

## FIVE

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For the third time, I've refused to see the chaplain. I've got nothing to say to him, I don't feel like talking and I'll be seeing him soon enough as it is. What interests me at the moment is trying to escape from the mechanism, trying to find if there's any way out of the inevitable. I've been moved to another cell. From this one, when I'm lying down, I can see the sky and nothing else. I spend all day watching its complexion darken as day turns to night. I lie here with my hands under my head and wait. I don't know how many times I've wondered whether there have ever been instances of condemned prisoners escaping from the implacable machinery, disappearing before the execution or breaking through the police cordon. I'd reproach myself every time for not having paid enough attention to stories of executions. You should always take an interest in these things. You never know what might happen. Like everyone else I'd read newspaper reports. But there must have been special books which I'd never been curious enough to refer to. That was where I

might have found stories of people who'd escaped. I might have discovered that there'd been at least one occasion when the wheel had stopped, that amongst so much that was inexorable and premeditated, chance or luck had just once managed to change something. Once! In a way, I think that would have been enough. My heart would have done the rest. The papers often talked about a debt being owed to society. According to them, it had to be paid. But that hardly appeals to the imagination. The vital thing was that there be a chance of escaping, of breaking out of this implacable ritual, of making a mad dash for it which would admit every possible hope. Naturally, that hope was of being shot down at a street corner, in full flight, and by a bullet from nowhere. But when I really thought about it, there was nothing to permit me such a luxury, everything was set against it, and I was caught in the mechanism again.

Willing as I was, I just couldn't accept such an absolute certainty. Because after all, the actual sentence which had established it was ridiculously out of proportion with its unshakeable persistence ever since the moment when that sentence had been passed. The fact that the sentence had been read out at eight o'clock rather than at five o'clock, and the fact that it might have been completely different, and that it had been decided upon by men who change their underwear, and that it had been credited to so vague an entity as the French (or German, or Chinese) people, all these things really seemed to detract considerably from the seriousness of such a decision. And yet I had to admit that from the very second it was taken, its consequences became just as certain, just as serious, as the fact that I was lying there flat against that wall.



At times like this I remembered a story that mother used to tell me about my father. I never met him. Perhaps the only thing I really knew about the man was this story that mother used to tell me: he'd gone to watch a murderer being executed. He'd felt ill at the thought of going. He had though and when he'd got back he'd been sick half the morning. My father disgusted me a bit at the time. But now I understood, it was completely natural. I don't know how I hadn't realized before that nothing was more important than executions and that, in actual fact, they were the only thing a man could really be interested in! If I ever got out of this prison, I'd go and watch all the executions there were. But I think I was wrong even to consider the possibility. For at the thought of being a free man standing there early in the morning behind a police cordon, on the other side as it were, and of being one of the spectators who come and watch and can be sick afterwards, my heart would suddenly be poisoned by a great flood of joy. But it was irrational. I was wrong to let myself make these suppositions because the next second I'd feel so dreadfully cold that it would make me curl up inside my blanket. My teeth would be chattering uncontrollably.

But naturally, you can't always be rational. At other times, for example, I'd work out new legal policies. I'd reform the punishment system. I'd realized that the essential thing was to give the condemned man a chance. Even one in a thousand was quite enough to sort things out. For instance, I imagined that they could find some chemical compound for the patient to take (I thought of him as the patient) which would kill him nine times out of ten. He would know this, that was the condition. Because

when I really thought about it and considered things calmly, I could see that what was wrong with the guillotine was that you had no chance at all, absolutely none. In fact it had been decided once and for all that the patient would die. It was a classified fact, a firmly fixed arrangement, a definite agreement which there was no question of going back on. In the unlikely event of something going wrong, they just started again. Consequently, the annoying thing was that the condemned man had to hope that the machine worked properly. I say this is what's wrong with the system. That's true in a way. But in another way, I had to admit that it also possessed the whole secret of good organization. After all, the condemned man was obliged to lend moral support. It was in his interest that everything should go off without a hitch.

I was also made to realize that up until then I'd had mistaken ideas about these things. I've always thought—I don't know why—that to get to the guillotine you had to climb onto a scaffold, up some steps. I think it was because of the 1789 Revolution, I mean because of everything I'd been shown or taught about these things. But one morning I remembered seeing a photograph which had appeared in the papers at the time of a famous execution. In actual fact, the machine stood flat on the ground, as ordinary as anything. And it was much narrower than I'd thought. It was funny that it hadn't occurred to me before. The machine in this picture had struck me because it looked so immaculate and gleaming, like a precision instrument. You always get exaggerated ideas of things you know nothing about. I was made to realize that on the contrary everything was quite simple:



the machine is on the same level as the man who's walking towards it. He goes up to it just as you would go to meet another person. That was annoying too. Climbing up into the sky to mount the scaffold was something the imagination could hang on to. Whereas, once again, the mechanism demolished everything: they killed you discreetly and rather shamefacedly but extremely accurately.

There were two other things I was always thinking about: the dawn and my appeal. I'd try to be rational though and not think about them any more. I'd stretch out and look at the sky and force myself to take an interest in it. It would turn green and I'd know it was evening. I'd make another effort to divert my thoughts. I'd listen to my heart. I couldn't imagine that this noise which had been with me for so long could ever stop. I've never really had much imagination. And yet I'd try to envisage a particular moment when the beating of my heart would no longer be going on inside my head. But in vain. Either the dawn or my appeal would still be there. And I'd end up telling myself that the most rational thing was not to hold myself back.

They came at dawn, I knew that. In fact I spent every night just waiting for the dawn to come. I've never liked being surprised. When something's happening to me, I'd rather be around. That's why I ended up only sleeping for a bit during the day, while all through the night I waited patiently for the dawn to break above the skylight. The most difficult part was that in-between time when I knew they usually operated. Once it was past midnight, I'd be waiting, listening. Never before had my ears picked up so many noises or detected such tiny sounds. I must say

though that in a way I was lucky throughout that period in that I never once heard footsteps. Mother often used to say that you're never altogether unhappy. And lying there in my prison when the sky turned red and a new day slid into my cell, I'd agree with her. Because I could just as easily have heard footsteps and my heart could have burst. For even though the faintest rustle would send me flying to the door and even though, with my ear pressed to the wood, I'd wait there frantically until I could hear my own breathing and be terrified to find it so hoarse, like a dog's death-rattle, my heart wouldn't burst after all and I'd have gained another twenty-four hours.

All through the day there was my appeal. I think I made the most of that idea. I'd calculate my assets so as to get the best return on my thoughts. I'd always assume the worst: my appeal had been dismissed. 'Well, then I'll die.' Sooner than other people, obviously. But everybody knows that life isn't worth living. And when it came down to it, I wasn't unaware of the fact that it doesn't matter very much whether you die at thirty or at seventy since, in either case, other men and women will naturally go on living, for thousands of years even. Nothing was plainer, in fact. It was still only me who was dying, whether it was now or in twenty years' time. At that point the thing that would rather upset my reasoning was that I'd feel my heart give this terrifying leap at the thought of having another twenty years to live. But I just had to stifle it by imagining what I'd be thinking in twenty years' time when I'd have to face the same situation anyway. Given that you've got to die, it obviously doesn't matter exactly how or when. Therefore (and the difficult thing was not to lose track of all the reasoning which that 'therefore'



implied), therefore, I had to accept that my appeal had been dismissed.

At that point, and only at that point, I'd as it were have the right, I'd so to speak give myself permission to consider the alternative hypothesis: I was pardoned. The annoying thing was that somehow I'd have to control that burning rush of blood which would make my eyes smart and my whole body delirious with joy. I'd have to do my best to restrain this outburst, to be rational about it. I'd have to remain calm even about this hypothesis, in order to make my resignation to the first one more plausible. When I'd managed it, I'd have gained an hour's respite. That was something anyway.

It was at one such moment that I refused yet again to see the chaplain. I was lying down and I could tell from a slight glow in the summer sky that evening was approaching. I'd just dismissed my appeal and I could feel the regular pulse of my blood circulating inside me. I had no need to see the chaplain. For the first time in ages I thought of Marie. She hadn't written to me for days on end. That evening I thought it over and I told myself that she'd probably got tired of being a condemned man's mistress. It also crossed my mind that she might have been ill or dead. It was in the natural order of things. And how would I have known when, now that we were physically separated, there was nothing left to keep us together or to remind us of each other. Anyway, from that point on, Marie's memory would have meant nothing to me. I wasn't interested in her any more if she was dead. I found that quite normal just as I could quite well understand that people would forget about me once I was

dead. They had nothing more to do with me. I couldn't even say that this was hard to accept.

It was at that precise moment that the chaplain walked in. A slight shiver went through me when I saw him. He noticed it and told me not to be afraid. I replied that he usually came at a different time. He told me that it was just a friendly visit and had nothing to do with my appeal which he knew nothing about. He sat down on my bunk and invited me to sit next to him. I refused. All the same, I found him quite pleasant.

He sat there for a moment, with his forearms on his knees, looking down at his hands. They were slim and muscular and they looked like a pair of nimble animals. He rubbed them slowly together. Then he sat like that, still looking down, for so long that for a second I thought I'd forgotten he was there.

But suddenly he raised his head and looked me in the face. 'Why do you refuse to see me?' he said. I replied that I didn't believe in God. He wanted to know whether I was quite sure about that and I said I had no reason for asking myself that question: it didn't seem to matter. He then leant back against the wall, with his hands flat on his thighs. Almost as if he were talking to himself, he remarked that sometimes you think you're sure when really you're not. I didn't say anything. He looked at me and asked, 'What do you think?' I replied that it was possible. In any case, I may not have been sure what really interested me, but I was absolutely sure what didn't interest me. And what he was talking about was one of the very things that didn't interest me.

He looked away and, still without changing position, asked me if I weren't talking like that out of utter despair.



I explained to him that I wasn't in despair. I was simply afraid, which was only natural. 'In that case, God would help you,' he said. 'Every man that I've known in your position has turned towards Him.' I remarked that that was up to them. It also proved that they could spare the time. As for me, I didn't want anyone to help me and time was the very thing I didn't have for taking an interest in what didn't interest me.

At that point he made an irritated gesture, but then he sat up and straightened the folds of his gown. When he'd finished, he spoke to me, addressing me as 'my friend': it wasn't because I was condemned to death that he was talking to me like that; in his opinion, we were all condemned to death. But I interrupted him by saying that it wasn't the same thing and that anyway, this could never be any consolation. 'Admittedly,' he agreed. 'But if you don't die now, you'll die later. And the same problem will arise. How are you going to face up to that terrifying ordeal?' I replied that I'd face up to it exactly as I was facing up to it now.

He stood up when I said that and looked me straight in the eye. It was a game I knew well. I often used to play it with Emmanuel or Céleste and generally they'd look away. The chaplain knew the game well too, I could tell immediately: his gaze never faltered. His voice didn't falter either when he said, 'Have you really no hope at all and do you live in the belief that you are to die outright?' 'Yes,' I said.

He then lowered his head and sat down again. He told me that he pitied me. He thought it was more than a man could bear. All I knew was that he was beginning to annoy me. I turned away as well and went and stood

under the skylight. I was leaning my shoulder against the wall. Without really following what he was saying, I heard him start asking me questions again. He was talking in an anxious and insistent voice. I realized that he was getting emotional and I listened more carefully.

He was expressing his certainty that my appeal would be allowed, but I was burdened with a sin from which I must free myself. According to him, human justice was nothing and divine justice was everything. I pointed out that it was the former which had condemned me. He replied that it hadn't washed away my sin for all that. I told him I didn't know what a sin was. I'd simply been told that I was guilty. I was guilty and I was paying for it and there was nothing more that could be asked of me. At that point he stood up again and I realized that in such a narrow cell, if he wanted to move, he didn't have much choice. He either had to stand up or sit down.

I was staring at the ground. He took a step towards me and stopped, as if he didn't dare come any closer. He was looking up at the sky through the bars. 'You're mistaken, my son,' he said, 'there is more that could be asked of you. And it may well be asked of you.' 'And what's that?' 'You could be asked to see.' 'To see what?'

The priest looked all around him and replied in a voice which suddenly sounded extremely weary, 'I know how the suffering oozes from these stones. I've never looked at them without a feeling of anguish. But deep in my heart I know that even the most wretched among you have looked at them and seen a divine face emerging from the darkness. It is that face which you are being asked to see.'

I woke up a bit. I told him that I'd been looking at these walls for months. There wasn't anything or anyone in the



world I knew better. Maybe, a long time ago, I had looked for a face in them. But that face was the colour of the sun and burning with desire: it was Marie's face. I'd looked for it in vain. Now it was all over. And in any case, I'd never seen anything emerging from any oozing stones.

The chaplain looked at me almost sadly. By now I had my back right up against the wall and my forehead was bathed in light. He said a few words which I didn't hear and then asked me very quickly if I'd let him kiss me. 'No,' I said. He turned and walked over to the wall and ran his hand slowly across it. 'Do you really love this earth as much as that?' he murmured. I didn't answer.

He stayed facing the wall for quite a long time. I found his presence tiresome and aggravating. I was about to tell him to go away and leave me alone when suddenly he had a sort of outburst and turned towards me exclaiming, 'No, I can't believe you. You must surely at some time have wished for another life.' I replied that naturally I had, but that it meant nothing more than wishing I was rich or could swim fast or had a better-shaped mouth. It was the same kind of thing. But he stopped me because he wanted to know how I imagined this other life. So I shouted at him, 'One which would remind me of this life,' and in the same breath I told him that I'd had enough. He started talking to me about God again, but I went up to him and made one last attempt to explain to him that I didn't have much time left. I didn't want to waste it on God. He tried to change the subject by asking me why I wasn't calling him 'father'. That irritated me and I told him that he wasn't my father: he was on the same side as the others.

'No, my son,' he said, placing his hand on my shoulder.

'I'm on your side. But you can't see that because your heart is blind. I shall pray for you.'

Then, for some reason, something exploded inside me. I started shouting at the top of my voice and I insulted him and told him not to pray for me. I'd grabbed him by the collar of his cassock. I was pouring everything out at him from the bottom of my heart in a paroxysm of joy and anger. He seemed so certain of everything, didn't he? And yet none of his certainties was worth one hair of a woman's head. He couldn't even be sure he was alive because he was living like a dead man. I might seem to be empty-handed. But I was sure of myself, sure of everything, surer than he was, sure of my life and sure of the death that was coming to me. Yes, that was all I had. But at least it was a truth which I had hold of just as it had hold of me. I'd been right, I was still right, I was always right. I'd lived in a certain way and I could just as well have lived in a different way. I'd done this and I hadn't done that. I hadn't done one thing whereas I had done another. So what? It was as if I'd been waiting all along for this very moment and for the early dawn when I'd be justified. Nothing, nothing mattered and I knew very well why. He too knew why. From the depths of my future, throughout the whole of this absurd life I'd been leading, I'd felt a vague breath drifting towards me across all the years that were still to come, and on its way this breath had evened out everything that was then being proposed to me in the equally unreal years I was living through. What did other people's deaths or a mother's love matter to me, what did his God or the lives people chose or the destinies they selected matter to me, when one and the same destiny was to select me and thousands of millions



of other privileged people who, like him, called themselves my brothers. Didn't he understand? Everyone was privileged. There were only privileged people. The others too would be condemned one day. He too would be condemned. What did it matter if he was accused of murder and then executed for not crying at his mother's funeral? Salamano's dog was worth just as much as his wife. The little automatic woman was just as guilty as the Parisian woman Masson had married or as Marie who wanted me to marry her. What did it matter that Raymond was just as much my mate as Céleste who was worth more than him? What did it matter that Marie now had a new Meursault to kiss? Didn't he understand that he was condemned and that from the depths of my future . . . I was choking with all this shouting. But already the chaplain was being wrested from me and the warders were threatening me. He calmed them though and looked at me for a moment in silence. His eyes were full of tears. Then he turned away and disappeared.

Once he was gone, I felt calm again. I was exhausted and I threw myself onto my bunk. I think I must have fallen asleep because I woke up with stars shining on my face. Sounds of the countryside were wafting in. The night air was cooling my temples with the smell of earth and salt. The wondrous peace of this sleeping summer flooded into me. At that point, on the verge of daybreak, there was a scream of sirens. They were announcing a departure to a world towards which I would now be forever indifferent. For the first time in a very long time I thought of mother. I felt that I understood why at the end of her life she'd taken a 'fiancé' and why she'd pretended to start again. There at the home, where lives faded away,

there too the evenings were a kind of melancholy truce. So close to death, mother must have felt liberated and ready to live her life again. No one, no one at all had any right to cry over her. And I too felt ready to live my life again. As if this great outburst of anger had purged all my ills, killed all my hopes, I looked up at the mass of signs and stars in the night sky and laid myself open for the first time to the benign indifference of the world. And finding it so much like myself, in fact so fraternal, I realized that I'd been happy, and that I was still happy. For the final consummation and for me to feel less lonely, my last wish was that there should be a crowd of spectators at my execution and that they should greet me with cries of hatred.