

5

Raymond called me at the office. He told me that a friend of his (he'd spoken to him about me) had invited me to spend the day Sunday at his little beach house, near Algiers. I said I'd really like to, but I'd promised to spend the day with a girlfriend. Raymond immediately told me that she was invited too. His friend's wife would be very glad not to be alone with a bunch of men.

I wanted to hang up right away because I know the boss doesn't like people calling us from town. But Raymond asked me to hang on and told me he could have passed on the invitation that evening, but he had something else to tell me. He'd been followed all day by a group of Arabs, one of whom was the brother of his former mistress. "If you see him hanging around the building when you get home this evening, let me know." I said I would.

A little later my boss sent for me, and for a second I was annoyed, because I thought he was going to tell me to do less talking on the phone and more work. But that wasn't it at all. He told me he wanted to talk to me about a plan of his that was still pretty vague. He just wanted

to have my opinion on the matter. He was planning to open an office in Paris which would handle his business directly with the big companies, on the spot, and he wanted to know how I felt about going there. I'd be able to live in Paris and to travel around for part of the year as well. "You're young, and it seems to me it's the kind of life that would appeal to you." I said yes but that really it was all the same to me. Then he asked me if I wasn't interested in a change of life. I said that people never change their lives, that in any case one life was as good as another and that I wasn't dissatisfied with mine here at all. He looked upset and told me that I never gave him a straight answer, that I had no ambition, and that that was disastrous in business. So I went back to work. I would rather not have upset him, but I couldn't see any reason to change my life. Looking back on it, I wasn't unhappy. When I was a student, I had lots of ambitions like that. But when I had to give up my studies I learned very quickly that none of it really mattered.

That evening Marie came by to see me and asked me if I wanted to marry her. I said it didn't make any difference to me and that we could if she wanted to. Then she wanted to know if I loved her. I answered the same way I had the last time, that it didn't mean anything but that I probably didn't love her. "So why marry me, then?" she said. I explained to her that it didn't really matter and that if she wanted to, we could get married. Besides, she was the one who was doing the asking and all I was

saying was yes. Then she pointed out that marriage was a serious thing. I said, "No." She stopped talking for a minute and looked at me without saying anything. Then she spoke. She just wanted to know if I would have accepted the same proposal from another woman, with whom I was involved in the same way. I said, "Sure." Then she said she wondered if she loved me, and there was no way I could know about that. After another moment's silence, she mumbled that I was peculiar, that that was probably why she loved me but that one day I might hate her for the same reason. I didn't say anything, because I didn't have anything to add, so she took my arm with a smile and said she wanted to marry me. I said we could do it whenever she wanted. Then I told her about my boss's proposition and she said she'd love to see Paris. I told her that I'd lived there once and she asked me what it was like. I said, "It's dirty. Lots of pigeons and dark courtyards. Everybody's pale."

Then we went for a walk through the main streets to the other end of town. The women were beautiful and I asked Marie if she'd noticed. She said yes and that she understood what I meant. For a while neither of us said anything. But I wanted her to stay with me, and I told her we could have dinner together at Céleste's. She would have liked to but she had something to do. We were near my place and I said goodbye to her. She looked at me. "Don't you want to know what I have to do?" I did, but I hadn't thought to ask, and she seemed to be scolding me. Then, seeing me so confused, she

laughed again and she moved toward me with her whole body to offer me her lips.

I had dinner at Céleste's. I'd already started eating when a strange little woman came in and asked me if she could sit at my table. Of course she could. Her gestures were jerky and she had bright eyes in a little face like an apple. She took off her jacket, sat down, and studied the menu feverishly. She called Céleste over and ordered her whole meal all at once, in a voice that was clear and very fast at the same time. While she was waiting for her first course, she opened her bag, took out a slip of paper and a pencil, added up the bill in advance, then took the exact amount, plus tip, out of a vest pocket and set it down on the table in front of her. At that point the waiter brought her first course and she gulped it down. While waiting for the next course, she again took out of her bag a blue pencil and a magazine that listed the radio programs for the week. One by one, and with great care, she checked off almost every program. Since the magazine was about a dozen pages long, she meticulously continued this task throughout the meal. I had already finished and she was still checking away with the same zeal. Then she stood up, put her jacket back on with the same robotlike movements, and left. I didn't have anything to do, so I left too and followed her for a while. She had positioned herself right next to the curb and was making her way with incredible speed and assurance, never once swerving or looking around. I eventually lost sight of her and turned

back. I thought about how peculiar she was but forgot about her a few minutes later.

I found old Salamano waiting outside my door. I asked him in and he told me that his dog was lost, because it wasn't at the pound. The people who worked there had told him that maybe it had been run over. He asked if he could find out at the police station. They told him that they didn't keep track of things like that because they happened every day. I told old Salamano that he could get another dog, but he was right to point out to me that he was used to this one.

I was sitting cross-legged on my bed and Salamano had sat down on a chair in front of the table. He was facing me and he had both hands on his knees. He had kept his old felt hat on. He was mumbling bits and pieces of sentences through his yellowing moustache. He was getting on my nerves a little, but I didn't have anything to do and I didn't feel sleepy. Just for something to say, I asked him about his dog. He told me he'd gotten it after his wife died. He had married fairly late. When he was young he'd wanted to go into the theater: in the army he used to act in military vaudevilles. But he had ended up working on the railroads, and he didn't regret it, because now he had a small pension. He hadn't been happy with his wife, but he'd pretty much gotten used to her. When she died he had been very lonely. So he asked a shop buddy for a dog and he'd gotten this one very young. He'd had to feed it from a bottle. But since a dog doesn't live as long as a man, they'd ended up

being old together. "He was bad-tempered," Salamano said. "We'd have a run-in every now and then. But he was a good dog just the same." I said he was well bred and Salamano looked pleased. "And," he added, "you didn't know him before he got sick. His coat was the best thing about him." Every night and every morning after the dog had gotten that skin disease, Salamano rubbed him with ointment. But according to him, the dog's real sickness was old age, and there's no cure for old age.

At that point I yawned, and the old man said he'd be going. I told him that he could stay and that I was sorry about what had happened to his dog. He thanked me. He told me that Maman was very fond of his dog. He called her "your poor mother." He said he supposed I must be very sad since Maman died, and I didn't say anything. Then he said, very quickly and with an embarrassed look, that he realized that some people in the neighborhood thought badly of me for having sent Maman to the home, but he knew me and he knew I loved her very much. I still don't know why, but I said that until then I hadn't realized that people thought badly of me for doing it, but that the home had seemed like the natural thing since I didn't have enough money to have Maman cared for. "Anyway," I added, "it had been a long time since she'd had anything to say to me, and she was bored all by herself." "Yes," he said, "and at least in a home you can make a few friends." Then he said good night. He wanted to sleep. His life had changed

◇ THE STRANGER ◇

now and he wasn't too sure what he was going to do. For the first time since I'd known him, and with a furtive gesture, he offered me his hand, and I felt the scales on his skin. He gave a little smile, and before he left he said, "I hope the dogs don't bark tonight. I always think it's mine."