

340 **CAMUS AND THE ABSURD**

As we near the end of this book it is fitting to have a selection from Albert Camus's (1913-1960) famous work, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, for it brings us back to the starting point of our explorations, namely, the concrete, living, particular, existing individual. Camus approaches the existing individual through a consideration of the meaning of life, and the question of whether life is or is not worth living, that is, the question of suicide. Camus is concerned with the existential relevance of the absurd and with the consequences that follow from the existence of absurdity. What, then, is the absurd?

For Camus, the absurdity of life is encountered both emotionally and intellectually. We feel that life is absurd in several ways. The habitual and daily routine of life inevitably leads us to the question, "Why?" What is it all for? Every day off to work, then back home, then watch TV, then get up again, and so on. What is the point of such a routine existence? There is, furthermore, the feeling of solitude and isolation that Camus expresses in the following passage:

... in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity. (p. 358)

Like Nietzsche, Camus recognizes the death of God and with it the isolation one must feel when values can no longer be believed to come from without. We seek some link that will ground our life in something greater, something solid, something true, something outside of ourselves, but all is illusion.

There is also a feeling of absurdity when we contemplate the passage of time. On the one hand, we live for the future. We think of ourselves as essentially what we will be. We make plans for ourselves and look forward to the future when our plans will be realized. On the other hand, "a day comes when a man notices or says that he is thirty" (p. 359). The passage of time is also the passage of our lives and the end of our future. Thus, what we long for is at the same time what we ought to reject. Death is a fact of life, and as such it can make us feel that none of our strivings and efforts make any sense or have any extrinsic justification. As Camus puts it,

No code of ethics and no effort are justifiable *a priori* in the face of the cruel mathematics that command our condition. (p. 360)

Before drawing the implications of the absurdities of our condition, Camus recounts certain intellectual experiences of the absurd.

Ultimately, Camus is attempting to show that we have a desire to understand the universe, ourselves, and our place in it, but that such an understanding can never be achieved. He says that

341 So long as the mind keeps silent in the motionless world of its hopes, everything is reflected and arranged in the unity of its nostalgia. But with its first move this world cracks and tumbles: an infinite number of shimmering fragments is offered to the understanding. We must despair of ever reconstructing the familiar, calm surface which would give us peace of heart. (p. 361)

Camus proceeds to define the absurd as the individual's desire for clarity linked with an irrational universe:

This world in itself is not reasonable, that is all that can be said. But what is absurd is the confrontation of this irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart. (p. 362)

Thus, Camus is certain of both his wish to reduce the world to a rational and intelligible principle and an intellectual recognition that such unity and clarity is impossible. What consequences are we to draw from the existence of absurdity? What is the existential relevance of this absurd situation? Is there any reason to go on living if all hopes and plans lead to death?

In the section on "Absurd Freedom" Camus attend to these questions. At the outset we can say that his answer is optimistic. According to Camus, there is a happiness, a joy, and a repose in living with a consciousness of the absurd. At the moment when one gives up all illusions of finding meaning in life and the universe

This hell of the present is his Kingdom at last. All problems recover their sharp edge. . . . Spiritual conflicts become embodied and return to the abject and magnificent shelter of man's heart. None of them is settled. But all are transfigured. (p. 363)

Thus, the first consequence Camus draws from the truth of the absurd is *revolt*. Revolt is

a constant confrontation between man and his own obscurity. . . . It challenges the world anew every second. . . . It is that constant presence of man in his own eyes. It is not aspiration, for it is devoid of hope. That revolt is the certainty of a crushing fate, without the resignation that ought to accompany it. (p. 364)

The position of revolt does not solve the problems that lead to life's meaninglessness, but it involves a lucid contemplation of the absurd that provides freedom and happiness.

The freedom Camus refers to is not the metaphysical freedom that can be bestowed upon an individual by God. It is not the faculty of free will or the eternal freedom that encompasses the belief that "someday" one's aims will be fulfilled. The "absurd man" achieves an inner freedom when he abandons the illusion upon which he has been living. Previously we were restricted by the future, by our belief in what we could be, in what we could hope for. As Camus sees it, we become a slave to our goals:

To the extent to which he imagined a purpose to his life, he adapted himself to the demands of a purpose to be achieved and became the slave of his liberty. Thus, I could not act otherwise than as the father (or the engineer or the leader of a nation, or the post-office sub-clerk) that I am preparing to be. (p. 366)

342 We achieve an absurd freedom when we realize that we cannot find meaning in the universe or in our connection with the universe, and that any meaning which we construct perishes with our death. Thus,

the absurd man feels released from everything outside that passionate attention crystallizing in him. He enjoys a freedom with regard to common rules. . . . The return to consciousness, the escape from everyday sleep represent the first steps of absurd freedom. (p. 366)

Camus seems to be making the same point as Nietzsche: Objective values have a kind of power over us; we become slaves to them. Thus, once we give up the illusion of freedom we are liberated. An absurd freedom is liberating, but it is also absurd because it leaves us alone. And yet it is "the only reasonable freedom: that which a human heart can experience and live" (p. 366).

We can now turn to the question of suicide. Camus rejects suicide as the inevitable or even the proper outcome of his reflections on the absurd. To choose to solve the problem of meaninglessness by rushing toward the future is really a pseudo solution. One cannot overcome meaninglessness, but one can gain a measure of happiness from it by keeping it alive, by contemplating it. Thus, Camus claims that life will be lived all the better if it has no meaning. For the existence of absurdity leads to lucidity, an absurd freedom and happiness.

The hero Sisyphus is at once tragic and absurd, and yet it is his fate that ensures his happiness:

The lucidity that was to constitute his torture at the same time crowns his victory. . . . One does not discover the absurd without being tempted to write a manual of happiness. (p. 368)

Recall that Sisyphus is condemned to push a huge stone up a mountain and then watch it fall, only to repeat the process forever. Camus says, "If the descent is thus sometimes performed in sorrow, it can also take place in joy" (p. 368). Once we have recognized the meaninglessness of life, and have become conscious of the absurd, we achieve a measure of victory over it. "One must imagine Sisyphus happy" (p. 369).

## From *The Myth of Sisyphus*

### *An Absurd Reasoning*

#### ABSURDITY AND SUICIDE

There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy. All the rest—whether or not the world has three dimensions, whether the mind has nine or twelve categories—comes afterwards. These are games; one must first answer. And if it is true, as Nietzsche claims, that a philosopher, to deserve our respect, must preach by example, you can appreciate the importance of that reply, for it will precede the definitive act. These are facts the heart can feel; yet they call for careful study before they become clear to the intellect.

If I ask myself how to judge that this question is more urgent than that, I reply that one judges by the actions it entails. I have never seen anyone die for the ontological argument. Galileo, who held a scientific truth of great importance, abjured it with the greatest ease as soon as it endangered his life. In a certain sense, he did right. That truth was not worth the stake. Whether the earth or the sun revolves around the other is a matter of profound indifference. To tell the truth, it is a futile question. On the other hand, I see many people die because they judge that life is not worth living. I see others paradoxically getting killed for the ideas or illusions that give them a reason for living (what is called a reason for living is also an excellent reason for dying). I therefore conclude that the meaning of life is the most urgent of questions. How to answer it? On all essential problems (I mean thereby those that run the risk of leading to death or those that intensify the passion of living) there are probably but two methods of thought: the method of La Palisse and the method of Don Quixote. Solely the balance between evidence and lyricism can allow us to achieve simultaneously emotion and lucidity. In a subject at once so humble and so heavy with emotion, the learned and classical dialectic must yield, one can see, to a more modest attitude of mind deriving at one and the same time from common sense and understanding.

Suicide has never been dealt with except as a social phenomenon. On the contrary, we are concerned here, at the outset, with the relationship between individual thought and suicide. An act like this is prepared within the silence of the heart, as is a great work of art. The man himself is ignorant of it. One evening he pulls the trigger or jumps. Of an apartment-building manager who had killed himself I was

358 told that he had lost his daughter five years before, that he had changed greatly since, and that that experience had "undermined" him. A more exact word cannot be imagined. Beginning to think is beginning to be undermined. Society has but little connection with such beginnings. The worm is in man's heart. That is where it must be sought. One must follow and understand this fatal game that leads from lucidity in the face of existence to flight from light.

There are many causes for a suicide, and generally the most obvious ones were not the most powerful. Rarely is suicide committed (yet the hypothesis is not excluded) through reflection. What sets off the crisis is almost always unverifiable. Newspapers often speak of "personal sorrows" or of "incurable illness." These explanations are plausible. But one would have to know whether a friend of the desperate man had not that very day addressed him indifferently. He is the guilty one. For that is enough to precipitate all the rancors and all the boredom still in suspension.

But if it is hard to fix the precise instant, the subtle step when the mind opted for death, it is easier to deduce from the act itself the consequences it implies. In a sense, and as in melodrama, killing yourself amounts to confessing. It is confessing that life is too much for you or that you do not understand it. Let's not go too far in such analogies, however, but rather return to everyday words. It is merely confessing that that "is not worth the trouble." Living, naturally, is never

easy. You continue making the gestures commanded by existence for many reasons, the first of which is habit. Dying voluntarily implies that you have recognized, even instinctively, the ridiculous character of that habit, the absence of any profound reason for living, the insane character of that daily agitation, and the uselessness of suffering.

What, then, is that incalculable feeling that deprives the mind of the sleep necessary to life? A world that can be explained even with bad reasons is a familiar world. But, on the other hand, in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity. . . .

All great deeds and all great thoughts have a ridiculous beginning. Great works are often born on a street-corner or in a restaurant's revolving door. So it is with absurdity. The absurd world more than others derives its nobility from that abject birth. In certain situations, replying "nothing" when asked what one is thinking about may be pretense in a man. Those who are loved are well aware of this. But if that reply is sincere, if it symbolizes that odd state of soul in which the void becomes eloquent, in which the chain of daily gestures is broken, in which the heart vainly seeks the link that will connect it again, then it is as it were the first sign of absurdity.

It happens that the stage sets collapse. Rising, streetcar, four hours in the office or the factory, meal, streetcar, four hours of work, meal, sleep, and Monday Tuesday Wednesday Thursday Friday and Saturday according to the same rhythm—this path is easily followed most of the time. But one day the "why" arises and everything begins in that weariness tinged with amazement. "Begins"—this is important. Weariness comes at the end of the acts of a mechanical life, but at the same time it inaugurates the impulse of consciousness. It awakens consciousness

359 and provokes what follows. What follows is the gradual return into the chain or it is the definitive awakening. At the end of the awakening comes, in time, the consequence: suicide or recovery. In itself weariness has something sickening about it. Here, I must conclude that it is good. For everything beings with consciousness and nothing is worth anything except through it. There is nothing original about these remarks. But they are obvious; that is enough for a while, during a sketchy reconnaissance in the origins of the absurd. Mere "anxiety," as Heidegger says, is at the source of everything.

Likewise and during every day of an unillustrious life, time carries us. But a moment always comes when we have to carry it. We live on the future: "tomorrow," "later on," "when you have made your way," "you will understand when you are old enough." Such irrelevancies are wonderful, for, after all, it's a matter of dying. Yet a day comes when a man notices or says that he is thirty. Thus he asserts his youth. But simultaneously he situates himself in relation to time. He takes his place in it. He admits that he stands at a certain point on a curve that he acknowledges having to travel to its end. He belongs to time, and by the horror that seizes him, he recognizes his worst enemy. Tomorrow, he was longing for tomorrow, whereas everything in him ought to reject it. That revolt of the flesh is the absurd.

A step lower and strangeness creeps in: perceiving that the world is "dense," sensing to what a degree a stone is foreign and irreducible to us, with what intensity nature or a landscape can negate us. At the heart of all beauty lies something inhuman, and these hills, the softness of the sky, the outline of these trees at this very minute lose the illusory meaning with which we had clothed them, henceforth more remote than a lost paradise. The primitive hostility of the world rises up to face us across millennia. For a second we cease to understand it because for centuries we have understood in it solely the images and designs that we had attributed to it beforehand, because henceforth we lack the power to make use of that artifice. The world evades us because it becomes itself again. That stage scenery masked by habit becomes again what it is. It withdraws at a distance from us. Just as there are days when under the familiar face of a woman, we see as a stranger her we had loved months or years ago, perhaps we shall come even to desire what suddenly leaves us so alone. But the time has not yet come. Just one thing: that denseness and that strangeness of the world is the absurd.

Men, too, secrete the inhuman. At certain moments of lucidity, the mechanical aspect of their gestures, their meaningless pantomime makes silly everything that surrounds them. A man is talking on the telephone behind a glass partition;

you cannot hear him, but you see his incomprehensible dumb show: you wonder why he is alive. This discomfort in the face of man's own inhumanity, this incalculable tumble before the image of what we are, this "nausea," as a writer of today calls it, is also the absurd. Likewise the stranger who at certain seconds comes to meet us in a mirror, the familiar and yet alarming brother we encounter in our own photographs is also the absurd.

360 I come at last to death and to the attitude we have toward it. On this point everything has been said and it is only proper to avoid pathos. Yet one will never be sufficiently surprised that everyone lives as if no one "knew." This is because in reality there is no experience of death. Properly speaking, nothing has been experienced but what has been lived and made conscious. Here, it is barely possible to speak of the experience of others' deaths. It is a substitute, an illusion, and it never quite convinces us. That melancholy convention cannot be persuasive. The horror comes in reality from the mathematical aspect of the event. If time frightens us, this is because it works out the problem and the solution comes afterward. All the pretty speeches about the soul will have their contrary convincingly proved, at least for a time. From this inert body on which a slap makes no mark the soul has disappeared. This elementary and definitive aspect of the adventure constitutes the absurd feeling. Under the fatal lighting of that destiny, its uselessness becomes evident. No code of ethics and no effort are justifiable *a priori* in the face of the cruel mathematics that command our condition.

Let me repeat: all this has been said over and over. I am limiting myself here to making a rapid classification and to pointing out these obvious themes. They run through all literatures and all philosophies. Everyday conversation feeds on them. There is no question of reinventing them. But it is essential to be sure of these facts in order to be able to question oneself subsequently on the primordial question. I am interested—let me repeat again—not so much in absurd discoveries as in their consequences. If one is assured of these facts, what is one to conclude, how far is one to go to elude nothing? Is one to die voluntarily or to hope in spite of everything? Beforehand, it is necessary to take the same rapid inventory on the plane of the intelligence.

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The mind's first step is to distinguish what is true from what is false. However, as soon as thought reflects on itself, what it first discovers is a contradiction. Useless to strive to be convincing in this case. Over the centuries no one has furnished a clearer and more elegant demonstration of the business than Aristotle: "The often ridiculed consequence of these opinions is that they destroy themselves. For by asserting that all is true we assert the truth of the contrary assertion and consequently the falsity of our own thesis (for the contrary assertion does not admit that it can be true). And if one says that all is false, that assertion is itself false. If we declare that solely the assertion opposed to ours is false or else that solely ours is not false, we are nevertheless forced to admit an infinite number of true or false judgments. For the one who expresses a true assertion proclaims simultaneously that it is true, and so on *ad infinitum*."

361 This vicious circle is but the first of a series in which the mind that studies itself gets lost in a giddy whirling. The very simplicity of these paradoxes makes them irreducible. Whatever may be the plays on words and the acrobatics of logic, to understand is, above all, to unify. The mind's deepest desire, even in its most elaborate operations, parallels man's unconscious feeling in the face of his universe: it is an insistence upon familiarity, an appetite for clarity. Understanding the world for a man is reducing it to the human, stamping it with his seal. The cat's universe is not the universe of the anthill. The truism "All thought is anthropomorphic" has no other meaning. Likewise, the mind that aims to understand reality can consider itself satisfied only by reducing it to terms of thought. If man realized that the universe like him can love and suffer, he would be reconciled. If thought discovered in the shimmering mirrors of phenomena eternal relations capable of summing them up and summing themselves up in a single principle, then would be seen an intellectual joy of which the myth of the blessed would be but a ridiculous imitation. That nostalgia for unity, that appetite for the absolute illustrates the essential impulse of the human drama. But the fact of that nostalgia's existence does not imply that it is to be immediately satisfied. For if, bridging the gulf that separates desire from conquest, we assert with Parmenides the reality of the One (what-

ever it may be), we fall into the ridiculous contradiction of a mind that asserts total unity and proves by its very assertion its own difference and the diversity it claimed to resolve. This other vicious circle is enough to stifle our hopes.

These are again truisms. I shall again repeat that they are not interesting in themselves but in the consequences that can be deduced from them. I know another truism: it tells me that man is mortal. One can nevertheless count the minds that have deduced the extreme conclusions from it. It is essential to consider as a constant point of reference in this essay the regular hiatus between what we fancy we know and what we really know, practical assent and simulated ignorance which allows us to live with ideas which, if we truly put them to the test, ought to upset our whole life. Faced with this inextricable contradiction of the mind, we shall fully grasp the divorce separating us from our own creations. So long as the mind keeps silent in the motionless world of its hopes, everything is reflected and arranged in the unity of its nostalgia. But with its first move this world cracks and tumbles: an infinite number of shimmering fragments is offered to the understanding. We must despair of ever reconstructing the familiar, calm surface which would give us peace of heart. After so many centuries of inquiries, so many abdications among thinkers, we are well aware that this is true for all our knowledge. With the exception of professional rationalists, today people despair of true knowledge. If the only significant history of human thought were to be written, it would have to be the history of its successive regrets and its impotences.

Of whom and of what indeed can I say: "I know that!" This heart within me I can feel, and I judge that it exists. This world I can touch, and I likewise judge that it exists. There ends all my knowledge, and the rest is construction. For if I try to seize this self of which I feel sure, if I try to define and to summarize it, it is nothing but water slipping through my fingers. I can sketch one by one all the aspects it is able to assume, all those likewise that have been attributed to it, this upbringing, this origin, this ardor or these silences, this nobility or this vileness. But aspects cannot be added up. This very heart which is mine will forever remain indefinable to me. Between the certainty I have of my existence and the content I try to give to that assurance, the gap will never be filled. Forever I shall be a stranger to myself. In psychology as in logic, there are truths but no truth. Socrates' "Know thyself" has as much value as the "Be virtuous" of our confessionals. They reveal a nostalgia at the same time as an ignorance. They are sterile exercises on great subjects. They are legitimate only in precisely so far as they are approximate.

And here are trees and I know their gnarled surface, water and I feel its taste. These scents of grass and stars at night, certain evenings when the heart relaxes—how shall I negate this world whose power and strength I feel? Yet all the knowledge on earth will give me nothing to assure me that this world is mine. You describe it to me and you teach me to classify it. You enumerate its laws and in my thirst for knowledge I admit that they are true. You take apart its mechanism and my hope increases. At the final stage you teach me that this wondrous and multi-colored universe can be reduced to the atom and that the atom itself can be reduced to the electron. All this is good and I wait for you to continue. But you tell me of an invisible planetary system in which electrons gravitate around a nucleus.

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You explain this world to me with an image. I realize then that you have been reduced to poetry: I shall never know. Have I the time to become indignant? You have already changed theories. So that science that was to teach me everything ends up in a hypothesis, that lucidity founders in metaphor, that uncertainty is resolved in a work of art. What need had I of so many efforts? The soft lines of these hills and the hand of evening on this troubled heart teach me much more. I have returned to my beginning. I realize that if through science I can seize phenomena and enumerate them, I cannot, for all that, apprehend the world. Were I to trace its entire relief with my finger, I should not know any more. And you give me the choice between a description that is sure but that teaches me nothing and hypotheses that claim to teach me but that are not sure. A stranger to myself and to the world, armed solely with a thought that negates itself as soon as it asserts, what is this condition in which I can have peace only by refusing to know and to live, in which the appetite for conquest bumps into walls that defy its assaults? To will is to stir up paradoxes. Everything is ordered in such a way as to bring into being that poisoned peace produced by thoughtlessness, lack of heart, or fatal renunciations.

Hence the intelligence, too, tells me in its way that this world is absurd. Its contrary, blind reason, may well claim that all is clear; I was waiting for proof and longing for it to be right. But despite so many pretentious centuries and over the

heads of so many eloquent and persuasive men, I know that is false. On this plane, at least, there is no happiness if I cannot know. That universal reason, practical or ethical, that determinism, those categories that explain everything are enough to make a decent man laugh. They have nothing to do with the mind. They negate its profound truth, which is to be enchained. In this unintelligible and limited universe, man's fate henceforth assumes its meaning. A horde of irrationals has sprung up and surrounds him until his ultimate end. In his recovered and now studied lucidity, the feeling of the absurd becomes clear and definite. I said that the world is absurd, but I was too hasty. This world in itself is not reasonable, that is all that can be said. But what is absurd is the confrontation of this irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart. The absurd depends as much on man as on the world. For the moment it is all that links them together. It binds them one to the other as only hatred can weld two creatures together. This is all I can discern clearly in this measureless universe where my adventure takes place. Let us pause here. If I hold to be true that absurdity that determines my relationship with life, if I become thoroughly imbued with that sentiment that seizes me in face of the world's scenes, with that lucidity imposed on me by the pursuit of a science, I must sacrifice everything to these certainties and I must see them squarely to be able to maintain them. Above all, I must adapt my behavior to them and pursue them in all their consequences. I am speaking here of decency. But I want to know beforehand if thought can live in those deserts. . . .

### ABSURD FREEDOM

Now the main thing is done, I hold certain facts from which I cannot separate. What I know, what is certain, what I cannot deny, what I cannot reject—this is what counts. I can negate everything of that part of me that lives on vague nostalgia; except this desire for unity, this longing to solve, this need for clarity and

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cohesion. I can refute everything in this world surrounding me that offends or enraptures me, except this chaos, this sovereign chance and this divine equivalence which springs from anarchy. I don't know whether this world has a meaning that transcends it. But I know that I do not know that meaning and that it is impossible for me just now to know it. What can a meaning outside my condition mean to me? I can understand only in human terms. What I touch, what resists me—that is what I understand. And these two certainties—my appetite for the absolute and for unity and the impossibility of reducing this world to a rational and reasonable principle—I also know that I cannot reconcile them. What other truth can I admit without lying, without bringing in a hope I lack and which means nothing within the limits of my condition?

If I were a tree among trees, a cat among animals, this life would have a meaning, or rather this problem would not arise, for I should belong to this world. I should *be* this world to which I am now opposed by my whole consciousness and my whole insistence upon familiarity. This ridiculous reason is what sets me in opposition to all creation. I cannot cross it out with a stroke of the pen. What I believe to be true I must therefore preserve. What seems to me so obvious, even against me, I must support. And what constitutes the basis of that conflict, of that break between the world and my mind, but the awareness of it? If therefore I want to preserve it, I can through a constant awareness, ever revived, ever alert. This is what, for the moment, I must remember. At this moment the absurd, so obvious and yet so hard to win, returns to a man's life and finds its home there. At this moment, too, the mind can leave the arid, dried-up path of lucid effort. That path now emerges in daily life. It encounters the world of the anonymous impersonal pronoun "one," but henceforth man enters in with his revolt and his lucidity. He has forgotten how to hope. This hell of the present is his Kingdom at last. All problems recover their sharp edge. Abstract evidence retreats before the poetry of forms and colors. Spiritual conflicts become embodied and return to the abject and magnificent shelter of man's heart. None of them is settled. But all are transfigured. Is one going to die, escape by the leap, rebuild a mansion of ideas and forms to one's own scale? Is one, on the contrary, going to take up the heart-rending and marvelous wager of the absurd? Let's make a final effort in this regard and draw all our conclusions. The body, affection, creation, action, human nobility will then resume their places in this mad world. At last man will again find there the wine of the absurd and the bread of indifference on which he feeds his greatness.

364 Let us insist again on the method: it is a matter of persisting. At a certain point on his path the absurd man is tempted. History is not lacking in either religions or prophets, even without gods. He is asked to leap. All he can reply is that he doesn't fully understand, that it is not obvious. Indeed, he does not want to do anything but what he fully understands. He is assured that this is the sin of pride, but he does not understand the notion of sin; that perhaps hell is in store, but he has not enough imagination to visualize that strange future; that he is losing immortal life, but that seems to him an idle consideration. An attempt is made to get him to admit his guilt. He feels innocent. To tell the truth, that is all he feels—his irreparable innocence. This is what allows him everything. Hence, what he demands of himself is to live *solely* with what he knows, to accommodate himself to what is, and to bring in nothing that is not certain. He is told that nothing is. But this at least is a certainty. And it is with this that he is concerned: he wants to find out if it is possible to live *without appeal*.

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Now I can broach the notion of suicide. It has already been felt what solution might be given. At this point the problem is reversed. It was previously a question of finding out whether or not life had to have a meaning to be lived. It now becomes clear, on the contrary, that it will be lived all the better if has no meaning. Living an experience, a particular fate, is accepting it fully. Now, no one will live this fate, knowing it to be absurd, unless he does everything to keep before him that absurd brought to light by consciousness. Negating one of the terms of the opposition on which he lives amounts to escaping it. To abolish conscious revolt is to elude the problem. The theme of permanent revolution is thus carried into individual experience. Living is keeping the absurd alive. Keeping it alive is, above all, contemplating it. Unlike Eurydice, the absurd dies only when we turn away from it. One of the only coherent philosophical positions is thus revolt. It is a constant confrontation between man and his own obscurity. It is an insistence upon an impossible transparency. It challenges the world anew every second. Just as danger provided man the unique opportunity of seizing awareness, so metaphysical revolt extends awareness to the whole of experience. It is that constant presence of man in his own eyes. It is not aspiration, for it is devoid of hope. That revolt is the certainty of a crushing fate, without the resignation that ought to accompany it.

This is where it is seen to what a degree absurd experience is remote from suicide. It may be thought that suicide follows revolt—but wrongly. For it does not represent the logical outcome of revolt. It is just the contrary by the consent it presupposes. Suicide, like the leap, is acceptance at its extreme. Everything is over and man returns to his essential history. His future, his unique and dreadful future—he sees and rushes toward it. In its way, suicide settles the absurd. It engulfs the absurd in the same death. But I know that in order to keep alive, the absurd cannot be settled. It escapes suicide to the extent that it is simultaneously awareness and rejection of death. It is, at the extreme limit of the condemned man's last thought, that shoelace that despite everything he sees a few yards away, on the very brink of his dizzying fall. The contrary of suicide, in fact, is the man condemned to death.

That revolt gives life its value. Spread out over the whole length of a life, it restores its majesty to that life. To a man devoid of blinders, there is no finer sight than that of the intelligence at grips with a reality that transcends it. The sight of human pride is unequalled. No disparagement is of any use. That discipline that the mind imposes on itself, that will conjured up out of nothing, that face-to-face struggle have something exceptional about them. To impoverish that reality whose inhumanity constitutes man's majesty is tantamount to impoverishing him himself. I understand then why the doctrines that explain everything to me also debilitate me at the same time. They relieve me of the weight of my own life, and yet I must carry it alone. At this juncture, I cannot conceive that a skeptical metaphysics can be joined to an ethics of renunciation.

365 Consciousness and revolt, these rejections are the contrary of renunciation. Everything that is indomitable and passionate in a human heart quickens them, on the contrary, with its own life. It is essential to die unreconciled and not of one's own free will. Suicide is a repudiation. The absurd man can only drain everything to the bitter end, and deplete himself. The absurd is his extreme tension, which he maintains constantly by solitary effort, for he knows that in that consciousness and in that day-to-day revolt he gives proof of his only truth, which is defiance. This is a first consequence.

If I remain in that prearranged position which consists in drawing all the conclusions (and nothing else) involved in a newly discovered notion, I am faced with a second paradox. In order to remain faithful to that method, I have nothing to do with the problem of metaphysical liberty. Knowing whether or not man is free doesn't interest me. I can experience only my own freedom. As to it, I can have no general notions, but merely a few clear insights. The problem of "freedom as such" has no meaning. For it is linked in quite a different way with the problem of God. Knowing whether or not man is free involves knowing whether he can have a master. The absurdity peculiar to this problem comes from the fact that the very notion that makes the problem of freedom possible also takes away all its meaning. For in the presence of God there is less a problem of freedom than a problem of evil. You know the alternative: either we are not free and God the all-powerful is responsible for evil. Or we are free and responsible but God is not all-powerful. All the scholastic subtleties have neither added anything to nor subtracted anything from the acuteness of this paradox.

This is why I cannot get lost in the glorification or the mere definition of a notion which eludes me and loses its meaning as soon as it goes beyond the frame of reference of my individual experience. I cannot understand what kind of freedom would be given me by a higher being. I have lost the sense of hierarchy. The only conception of freedom I can have is that of the prisoner or the individual in the midst of the State. The only one I know is freedom of thought and action. Now if the absurd cancels all my chances of eternal freedom, it restores and magnifies, on the other hand, my freedom of action. That privation of hope and future means an increase in man's availability.

Before encountering the absurd, the everyday man lives with aims, a concern for the future or for justification (with regard to whom or what is not the question). He weighs his chances, he counts on "someday," his retirement or the labor of his sons. He still thinks that something in his life can be directed. In truth, he acts as if he were free, even if all the facts make a point of contradicting that liberty. But after the absurd, everything is upset. That idea that "I am," my way of acting as if everything has a meaning (even if, on occasion, I said that nothing has)—all that is given the lie in vertiginous fashion by the absurdity of a possible death. Thinking of the future, establishing aims for oneself, having preferences—all this presupposes a belief in freedom, even if one occasionally ascertains that one doesn't feel it. But at that moment I am well aware that that higher liberty, that freedom *to be*, which alone can serve as basis for a truth, does not exist: Death is there as the only reality. After death the chips are down. I am not even free, either, to perpetuate myself, but a slave, and, above all, a slave without hope of an eternal revolution, without recourse to contempt. And who without revolution and without contempt can remain a slave? What freedom can exist in the fullest sense without assurance of eternity?

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But at the same time the absurd man realizes that hitherto he was bound to that postulate of freedom on the illusion of which he was living. In a certain sense, that hampered him. To the extent to which he imagined a purpose to his life, he adapted himself to the demands of a purpose to be achieved and became the slave of his liberty. Thus I could not act otherwise than as the father (or the engineer or the leader of a nation, or the post-office sub-clerk) that I am preparing to be. I think I can choose to be that rather than something else. I think so unconsciously, to be sure. But at the same time I strengthen my postulate with the beliefs of those around me, with the presumptions of my human environment (others are so sure of being free, and that cheerful mood is so contagious!). However far one may remain from any presumption, moral or social, one is partly influenced by them and even, for the best among them (there are good and bad presumptions), one adapts one's life to them. Thus the absurd man realizes that he was not really free. To speak clearly, to the extent to which I hope, to which I worry about a truth that might be individual to me, about a way of being or creating, to the extent to which I arrange my life and prove thereby that I accept its having a meaning, I create for myself barriers between which I confine my life. I do like so many bureaucrats of the mind and heart who only fill me with disgust and whose only vice, I now see clearly, is to take man's freedom seriously.

The absurd enlightens me on this point: there is no future. Henceforth this is the reason for my inner freedom. I shall use two comparisons here. Mystics, to begin with, find freedom in giving themselves. By losing themselves in their god, by accepting his rules, they become secretly free. In spontaneously accepted slavery they recover a deeper independence. But what does that freedom mean? It

may be said, above all, that they *feel* free with regard to themselves, and not so much free as liberated. Likewise, completely turned toward death (taken here as the most obvious absurdity), the absurd man feels released from everything outside that passionate attention crystallizing in him. He enjoys a freedom with regard to common rules. It can be seen at this point that the initial themes of existential philosophy keep their entire value. The return to consciousness, the escape from everyday sleep represent the first steps of absurd freedom. But it is existential *preaching* that is alluded to, and with it that spiritual leap which basically escapes consciousness. In the same way (this is my second comparison) the slaves of antiquity did not belong to themselves. But they knew that freedom which consists in not feeling responsible. Death, too, has patrician hands which, while crushing, also liberate.

Losing oneself in that bottomless certainty, feeling henceforth sufficiently remote from one's own life to increase it and take a broad view of it—this involves the principle of a liberation. Such new independence has a definite time limit, like any freedom of action. It does not write a check on eternity. But it takes the place of the illusions of *freedom*, which all stopped with death. The divine availability of the condemned man before whom the prison doors open in a certain early dawn, that unbelievable disinterestedness with regard to everything except for the pure flame of life—it is clear that death and the absurd are here the principles of the only reasonable freedom: that which a human heart can experience and live. This is a second consequence. The absurd man thus catches sight of a burning and frigid, transparent and limited universe in which nothing is possible but everything is given; and beyond which all is collapse and nothingness. He can then decide to accept such a universe and draw from it his strength, his refusal to hope, and the unyielding evidence of a life without consolation.

### *The Myth of Sisyphus*

The gods had condemned Sisyphus to ceaselessly rolling a rock to the top of a mountain, whence the stone would fall back of its own weight. They had thought with some reason that there is no more dreadful punishment than futile and hopeless labor.

If one believes Homer, Sisyphus was the wisest and most prudent of mortals. According to another tradition, however, he was disposed to practice the profession of highwayman. I see no contradiction in this. Opinions differ as to the reasons why he became the futile laborer of the underworld. To begin with, he is accused of a certain levity in regard to the gods. He stole their secrets. Ægina, the daughter of Æsopus, was carried off by Jupiter. The father was shocked by that disappearance and complained to Sisyphus. He, who knew of the abduction, offered to tell about it on condition that Æsopus would give water to the citadel of Corinth. To the celestial thunderbolts he preferred the benediction of water. He was punished for this in the underworld. Homer tells us also that Sisyphus had put Death in chains. Pluto could not endure the sight of his deserted, silent empire. He dispatched the god of war, who liberated Death from the hands of her conqueror.

It is said also that Sisyphus, being near to death, rashly wanted to test his wife's love. He ordered her to cast his unburied body into the middle of the public square. Sisyphus woke up in the underworld. And there, annoyed by an obedience so contrary to human love, he obtained from Pluto permission to return to earth in order to chastise his wife. But when he had seen again the face of this world, enjoyed water and sun, warm stones and the sea, he no longer wanted to go back to the infernal darkness. Recalls, signs of anger, warnings were of no avail. Many years more he lived facing the curve of the gulf, the sparkling sea, and the smiles of earth. A decree of the gods was necessary. Mercury came and seized the impudent man by the collar and, snatching him from his joys, led him forcibly back to the underworld, where his rock was ready for him.

You have already grasped that Sisyphus is the absurd hero. He is, as much through his passions as through his torture. His scorn of the gods, his hatred of death, and his passion for life won him that unspeakable penalty in which the whole being is exerted toward accomplishing nothing. This is the price that must be paid for the passions of this earth. Nothing is told us about Sisyphus in the underworld. Myths are made for the imagination to breathe life into them. As for this

myth, one sees merely the whole effort of a body straining to raise the huge stone, to roll it and push it up a slope a hundred times over; one sees the face screwed up, the cheek tight against the stone, the shoulder bracing the clay-covered mass, the foot wedging it, the fresh start with arms outstretched, the wholly human security of two earth-clotted hands. At the very end of his long effort measured by skyless space and time without depth, the purpose is achieved. Then Sisyphus watches the stone rush down in a few moments toward that lower world whence he will have to push it up again toward the summit. He goes back down to the plain.

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It is during that return, that pause, that Sisyphus interests me. A face that toils so close to stones is already stone itself! I see that man going back down with a heavy yet measured step toward the torment of which he will never know the end. That hour like a breathing-space which returns as surely as his suffering, that is the hour of consciousness. At each of those moments when he leaves the heights and gradually sinks toward the lairs of the gods, he is superior to his fate. He is stronger than his rock.

If this myth is tragic, that is because its hero is conscious. Where would his torture be, indeed, if at every step the hope of succeeding upheld him? The workman of today works every day in his life at the same tasks, and this fate is no less absurd. But it is tragic only at the rare moments when it becomes conscious. Sisyphus, proletarian of the gods, powerless and rebellious, knows the whole extent of his wretched condition: it is what he thinks of during his descent. The lucidity that was to constitute his torture at the same time crowns his victory. There is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn.

If the descent is thus sometimes performed in sorrow, it can also take place in joy. This word is not too much. Again I fancy Sisyphus returning toward his rock, and the sorrow was in the beginning. When the images of earth cling too tightly to memory, when the call of happiness becomes too insistent, it happens that melancholy rises in man's heart: this is the rock's victory, this is the rock itself. The boundless grief is too heavy to bear. These are our nights of Gethsemane. But crushing truths perish from being acknowledged. Thus, Œdipus at the outset obeys fate without knowing it. But from the moment he knows, his tragedy begins. Yet at the same moment, blind and desperate, he realizes that the only bond linking him to the world is the cool hand of a girl. Then a tremendous remark rings out: "Despite so many ordeals, my advanced age and the nobility of my soul make me conclude that all is well." Sophocles' Œdipus, like Dostoevsky's Kirilov, thus gives the recipe for the absurd victory. Ancient wisdom confirms modern heroism.

One does not discover the absurd without being tempted to write a manual of happiness. "What! by such narrow ways—?" There is but one world, however. Happiness and the absurd are two sons of the same earth. They are inseparable. It would be a mistake to say that happiness necessarily springs from the absurd discovery. It happens as well that the feeling of the absurd springs from happiness. "I conclude that all is well," says Œdipus, and that remark is sacred. It echoes in the wild and limited universe of man. It teaches that all is not, has not been, exhausted. It drives out of this world a god who had come into it with dissatisfaction and a preference for futile sufferings. It makes of fate a human matter, which must be settled among men.

All Sisyphus' silent joy is contained therein. His fate belongs to him. His rock is his thing. Likewise, the absurd man, when he contemplates his torment, silences all the idols. In the universe suddenly restored to its silence, the myriad wondering little voices of the earth rise up. Unconscious, secret calls, invitations from all the faces, they are the necessary reverse and price of victory. There is no sun without shadow, and it is essential to know the night. The absurd man says yes and his effort will henceforth be unceasing. If there is a personal fate, there is no higher destiny, or at least there is but one which he concludes is inevitable and despicable. For the rest, he knows himself to be the master of his days. At that subtle moment when man glances backward over his life, Sisyphus returning toward his rock, in

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that slight pivoting he contemplates that series of unrelated actions which becomes his fate, created by him, combined under his memory's eye and soon sealed by his death. Thus, convinced of the wholly human origin of all that is human, a blind man eager to see who knows that the night has no end, he is still on the go. The rock is still rolling.

I leave Sisyphus at the foot of the mountain! One always finds one's burden again. But Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises rocks. He too concludes that all is well. This universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile. Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night-filled mountain, in itself forms a world. The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.

## From *The Stranger*

1

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.

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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

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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.

"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.'"

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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. Before 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 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

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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.

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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 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

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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.

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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.

374 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 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.

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

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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.

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Even in the prisoner's dock it's always interesting to hear people talk about you. And during the summations by the prosecutor and my lawyer, there was a lot said about me, maybe more about me than about my crime. But were their two speeches so different after all? My lawyer raised his arms and pleaded guilty, but with an explanation. The prosecutor waved his hands and proclaimed my guilt, but without an explanation. One thing bothered me a little, though. Despite everything that was on my mind, I felt like intervening every now and then, but my lawyer kept telling me, "Just keep quiet—it won't do your case any good." In a way, they seemed to be arguing the case as if it had nothing to do with me. Everything was happening without my participation. My fate was being decided without anyone so much as asking my opinion. There were times when I felt like breaking in on all of them and saying, "Wait a minute! Who's the accused here? Being the accused counts for something. And I have something to say!" But on second thought, I didn't have anything to say. Besides, I have to admit that whatever interest you can get people to take in you doesn't last very long. For example, I got bored very quickly with the prosecutor's speech. Only bits and pieces—a gesture or a long but isolated tirade—caught my attention or aroused my interest.

The gist of what he was saying, if I understood him correctly, was that my crime was premeditated. At least that is what he tried to show. As he himself said, "I will prove it to you, gentlemen, and I will prove it in two ways. First, in the blinding clarity of the facts, and second, in the dim light cast by the mind of this criminal soul." He reminded the court of my insensitivity; of my ignorance when asked Maman's age; of my swim the next day—with a woman; of the Fernandel movie; and finally of my taking Marie home with me. It took me a few minutes to understand the last part because he kept saying "his mistress" and to me she was Marie. Then he came to the business with Raymond. I thought his way of viewing the events had a certain consistency. What he was saying was plausible. I had agreed with Raymond to write the letter in order to lure his mistress and submit her to mistreatment by a man "of doubtful morality." I had provoked Raymond's adversaries at the beach. Raymond had been wounded. I had asked him to give me his gun. I had gone back alone intending to use it. I had shot the Arab as I planned. I had waited. And to make sure I had done the job right, I fired four more shots, calmly, point-blank—thoughtfully, as it were.

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"And there you have it, gentlemen," said the prosecutor. "I have retraced for you the course of events which led this man to kill with full knowledge of his actions. I stress this point," he said, "for this is no ordinary murder, no thoughtless act for which you might find mitigating circumstances. This man, gentlemen, this man is intelligent. You heard him, didn't you? He knows how to answer. He knows the value of words. And no one can say that he acted without realizing what he was doing."

I was listening, and I could hear that I was being judged intelligent. But I couldn't quite understand how an ordinary man's good qualities could become crushing accusations against a guilty man. At least that was what struck me, and I

stopped listening to the prosecutor until I heard him say, "Has he so much as expressed any remorse? Never, gentlemen. Not once during the preliminary hearings did this man show emotion over his heinous offense." At that point, he turned in my direction, pointed his finger at me, and went on attacking me without my ever really understanding why. Of course, I couldn't help admitting that he was right. I didn't feel much remorse for what I'd done. But I was surprised by how relentless he was. I would have liked to have tried explaining to him cordially, almost affectionately, that I had never been able to truly feel remorse for anything. My mind was always on what was coming next, today or tomorrow. But naturally, given the position I'd been put in, I couldn't talk to anyone in that way. I didn't have the right to show any feeling or goodwill. And I tried to listen again, because the prosecutor started talking about my soul.

He said that he had peered into it and that he had found nothing, gentlemen of the jury. He said the truth was that I didn't have a soul and that nothing human, not one of the moral principles that govern men's hearts, was within my reach. . . .

When the prosecutor returned to his seat, there was a rather long silence. My head was spinning with heat and astonishment. The presiding judge cleared his throat and in a very low voice asked me if I had anything to add. I stood up, and since I did wish to speak, I said, almost at random, in fact, that I never intended to kill the Arab. . . . The judge replied by saying that at least that was an assertion, that until then he hadn't quite grasped the nature of my defense, and that before hearing from my lawyer he would be happy to have me state precisely the motives for my act. Fumbling a little with my words and realizing how ridiculous I sounded, I blurted out that it was because of the sun. People laughed. My lawyer threw up his hands, and immediately after that he was given the floor. But he stated that it was late and that he would need several hours. He requested that the trial be reconvened in the afternoon. The court granted his motion.

That afternoon the big fans were still churning the thick air in the courtroom and the jurors' brightly colored fans were all moving in unison. It seemed to me as if my lawyer's summation would never end. At one point though, I listened, because he was saying, "It is true I killed a man." He went on like that, saying "I" whenever he was speaking about me. I was completely taken aback. I leaned over to one of the guards and asked him why he was doing that. He told me to keep quiet, and a few seconds later he added, "All lawyers do it." I thought it was a way to exclude me even further from the case, reduce me to nothing, and, in a sense, substitute himself for me.

In the end, all I remember is that while my lawyer went on talking, I could hear through the expanse of chambers and courtrooms an ice cream vendor blow-

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ing his tin trumpet out on the street. I was assailed by memories of a life that wasn't mine anymore, but one in which I'd found the simplest and most lasting joys: the smells of summer, the part of town I loved, a certain evening sky, Marie's dresses and the way she laughed. The utter pointlessness of whatever I was doing there seized me by the throat, and all I wanted was to get it over with and get back to my cell and sleep. I barely even heard when my lawyer, wrapping up, exclaimed that the jury surely would not send an honest, hard-working man to his death because he had lost control of himself for one moment, and then he asked them to find extenuating circumstances for a crime for which I was already suffering the most agonizing of punishments—eternal remorse. Court was adjourned and my lawyer sat back down. He looked exhausted. But his colleagues came over to shake his hand. I heard: "That was brilliant!" One of them even appealed to me as a witness. "Wasn't it?" he said. I agreed, but my congratulations weren't sincere, because I was too tired.

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We waited a long time—almost three-quarters of an hour, I think. Then a bell rang. My lawyer left me, saying, "The foreman of the jury is going to announce the verdict. You'll only be brought in for the passing of sentence." Doors slammed. People were running on stairs somewhere, but I couldn't tell if they were nearby or far away. Then I heard a muffled voice reading something in the courtroom. When the bell rang again, when the door to the dock opened, what rose to meet me was the silence in the courtroom, silence and the strange feeling I had when I noticed that the young reporter had turned his eyes away. I didn't look in Marie's direction. I didn't have time to, because the presiding judge told me in bizarre language that I was to have my head cut off in a public square in the name of the French people. Then it seemed to me that I suddenly knew what was on everybody's face. It was a

look of consideration, I'm sure. The policemen were very gentle with me. The lawyer put his hand on my wrist. I wasn't thinking about anything anymore. But the presiding judge asked me if I had anything to say. I thought about it. I said, "No." That's when they took me away.

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All day long there was the thought of my appeal. I think I got everything out of that I could. I would assess my holdings and get the maximum return on my thoughts. I would always begin by assuming the worst: my appeal was denied. "Well, so I'm going to die." Sooner than other people will, obviously. But everybody knows life isn't worth living. Deep down I knew perfectly well that it doesn't much matter whether you die at thirty or at seventy, since in either case other men and women will naturally go on living—and for thousands of years. In fact, nothing could be clearer. Whether it was now or twenty years from now, I would still be the one dying. At that point, what would disturb my train of thought was the terrifying leap I would feel my heart take at the idea of having twenty more years of life ahead of me. But I simply had to stifle it by imagining what I'd be thinking in twenty years when it would all come down to the same thing anyway. Since we're all going to die, it's obvious that when and how don't matter. Therefore (and the difficult thing was not to lose sight of all the reasoning that went into this "therefore"), I had to accept the rejection of my appeal.

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Then and only then would I have the right, so to speak—would I give myself permission, as it were—to consider the alternative hypothesis: I was pardoned. The trouble was that I would somehow have to cool the hot blood that would suddenly surge through my body and sting my eyes with a delirious joy. It would take all my strength to quiet my heart, to be rational. In order to make my resignation to the first hypothesis more plausible, I had to be level-headed about this one as well. If I succeeded, I gained an hour of calm. That was something anyway.

It was at one such moment that I once again refused to see the chaplain. I was lying down, and I could tell from the golden glow in the sky that evening was coming on. I had just denied my appeal and I could feel the steady pulse of my blood circulating inside me. I didn't need to see the chaplain. For the first time in a long time I thought about Marie. The days had been long since she'd stopped writing. That evening I thought about it and told myself that maybe she had gotten tired of being the girlfriend of a condemned man. It also occurred to me that maybe she was sick, or dead. These things happen. How was I to know, since apart from our two bodies, now separated, there wasn't anything to keep us together or even to remind us of each other? Anyway, after that, remembering Marie meant nothing to me. I wasn't interested in her dead. That seemed perfectly normal to me, since I understood very well that people would forget me when I was dead. They wouldn't have anything more to do with me. I wasn't even able to tell myself that it was hard to think those things.

It was at that exact moment that the chaplain came in. When I saw him I felt a little shudder go through me. He noticed it and told me not to be afraid. I told him that it wasn't his usual time. He replied 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, there was something very gentle about him.

He sat there for a few seconds, leaning forward, with his elbows on his knees, looking at his hands. They were slender and sinewy and they reminded me of two nimble animals. He slowly rubbed one against the other. Then he sat there, leaning forward like that, for so long that for an instant I seemed to forget he was there.

But suddenly he raised his head and looked straight at me. "Why have you refused to see me?" he asked. I said that I didn't believe in God. He wanted to know if I was sure and I said that I didn't see any reason to ask myself that question: it seemed unimportant. He then leaned back against the wall, hands flat on his thighs. Almost as if it wasn't me he was talking to, he remarked that sometimes we think we're sure when in fact we're not. I didn't say anything. He looked at me and asked, "What do you think?" I said it was possible. In any case, I may not have been sure about what really did interest me, but I was absolutely sure about what didn't. And it just so happened that what he was talking about didn't interest me.

He looked away and without moving asked me if I wasn't talking that way out of extreme despair. I explained to him that I wasn't desperate. I was just afraid, which

was only natural. "Then God can help you," he said. "Every man I have known in your position has turned to Him." I acknowledged that that was their right. It also meant that they must have had the time for it. As for me, I didn't want anybody's help, and I just didn't have the time to interest myself in what didn't interest me.

At that point he threw up his hands in annoyance but then sat forward and smoothed out the folds of his cassock. When he had finished he started in again,

380 addressing me as "my friend." If he was talking to me this way, it wasn't because I was condemned to die; the way he saw it, we were all condemned to die. But I interrupted him by saying that it wasn't the same thing and that besides, it wouldn't be a consolation anyway. "Certainly," he agreed. "But if you don't die today, you'll die tomorrow, or the next day. And then the same question will arise. How will you face that terrifying ordeal?" I said I would face it exactly as I was facing it now.

At that he stood up and looked me straight in the eye. It was a game I knew well. I played it a lot with Emmanuel and Céleste and usually they were the ones who looked away. The chaplain knew the game well too, I could tell right away: his gaze never faltered. And his voice didn't falter, either, when he said, "Have you no hope at all? And do you really live with the thought that when you die, you die, and nothing remains?" "Yes," I said.

Then he lowered his head and sat back down. He told me that he pitied me. He thought it was more than a man could bear. I didn't feel anything except that he was beginning to annoy me. Then I turned away and went and stood under the skylight. I leaned 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 agitated, urgent voice. I could see that he was genuinely upset, so I listened more closely.

He was expressing his certainty that my appeal would be granted, but I was carrying the burden of a sin from which I had to free myself. According to him, human justice was nothing and divine justice was everything. I pointed out that it was the former that had condemned me. His response was that it hadn't washed away my sin for all that. I told him I didn't know what a sin was. All they had told me was that I was guilty. I was guilty, I was paying for it, and nothing more could be asked of me. At that point he stood up again, and the thought occurred to me that in such a narrow cell, if he wanted to move around he didn't have many options. He could either sit down or stand up.

I was staring at the ground. He took a step toward me and stopped, as if he didn't dare come any closer. He looked at the sky through the bars. "You're wrong, my son," he said. "More could be asked of you. And it may be asked." "And what's that?" "You could be asked to see." "See what?"

The priest gazed around my cell and answered in a voice that sounded very weary to me. "Every stone here sweats with suffering, I know that. I have never looked at them without a feeling of anguish. But deep in my heart I know that the most wretched among you have seen a divine face emerge from their darkness. That is the face you are asked to see."

This perked me up a little. I said I had been looking at the stones in these walls for months. There wasn't anything or anyone in the world I knew better. Maybe at one time, way back, I had searched for a face in them. But the face I was looking for was as bright as the sun and the flame of desire—and it belonged to Marie. I had searched for it in vain. Now it was all over. And in any case, I'd never seen anything emerge from any sweating stones.

The chaplain looked at me with a kind of sadness. I now had my back flat against the wall, and light was streaming over my forehead. He muttered a few words I didn't catch and abruptly asked if he could embrace me. "No," I said. He turned and walked over to the wall and slowly ran his hand over it. "Do you really love this earth as much as all that?" he murmured. I didn't answer.

381 He stood there with his back to me for quite a long time. His presence was grating and oppressive. I was just about to tell him to go, to leave me alone, when all of a sudden, turning toward me, he burst out, "No, I refuse to believe you! I know that at one time or another you've wished for another life." I said of course I had, but it didn't mean any more than wishing to be rich, to be able to swim faster, or to have a more nicely shaped mouth. It was all the same. But he stopped me and wanted to know how I pictured this other life. Then I shouted at him, "One where I could remember this life!" and that's when I told him I'd had enough. He wanted

to talk to me about God again, but I went up to him and made one last attempt to explain to him that I had only a little time left and I didn't want to waste it on God. He tried to change the subject by asking me why I was calling him "monsieur" and not "father." That got me mad, and I told him he wasn't my father; he wasn't even on my side.

"Yes, my son," he said, putting his hand on my shoulder, "I am on your side. But you have no way of knowing it, because your heart is blind. I shall pray for you."

Then, I don't know why, but something inside me snapped. I started yelling at the top of my lungs, and I insulted him and told him not to waste his prayers on me. I grabbed him by the collar of his cassock. I was pouring out on him everything that was in my heart, cries of anger and cries of joy. He seemed so certain about everything, didn't he? And yet none of his certainties was worth one hair of a woman's head. He wasn't even sure he was alive, because he was living like a dead man. Whereas it looked as if I was the one who'd come up emptyhanded. But I was sure about me, about everything, surer than he could ever be, sure of my life and sure of the death I had waiting for me. Yes, that was all I had. But at least I had as much of a hold on it as it had on me. I had been right, I was still right, I was always right. I had lived my life one way and I could just as well have lived it another. I had done this and I hadn't done that. I hadn't done this thing but I had done another. And so? It was as if I had waited all this time for this moment and for the first light of this dawn to be vindicated. Nothing, nothing mattered, and I knew why. So did he. Throughout the whole absurd life I'd lived, a dark wind had been rising toward me from somewhere deep in my future, across years that were still to come, and as it passed, this wind leveled whatever was offered to me at the time, in years no more real than the ones I was living. What did other people's deaths or a mother's love matter to me; what did his God or the lives people choose or the fate they think they elect matter to me when we're all elected by the same fate, me and billions of privileged people like him who also called themselves my brothers? Couldn't he see, couldn't he see that? Everybody was privileged. There were only privileged people. The others would all be condemned one day. And he would be condemned, too. What would it matter if he were accused of murder and then executed because he didn't cry at his mother's funeral? Salamano's dog was worth just as much as his wife. The little robot woman was just as guilty as the Parisian woman Masson married, or as Marie, who had wanted me to marry her. What did it matter that Raymond was as much my friend as Céleste, who was worth a lot more than him? What did it matter that Marie now offered her lips to a new Meursault? Couldn't he, couldn't this condemned man see . . . And that from somewhere deep in my future . . . All the shouting had me gasping for air. But they were already tearing the chaplain from my grip and the guards were threatening me. He calmed them,

382 though, and looked at me for a moment without saying anything. His eyes were full of tears. Then he turned and disappeared.

With him gone, I was able to calm down again. I was exhausted and threw myself on my bunk. I must have fallen asleep, because I woke up with the stars in my face. Sounds of the countryside were drifting in. Smells of night, earth, and salt air were cooling my temples. The wondrous peace of that sleeping summer flowed through me like a tide. Then, in the dark hour before dawn, sirens blasted. They were announcing departures for a world that now and forever meant nothing to me. For the first time in a long time I thought about Maman. I felt as if I understood why at the end of her life she had taken a "fiancee," why she had played at beginning again. Even there, in that home where lives were fading out, evening was a kind of wistful respite. So close to death, Maman must have felt free then and ready to live it all again. Nobody, nobody had the right to cry over her. And I felt ready to live it all again too. As if that blind rage had washed me clean, rid me of hope; for the first time, in that night alive with signs and stars, I opened myself to the gentle indifference of the world. Finding it so much like myself—so like a brother, really—I felt that I had been happy and that I was happy again. For everything to be consummated, for me to feel less alone, I had only to wish that there be a large crowd of spectators the day of my execution and that they greet me with cries of hate.