



The Stranger

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Nobel Prize in Literature

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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.