

ALSO BY ALBERT CAMUS

Awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1957

Notebooks 1942-1951 (*Carnets*,
janvier 1942-mars 1951) 1965

Notebooks 1935-1942 (*Carnets*,
mai 1935-février 1942) 1963

Resistance, Rebellion, and Death (*Actuelles*
—a selection) 1961

The Possessed (*Les Possédés*) 1960

Caligula and Three Other Plays (*Caligula*,
Le Malentendu, *L'Etat de siège*,
Les Justes) 1958

Exile and the Kingdom (*L'Exil*
et le Royaume) 1958

The Fall (*La Chute*) 1957

The Myth of Sisyphus (*Le Mythe de Sisyphe*)
and Other Essays 1955

The Rebel (*L'Homme Révolté*) 1954

The Plague (*La Peste*) 1948

The Stranger (*L'Etranger*) 1946

THE STRANGER

ALBERT CAMUS

Translated from the French

by Matthew Ward

VINTAGE INTERNATIONAL
VINTAGE BOOKS
A DIVISION OF RANDOM HOUSE, INC.
NEW YORK

Maman died today. Or yesterday maybe, I don't know. I got a telegram from the home: "Mother deceased. Funeral tomorrow. Faithfully yours." That doesn't mean anything. Maybe it was yesterday.

The old people's home is at Marengo, about eighty kilometers from Algiers, I'll take the two o'clock bus and get there in the afternoon. That way I can be there for the vigil and come back tomorrow night. I asked my boss for two days off and there was no way he was going to refuse me with an excuse like that. But he wasn't too happy about it. I even said, "It's not my fault." He didn't say anything. Then I thought I shouldn't have said that. After all, I didn't have anything to apologize for. He's the one who should have offered his condolences. But he probably will day after tomorrow, when he sees I'm in mourning. For now, it's almost as if Maman weren't dead. After the funeral, though, the case will be closed, and everything will have a more official feel to it.

I caught the two o'clock bus. It was very hot. I ate at the restaurant, at Céleste's, as usual. Everybody felt very sorry for me, and Céleste said, "You only have one

mother." When I left, they walked me to the door. I was a little distracted because I still had to go up to Emmanuel's place to borrow a black tie and an arm band. He lost his uncle a few months back.

I ran so as not to miss the bus. It was probably because of all the rushing around, and on top of that the bumpy ride, the smell of gasoline, and the glare of the sky and the road, that I dozed off. I slept almost the whole way. And when I woke up, I was slumped against a soldier who smiled at me and asked if I'd been traveling long. I said, "Yes," just so I wouldn't have to say anything else.

The home is two kilometers from the village. I walked them. I wanted to see Maman right away. But the caretaker told me I had to see the director first. He was busy, so I waited awhile. The caretaker talked the whole time and then I saw the director. I was shown into his office. He was a little old man with the ribbon of the Legion of Honor in his lapel. He looked at me with his clear eyes. Then he shook my hand and held it so long I didn't know how to get it loose. He thumbed through a file and said, "Madame Meursault came to us three years ago. You were her sole support." I thought he was criticizing me for something and I started to explain. But he cut me off. "You don't have to justify yourself, my dear boy. I've read your mother's file. You weren't able to provide for her properly. She needed someone to look after her. You earn only a modest salary. And the truth of the matter is, she was happier here." I said,

"Yes, sir." He added, "You see, she had friends here, people her own age. She was able to share things from the old days with them. You're young, and it must have been hard for her with you."

It was true. When she was at home with me, Maman used to spend her time following me with her eyes, not saying a thing. For the first few days she was at the home she cried a lot. But that was because she wasn't used to it. A few months later and she would have cried if she'd been taken out. She was used to it. That's partly why I didn't go there much this past year. And also because it took up my Sunday—not to mention the trouble of getting to the bus, buying tickets, and spending two hours traveling.

The director spoke to me again. But I wasn't really listening anymore. Then he said, "I suppose you'd like to see your mother." I got up without saying anything and he led the way to the door. On the way downstairs, he explained, "We've moved her to our little mortuary. So as not to upset the others. Whenever one of the residents dies, the others are a bit on edge for the next two or three days. And that makes it difficult to care for them." We crossed a courtyard where there were lots of old people chatting in little groups. As we went by, the talking would stop. And then the conversation would start up again behind us. The sound was like the muffled jabber of parakeets. The director stopped at the door of a small building. "I'll leave you now, Monsieur Meursault. If you need me for anything, I'll be in my office.

As is usually the case, the funeral is set for ten o'clock in the morning. This way you'll be able to keep vigil over the departed. One last thing: it seems your mother often expressed to her friends her desire for a religious burial. I've taken the liberty of making the necessary arrangements. But I wanted to let you know." I thanked him. While not an atheist, Maman had never in her life given a thought to religion.

I went in. It was a very bright, whitewashed room with a skylight for a roof. The furniture consisted of some chairs and some cross-shaped sawhorses. Two of them, in the middle of the room, were supporting a closed casket. All you could see were some shiny screws, not screwed down all the way, standing out against the walnut-stained planks. Near the casket was an Arab nurse in a white smock, with a brightly colored scarf on her head.

Just then the caretaker came in behind me. He must have been running. He stuttered a little. "We put the cover on, but I'm supposed to unscrew the casket so you can see her." He was moving toward the casket when I stopped him. He said, "You don't want to?" I answered, "No." He was quiet, and I was embarrassed because I felt I shouldn't have said that. He looked at me and then asked, "Why not?" but without criticizing, as if he just wanted to know. I said, "I don't know." He started twirling his moustache, and then without looking at me, again he said, "I understand." He had nice pale blue eyes and a reddish complexion. He offered me a chair and then

sat down right behind me. The nurse stood up and went toward the door. At that point the caretaker said to me, "She's got an abscess." I didn't understand, so I looked over at the nurse and saw that she had a bandage wrapped around her head just below the eyes. Where her nose should have been, the bandage was flat. All you could see of her face was the whiteness of the bandage.

When she'd gone, the caretaker said, "I'll leave you alone." I don't know what kind of gesture I made, but he stayed where he was, behind me. Having this presence breathing down my neck was starting to annoy me. The room was filled with beautiful late-afternoon sunlight. Two hornets were buzzing against the glass roof. I could feel myself getting sleepy. Without turning around, I said to the caretaker, "Have you been here long?" Right away he answered, "Five years"—as if he'd been waiting all along for me to ask.

After that he did a lot of talking. He would have been very surprised if anyone had told him he would end up caretaker at the Marengo home. He was sixty-four and came from Paris. At that point I interrupted him. "Oh, you're not from around here?" Then I remembered that before taking me to the director's office, he had talked to me about Maman. He'd told me that they had to bury her quickly, because it gets hot in the plains, especially in this part of the country. That was when he told me he had lived in Paris and that he had found it hard to forget it. In Paris they keep vigil over the body for

three, sometimes four days. But here you barely have time to get used to the idea before you have to start running after the hearse. Then his wife had said to him, "Hush now, that's not the sort of thing to be telling the gentleman." The old man had blushed and apologized. I'd stepped in and said, "No, not at all." I thought what he'd been saying was interesting and made sense.

In the little mortuary he told me that he'd come to the home because he was destitute. He was in good health, so he'd offered to take on the job of caretaker. I pointed out that even so he was still a resident. He said no, he wasn't. I'd already been struck by the way he had of saying "they" or "the others" and, less often, "the old people," talking about the patients, when some of them weren't any older than he was. But of course it wasn't the same. He was the caretaker, and to a certain extent he had authority over them.

Just then the nurse came in. Night had fallen suddenly. Darkness had gathered, quickly, above the skylight. The caretaker turned the switch and I was blinded by the sudden flash of light. He suggested I go to the dining hall for dinner. But I wasn't hungry. Then he offered to bring me a cup of coffee with milk. I like milk in my coffee, so I said yes, and he came back a few minutes later with a tray. I drank the coffee. Then I felt like having a smoke. But I hesitated, because I didn't know if I could do it with Maman right there. I thought about it; it didn't matter. I offered the caretaker a cigarette and we smoked.

At one point he said, "You know, your mother's friends will be coming to keep vigil too. It's customary. I have to go get some chairs and some black coffee." I asked him if he could turn off one of the lights. The glare on the white walls was making me drowsy. He said he couldn't. That was how they'd been wired: it was all or nothing. I didn't pay too much attention to him after that. He left, came back, set up some chairs. On one of them he stacked some cups around a coffee pot. Then he sat down across from me, on the other side of Maman. The nurse was on that side of the room too, but with her back to me. I couldn't see what she was doing. But the way her arms were moving made me think she was knitting. It was pleasant; the coffee had warmed me up, and the smell of flowers on the night air was coming through the open door. I think I dozed off for a while.

It was a rustling sound that woke me up. Because I'd had my eyes closed, the whiteness of the room seemed even brighter than before. There wasn't a shadow anywhere in front of me, and every object, every angle and curve stood out so sharply it made my eyes hurt. That's when Maman's friends came in. There were about ten in all, and they floated into the blinding light without a sound. They sat down without a single chair creaking. I saw them more clearly than I had ever seen anyone, and not one detail of their faces or their clothes escaped me. But I couldn't hear them, and it was hard for me to believe they really existed. Almost all the women were wearing aprons, and the strings, which were tied tight

around their waists, made their bulging stomachs stick out even more. I'd never noticed what huge stomachs old women can have. Almost all the men were skinny and carried canes. What struck me most about their faces was that I couldn't see their eyes, just a faint glimmer in a nest of wrinkles. When they'd sat down, most of them looked at me and nodded awkwardly, their lips sucked in by their toothless mouths, so that I couldn't tell if they were greeting me or if it was just a nervous tic. I think they were greeting me. It was then that I realized they were all sitting across from me, nodding their heads, grouped around the caretaker. For a second I had the ridiculous feeling that they were there to judge me.

Soon one of the women started crying. She was in the second row, hidden behind one of her companions, and I couldn't see her very well. She was crying softly, steadily, in little sobs. I thought she'd never stop. The others seemed not to hear her. They sat there hunched up, gloomy and silent. They would look at the casket, or their canes, or whatever else, but that was all they would look at. The woman kept on crying. It surprised me, because I didn't know who she was. I wished I didn't have to listen to her anymore. But I didn't dare say anything. The caretaker leaned over and said something to her, but she shook her head, mumbled something, and went on crying as much as before. Then the caretaker came around to my side. He sat down next to me. After a long pause he explained, without looking at

me, "She was very close to your mother. She says your mother was her only friend and now she hasn't got any-one."

We just sat there like that for quite a while. The woman's sighs and sobs were quieting down. She sniffled a lot. Then finally she shut up. I didn't feel drowsy anymore, but I was tired and my back was hurting me. Now it was all these people not making a sound that was getting on my nerves. Except that every now and then I'd hear a strange noise and I couldn't figure out what it was. Finally I realized that some of the old people were sucking at the insides of their cheeks and making these weird smacking noises. They were so lost in their thoughts that they weren't even aware of it. I even had the impression that the dead woman lying in front of them didn't mean anything to them. But I think now that that was a false impression.

We all had some coffee, served by the caretaker. After that I don't know any more. The night passed. I remember opening my eyes at one point and seeing that all the old people were slumped over asleep, except for one old man, with his chin resting on the back of his hands wrapped around his cane, who was staring at me as if he were just waiting for me to wake up. Then I dozed off again. I woke up because my back was hurting more and more. Dawn was creeping up over the skylight. Soon afterwards, one of the old men woke up and coughed a lot. He kept hacking into a large checkered handkerchief, and every cough was like a convulsion. He woke

the others up, and the caretaker told them that they ought to be going. They got up. The uncomfortable vigil had left their faces ashen looking. On their way out, and much to my surprise, they all shook my hand—as if that night during which we hadn't exchanged as much as a single word had somehow brought us closer together.

I was tired. The caretaker took me to his room and I was able to clean up a little. I had some more coffee and milk, which was very good. When I went outside, the sun was up. Above the hills that separate Marengo from the sea, the sky was streaked with red. And the wind coming over the hills brought the smell of salt with it. It was going to be a beautiful day. It had been a long time since I'd been out in the country, and I could feel how much I'd enjoy going for a walk if it hadn't been for Maman.

But I waited in the courtyard, under a plane tree. I breathed in the smell of fresh earth and I wasn't sleepy anymore. I thought of the other guys at the office. They'd be getting up to go to work about this time: for me that was always the most difficult time of day. I thought about those things a little more, but I was distracted by the sound of a bell ringing inside the buildings. There was some commotion behind the windows, then everything quieted down again. The sun was now a little higher in the sky: it was starting to warm my feet. The caretaker came across the courtyard and told me that the director was asking for me. I went to his office. He had me sign

a number of documents. I noticed that he was dressed in black with pin-striped trousers. He picked up the telephone and turned to me. "The undertaker's men arrived a few minutes ago. I'm going to ask them to seal the casket. Before I do, would you like to see your mother one last time?" I said no. He gave the order into the telephone, lowering his voice: "Figeac, tell the men they can go ahead."

After that he told me he would be attending the funeral and I thanked him. He sat down behind his desk and crossed his short legs. He informed me that he and I would be the only ones there, apart from the nurse on duty. The residents usually weren't allowed to attend funerals. He only let them keep the vigil. "It's more humane that way," he remarked. But in this case he'd given one of mother's old friends—Thomas Pérez—permission to join the funeral procession. At that the director smiled. He said, "I'm sure you understand. It's a rather childish sentiment. But he and your mother were almost inseparable. The others used to tease them and say, 'Pérez has a fiancée.' He'd laugh. They enjoyed it. And the truth is he's taking Madame Meursault's death very hard. I didn't think I could rightfully refuse him permission. But on the advice of our visiting physician, I did not allow him to keep the vigil last night."

We didn't say anything for quite a long time. The director stood up and looked out the window of his office. A moment later he said, "Here's the priest from Marengo already. He's early." He warned me that it would take at

least three-quarters of an hour to walk to the church, which is in the village itself. We went downstairs. Out in front of the building stood the priest and two altar boys. One of them was holding a censer, and the priest was leaning toward him, adjusting the length of its silver chain. As we approached, the priest straightened up. He called me "my son" and said a few words to me. He went inside; I followed.

I noticed right away that the screws on the casket had been tightened and that there were four men wearing black in the room. The director was telling me that the hearse was waiting out in the road and at the same time I could hear the priest beginning his prayers. From then on everything happened very quickly. The men moved toward the casket with a pall. The priest, his acolytes, the director and I all went outside. A woman I didn't know was standing by the door. "Monsieur Meursault," the director said. I didn't catch the woman's name; I just understood that she was the nurse assigned by the home. Without smiling she lowered her long, gaunt face. Then we stepped aside to make way for the body. We followed the pall bearers and left the home. Outside the gate stood the hearse. Varnished, glossy, and oblong, it reminded me of a pencil box. Next to it was the funeral director, a little man in a ridiculous getup, and an awkward, embarrassed-looking old man. I realized that it was Monsieur Pérez. He was wearing a soft felt hat with a round crown and a wide brim (he took it off as the casket was coming through the gate), a suit with trousers

that were corkscrewed down around his ankles, and a black tie with a knot that was too small for the big white collar of his shirt. His lips were trembling below a nose dotted with blackheads. Strange, floppy, thick-rimmed ears stuck out through his fine, white hair, and I was struck by their blood-red color next to the pallor of his face. The funeral director assigned us our places. First came the priest, then the hearse. Flanking it, the four men. Behind it, the director and myself and, bringing up the rear, the nurse and Monsieur Pérez.

The sky was already filled with light. The sun was beginning to bear down on the earth and it was getting hotter by the minute. I don't know why we waited so long before getting under way. I was hot in my dark clothes. The little old man, who had put his hat back on, took it off again. I turned a little in his direction and was looking at him when the director started talking to me about him. He told me that my mother and Monsieur Pérez often used to walk down to the village together in the evenings, accompanied by a nurse. I was looking at the countryside around me. Seeing the rows of cypress trees leading up to the hills next to the sky, and the houses standing out here and there against that red and green earth, I was able to understand Maman better. Evenings in that part of the country must have been a kind of sad relief. But today, with the sun bearing down, making the whole landscape shimmer with heat, it was inhuman and oppressive.

We got under way. It was then that I noticed that

Pérez had a slight limp. Little by little, the hearse was picking up speed and the old man was losing ground. One of the men flanking the hearse had also dropped back and was now even with me. I was surprised at how fast the sun was climbing in the sky. I noticed that for quite some time the countryside had been buzzing with the sound of insects and the crackling of grass. The sweat was pouring down my face. I wasn't wearing a hat, so I fanned myself with my handkerchief. The man from the undertaker's said something to me then which I missed. He was lifting the edge of his cap with his right hand and wiping his head with a handkerchief with his left at the same time. I said, "What?" He pointed up at the sky and repeated, "Pretty hot." I said, "Yes." A minute later he asked, "Is that your mother in there?" Again I said, "Yes." "Was she old?" I answered, "Fairly," because I didn't know the exact number. After that he was quiet. I turned around and saw old Pérez about fifty meters behind us. He was going as fast as he could, swinging his felt hat at the end of his arm. I looked at the director, too. He was walking with great dignity, without a single wasted motion. A few beads of sweat were forming on his forehead, but he didn't wipe them off.

The procession seemed to me to be moving a little faster. All around me there was still the same glowing countryside flooded with sunlight. The glare from the sky was unbearable. At one point, we went over a section of the road that had just been repaved. The tar had burst open in the sun. Our feet sank into it, leaving its

Simple
Existential
Surrealism

shiny pulp exposed. Sticking up above the top of the hearse, the coachman's hard leather hat looked as if it had been molded out of the same black mud. I felt a little lost between the blue and white of the sky and the monotony of the colors around me—the sticky black of the tar, the dull black of all the clothes, and the shiny black of the hearse. All of it—the sun, the smell of leather and horse dung from the hearse, the smell of varnish and incense, and my fatigue after a night without sleep—was making it hard for me to see or think straight. I turned around again: Pérez seemed to be way back there, fading in the shimmering heat. Then I lost sight of him altogether. I looked around and saw that he'd left the road and cut out across the fields. I also noticed there was a bend in the road up ahead. I realized that Pérez, who knew the country, was taking a short cut in order to catch up with us. By the time we rounded the bend, he was back with us. Then we lost him again. He set off cross country once more, and so it went on. I could feel the blood pounding in my temples.

After that, everything seemed to happen so fast, so deliberately, so naturally that I don't remember any of it anymore. Except for one thing: as we entered the village, the nurse spoke to me. She had a remarkable voice which didn't go with her face at all, a melodious, quavering voice. She said, "If you go slowly, you risk getting sunstroke. But if you go too fast, you work up a sweat and then catch a chill inside the church." She was right. There was no way out. Several other images

from that day have stuck in my mind: for instance, Pérez's face when he caught up with us for the last time, just outside the village. Big tears of frustration and exhaustion were streaming down his cheeks. But because of all the wrinkles, they weren't dripping off. They spread out and ran together again, leaving a watery film over his ruined face. Then there was the church and the villagers on the sidewalks, the red geraniums on the graves in the cemetery, Pérez fainting (he crumpled like a rag doll), the blood-red earth spilling over Maman's casket, the white flesh of the roots mixed in with it, more people, voices, the village, waiting in front of a café, the incessant drone of the motor, and my joy when the bus entered the nest of lights that was Algiers and I knew I was going to go to bed and sleep for twelve hours.

(over)
Images

As I was waking up, it came to me why my boss had seemed annoyed when I asked him for two days off: today is Saturday. I'd sort of forgotten, but as I was getting up, it came to me. And, naturally, my boss thought about the fact that I'd be getting four days' vacation that way, including Sunday, and he couldn't have been happy about that. But, in the first place, it isn't my fault if they buried Maman yesterday instead of today, and second, I would have had Saturday and Sunday off anyway. Obviously, that still doesn't keep me from understanding my boss's point of view.

I had a hard time getting up, because I was tired from the day before. While I was shaving, I wondered what I was going to do and I decided to go for a swim. I caught the streetcar to go to the public beach down at the harbor. Once there, I dove into the channel. There were lots of young people. In the water I ran into Marie Cardona, a former typist in our office whom I'd had a thing for at the time. She did too, I think. But she'd left soon afterwards and we didn't have the time. I helped her onto a float and as I did, I brushed against her breasts.

I was still in the water when she was already lying flat on her stomach on the float. She turned toward me. Her hair was in her eyes and she was laughing. I hoisted myself up next to her. It was nice, and, sort of joking around, I let my head fall back and rest on her stomach. She didn't say anything so I left it there. I had the whole sky in my eyes and it was blue and gold. On the back of my neck I could feel Marie's heart beating softly. We lay on the float for a long time, half asleep. When the sun got too hot, she dove off and I followed. I caught up with her, put my arm around her waist, and we swam together. She laughed the whole time. On the dock, while we were drying ourselves off, she said, "I'm darker than you." I asked her if she wanted to go to the movies that evening. She laughed again and told me there was a Fernandel movie she'd like to see. Once we were dressed, she seemed very surprised to see I was wearing a black tie and she asked me if I was in mourning. I told her Maman had died. She wanted to know how long ago, so I said, "Yesterday." She gave a little start but didn't say anything. I felt like telling her it wasn't my fault, but I stopped myself because I remembered that I'd already said that to my boss. It didn't mean anything. Besides, you always feel a little guilty.

By that evening Marie had forgotten all about it. The movie was funny in parts, but otherwise it was just too stupid. She had her leg pressed against mine. I was fondling her breasts. Toward the end of the show, I gave her a kiss, but not a good one. She came back to my place.

When I woke up, Marie had gone. She'd explained to me that she had to go to her aunt's. I remembered that it was Sunday, and that bothered me: I don't like Sundays. So I rolled over, tried to find the salty smell Marie's hair had left on the pillow, and slept until ten. Then I smoked a few cigarettes, still in bed, till noon. I didn't feel like having lunch at Céleste's like I usually did because they'd be sure to ask questions and I don't like that. I fixed myself some eggs and ate them out of the pan, without bread because I didn't have any left and I didn't feel like going downstairs to buy some.

After lunch I was a little bored and I wandered around the apartment. It was just the right size when Maman was here. Now it's too big for me, and I've had to move the dining room table into my bedroom. I live in just one room now, with some saggy straw chairs, a wardrobe whose mirror has gone yellow, a dressing table, and a brass bed. I've let the rest go. A little later, just for something to do, I picked up an old newspaper and read it. I cut out an advertisement for Kruschen Salts and stuck it in an old notebook where I put things from the papers that interest me. I also washed my hands, and then I went out onto the balcony.

My room looks out over the main street in the neighborhood. It was a beautiful afternoon. Yet the pavement was wet and slippery, and what few people there were were in a hurry. First, it was families out for a walk: two little boys in sailor suits, with trousers below the knees, looking a little cramped in their stiff clothes, and a little

girl with a big pink bow and black patent-leather shoes. Behind them, an enormous mother, in a brown silk dress, and the father, a rather frail little man I know by sight. He had on a straw hat and a bow tie and was carrying a walking stick. Seeing him with his wife, I understood why people in the neighborhood said he was distinguished. A little later the local boys went by, hair greased back, red ties, tight-fitting jackets, with embroidered pocket handkerchiefs and square-toed shoes. I thought they must be heading to the movies in town. That was why they were leaving so early and hurrying toward the streetcar, laughing loudly.

After them, the street slowly emptied out. The matinees had all started, I guess. The only ones left were the shopkeepers and the cats. The sky was clear but dull above the fig trees lining the street. On the sidewalk across the way the tobacconist brought out a chair, set it in front of his door, and straddled it, resting his arms on the back. The streetcars, packed a few minutes before, were almost empty. In the little café Chez Pierrot, next door to the tobacconist's, the waiter was sweeping up the sawdust in the deserted restaurant inside. It was Sunday all right.

I turned my chair around and set it down like the tobacconist's because I found that it was more comfortable that way. I smoked a couple of cigarettes, went inside to get a piece of chocolate, and went back to the window to eat it. Soon after that, the sky grew dark and I thought we were in for a summer storm. Gradually, though, it

Is it possible
like seeing everyone's life
as more in the story than your own

cleared up again. But the passing clouds had left a hint of rain hanging over the street, which made it look darker. I sat there for a long time and watched the sky.

At five o'clock some streetcars pulled up, clanging away. They were bringing back gangs of fans from the local soccer stadium. They were crowded onto the running boards and hanging from the handrails. The streetcars that followed brought back the players, whom I recognized by their little athletic bags. They were shouting and singing at the tops of their lungs that their team would never die. Several of them waved to me. One of them even yelled up to me, "We beat 'em!" And I nodded, as if to say "Yes." From then on there was a steady stream of cars.

The sky changed again. Above the rooftops the sky had taken on a reddish glow, and with evening coming on the streets came to life. People were straggling back from their walks. I recognized the distinguished little man among the others. Children were either crying or lagging behind. Almost all at once moviegoers spilled out of the neighborhood theaters into the street. The young men among them were gesturing more excitedly than usual and I thought they must have seen an adventure film. The ones who had gone to the movies in town came back a little later. They looked more serious. They were still laughing, but only now and then, and they seemed tired and dreamy. But they hung around anyway, walking up and down the sidewalk across the street. The local girls, bareheaded, were walking arm in

*

arm. The young men had made sure they would have to bump right into them and then they would make cracks. The girls giggled and turned their heads away. Several of the girls, whom I knew, waved to me.

Then the street lamps came on all of a sudden and made the first stars appearing in the night sky grow dim. I felt my eyes getting tired from watching the street filled with so many people and lights. The street lamps were making the pavement glisten, and the light from the streetcars would glint off someone's shiny hair, or off a smile or a silver bracelet. Soon afterwards, with the streetcars running less often and the sky already blue above the trees and the lamps, the neighborhood emptied out, almost imperceptibly, until the first cat slowly made its way across the now deserted street. Then I thought maybe I ought to have some dinner. My neck was a little stiff from resting my chin on the back of the chair for so long. I went downstairs to buy some bread and spaghetti, did my cooking, and ate standing up. I wanted to smoke a cigarette at the window, but the air was getting colder and I felt a little chilled. I shut my windows, and as I was coming back I glanced at the mirror and saw a corner of my table with my alcohol lamp next to some pieces of bread. It occurred to me that anyway one more Sunday was over, that Maman was buried now, that I was going back to work, and that, really, nothing had changed.

there

I worked hard at the office today. The boss was nice. He asked me if I wasn't too tired and he also wanted to know Maman's age. I said, "About sixty," so as not to make a mistake; and I don't know why, but he seemed to be relieved somehow and to consider the matter closed.

There was a stack of freight invoices that had piled up on my desk, and I had to go through them all. Before leaving the office to go to lunch, I washed my hands. I really like doing this at lunchtime. I don't enjoy it so much in the evening, because the roller towel you use is soaked through: one towel has to last all day. I mentioned it once to my boss. He told me he was sorry but it was really a minor detail. I left a little late, at half past twelve, with Emmanuel, who works as a dispatcher. The office overlooks the sea, and we took a minute to watch the freighters in the harbor, which was ablaze with sunlight. Then a truck came toward us with its chains rattling and its engine backfiring. Emmanuel said, "How 'bout it?" and I started running. The truck passed us and we ran after it. I was engulfed by the noise and the dust.

I couldn't see anything, and all I was conscious of was the sensation of hurtling forward in a mad dash through cranes and winches, masts bobbing on the horizon and the hulls of ships alongside us as we ran. I was first to grab hold and take a flying leap. Then I reached out and helped Emmanuel scramble up. We were out of breath; the truck was bumping around on the uneven cobblestones of the quay in a cloud of dust and sun. Emmanuel was laughing so hard he could hardly breathe.

We arrived at Céleste's dripping with sweat. Céleste was there, as always, with his big belly, his apron, and his white moustache. He asked me if things were "all right now." I told him yes they were and said I was hungry. I ate fast and had some coffee. Then I went home and slept for a while because I'd drunk too much wine, and when I woke up I felt like having a smoke. It was late and I ran to catch a streetcar. I worked all afternoon. It got very hot in the office, and that evening, when I left, I was glad to walk back slowly along the docks. The sky was green; I felt good. But I went straight home because I wanted to boil myself some potatoes.

On my way upstairs, in the dark, I ran into old Salamano, my neighbor across the landing. He was with his dog. The two of them have been inseparable for eight years. The spaniel has a skin disease—mange, I think—which makes almost all its hair fall out and leaves it covered with brown sores and scabs. After living together for so long, the two of them alone in one tiny room, they've ended up looking like each other. Old

Salamano has reddish scabs on his face and wispy yellow hair. As for the dog, he's sort of taken on his master's stooped look, muzzle down, neck straining. They look as if they belong to the same species, and yet they hate each other. Twice a day, at eleven and six, the old man takes the dog out for a walk. They haven't changed their route in eight years. You can see them in the rue de Lyon, the dog pulling the man along until old Salamano stumbles. Then he beats the dog and swears at it. The dog cowers and trails behind. Then it's the old man who pulls the dog. Once the dog has forgotten, it starts dragging its master along again, and again gets beaten and sworn at. Then they both stand there on the sidewalk and stare at each other, the dog in terror, the man in hatred. It's the same thing every day. When the dog wants to urinate, the old man won't give him enough time and yanks at him, so that the spaniel leaves behind a trail of little drops. If the dog has an accident in the room, it gets beaten again. This has been going on for eight years. Céleste is always saying, "It's pitiful," but really, who's to say? When I ran into him on the stairs, Salamano was swearing away at the dog. He was saying, "Filthy, stinking bastard!" and the dog was whimpering. I said "Good evening," but the old man just went on cursing. So I asked him what the dog had done. He didn't answer. All he said was "Filthy, stinking bastard!" I could barely see him leaning over his dog, trying to fix something on its collar. I spoke louder. Then, without turning around, he answered with a kind of suppressed rage, "He's always

* No compassion!

◊ THE STRANGER ◊

there." Then he left, yanking at the animal, which was letting itself be dragged along, whimpering.

Just then my other neighbor came in. The word around the neighborhood is that he lives off women. But when you ask him what he does, he's a "warehouse guard." Generally speaking, he's not very popular. But he often talks to me and sometimes stops by my place for a minute, because I listen to him. I find what he has to say interesting. Besides, I don't have any reason not to talk to him. His name is Raymond Sintès. He's a little on the short side, with broad shoulders and a nose like a boxer's. He always dresses very sharp. And once he said to me, talking about Salamano, "If that isn't pitiful!" He asked me didn't I think it was disgusting and I said no.

We went upstairs and I was about to leave him when he said, "I've got some blood sausage and some wine at my place. How about joining me?" I figured it would save me the trouble of having to cook for myself, so I accepted. He has only one room too, and a little kitchen with no window. Over his bed he has a pink-and-white plaster angel, some pictures of famous athletes, and two or three photographs of naked women. The room was dirty and the bed was unmade. First he lit his paraffin lamp, then he took a pretty dubious-looking bandage out of his pocket and wrapped it around his right hand. I asked him what he'd done to it. He said he'd been in a fight with some guy who was trying to start trouble.

◊ THE STRANGER ◊

"You see, Monsieur Meursault," he said, "it's not that I'm a bad guy, but I have a short fuse. This guy says to me, 'If you're man enough you'll get down off that streetcar.' I said, 'C'mon, take it easy.' Then he said, 'You're yellow.' So I got off and I said to him, 'I think you better stop right there or I'm gonna have to teach you a lesson.' And he said, 'You and who else?' So I let him have it. He went down. I was about to help him up but he started kicking me from there on the ground. So I kneed him one and slugged him a couple of times. His face was all bloody. I asked him if he'd had enough. He said, 'Yes.'" All this time, Sintès was fiddling with his bandage. I was sitting on the bed. He said, "So you see, I wasn't the one who started it. He was asking for it." It was true and I agreed. Then he told me that as a matter of fact he wanted to ask my advice about the whole business, because I was a man, I knew about things, I could help him out, and then we'd be pals. I didn't say anything, and he asked me again if I wanted to be pals. I said it was fine with me: he seemed pleased. He got out the blood sausage, fried it up, and set out glasses, plates, knives and forks, and two bottles of wine. All this in silence. Then we sat down. As we ate, he started telling me his story. He was a little hesitant at first. "I knew this lady . . . as a matter of fact, well, she was my mistress." The man he'd had the fight with was this woman's brother. He told me he'd been keeping her. I didn't say anything, and yet right away he added that he knew what people around the neighborhood

were saying, but that his conscience was clear and that he was a warehouse guard.

"To get back to what I was saying," he continued, "I realized that she was cheating on me." He'd been giving her just enough to live on. He paid the rent on her room and gave her twenty francs a day for food. "Three hundred francs for the room, six hundred for food, a pair of stockings every now and then—that made it a thousand francs. And Her Highness refused to work. But she was always telling me that things were too tight, that she couldn't get by on what I was giving her. And I'd say to her, 'Why not work half-days? You'd be helping me out on all the little extras. I bought you a new outfit just this month, I give you twenty francs a day, I pay your rent, and what do you do? . . . You have coffee in the afternoons with your friends. You even provide the coffee and sugar. And me, I provide the money. I've been good to you, and this is how you repay me.' But she wouldn't work; she just kept on telling me she couldn't make ends meet—and that's what made me realize she was cheating on me."

Then he told me that he'd found a lottery ticket in her purse and she hadn't been able to explain how she paid for it. A short time later he'd found a ticket from the shop in Mont-de-Piété in her room which proved that she'd pawned two bracelets. Until then he hadn't even known the bracelets existed. "It was clear that she was cheating on me. So I left her. But first I smacked her around. And then I told her exactly what I thought of

her. I told her that all she was interested in was getting into the sack. You see, Monsieur Meursault, it's like I told her: 'You don't realize that everybody's jealous of how good you have it with me. Someday you'll know just how good it was.'"

He'd beaten her till she bled. He'd never beaten her before. "I'd smack her around a little, but nice-like, you might say. She'd scream a little. I'd close the shutters and it always ended the same way. But this time it's for real. And if you ask me, she still hasn't gotten what she has coming."

Then he explained that that was what he needed advice about. He stopped to adjust the lamp's wick, which was smoking. I just listened. I'd drunk close to a liter of wine and my temples were burning. I was smoking Raymond's cigarettes because I'd run out. The last streetcars were going by, taking the now distant sounds of the neighborhood with them. Raymond went on. What bothered him was that he "still had sexual feelings for her." But he wanted to punish her. First he'd thought of taking her to a hotel and calling the vice squad to cause a scandal and have her listed as a common prostitute. After that he'd looked up some of his underworld friends. But they didn't come up with anything. As Raymond pointed out to me, a lot of good it does being in the underworld. He'd said the same thing to them, and then they'd suggested "marking" her. But that wasn't what he wanted. He was going to think about it. But first he wanted to ask me something. Be-

◇ THE STRANGER ◇

fore he did, though, he wanted to know what I thought of the whole thing. I said I didn't think anything but that it was interesting. He asked if I thought she was cheating on him, and it seemed to me she was; if I thought she should be punished and what I would do in his place, and I said you can't ever be sure, but I understood his wanting to punish her. I drank a little more wine. He lit a cigarette and let me in on what he was thinking about doing. He wanted to write her a letter, "one with a punch and also some things in it to make her sorry for what she's done." Then, when she came running back, he'd go to bed with her and "right at the last minute" he'd spit in her face and throw her out. Yes, that would punish her, I thought. But Raymond told me he didn't think he could write the kind of letter it would take and that he'd thought of asking me to write it for him. Since I didn't say anything, he asked if I'd mind doing it right then and I said no.

He downed a glass of wine and then stood up. He pushed aside the plates and the little bit of cold sausage we'd left. He carefully wiped the oilcloth covering the table. Then from a drawer in his night table he took out a sheet of paper, a yellow envelope, a small red pen box, and a square bottle with purple ink in it. When he told me the woman's name I realized she was Moorish. I wrote the letter. I did it just as it came to me, but I tried my best to please Raymond because I didn't have any reason not to please him. Then I read it out loud. He listened, smoking and nodding his head; then he asked

me to read it again. He was very pleased. He said, "I could tell you knew about these things." I didn't notice at first, but he had stopped calling me "monsieur." It was only when he announced "Now you're a pal, Meursault" and said it again that it struck me. He repeated his remark and I said, "Yes." I didn't mind being his pal, and he seemed set on it. He sealed the letter and we finished off the wine. Then we sat and smoked for a while without saying anything. Outside, everything was quiet; we heard the sound of a car passing. I said, "It's late." Raymond thought so too. He remarked how quickly the time passed, and in a way it was true. I felt sleepy, but it was hard for me to get up. I must have looked tired, because Raymond told me not to let things get to me. At first I didn't understand. Then he explained that he'd heard about Maman's death but that it was one of those things that was bound to happen sooner or later. I thought so too.

I got up. Raymond gave me a very firm handshake and said that men always understand each other. I left his room, closing the door behind me, and paused for a minute in the dark, on the landing. The house was quiet, and a breath of dark, dank air wafted up from deep in the stairwell. All I could hear was the blood pounding in my ears. I stood there, motionless. And in old Salamano's room, the dog whimpered softly.

* Maman is always states things as "I see" ... it appeared ... Many with it Qualifier.

◇ THE STRANGER ◇

the self is not something on
films, it is something one
creates (Thomas Szasz)

Control
Scenes

4

I worked hard all week. Raymond stopped by and told me he'd sent the letter. I went to the movies twice with Emmanuel, who doesn't always understand what's going on on the screen. So you have to explain things to him. Yesterday was Saturday, and Marie came over as we'd planned. I wanted her so bad when I saw her in that pretty red-and-white striped dress and leather sandals. You could make out the shape of her firm breasts, and her tan made her face look like a flower. We caught a bus and went a few kilometers outside Algiers, to a beach with rocks at either end, bordered by shore grass on the land side. The four o'clock sun wasn't too hot, but the water was warm, with slow, gently lapping waves. Marie taught me a game. As you swam, you had to skim off the foam from the crest of the waves with your mouth, hold it there, then roll over on your back and spout it out toward the sky. This made a delicate froth which disappeared into the air or fell back in a warm spray over my face. But after a while my mouth was stinging with the salty bitterness. Then Marie swam over to me and pressed herself against me in the water.

♦ THE STRANGER ♦

She put her lips on mine. Her tongue cooled my lips and we tumbled in the waves for a moment.

When we'd gotten dressed again on the beach, Marie looked at me with her eyes sparkling. I kissed her. We didn't say anything more from that point on. I held her to me and we hurried to catch a bus, get back, go to my place, and throw ourselves onto my bed. I'd left my window open, and the summer night air flowing over our brown bodies felt good.

That morning Marie stayed and I told her that we would have lunch together. I went downstairs to buy some meat. On my way back upstairs I heard a woman's voice in Raymond's room. A little later old Salamano growled at his dog; we heard the sound of footsteps and claws on the wooden stairs and then "Lousy, stinking bastard" and they went down into the street. I told Marie all about the old man and she laughed. She was wearing a pair of my pajamas with the sleeves rolled up. When she laughed I wanted her again. A minute later she asked me if I loved her. I told her it didn't mean anything but that I didn't think so. She looked sad. But as we were fixing lunch, and for no apparent reason, she laughed in such a way that I kissed her. It was then that we heard what sounded like a fight break out in Raymond's room.

First we heard a woman's shrill voice and then Raymond saying, "You used me, you used me. I'll teach you to use me." There were some thuds and the woman screamed, but in such a terrifying way that the landing

immediately filled with people. Marie and I went to see, too. The woman was still shrieking and Raymond was still hitting her. Marie said it was terrible and I didn't say anything. She asked me to go find a policeman, but I told her I didn't like cops. One showed up anyway with the tenant from the third floor, who's a plumber. The cop knocked on the door and we couldn't hear anything anymore. He knocked harder and after a minute the woman started crying and Raymond opened the door. He had a cigarette in his mouth and an innocent look on his face. The girl rushed to the door and told the policeman that Raymond had hit her. "What's your name?" the cop said. Raymond told him. "Take that cigarette out of your mouth when you're talking to me," the cop said. Raymond hesitated, looked at me, and took a drag on his cigarette. Right then the cop slapped him—a thick, heavy smack right across the face. The cigarette went flying across the landing. The look on Raymond's face changed, but he didn't say anything for a minute, and then he asked, in a meek voice, if he could pick up his cigarette. The cop said to go ahead and added, "Next time you'll know better than to clown around with a policeman." Meanwhile the girl was crying and she repeated, "He beat me up! He's a pimp!" "Officer," Raymond asked, "is that legal, calling a man a pimp like that?" But the cop ordered him to shut his trap. Then Raymond turned to the girl and said, "You just wait, sweetheart—we're not through yet." The cop told him to knock it off and said that the girl was to go and he was to stay in his room and wait to be summoned to the

police station. He also said that Raymond ought to be ashamed to be so drunk that he'd have the shakes like that. Then Raymond explained, "I'm not drunk, officer. It's just that I'm here, and you're there, and I'm shaking, I can't help it." He shut his door and everybody went away. Marie and I finished fixing lunch. But she wasn't hungry; I ate almost everything. She left at one o'clock and I slept awhile.

Around three o'clock there was a knock on my door and Raymond came in. I didn't get up. He sat down on the edge of my bed. He didn't say anything for a minute and I asked him how it had all gone. He told me that he'd done what he wanted to do but that she'd slapped him and so he'd beaten her up. I'd seen the rest. I told him it seemed to me that she'd gotten her punishment now and he ought to be happy. He thought so too, and he pointed out that the cop could do anything he wanted, it wouldn't change the fact that she'd gotten her beating. He added that he knew all about cops and how to handle them. Then he asked me if I'd expected him to hit the cop back. I said I wasn't expecting anything, and besides I didn't like cops. Raymond seemed pretty happy. He asked me if I wanted to go for a walk with him. I got up and started combing my hair. He told me that I'd have to act as a witness for him. It didn't matter to me, but I didn't know what I was supposed to say. According to Raymond, all I had to do was to state that the girl had cheated on him. I agreed to act as a witness for him.

We went out and Raymond bought me a brandy.

Then he wanted to shoot a game of pool, and I just barely lost. Afterwards he wanted to go to a whorehouse, but I said no, because I don't like that. So we took our time getting back, him telling me how glad he was that he'd been able to give the woman what she deserved. I found him very friendly with me and I thought it was a nice moment.

From a distance I noticed old Salamano standing on the doorstep. He looked flustered. When we got closer, I saw that he didn't have his dog. He was looking all over the place, turning around, peering into the darkness of the entryway, muttering incoherently, and then he started searching the street again with his little red eyes. When Raymond asked him what was wrong, he didn't answer right away. I barely heard him mumble "Stinking bastard," and he went on fidgeting around. I asked him where his dog was. He snapped at me and said he was gone. And then all of a sudden the words came pouring out: "I took him to the Parade Ground, like always. There were lots of people around the booths at the fair. I stopped to watch 'The King of the Escape Artists.' And when I was ready to go, he wasn't there. Sure, I've been meaning to get him a smaller collar for a long time. But I never thought the bastard would take off like that."

Then Raymond pointed out to him that the dog might have gotten lost and that he would come back. He gave examples of dogs that had walked dozens of kilometers to get back to their masters. Nevertheless, the

old man looked even more flustered. "But they'll take him away from me, don't you see? If only somebody would take him in. But that's impossible—everybody's disgusted by his scabs. The police'll get him for sure." So I told him he should go to the pound and they'd give the dog back to him after he paid a fee. He asked me if it was a big fee. I didn't know. Then he got mad: "Pay money for that bastard—ha! He can damn well die!" And he started cursing the dog. Raymond laughed and went inside. I followed him and we parted upstairs on the landing. A minute later I heard the old man's footsteps and he knocked on my door. When I opened it, he stood in the doorway for a minute and said, "Excuse me, excuse me." I asked him to come in, but he refused. He was looking down at the tips of his shoes and his scabby hands were trembling. Without looking up at me he asked, "They're not going to take him away from me, are they, Monsieur Meursault? They'll give him back to me. Otherwise, what's going to happen to me?" I told him that the pound kept dogs for three days so that their owners could come and claim them and that after that they did with them as they saw fit. He looked at me in silence. Then he said, "Good night." He shut his door and I heard him pacing back and forth. His bed creaked. And from the peculiar little noise coming through the partition, I realized he was crying. For some reason I thought of Maman. But I had to get up early the next morning. I wasn't hungry, and I went to bed without any dinner.

Raymond called me at the office. He told me that a friend of his (he'd spoken to him about me) had invited me to spend the day Sunday at his little beach house, near Algiers. I said I'd really like to, but I'd promised to spend the day with a girlfriend. Raymond immediately told me that she was invited too. His friend's wife would be very glad not to be alone with a bunch of men.

I wanted to hang up right away because I know the boss doesn't like people calling us from town. But Raymond asked me to hang on and told me he could have passed on the invitation that evening, but he had something else to tell me. He'd been followed all day by a group of Arabs, one of whom was the brother of his former mistress. "If you see him hanging around the building when you get home this evening, let me know." I said I would.

A little later my boss sent for me, and for a second I was annoyed, because I thought he was going to tell me to do less talking on the phone and more work. But that wasn't it at all. He told me he wanted to talk to me about a plan of his that was still pretty vague. He just wanted

ONE L.I.M. IS AS GOOD
AS ANOTHER -

AS GOOD X X

♦ THE STRANGER ♦

to have my opinion on the matter. He was planning to open an office in Paris which would handle his business directly with the big companies, on the spot, and he wanted to know how I felt about going there. I'd be able to live in Paris and to travel around for part of the year as well. "You're young, and it seems to me it's the kind of life that would appeal to you." I said yes but that really it was all the same to me. Then he asked me if I wasn't interested in a change of life. I said that people never change their lives, that in any case one life was as good as another and that I wasn't dissatisfied with mine here at all. He looked upset and told me that I never gave him a straight answer, that I had no ambition, and that that was disastrous in business. So I went back to work. I would rather not have upset him, but I couldn't see any reason to change my life. Looking back on it, I wasn't unhappy. When I was a student, I had lots of ambitions like that. But when I had to give up my studies I learned very quickly that none of it really mattered.

That evening Marie came by to see me and asked me if I wanted to marry her. I said it didn't make any difference to me and that we could if she wanted to. Then she wanted to know if I loved her. I answered the same way I had the last time, that it didn't mean anything but that I probably didn't love her. "So why marry me, then?" she said. I explained to her that it didn't really matter and that if she wanted to, we could get married. Besides, she was the one who was doing the asking and all I was

saying was yes. Then she pointed out that marriage was a serious thing. I said, "No." She stopped talking for a minute and looked at me without saying anything. Then she spoke. She just wanted to know if I would have accepted the same proposal from another woman, with whom I was involved in the same way. I said, "Sure." Then she said she wondered if she loved me, and there was no way I could know about that. After another moment's silence, she mumbled that I was peculiar, that that was probably why she loved me but that one day I might hate her for the same reason. I didn't say anything, because I didn't have anything to add, so she took my arm with a smile and said she wanted to marry me. I said we could do it whenever she wanted. Then I told her about my boss's proposition and she said she'd love to see Paris. I told her that I'd lived there once and she asked me what it was like. I said, "It's dirty. Lots of pigeons and dark courtyards. Everybody's pale."

Then we went for a walk through the main streets to the other end of town. The women were beautiful and I asked Marie if she'd noticed. She said yes and that she understood what I meant. For a while neither of us said anything. But I wanted her to stay with me, and I told her we could have dinner together at Céleste's. She would have liked to but she had something to do. We were near my place and I said goodbye to her. She looked at me. "Don't you want to know what I have to do?" I did, but I hadn't thought to ask, and she seemed to be scolding me. Then, seeing me so confused, she

laughed again and she moved toward me with her whole body to offer me her lips.

I had dinner at Céleste's. I'd already started eating when a strange little woman came in and asked me if she could sit at my table. Of course she could. Her gestures were jerky and she had bright eyes in a little face like an apple. She took off her jacket, sat down, and studied the menu feverishly. She called Céleste over and ordered her whole meal all at once, in a voice that was clear and very fast at the same time. While she was waiting for her first course, she opened her bag, took out a slip of paper and a pencil, added up the bill in advance, then took the exact amount, plus tip, out of a vest pocket and set it down on the table in front of her. At that point the waiter brought her first course and she gulped it down. While waiting for the next course, she again took out of her bag a blue pencil and a magazine that listed the radio programs for the week. One by one, and with great care, she checked off almost every program. Since the magazine was about a dozen pages long, she meticulously continued this task throughout the meal. I had already finished and she was still checking away with the same zeal. Then she stood up, put her jacket back on with the same robotlike movements, and left. I didn't have anything to do, so I left too and followed her for a while. She had positioned herself right next to the curb and was making her way with incredible speed and assurance, never once swerving or looking around. I eventually lost sight of her and turned

* No difference Between
the Dog and the wife.

◊ THE STRANGER ◊

back. I thought about how peculiar she was but forgot about her a few minutes later.

I found old Salamano waiting outside my door. I asked him in and he told me that his dog was lost, because it wasn't at the pound. The people who worked there had told him that maybe it had been run over. He asked if he could find out at the police station. They told him that they didn't keep track of things like that because they happened every day. I told old Salamano that he could get another dog, but he was right to point out to me that he was used to this one.

I was sitting cross-legged on my bed and Salamano had sat down on a chair in front of the table. He was facing me and he had both hands on his knees. He had kept his old felt hat on. He was mumbling bits and pieces of sentences through his yellowing moustache. He was getting on my nerves a little, but I didn't have anything to do and I didn't feel sleepy. Just for something to say, I asked him about his dog. He told me he'd gotten it after his wife died. He had married fairly late. When he was young he'd wanted to go into the theater: in the army he used to act in military vaudevilles. But he had ended up working on the railroads, and he didn't regret it, because now he had a small pension. He hadn't been happy with his wife, but he'd pretty much gotten used to her. When she died he had been very lonely. So he asked a shop buddy for a dog and he'd gotten this one very young. He'd had to feed it from a bottle. But since a dog doesn't live as long as a man, they'd ended up

◊ THE STRANGER ◊

being old together. "He was bad-tempered," Salamano said. "We'd have a run-in every now and then. But he was a good dog just the same." I said he was well bred and Salamano looked pleased. "And," he added, "you didn't know him before he got sick. His coat was the best thing about him." Every night and every morning after the dog had gotten that skin disease, Salamano rubbed him with ointment. But according to him, the dog's real sickness was old age, and there's no cure for old age.

At that point I yawned, and the old man said he'd be going. I told him that he could stay and that I was sorry about what had happened to his dog. He thanked me. He told me that Maman was very fond of his dog. He called her "your poor mother." He said he supposed I must be very sad since Maman died, and I didn't say anything. Then he said, very quickly and with an embarrassed look, that he realized that some people in the neighborhood thought badly of me for having sent Maman to the home, but he knew me and he knew I loved her very much. I still don't know why, but I said that until then I hadn't realized that people thought badly of me for doing it, but that the home had seemed like the natural thing since I didn't have enough money to have Maman cared for. "Anyway," I added, "it had been a long time since she'd had anything to say to me, and she was bored all by herself." "Yes," he said, "and at least in a home you can make a few friends." Then he said good night. He wanted to sleep. His life had changed

now and he wasn't too sure what he was going to do. For the first time since I'd known him, and with a furtive gesture, he offered me his hand, and I felt the scales on his skin. He gave a little smile, and before he left he said, "I hope the dogs don't bark tonight. I always think it's mine."

I had a hard time waking up on Sunday, and Marie had to call me and shake me. We didn't eat anything, because we wanted to get to the beach early. I felt completely drained and I had a slight headache. My cigarette tasted bitter. Marie made fun of me because, she said, I had on a "funeral face." She had put on a white linen dress and let her hair down. I told her she was beautiful and she laughed with delight.

On our way downstairs we knocked on Raymond's door. He told us he'd be right down. Once out in the street, because I was so tired and also because we hadn't opened the blinds, the day, already bright with sun, hit me like a slap in the face. Marie was jumping with joy and kept on saying what a beautiful day it was. I felt a little better and I noticed that I was hungry. I told Marie, who pointed to her oilcloth bag where she'd put our bathing suits and a towel. I just had to wait and then we heard Raymond shutting his door. He had on blue trousers and a white short-sleeved shirt. But he'd put on a straw hat, which made Marie laugh, and his forearms were all white under the black hairs. I found it a little

repulsive. He was whistling as he came down the stairs and he seemed very cheerful. He said "Good morning, old man" to me and called Marie "mademoiselle."

The day before, we'd gone to the police station and I'd testified that the girl had cheated on Raymond. He'd gotten off with a warning. They didn't check out my statement. Outside the front door we talked about it with Raymond, and then we decided to take the bus. The beach wasn't very far, but we'd get there sooner that way. Raymond thought his friend would be glad to see us get there early. We were just about to leave when all of a sudden Raymond motioned to me to look across the street. I saw a group of Arabs leaning against the front of the tobacconist's shop. They were staring at us in silence, but in that way of theirs, as if we were nothing but stones or dead trees. Raymond told me that the second one from the left was his man, and he seemed worried. But, he added, it was all settled now. Marie didn't really understand and asked us what was wrong. I told her that they were Arabs who had it in for Raymond. She wanted to get going right away. Raymond drew himself up and laughed, saying we'd better step on it.

We headed toward the bus stop, which wasn't far, and Raymond said that the Arabs weren't following us. I turned around. They were still in the same place and they were looking with the same indifference at the spot where we'd just been standing. We caught the bus. Raymond, who seemed very relieved, kept on cracking

jokes for Marie. I could tell he liked her, but she hardly said anything to him. Every once in a while she'd look at him and laugh.

We got off in the outskirts of Algiers. The beach wasn't far from the bus stop. But we had to cross a small plateau which overlooks the sea and then drops steeply down to the beach. It was covered with yellowish rocks and the whitest asphodels set against the already hard blue of the sky. Marie was having fun scattering the petals, taking big swipes at them with her oilcloth bag. We walked between rows of small houses behind green or white fences, some with their verandas hidden behind the tamarisks, others standing naked among the rocks. Before we reached the edge of the plateau, we could already see the motionless sea and, farther out, a massive, drowsy-looking promontory in the clear water. The faint hum of a motor rose up to us in the still air. And way off, we saw a tiny trawler moving, almost imperceptibly, across the dazzling sea. Marie gathered some rock irises. From the slope leading down to the beach, we could see that there were already some people swimming.

Raymond's friend lived in a little wooden bungalow at the far end of the beach. The back of the house rested up against the rocks, and the pilings that held it up in front went straight down into the water. Raymond introduced us. His friend's name was Masson. He was a big guy, very tall and broad-shouldered, with a plump, sweet little wife with a Parisian accent. Right off he told

us to make ourselves at home and said that his wife had just fried up some fish he'd caught that morning. I told him how nice I thought his house was. He told me that he spent Saturdays and Sundays and all his days off there. "With my wife, of course," he added. Just then his wife was laughing with Marie. For the first time maybe, I really thought I was going to get married.

Masson wanted to go for a swim, but his wife and Raymond didn't want to come. The three of us went down to the beach and Marie jumped right in. Masson and I waited a little. He spoke slowly, and I noticed that he had a habit of finishing everything he said with "and I'd even say," when really it didn't add anything to the meaning of his sentence. Referring to Marie, he said, "She's stunning, and I'd even say charming." After that I didn't pay any more attention to this mannerism of his, because I was absorbed by the feeling that the sun was doing me a lot of good. The sand was starting to get hot underfoot. I held back the urge to get into the water a minute longer, but finally I said to Masson, "Shall we?" I dove in. He waded in slowly and started swimming only when he couldn't touch bottom anymore. He did the breast stroke, and not too well, either, so I left him and joined Marie. The water was cold and I was glad to be swimming. Together again, Marie and I swam out a ways, and we felt a closeness as we moved in unison and were happy.

Out in deeper water we floated on our backs and the sun on my upturned face was drying the last of the

water trickling into my mouth. We saw Masson making his way back to the beach to stretch out in the sun. From far away he looked huge. Marie wanted us to swim together. I got behind her to hold her around the waist. She used her arms to move us forward and I did the kicking. The little splashing sound followed us through the morning air until I got tired. I left Marie and headed back, swimming smoothly and breathing easily. On the beach I stretched out on my stomach alongside Masson and put my face on the sand. I said it was nice and he agreed. Soon afterwards Marie came back. I rolled over to watch her coming. She was glistening all over with salty water and holding her hair back. She lay down right next to me and the combined warmth from her body and from the sun made me doze off.

Marie shook me and told me that Masson had gone back up to the house, that it was time for lunch. I got up right away because I was hungry, but Marie told me I hadn't kissed her since that morning. It was true, and yet I had wanted to. "Come into the water," she said. We ran and threw ourselves into the first little waves. We swam a few strokes and she reached out and held on to me. I felt her legs wrapped around mine and I wanted her.

When we got back, Masson was already calling us. I said I was starving and then out of the blue he announced to his wife that he liked me. The bread was good; I devoured my share of the fish. After that there

was some meat and fried potatoes. We all ate without talking. Masson drank a lot of wine and kept filling my glass. By the time the coffee came, my head felt heavy and I smoked a lot. Masson, Raymond, and I talked about spending August together at the beach, sharing expenses. Suddenly Marie said, "Do you know what time it is? It's only eleven-thirty!" We were all surprised, but Masson said that we'd eaten very early and that it was only natural because lunchtime was whenever you were hungry. For some reason that made Marie laugh. I think she'd had a little too much to drink. Then Masson asked me if I wanted to go for a walk on the beach with him. "My wife always takes a nap after lunch. Me, I don't like naps. I need to walk. I tell her all the time it's better for her health. But it's her business." Marie said she'd stay and help Madame Masson with the dishes. The little Parisienne said that first they'd have to get rid of the men. The three of us went down to the beach.

The sun was shining almost directly overhead onto the sand, and the glare on the water was unbearable. There was no one left on the beach. From inside the bungalows bordering the plateau and jutting out over the water, we could hear the rattling of plates and silverware. It was hard to breathe in the rocky heat rising from the ground. At first Raymond and Masson discussed people and things I didn't know about. I gathered they'd known each other for a long time and had even lived together at one point. We headed down

to the sea and walked along the water's edge. Now and then a little wave would come up higher than the others and wet our canvas shoes. I wasn't thinking about anything, because I was half asleep from the sun beating down on my bare head.

At that point Raymond said something to Masson which I didn't quite catch. But at the same time I noticed, at the far end of the beach and a long way from us, two Arabs in blue overalls coming in our direction. I looked at Raymond and he said, "It's him." We kept walking. Masson asked how they'd managed to follow us all this way. I thought they must have seen us get on the bus with a beach bag, but I didn't say anything.

The Arabs were walking slowly, but they were already much closer. We didn't change our pace, but Raymond said, "If there's any trouble, Masson, you take the other one. I'll take care of my man. Meursault, if another one shows up, he's yours." I said, "Yes," and Masson put his hands in his pockets. The blazing sand looked red to me now. We moved steadily toward the Arabs. The distance between us was getting shorter and shorter. When we were just a few steps away from each other, the Arabs stopped. Masson and I slowed down. Raymond went right up to his man. I couldn't hear what he said to him, but the other guy made a move as though he were going to butt him. Then Raymond struck the first blow and called Masson right away. Masson went for the one that had been pointed out as his and hit him twice, as hard as he could. The Arab fell flat in the water,

facedown, and lay there for several seconds with bubbles bursting on the surface around his head. Meanwhile Raymond had landed one too, and the other Arab's face was bleeding. Raymond turned to me and said, "Watch this. I'm gonna let him have it now." I shouted, "Look out, he's got a knife!" But Raymond's arm had already been cut open and his mouth slashed. Masson lunged forward. But the other Arab had gotten back up and gone around behind the one with the knife. We didn't dare move. They started backing off slowly, without taking their eyes off us, keeping us at bay with the knife. When they thought they were far enough away, they took off running as fast as they could while we stood there motionless in the sun and Raymond clutched at his arm dripping with blood.

Masson immediately said there was a doctor who spent his Sundays up on the plateau. Raymond wanted to go see him right away. But every time he tried to talk the blood bubbled in his mouth. We steadied him and made our way back to the bungalow as quickly as we could. Once there, Raymond said that they were only flesh wounds and that he could make it to the doctor's. He left with Masson and I stayed to explain to the women what had happened. Madame Masson was crying and Marie was very pale. I didn't like having to explain to them, so I just shut up, smoked a cigarette, and looked at the sea.

Raymond came back with Masson around one-thirty. His arm was bandaged up and he had an adhesive

plaster on the corner of his mouth. The doctor had told him that it was nothing, but Raymond looked pretty grim. Masson tried to make him laugh. But he still wouldn't say anything. When he said he was going down to the beach, I asked him where he was going. He said he wanted to get some air. Masson and I said we'd go with him. But that made him angry and he swore at us. Masson said not to argue with him. I followed him anyway.

We walked on the beach for a long time. By now the sun was overpowering. It shattered into little pieces on the sand and water. I had the impression that Raymond knew where he was going, but I was probably wrong. At the far end of the beach we finally came to a little spring running down through the sand behind a large rock. There we found our two Arabs. They were lying down, in their greasy overalls. They seemed perfectly calm and almost content. Our coming changed nothing. The one who had attacked Raymond was looking at him without saying anything. The other one was blowing through a little reed over and over again, watching us out of the corner of his eye. He kept repeating the only three notes he could get out of his instrument.

The whole time there was nothing but the sun and the silence, with the low gurgling from the spring and the three notes. Then Raymond put his hand in his hip pocket, but the others didn't move, they just kept looking at each other. I noticed that the toes on the one

♦ THE STRANGER ♦

playing the flute were tensed. But without taking his eyes off his adversary, Raymond asked me, "Should I let him have it?" I thought that if I said no he'd get himself all worked up and shoot for sure. All I said was, "He hasn't said anything yet. It'd be pretty lousy to shoot him like that." You could still hear the sound of the water and the flute deep within the silence and the heat. Then Raymond said, "So I'll call him something and when he answers back, I'll let him have it." I answered, "Right. But if he doesn't draw his knife, you can't shoot." Raymond started getting worked up. The other Arab went on playing, and both of them were watching every move Raymond made. "No," I said to Raymond, "take him on man to man and give me your gun. If the other one moves in, or if he draws his knife, I'll let him have it."

The sun glinted off Raymond's gun as he handed it to me. But we just stood there motionless, as if everything had closed in around us. We stared at each other without blinking, and everything came to a stop there between the sea, the sand, and the sun, and the double silence of the flute and the water. It was then that I realized that you could either shoot or not shoot. But all of a sudden, the Arabs, backing away, slipped behind the rock. So Raymond and I turned and headed back the way we'd come. He seemed better and talked about the bus back.

I went with him as far as the bungalow, and as he climbed the wooden steps, I just stood there at the

where did Arab's from go?
♦ THE STRANGER ♦
bottom, my head ringing from the sun, unable to face the effort it would take to climb the wooden staircase and face the women again. But the heat was so intense that it was just as bad standing still in the blinding stream falling from the sky. To stay or to go, it amounted to the same thing. A minute later I turned back toward the beach and started walking.

There was the same dazzling red glare. The sea gasped for air with each shallow, stifled little wave that broke on the sand. I was walking slowly toward the rocks and I could feel my forehead swelling under the sun. All that heat was pressing down on me and making it hard for me to go on. And every time I felt a blast of its hot breath strike my face, I gritted my teeth, clenched my fists in my trouser pockets, and strained every nerve in order to overcome the sun and the thick drunkenness it was spilling over me. With every blade of light that flashed off the sand, from a bleached shell or a piece of broken glass, my jaws tightened. I walked for a long time.

From a distance I could see the small, dark mass of rock surrounded by a blinding halo of light and sea spray. I was thinking of the cool spring behind the rock. I wanted to hear the murmur of its water again, to escape the sun and the strain and the women's tears, and to find shade and rest again at last. But as I got closer, I saw that Raymond's man had come back.

He was alone. He was lying on his back, with his hands behind his head, his forehead in the shade of the

rock, the rest of his body in the sun. His blue overalls seemed to be steaming in the heat. I was a little surprised. As far as I was concerned, the whole thing was over, and I'd gone there without even thinking about it.

As soon as he saw me, he sat up a little and put his hand in his pocket. Naturally, I gripped Raymond's gun inside my jacket. Then he lay back again, but without taking his hand out of his pocket. I was pretty far away from him, about ten meters or so. I could tell he was glancing at me now and then through half-closed eyes. But most of the time, he was just a form shimmering before my eyes in the fiery air. The sound of the waves was even lazier, more drawn out than at noon. It was the same sun, the same light still shining on the same sand as before. For two hours the day had stood still; for two hours it had been anchored in a sea of molten lead. On the horizon, a tiny steamer went by, and I made out the black dot from the corner of my eye because I hadn't stopped watching the Arab.

It occurred to me that all I had to do was turn around and that would be the end of it. But the whole beach, throbbing in the sun, was pressing on my back. I took a few steps toward the spring. The Arab didn't move. Besides, he was still pretty far away. Maybe it was the shadows on his face, but it looked like he was laughing. I waited. The sun was starting to burn my cheeks, and I could feel drops of sweat gathering in my eyebrows. The sun was the same as it had been the day I'd buried Maman, and like then, my forehead

especially was hurting me, all the veins in it throbbing under the skin. It was this burning, which I couldn't stand anymore, that made me move forward. I knew that it was stupid, that I wouldn't get the sun off me by stepping forward. But I took a step, one step, forward. And this time, without getting up, the Arab drew his knife and held it up to me in the sun. The light shot off the steel and it was like a long flashing blade cutting at my forehead. At the same instant the sweat in my eyebrows dripped down over my eyelids all at once and covered them with a warm, thick film. My eyes were blinded behind the curtain of tears and salt. All I could feel were the cymbals of sunlight crashing on my forehead and, indistinctly, the dazzling spear flying up from the knife in front of me. The scorching blade slashed at my eyelashes and stabbed at my stinging eyes. That's when everything began to reel. The sea carried up a thick, fiery breath. It seemed to me as if the sky split open from one end to the other to rain down fire. My whole being tensed and I squeezed my hand around the revolver. The trigger gave; I felt the smooth underside of the butt; and there, in that noise, sharp and deafening at the same time, is where it all started. I shook off the sweat and sun. I knew that I had shattered the harmony of the day, the exceptional silence of a beach where I'd been happy. Then I fired four more times at the motionless body where the bullets lodged without leaving a trace. And it was like knocking four quick times on the door of unhappiness.