

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

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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.