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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.

I caught the two o'clock bus. It was very hot. I ate at the restaurant, at Céleste's, as usual. Everybody felt very sorry for me, and Céleste said, "You only have one

mother." When I left, they walked me to the door. I was a little distracted because I still had to go up to Emmanuel's place to borrow a black tie and an arm band. He lost his uncle a few months back.

I ran so as not to miss the bus. It was probably because of all the rushing around, and on top of that the bumpy ride, the smell of gasoline, and the glare of the sky and the road, that I dozed off. I slept almost the whole way. And when I woke up, I was slumped against a soldier who smiled at me and asked if I'd been traveling long. I said, "Yes," just so I wouldn't have to say anything else.

The home is two kilometers from the village. I walked them. I wanted to see Maman right away. But the caretaker told me I had to see the director first. He was busy, so I waited awhile. The caretaker talked the whole time and then I saw the director. I was shown into his office. He was a little old man with the ribbon of the Legion of Honor in his lapel. He looked at me with his clear eyes. Then he shook my hand and held it so long I didn't know how to get it loose. He thumbed through a file and said, "Madame Meursault came to us three years ago. You were her sole support." I thought he was criticizing me for something and I started to explain. But he cut me off. "You don't have to justify yourself, my dear boy. I've read your mother's file. You weren't able to provide for her properly. She needed someone to look after her. You earn only a modest salary. And the truth of the matter is, she was happier here." I said,

"Yes, sir." He added, "You see, she had friends here, people her own age. She was able to share things from the old days with them. You're young, and it must have been hard for her with you."

It was true. When she was at home with me, Maman used to spend her time following me with her eyes, not saying a thing. For the first few days she was at the home she cried a lot. But that was because she wasn't used to it. A few months later and she would have cried if she'd been taken out. She was used to it. That's partly why I didn't go there much this past year. And also because it took up my Sunday—not to mention the trouble of getting to the bus, buying tickets, and spending two hours traveling.

The director spoke to me again. But I wasn't really listening anymore. Then he said, "I suppose you'd like to see your mother." I got up without saying anything and he led the way to the door. On the way downstairs, he explained, "We've moved her to our little mortuary. So as not to upset the others. Whenever one of the residents dies, the others are a bit on edge for the next two or three days. And that makes it difficult to care for them." We crossed a courtyard where there were lots of old people chatting in little groups. As we went by, the talking would stop. And then the conversation would start up again behind us. The sound was like the muffled jabber of parakeets. The director stopped at the door of a small building. "I'll leave you now, Monsieur Meursault. If you need me for anything, I'll be in my office."

As is usually the case, the funeral is set for ten o'clock in the morning. This way you'll be able to keep vigil over the departed. One last thing: it seems your mother often expressed to her friends her desire for a religious burial. I've taken the liberty of making the necessary arrangements. But I wanted to let you know." I thanked him. While not an atheist, Maman had never in her life given a thought to religion.

I went in. It was a very bright, whitewashed room with a skylight for a roof. The furniture consisted of some chairs and some cross-shaped sawhorses. Two of them, in the middle of the room, were supporting a closed casket. All you could see were some shiny screws, not screwed down all the way, standing out against the walnut-stained planks. Near the casket was an Arab nurse in a white smock, with a brightly colored scarf on her head.

Just then the caretaker came in behind me. He must have been running. He stuttered a little. "We put the cover on, but I'm supposed to unscrew the casket so you can see her." He was moving toward the casket when I stopped him. He said, "You don't want to?" I answered, "No." He was quiet, and I was embarrassed because I felt I shouldn't have said that. He looked at me and then asked, "Why not?" but without criticizing, as if he just wanted to know. I said, "I don't know." He started twirling his moustache, and then without looking at me, again he said, "I understand." He had nice pale blue eyes and a reddish complexion. He offered me a chair and then

sat down right behind me. The nurse stood up and went toward the door. At that point the caretaker said to me, "She's got an abscess." I didn't understand, so I looked over at the nurse and saw that she had a bandage wrapped around her head just below the eyes. Where her nose should have been, the bandage was flat. All you could see of her face was the whiteness of the bandage.

When she'd gone, the caretaker said, "I'll leave you alone." I don't know what kind of gesture I made, but he stayed where he was, behind me. Having this presence breathing down my neck was starting to annoy me. The room was filled with beautiful late-afternoon sunlight. Two hornets were buzzing against the glass roof. I could feel myself getting sleepy. Without turning around, I said to the caretaker, "Have you been here long?" Right away he answered, "Five years"—as if he'd been waiting all along for me to ask.

After that he did a lot of talking. He would have been very surprised if anyone had told him he would end up caretaker at the Marengo home. He was sixty-four and came from Paris. At that point I interrupted him. "Oh, you're not from around here?" Then I remembered that before taking me to the director's office, he had talked to me about Maman. He'd told me that they had to bury her quickly, because it gets hot in the plains, especially in this part of the country. That was when he told me he had lived in Paris and that he had found it hard to forget it. In Paris they keep vigil over the body for

three, sometimes four days. But here you barely have time to get used to the idea before you have to start running after the hearse. Then his wife had said to him, "Hush now, that's not the sort of thing to be telling the gentleman." The old man had blushed and apologized. I'd stepped in and said, "No, not at all." I thought what he'd been saying was interesting and made sense.

In the little mortuary he told me that he'd come to the home because he was destitute. He was in good health, so he'd offered to take on the job of caretaker. I pointed out that even so he was still a resident. He said no, he wasn't. I'd already been struck by the way he had of saying "they" or "the others" and, less often, "the old people," talking about the patients, when some of them weren't any older than he was. But of course it wasn't the same. He was the caretaker, and to a certain extent he had authority over them.

Just then the nurse came in. Night had fallen suddenly. Darkness had gathered, quickly, above the skylight. The caretaker turned the switch and I was blinded by the sudden flash of light. He suggested I go to the dining hall for dinner. But I wasn't hungry. Then he offered to bring me a cup of coffee with milk. I like milk in my coffee, so I said yes, and he came back a few minutes later with a tray. I drank the coffee. Then I felt like having a smoke. But I hesitated, because I didn't know if I could do it with Maman right there. I thought about it; it didn't matter. I offered the caretaker a cigarette and we smoked.

At one point he said, "You know, your mother's friends will be coming to keep vigil too. It's customary. I have to go get some chairs and some black coffee." I asked him if he could turn off one of the lights. The glare on the white walls was making me drowsy. He said he couldn't. That was how they'd been wired: it was all or nothing. I didn't pay too much attention to him after that. He left, came back, set up some chairs. On one of them he stacked some cups around a coffee pot. Then he sat down across from me, on the other side of Maman. The nurse was on that side of the room too, but with her back to me. I couldn't see what she was doing. But the way her arms were moving made me think she was knitting. It was pleasant; the coffee had warmed me up, and the smell of flowers on the night air was coming through the open door. I think I dozed off for a while.

It was a rustling sound that woke me up. Because I'd had my eyes closed, the whiteness of the room seemed even brighter than before. There wasn't a shadow anywhere in front of me, and every object, every angle and curve stood out so sharply it made my eyes hurt. That's when Maman's friends came in. There were about ten in all, and they floated into the blinding light without a sound. They sat down without a single chair creaking. I saw them more clearly than I had ever seen anyone, and not one detail of their faces or their clothes escaped me. But I couldn't hear them, and it was hard for me to believe they really existed. Almost all the women were wearing aprons, and the strings, which were tied tight

around their waists, made their bulging stomachs stick out even more. I'd never noticed what huge stomachs old women can have. Almost all the men were skinny and carried canes. What struck me most about their faces was that I couldn't see their eyes, just a faint glimmer in a nest of wrinkles. When they'd sat down, most of them looked at me and nodded awkwardly, their lips sucked in by their toothless mouths, so that I couldn't tell if they were greeting me or if it was just a nervous tic. I think they were greeting me. It was then that I realized they were all sitting across from me, nodding their heads, grouped around the caretaker. For a second I had the ridiculous feeling that they were there to judge me.

Soon one of the women started crying. She was in the second row, hidden behind one of her companions, and I couldn't see her very well. She was crying softly, steadily, in little sobs. I thought she'd never stop. The others seemed not to hear her. They sat there hunched up, gloomy and silent. They would look at the casket, or their canes, or whatever else, but that was all they would look at. The woman kept on crying. It surprised me, because I didn't know who she was. I wished I didn't have to listen to her anymore. But I didn't dare say anything. The caretaker leaned over and said something to her, but she shook her head, mumbled something, and went on crying as much as before. Then the caretaker came around to my side. He sat down next to me. After a long pause he explained, without looking at

me, "She was very close to your mother. She says your mother was her only friend and now she hasn't got any one."

We just sat there like that for quite a while. The woman's sighs and sobs were quieting down. She sniffled a lot. Then finally she shut up. I didn't feel drowsy anymore, but I was tired and my back was hurting me. Now it was all these people not making a sound that was getting on my nerves. Except that every now and then I'd hear a strange noise and I couldn't figure out what it was. Finally I realized that some of the old people were sucking at the insides of their cheeks and making these weird smacking noises. They were so lost in their thoughts that they weren't even aware of it. I even had the impression that the dead woman lying in front of them didn't mean anything to them. But I think now that that was a false impression.

We all had some coffee, served by the caretaker. After that I don't know any more. The night passed. I remember opening my eyes at one point and seeing that all the old people were slumped over asleep, except for one old man, with his chin resting on the back of his hands wrapped around his cane, who was staring at me as if he were just waiting for me to wake up. Then I dozed off again. I woke up because my back was hurting more and more. Dawn was creeping up over the skylight. Soon afterwards, one of the old men woke up and coughed a lot. He kept hacking into a large checkered handkerchief, and every cough was like a convulsion. He woke

the others up, and the caretaker told them that they ought to be going. They got up. The uncomfortable vigil had left their faces ashen looking. On their way out, and much to my surprise, they all shook my hand—as if that night during which we hadn't exchanged as much as a single word had somehow brought us closer together.

I was tired. The caretaker took me to his room and I was able to clean up a little. I had some more coffee and milk, which was very good. When I went outside, the sun was up. Above the hills that separate Marengo from the sea, the sky was streaked with red. And the wind coming over the hills brought the smell of salt with it. It was going to be a beautiful day. It had been a long time since I'd been out in the country, and I could feel how much I'd enjoy going for a walk if it hadn't been for Maman.

But I waited in the courtyard, under a plane tree. I breathed in the smell of fresh earth and I wasn't sleepy anymore. I thought of the other guys at the office. They'd be getting up to go to work about this time: for me that was always the most difficult time of day. I thought about those things a little more, but I was distracted by the sound of a bell ringing inside the buildings. There was some commotion behind the windows, then everything quieted down again. The sun was now a little higher in the sky: it was starting to warm my feet. The caretaker came across the courtyard and told me that the director was asking for me. I went to his office. He had me sign

a number of documents. I noticed that he was dressed in black with pin-striped trousers. He picked up the telephone and turned to me. "The undertaker's men arrived a few minutes ago. I'm going to ask them to seal the casket. Before I do, would you like to see your mother one last time?" I said no. He gave the order into the telephone, lowering his voice: "Figeac, tell the men they can go ahead."

After that he told me he would be attending the funeral and I thanked him. He sat down behind his desk and crossed his short legs. He informed me that he and I would be the only ones there, apart from the nurse on duty. The residents usually weren't allowed to attend funerals. He only let them keep the vigil. "It's more humane that way," he remarked. But in this case he'd given one of mother's old friends—Thomas Pérez—permission to join the funeral procession. At that the director smiled. He said, "I'm sure you understand. It's a rather childish sentiment. But he and your mother were almost inseparable. The others used to tease them and say, 'Pérez has a fiancée.' He'd laugh. They enjoyed it. And the truth is he's taking Madame Meursault's death very hard. I didn't think I could rightfully refuse him permission. But on the advice of our visiting physician, I did not allow him to keep the vigil last night."

We didn't say anything for quite a long time. The director stood up and looked out the window of his office. A moment later he said, "Here's the priest from Marengo already. He's early." He warned me that it would take at

least three-quarters of an hour to walk to the church, which is in the village itself. We went downstairs. Out in front of the building stood the priest and two altar boys. One of them was holding a censer, and the priest was leaning toward him, adjusting the length of its silver chain. As we approached, the priest straightened up. He called me "my son" and said a few words to me. He went inside; I followed.

I noticed right away that the screws on the casket had been tightened and that there were four men wearing black in the room. The director was telling me that the hearse was waiting out in the road and at the same time I could hear the priest beginning his prayers. From then on everything happened very quickly. The men moved toward the casket with a pall. The priest, his acolytes, the director and I all went outside. A woman I didn't know was standing by the door. "Monsieur Meursault," the director said. I didn't catch the woman's name; I just understood that she was the nurse assigned by the home. Without smiling she lowered her long, gaunt face. Then we stepped aside to make way for the body. We followed the pall bearers and left the home. Outside the gate stood the hearse. Varnished, glossy, and oblong, it reminded me of a pencil box. Next to it was the funeral director, a little man in a ridiculous getup, and an awkward, embarrassed-looking old man. I realized that it was Monsieur Pérez. He was wearing a soft felt hat with a round crown and a wide brim (he took it off as the casket was coming through the gate), a suit with trousers

that were corkscrewed down around his ankles, and a black tie with a knot that was too small for the big white collar of his shirt. His lips were trembling below a nose dotted with blackheads. Strange, floppy, thick-rimmed ears stuck out through his fine, white hair, and I was struck by their blood-red color next to the pallor of his face. The funeral director assigned us our places. First came the priest, then the hearse. Flanking it, the four men. Behind it, the director and myself and, bringing up the rear, the nurse and Monsieur Pérez.

The sky was already filled with light. The sun was beginning to bear down on the earth and it was getting hotter by the minute. I don't know why we waited so long before getting under way. I was hot in my dark clothes. The little old man, who had put his hat back on, took it off again. I turned a little in his direction and was looking at him when the director started talking to me about him. He told me that my mother and Monsieur Pérez often used to walk down to the village together in the evenings, accompanied by a nurse. I was looking at the countryside around me. Seeing the rows of cypress trees leading up to the hills next to the sky, and the houses standing out here and there against that red and green earth, I was able to understand Maman better. Evenings in that part of the country must have been a kind of sad relief. But today, with the sun bearing down, making the whole landscape shimmer with heat, it was inhuman and oppressive.

We got under way. It was then that I noticed that

Pérez had a slight limp. Little by little, the hearse was picking up speed and the old man was losing ground. One of the men flanking the hearse had also dropped back and was now even with me. I was surprised at how fast the sun was climbing in the sky. I noticed that for quite some time the countryside had been buzzing with the sound of insects and the crackling of grass. The sweat was pouring down my face. I wasn't wearing a hat, so I fanned myself with my handkerchief. The man from the undertaker's said something to me then which I missed. He was lifting the edge of his cap with his right hand and wiping his head with a handkerchief with his left at the same time. I said, "What?" He pointed up at the sky and repeated, "Pretty hot." I said, "Yes." A minute later he asked, "Is that your mother in there?" Again I said, "Yes." "Was she old?" I answered, "Fairly," because I didn't know the exact number. After that he was quiet. I turned around and saw old Pérez about fifty meters behind us. He was going as fast as he could, swinging his felt hat at the end of his arm. I looked at the director, too. He was walking with great dignity, without a single wasted motion. A few beads of sweat were forming on his forehead, but he didn't wipe them off.

The procession seemed to me to be moving a little faster. All around me there was still the same glowing countryside flooded with sunlight. The glare from the sky was unbearable. At one point, we went over a section of the road that had just been repaved. The tar had burst open in the sun. Our feet sank into it, leaving its

shiny pulp exposed. Sticking up above the top of the hearse, the coachman's hard leather hat looked as if it had been molded out of the same black mud. I felt a little lost between the blue and white of the sky and the monotony of the colors around me—the sticky black of the tar, the dull black of all the clothes, and the shiny black of the hearse. All of it—the sun, the smell of leather and horse dung from the hearse, the smell of varnish and incense, and my fatigue after a night without sleep—was making it hard for me to see or think straight. I turned around again: Pérez seemed to be way back there, fading in the shimmering heat. Then I lost sight of him altogether. I looked around and saw that he'd left the road and cut out across the fields. I also noticed there was a bend in the road up ahead. I realized that Pérez, who knew the country, was taking a short cut in order to catch up with us. By the time we rounded the bend, he was back with us. Then we lost him again. He set off cross country once more, and so it went on. I could feel the blood pounding in my temples.

After that, everything seemed to happen so fast, so deliberately, so naturally that I don't remember any of it anymore. Except for one thing: as we entered the village, the nurse spoke to me. She had a remarkable voice which didn't go with her face at all, a melodious, quavering voice. She said, "If you go slowly, you risk getting sunstroke. But if you go too fast, you work up a sweat and then catch a chill inside the church." She was right. There was no way out. Several other images

from that day have stuck in my mind: for instance, Pérez's face when he caught up with us for the last time, just outside the village. Big tears of frustration and exhaustion were streaming down his cheeks. But because of all the wrinkles, they weren't dripping off. They spread out and ran together again, leaving a watery film over his ruined face. Then there was the church and the villagers on the sidewalks, the red geraniums on the graves in the cemetery, Pérez fainting (he crumpled like a rag doll), the blood-red earth spilling over Maman's casket, the white flesh of the roots mixed in with it, more people, voices, the village, waiting in front of a café, the incessant drone of the motor, and my joy when the bus entered the nest of lights that was Algiers and I knew I was going to go to bed and sleep for twelve hours.