

me, excuse me.' I asked him in, but he didn't want to. He was looking down at his boots and his scabby hands were trembling. Without looking up at me, he asked, 'They won't take him away from me, will they, Mr Meursault. They will give him back to me. Otherwise what will I do?' I told him that they kept dogs at the pound for three days for their owners to collect them and that after that they dealt with them as they saw fit. He looked at me in silence. Then he said, 'Goodnight.' He closed his door and I heard him pacing up and down. Then his bed creaked. And from the peculiar little noise coming through the partition wall, I realized that he was crying. For some reason I thought of mother. But I had to get up early in the morning. I wasn't hungry and I went to bed without any dinner.

FIVE

Raymond phoned 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 next Sunday at his chalet, just outside Algiers. I said I'd really like to, but I'd promised to spend the day with a girl-friend. Raymond immediately announced that she was invited too. His friend's wife would be only too pleased not to be the only woman among a crowd of men.

I wanted to hang up straight away because I know my boss doesn't like people ringing us up from town. But Raymond asked me to hold on and told me that he could have passed on this invitation that evening, but he wanted to warn me about something else. He'd been followed all day by a group of Arabs and one of them was the brother of his former mistress. 'If you see him near the house this evening when you come home, warn me,' I told him I would.

Soon after that, my boss sent for me and for a moment I was annoyed because I thought he was going to tell me to

do a bit less phoning and a bit more work. But that wasn't it at all. He announced that he wanted to talk to me about a project he was vaguely considering. He just wanted to hear what I thought of the idea. He intended to set up an office in Paris to handle that side of the business on the spot by dealing directly with the big companies and he wanted to know if I was prepared to go over there. I'd be able to live in Paris and travel around for part of the year as well. 'You're a young man, and I imagine that sort of life must appeal to you.' I said yes but really I didn't mind. He then asked me if I wasn't interested in changing my life. I replied that you could never change your life, that in any case one life was as good as another and that I wasn't at all dissatisfied with mine here. He looked upset and told me that I always evaded the question and that I had no ambition, which was disastrous in the business world. So I went back to work. I'd rather not have upset him, but I couldn't see any reason for changing my life. Come to think of it, I wasn't unhappy. When I was a student, I had plenty of that sort of ambition. But when I had to give up my studies, I very soon realized that none of it really mattered.

That evening, Marie came round for me and asked me if I wanted to marry her. I said I didn't mind and we could do it if she wanted to. She then wanted to know if I loved her. I replied as I had done once already, that it didn't mean anything but that I probably didn't. 'Why marry me then?' she said. I explained to her that it really didn't matter and that if she wanted to, we could get married. Anyway, she was the one who was asking me and I was simply saying yes. She then remarked that marriage was a serious matter. I said, 'No.' She didn't say anything for a

moment and looked at me in silence. Then she spoke. She just wanted to know if I'd have accepted the same proposal if it had come from another woman, with whom I had a similar relationship. I said, 'Naturally.' She then said she wondered if she loved me and well, I had no idea 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 disgust her for the very same reason. I didn't say anything, having nothing to add, so she smiled and took my arm and announced that she wanted to marry me. I replied that we'd do so whenever she liked. I then told her about my boss's proposal and Marie said she'd like 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. Full of pigeons and dark courtyards. The people have all got white skin.'

Then we went for a walk across the town by its main streets. There were beautiful women everywhere and I asked Marie if she'd noticed. She said yes and she understood me. For a while neither of us said anything. I wanted her to stay with me though and I told her that we could have dinner together at Céleste's. She'd really have liked to but she was doing something. We were near my place and I said goodbye to her. She looked at me. 'Don't you want to know what I'm doing?' I did want to know, but I hadn't thought of asking and now she seemed to be reproaching me for it. Then, seeing me looking perplexed, she laughed again and bent her whole body towards me to give me a kiss.

I had dinner at Céleste's. I'd just started eating when a peculiar little woman came in and asked me if she could sit at my table. Naturally, she could. She moved in a series

of jerks and her bright-eyed little face was like an apple. She took off her jacket, sat down and studied the menu feverishly. She called Celeste over and ordered her whole meal at once, speaking precisely but rapidly. While she was waiting for her hors d'oeuvre she opened her bag, took out a small square of paper and a pencil, added up the bill in advance, then took the exact sum, plus a tip, out of her waistcoat pocket and placed it in front of her. At that point the hors d'oeuvre arrived and she gulped it down as fast as she could. While she was waiting for the next course, she dived into her bag again and took out a blue pencil and a magazine which gave the radio programmes for the week. One by one, she very carefully ticked almost every programme. The magazine had a dozen or so pages, so this meticulous task occupied her throughout the meal. I'd already finished and she was still ticking away with the same diligence. Then she stood up, put her jacket back on with the same precise, robot-like movements and left. I didn't have anything to do, so I left as well and followed her for a bit. She'd taken up a position on the edge of the pavement and was making her way along with incredible speed and assurance without either changing course or looking round. I ended up losing sight of her and turned back. I thought how peculiar she was, but I fairly soon forgot about her.

Outside my door I found old Salamano. I asked him in and he told me that his dog was definitely lost, because it wasn't at the pound. The people there had told him that it might have been run over. He'd asked them if he could possibly find out at a police station. He'd been told that they didn't keep records of things like that, because they happened every day. I told old Salamano that he could get

another dog, but he rightly pointed out to me that he'd got used to this one.

I was crouched on my bed and Salamano had sat down on a chair by the table. He was facing me, with both his hands on his knees. He still had his old felt hat on. He was mumbling half-finished sentences into his yellowing moustache. He was annoying me a bit, but I didn't have anything to do and I didn't feel sleepy. To make conversation, I asked him about his dog. He told me that he'd got it when his wife had died. He'd married fairly late. As a young man he'd wanted to go into the theatre: in the army he used to act in military vaudevilles. But he'd ended up working on the railways and he didn't regret it, because now he had a small pension. He hadn't been happy with his wife, but on the whole he'd got quite used to her. When she'd died he'd felt very lonely. So he'd asked a friend in the workshop for a dog and he'd got this one as a puppy. 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 growing old together. 'He was bad-tempered,' Salamano said. 'Every now and then we had a right old row. But he was a nice dog all the same.' I said he was a good breed and Salamano looked pleased. 'Yes,' he added, 'but you should have seen him before his illness. His coat was his best point.' Every night and every morning, after it got that skin trouble, Salamano used to rub it with ointment. But according to him, its real trouble 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 upset about what had happened to his dog: he thanked me. He told me that mother used to be very fond of his dog. He

SIX

That Sunday I had trouble waking up and Marie had to shout at me and shake me. We didn't eat anything because we wanted to be in the water early. I felt completely empty and I had a bit of a headache. My cigarette tasted bitter. Marie made fun of me because she said I had 'a face like a funeral'. She'd 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 down we knocked at Raymond's door. He told us he was just coming. Out in the street, because I was tired and also because we hadn't opened the shutters, the bright morning sunshine hit me like a slap in the face. Marie was jumping with joy and kept on saying what a beautiful day it was. I began to feel better and I noticed that I was hungry. I told Marie and she pointed to her oilcloth bag where she'd put our swimming costumes and a towel. I just had to wait and we heard Raymond shutting his door. He was wearing blue trousers and a white short-sleeved shirt. But he'd put a straw hat on,

referred to her as 'your poor mother'. He seemed to assume that I'd been very unhappy ever since mother had died and I didn't say anything. Then, very quickly as if he was embarrassed, he told me that he realized that local people thought badly of me for sending my mother to a home, but that he knew me better and he knew I loved mother very much. I replied, I still don't know why, that I hadn't realized before that people thought badly of me for doing that, but that the home had seemed the natural thing since I didn't have enough money to have mother looked after. 'Anyway,' I added, 'she'd run out of things to say to me a long time ago and she'd got bored of being alone.' 'Yes,' he said, 'and at least in a home you can make a few friends.' Then he said he must go. He wanted to get some sleep. His life had changed now and he didn't quite know what he was going to do. For the first time since I'd known him, and with a rather secretive gesture, he gave me his hand and I felt the scales on his skin. He smiled slightly and before he went, he said, 'I hope the dogs don't bark tonight. I always think it's mine.'