

One

My mother died today. Or maybe yesterday, I don't know. I received a telegram from the old people's home: 'Mother deceased. Funeral tomorrow. Very sincerely yours.' That doesn't mean anything. It might have been yesterday.

The old people's home is in Marengo, eighty kilometres from Algiers. I'll get the bus at two o'clock and arrive in the afternoon. That way I can be at the wake and come home tomorrow night. I asked my boss for two days off and he couldn't say no given the circumstances. But he didn't seem happy about it. I even said: 'It's not my fault.' He didn't reply. Then I thought I shouldn't have said that. Although I had nothing to apologize for. He was the one who should have been offering me his condolences. But he'll no doubt say something the day after tomorrow when he sees me dressed in black. For now, it's still a little as if Mama hadn't died. After the funeral, however, it will be over and done with, a matter that is officially closed.

I got the bus at two o'clock. It was very hot. I ate at Céleste's restaurant as I always do. Everyone felt very sorry for me, and Céleste said: 'You only have one mother.' When

I got up to leave, they walked me to the door. I felt a little strange because I had to go up to Emmanuel's place to borrow a black tie and armband. He lost his uncle a few months ago.

I had to run to catch the bus. Rushing around, running like that, plus the bumpy ride, the smell of petrol, the sun's glare reflecting off the road, all that must have been why I felt so drowsy. I slept for nearly the whole journey. When I woke up, I was leaning against a soldier who smiled at me and asked if I had come a long way. I said 'Yes' so I wouldn't have to talk any more.

The old people's home is two kilometres from the village. I walked. I wanted to see Mama right away. But the caretaker told me I had to meet the director first. He was busy, so I had to wait a while. The caretaker talked the whole time and then I saw the director; he showed me into his office. He was a short, elderly man who wore the Legion of Honour. He looked at me with his pale blue eyes. Then he shook my hand, but he held on to it for so long that I didn't quite know how to pull it away. He looked at some papers, then said: 'Madame Meursault came to us three years ago. You were the only one who could support her financially.' I thought he was reproaching me for something and started to explain. But he stopped me: 'You have no reason to justify yourself, my dear boy. I've read your mother's file. You weren't able to look after all her needs. She required a nurse. You earn a very

modest living. And to tell the truth, she was happier here with us.' I said: 'Yes, Monsieur.' 'She had friends here, you know,' he added, 'people of her own age. She could share her interests from the past with them. You're young and she was probably bored when she was living with you.'

It was true. When we lived together, Mama spent all her time silently watching me come and go. The first few days she was at the old people's home, she often cried. But that was because her routine had changed. After a few months, she would have cried if she'd been taken out of the home. For the same reason. That was partly why I hadn't gone to visit her very often during the past year. And also because it took up my whole Sunday – not to mention the time and effort to buy the ticket, get the bus and travel for two hours each way.

The director was talking to me again but I was barely listening. Then he said: 'I assume you would like to see your mother.' I stood up without saying anything and followed him out the door. On the staircase, he explained: 'We put her in our little mortuary so we didn't upset the others. Every time one of our residents dies, they feel anxious for two or three days. And that makes it difficult for us to do our job.' We walked through a courtyard where there were a lot of old people chatting in little groups. They stopped talking as we walked by. Once we had passed, their conversations started up again; they sounded like parakeets squawking in

the distance. When we reached the door of a small building, the director stopped: 'I'll leave you here, Monsieur Meursault. I'll be in my office if you need anything. The funeral was set for ten o'clock tomorrow morning so you could attend the wake of your dearly departed. One more thing: your mother, it seems, often told her companions that she wished to have a religious burial. I have taken the liberty of arranging everything. But I wanted to let you know.' I thanked him. While not actually an atheist, Mama had never once in her life given a thought to religion.

I went inside. The room was very bright, whitewashed, with a glass roof. There were chairs and trestles in the shape of an X. In the centre of the room, two of them supported the coffin; the lid was closed. All you could see were its shiny metal screws, barely secured, sticking out from the stained walnut planks. Near the coffin there was an Arab nurse in a white smock, wearing a brightly coloured scarf over her head.

At that moment, the caretaker came in behind me. He must have been running, he stammered a little: 'We closed the casket, so I have to unscrew the lid for you to see her.' He started walking towards the coffin but I stopped him. 'You don't want to?' he asked. I replied: 'No.' He stopped and I was uncomfortable because I felt I shouldn't have said that. After a moment, he looked at me and asked: 'Why?' but without sounding reproachful, just as if he were simply

asking a question. I said: 'I don't know.' Then he twirled his white moustache through his fingers and, without looking at me, he said: 'I understand.' He had beautiful light blue eyes and a slightly ruddy complexion. He brought a chair over for me and then sat down himself a little behind me. The nurse stood up and headed for the exit. At that moment, the caretaker said: 'She has leprosy.' I didn't understand, so I looked up at the nurse and saw that she had a bandage around her head just below her eyes. It sat flat where her nose had been eaten away by the disease. All you could see was the whiteness of the bandage against her face.

After she left, the caretaker said: 'I'll leave you alone.' I don't know what gesture I made but he stood at the back of my chair and didn't move. His presence behind me made me feel uncomfortable. It was late afternoon; the room was bathed in a beautiful light. Two hornets buzzed around the window. I could feel myself getting sleepy. Without turning around, I asked the caretaker: 'Have you been here long?' He immediately replied: 'Five years' – as if he had been waiting, forever, for me to ask.

Then he talked for a long time. He would have been very surprised if anyone had told him he'd end up a caretaker in an old people's home in Marengo. He was sixty-four years old and from Paris. I interrupted him to ask: 'Ah, so you're not from around here?' Then I remembered that before taking me to the director's office, he had talked about Mama.

He'd told me they would have to bury her very quickly because it was so hot in the open country, especially in these parts. Then he told me he used to live in Paris and found it difficult to forget it. In Paris, people stayed with the dead person for three, four days sometimes. Here there's no time for that, you've barely come to terms with what's happened when you have to rush out to follow the hearse. Then his wife said: 'Do be quiet, you shouldn't be telling the gentleman such things.' The old man blushed and apologized. 'It's all right,' I cut in, 'it's all right.' I agreed with what he said and found it interesting.

In the little mortuary, he told me he had no money at all when he first came to the home. Since he considered himself healthy, he had offered to take on the job of caretaker. I pointed out to him that when all was said and done, he was one of the residents. He said he wasn't. I had already been struck by the way he said 'they', 'the others' and, more rarely, 'the old people' when he spoke about the residents, some of whom were the same age as him. But naturally it was different. He was the caretaker and to a certain extent he had more privileges and some authority over them.

Then the nurse came in. Night had fallen quite suddenly. Very quickly, the sky had grown heavy and darker above the glass roof. The caretaker switched on the lights and I was blinded by the sudden burst of brightness. He invited me to come to the dining hall to eat, but I wasn't hungry. He then

offered to bring me a cup of milky coffee. I like coffee, so I said yes, and a moment later he came back carrying some on a tray. I drank it. Then I wanted a cigarette. But I hesitated because I didn't know if I should smoke in front of Mama. I thought about it: it was of no importance whatsoever. I offered the caretaker a cigarette and we both smoked.

'You know,' he said to me after a moment, 'your mother's friends are going to come to the wake as well. It's the custom here. I have to go and get some more chairs and coffee.' I asked him if he could switch off one of the lights. Their harsh reflection off the white walls was making me sleepy. He told me it wasn't possible. That's how the lights worked: it was all or nothing. I didn't pay much attention to him after that. He went out, came back, set up the chairs. He put some cups around a coffee pot on one of them. Then he sat down opposite me, on the other side of Mama. The nurse was also at the back, but turned away from me so that I couldn't see what she was doing. Judging by the way her arms were moving, though, I could tell she was knitting. It was cooler now; the coffee had warmed me up and the night air drifted in through the open door, bringing with it the sweet scent of flowers. I think I fell asleep for a while.

I was awakened by something brushing against me. My eyes had been closed and now the room seemed even more dazzling white. There wasn't a single shadow and every object, every angle, every curve stood out so sharply that it