty. Anna felt utterly bereft as the little body of her child was buried in the graveyard just a few metres away from the church where Theodorus preached every Sunday.

Exactly one year after this sad event, on 30 March 1853, Anna successfully gave birth to a second son, whom they named Vincent Willem van Gogh. While the boy had the red hair and freckled skin of the Van Goghs, he shared his mother's temperament, and was often impatient and even abrupt. Unfortunately for Vincent, he was raised in the shadow of his little namesake. Every week a pilgrimage was undertaken to the grave of his stillborn brother, and the family solemnly placed flowers on the little gravestone. Whenever Vincent displayed stubborn or moody behaviour, the stillborn boy was always held up as the model child.<sup>8</sup>

Vincent was his mother's pride and joy, but her mood towards him often switched to coldness and loathing. 'In this mood and in anger she often could not resist brandishing before him a picture of that dead brother who would have been so different – obedient, quiet, ever loving – and rebuking him for adding by his naughtiness to her suffering,' wrote one of Vincent's biographers. 'Then she would repent, would dote on him, spoil him, caress him fiercely and possessively – for at times he was very precious to her, more so than any other of her living children.'<sup>9</sup>

As the eldest, Vincent was the first of the Van Gogh children to attend school. He started off in Zundert, but in 1864, when he was

eleven years old, his parents decided to send him to Jan Provily's boarding school at Zevenbergen, about thirty-two kilometres from Zundert. It was a grey, rainy day when they dropped him off, and young Vincent was overcome by sadness as he watched the coach ride off with his parents. He was at Zevenbergen for two years, and in August 1866 he left to attend the new middle school, Hogere Burgerschool Willem II in Tilburg, where Constantijn C. Huysmans, a successful artist in Paris, gave him drawing lessons.<sup>10</sup>

The next child, Anna Cornelia, was born in 1855. Like Vincent, she was sent off to boarding school, but in Leeuwarden. Afterwards she went to England, where she lived from 1874 to 1876, first in London and later in Welwyn, where she gave French lessons. On her return to the Netherlands, Anna was employed as a lady's companion by the Van Houten family in Hengelo. In 1878 she married the son of the family, Joan Marinus, a chalk lime manufacturer. She and her husband had two daughters.

Next in the family was Theodorus (Theo), born in 1857. He developed a close relationship with his younger brother Cor – far closer than that between Cor and Vincent. Cor valued his bond with Theo, once writing to him: 'Do not think that although I don't write often, I have forgotten you, because you are really my only brother.'<sup>11</sup> There was also a special bond between Theo and Vincent, as will later become clear. After Theo's high-school education in Oijsterwijk, south-west of Helvoirt where the family lived for a while, he joined the Goupil Art Gallery in 1873, which was later taken over by Boussod, Valadon & Cie. In 1881 Theo was appointed as manager of the Goupil's Boulevard Montmartre branch in Paris. Some years later, in Amsterdam, he married Jo Bongers, an English teacher he had met four years earlier. Their only child, Vincent Willem, was born in 1890 and died in 1978. Theo