

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 anyone."

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