

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.'

word to him. Every now and then she'd glance at him and laugh.

We went down into the suburbs of Algiers. The beach isn't far from the bus stop. But we had to cross a small plateau which overlooks the sea and then shelves down steeply to the beach. It was covered with yellowish rocks and brilliant white asphodels standing out against what was already a hard blue sky. Marie amused herself by swinging her oilcloth bag about and scattering petals everywhere. We walked along between rows of little villas with green or white fences, some half-buried, with their verandas overgrown with tamarisk, others standing naked among the rocks. Before we reached the edge of the plateau, we could already see the motionless surface of the sea and, further along, a massive promontory dropping in the clear water. The faint hum of an engine waited towards us through the still air. And in the distance we saw a tiny trawler moving imperceptibly across the dazzling sea. Marie picked some rock irises. From the slope leading down to the beach, we could see that there were already some people swimming.

Raymond's friend had a little wooden chalet at the far end of the beach. The house part backed onto some rocks while the piles supporting the front waded right into the water. Raymond introduced us. His friend was called Masson. He was a huge, broad-shouldered fellow, with a plump and friendly little wife, who had a Parisian accent. He immediately told us to make ourselves at home and said they'd tried us some fish which he'd caught that same morning. I told him how much I liked his house. He informed me that he spent his Saturdays and Sundays and all his holidays there. 'I get on well with my wife,' he

which made Marie laugh, and his forearms were all white under the black hairs. I was rather disgusted. He was whistling as he came down and he seemed really pleased. He said, 'Hi there, old man,' to me and addressed Marie as 'Miss'.

The day before, we'd been to the police station and I'd testified that the girl had 'cheated' on Raymond. He got off with a warning. They didn't check my statement. On the doorstep we talked about it with Raymond, and then we decided to catch the bus. The beach wasn't very far away, but we'd get there more quickly that way. Raymond said he thought his friend would be pleased to see us arrive early. We were just about to set off when Raymond suddenly pointed across the street. I looked and saw a group of Arabs leaning against the front of the tobacconist's shop. They were looking at us in silence, but in their own special way, as if we were nothing more than blocks of stone or dead trees. Raymond told me that the second one from the left was his man, and he looked worried. He added that anyway it was all settled now. Marie didn't really understand and asked us what was wrong. I told her that these Arabs had something against Raymond. She wanted to get going at once. Raymond straightened up and laughed, saying we'd better get a move on.

We went towards the bus stop which was a bit further along and Raymond informed me that the Arabs weren't following us. I looked round. They were still in the same place and looking with the same indifference at the spot where we'd just been. We caught the bus. Raymond, who seemed altogether relieved, kept on cracking jokes for Marie. I could tell that he liked her, but she hardly said a

ach beside Masson and put my face in the sand. I said it was good and he agreed. Soon afterwards Marie came up. I turned round to watch her coming. She was glistening all over with salty water and holding her hair back off her face. She lay down alongside me and the warmth of her body and the heat of the sun made me doze off a bit. Marie shook me and told me that Masson had gone back up to the house, it was time for lunch. I got up straight away because I was hungry, but Marie told me that I hadn't kissed her all morning. It was true and yet I wanted to. 'Come into the water,' she said. We ran and sprawled in the little waves at the edge. We swam a few strokes and she clung on to me. I felt her legs round mine and I wanted her.

When we got back, Masson was already calling us. I said I was very hungry and he immediately announced to his wife that he liked me. The bread was good, and I devoured my share of the fish. After that there was some meat and fried potatoes. We all ate in silence. Masson drank a lot of wine and kept on filling my glass. By the time it came to the coffee, I had rather a thick head and I smoked a lot. Masson, Raymond and I thought of spending the whole of August together at the beach, sharing expenses. Suddenly Marie said, 'Do you know what time it is? It's half past eleven.' We were all surprised, but Masson said we'd eaten very early and that was quite natural because the time to have lunch was when you felt hungry. For some reason that made Marie laugh. I think she'd had a bit too much to drink. Masson then asked me if I wanted to go for a walk on the beach with him. 'My wife always has a siesta after lunch. But I don't like doing that. I have to go for a walk. I'm always telling her that

added. And just then his wife was laughing with Marie. For the first time perhaps, I really thought I'd 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 and Marie plunged straight into the water. Masson and I waited a bit. He spoke slowly and I noticed that he had a habit of finishing off every statement he made with an 'and what's more', even when, in fact, he didn't add anything to the meaning of his sentence. Referring to Marie, he said, 'She's stunning, and what's more, charming.' After that I didn't take any more notice of this habit of his because I was concentrating on feeling the sun doing me good. The sand was beginning to get hot underneath. I denied myself the water for a bit longer, but I ended up saying to Masson, 'Let's go.' I dived in. He went in slowly and only took the plunge when he got out of his depth. He swam breast-stroke and rather badly too, so I left him behind and joined Marie. The water was cold and I was glad to be swimming. Marie and I swam right out, moving together and feeling content together.

Out in the open we lay on our backs and with my face turned towards the sky I could feel the sun peeling away the last few layers of water which trickled down into my mouth. We saw Masson making his way back to the beach to stretch out in the sun. From a distance he looked enormous. Marie wanted us to swim together. I went behind her to hold her round the waist and she swam with her arms while I helped by kicking with my feet. The little splashing sound followed us through the morning air until I began to feel tired. So then I left Marie and made my way back, swimming steadily and breathing regularly. On the beach I stretched out flat on my stom-

another one turns up, he's yours,' I said, 'Yes' and Masson put his hands in his pockets. The sand was so hot that it seemed to have turned red. We were advancing steadily towards the Arabs. The distance between us diminished regularly. When we were within a few paces of each other, the Arabs stopped. Masson and I slowed down. Raymond went straight up to his man. I didn't quite hear what he said to him, but the Arab made as if to butt him with his head. Raymond then struck the first blow and immediately shouted to Masson. Masson went up to the one he'd been assigned to and hit him twice with all his strength. The Arab fell flat in the water, face down, on the surface, round his head. Meanwhile Raymond had hit the other one as well and his face was covered in blood. Raymond turned to me and said, 'You wait till I've finished with him.' I shouted, 'Look out, he's got a knife!' But already Raymond had his arm cut open and his mouth gashed.

Masson sprang forward. But the other Arab had got up again and he went round behind the one with the knife. We didn't dare move. They backed slowly away, without taking their eyes off us and keeping us at bay with the knife. When they thought they were at a safe distance, they ran off as fast as they could, and we were left pinned to the ground beneath the sun with Raymond clutching at his arm which was dripping with blood.

Masson immediately said that there was a doctor who spent his Sundays up on the plateau. Raymond wanted to go straight to him. But every time he spoke the blood from his wound bubbled up inside his mouth. We helped him back to the chalet as quickly as we could. When we

it's better for the health. But after all, it's up to her,' Marie announced that she'd stay and help Mrs Masson with the washing-up. The little Parisian woman said that for that they'd have to get rid of the men. The three of us went out.

The sun was shining almost vertically onto the sand and the glare from the sea was unbearable. There was no one left on the beach. From the chalets running along the edge of the plateau and overlooking the sea came the sound of cutlery on crockery. It was hard to breathe in the dry heat rising from the ground. To begin with, Raymond and Masson discussed people and things I knew nothing about. I gathered that they'd known each other for some time and had even lived together once. We made our way down to the water and walked along the edge of the sea. 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 the sun beating down on my bare head was making me feel sleepy.

At that point Raymond said something to Masson which I didn't quite hear. But at the same time, right at the far end of the beach and a long way from where we were, I noticed two Arabs in boiler suits coming towards us. I looked at Raymond and he said, 'It's him.' We walked on. Masson wondered how they'd managed to follow us all this way. I thought they'd probably seen us getting on the bus with a beach-bag, but I didn't say anything.

The Arabs were advancing slowly and they were already much nearer. We didn't change pace, but Raymond said, 'If there's a fight, Masson, you take the one on the right. I'll take care of my man. Meursault, if

got there, Raymond said that his wounds were only superficial and he could walk to the doctor's. He left with Masson and I stayed to explain to the women what had happened. Mrs Masson was in tears and Marie had gone very pale. It annoyed me to have to explain things to them. I ended up not saying anything and just smoked and watched the sea.

At about half past one Raymond came back with Masson. He had his arm bandaged up and some sticking-plaster on the corner of his mouth. The doctor had told him it was nothing, but Raymond looked very gloomy. Masson tried to make him laugh. But he still wouldn't speak. When he said that he was going down onto the beach, I asked him where he was going. He told me that he wanted to get some air. Masson and I said we'd go with him. At that he got angry and swore at us. Masson said we mustn't argue with him. But I followed him all the same.

We walked for a long time on the beach. The sun was crashing down onto the sea and the sand and shattering into little pieces. I had the impression that Raymond knew where he was going, but I was probably wrong. Right at the far end of the beach we came at last 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 boiler suits. They seemed quite calm and almost contented. Our arrival had no effect on them. The one who had attacked Raymond was watching him in silence. The other one was blowing down a small reed; watching us out of the corner of his eye, he was repeating over and over again the only three notes the instrument would make.

All this time there was just the sun and the silence, with the sound of the little spring and the three notes. Then Raymond put his hand to his hip-pocket, but the Arabs didn't move, they just kept looking at each other. I noticed that the one who was playing the flute had his toes spread right apart. But without taking his eyes off his adversary, Raymond asked me, 'Shall I let him have it?' I said no he'd get himself worked up and be bound to shoot. I simply told him, 'He hasn't said anything to you yet. It'd be unfair to shoot just like that.' Again there was the sound of the water and the flute amidst the silence and the heat. Then Raymond said, 'I'll insult him then, and when he answers back, I'll let him have it.' I answered, 'All right. But if he doesn't draw his knife, you can't shoot.' Raymond started getting a bit worked up. The other Arab was still playing and both of them were watching Raymond's every movement. 'No,' I said to Raymond, 'take him on hand to hand and give me your gun. If the other one intervenes, or if he draws his knife, I'll let him have it.'

When Raymond handed me his gun, the sun glinted off it. And yet still we remained motionless as if everything had closed in around us. We just stared fixedly at one another and here amid the sand, the sun and the sea, in the dual silence of the flute and the water, everything was at a standstill. I realized at that point that you could either shoot or not shoot. But suddenly the Arabs retreated and slid round behind the rock. So Raymond and I turned back. He seemed to be feeling better and talked about the bus home.

I went as far as the chalet with him but, while he

climbed the wooden steps, I stayed at the bottom, with my head ringing from the sun, unable to face the effort of climbing the wooden staircase and having to confront the women again. But it was so hot that it was equally unbearable just standing there in the blinding rain that was pouring down out of the sky. Whether I stayed there or moved, it would come to the same thing. After a minute or two I turned back towards the beach and started walking.

There was still the same dazzling red glare. The little waves were lapping restlessly at the sand as the stifled sea gasped for breath. I was walking slowly towards the rocks and I could feel my forehead swelling up under the sun. The heat was pushing full against me as I tried to walk. And every time I felt the blast of its hot breath on my face, I set my teeth, closed my fists in my trouser pockets and tensed my whole body in defiance of the sun and of the drunken haze it was pouring into me. With every blade of light that leapt up off the sand, from a white 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 lump of rock surrounded by a blinding halo of light and spray. I was thinking of the cool spring behind the rock. I wanted to hear the murmur of its water again, to escape from the sun and the effort and the women's tears, and to relax in the shade again. But when I got nearer, I saw that Raymond's Arab 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, and his whole body in the sun. His boiler suit was steaming in the heat. I was a bit surprised. As far as I was concerned, it

was all settled and I'd gone there without even thinking about it.

As soon as he saw me, he sat up slightly 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 some distance away from him, about ten yards or so. Every now and then I could see him looking at me, through half-closed eyes. But for most of the time he was just a shape dancing in front of me in the scorching air. The waves sounded even longer and lazier than they had been at midday. It was still the same sun, the same light and the same sand as before. For two hours now the day had stood still, for two hours it had been anchored in an ocean of molten metal. Out on the horizon a tiny steamer went by and I could just see it as a black speck out of the corner of my eye, because I hadn't stopped looking at the Arab.

I realized that I only had to turn round and it would all be over. But the whole beach was reverberating in the sun and pressing against me from behind. I took a few steps towards the spring. The Arab didn't move. Even now he was still some distance away. Perhaps because of the shadows on his face, he seemed to be laughing. I waited. The sun was beginning to burn my cheeks and I felt drops of sweat gathering in my eyebrows. It was the same sun as on the day of mother's funeral and again it was my forehead that was hurting me most and all the veins were throbbing at once beneath the skin. And because I couldn't stand this burning feeling any longer, I moved forward. I knew it was stupid and I wouldn't get out of the sun with one step. But I took a step, just one step

PART II

forward. And this time, without sitting up, the Arab drew his knife and held it out towards me in the sun. The light leapt up off the steel and it was like a long, flashing sword lunging at my forehead. At the same time all the sweat that had gathered in my eyebrows suddenly ran down over my eyelids, covering them with a dense layer of warm moisture. My eyes were blinded by this veil of salty tears. All I could feel were the cymbals the sun was clashing against my forehead and, indistinctly, the daz-zling spear still leaping up off the knife in front of me. It was like a red-hot blade gnawing at my eyelashes and gouging out my stinging eyes. That was when everything shook. The sea swept ashore a great breath of fire. The sky seemed to be splitting from end to end and raining down sheets of flame. My whole being went tense and I tightened my grip on the gun. The trigger gave, I felt the underside of the polished butt and it was there, in that sharp but deafening noise, that it all started. I shook off the sweat and the sun. I realized that I'd destroyed the balance of the day and the perfect silence of this beach where I'd been happy. And I fired four more times at a lifeless body and the bullets sank in without leaving a mark. And it was like giving four sharp knocks at the door of unhappiness.