

3

I worked hard at the office today. The boss was nice. He asked me if I wasn't too tired and he also wanted to know Maman's age. I said, "About sixty," so as not to make a mistake; and I don't know why, but he seemed to be relieved somehow and to consider the matter closed.

There was a stack of freight invoices that had piled up on my desk, and I had to go through them all. Before leaving the office to go to lunch, I washed my hands. I really like doing this at lunchtime. I don't enjoy it so much in the evening, because the roller towel you use is soaked through: one towel has to last all day. I mentioned it once to my boss. He told me he was sorry but it was really a minor detail. I left a little late, at half past twelve, with Emmanuel, who works as a dispatcher. The office overlooks the sea, and we took a minute to watch the freighters in the harbor, which was ablaze with sunlight. Then a truck came toward us with its chains rattling and its engine backfiring. Emmanuel said, "How 'bout it?" and I started running. The truck passed us and we ran after it. I was engulfed by the noise and the dust.

I couldn't see anything, and all I was conscious of was the sensation of hurtling forward in a mad dash through cranes and winches, masts bobbing on the horizon and the hulls of ships alongside us as we ran. I was first to grab hold and take a flying leap. Then I reached out and helped Emmanuel scramble up. We were out of breath; the truck was bumping around on the uneven cobblestones of the quay in a cloud of dust and sun. Emmanuel was laughing so hard he could hardly breathe.

We arrived at Céleste's dripping with sweat. Céleste was there, as always, with his big belly, his apron, and his white moustache. He asked me if things were "all right now." I told him yes they were and said I was hungry. I ate fast and had some coffee. Then I went home and slept for a while because I'd drunk too much wine, and when I woke up I felt like having a smoke. It was late and I ran to catch a streetcar. I worked all afternoon. It got very hot in the office, and that evening, when I left, I was glad to walk back slowly along the docks. The sky was green; I felt good. But I went straight home because I wanted to boil myself some potatoes.

On my way upstairs, in the dark, I ran into old Salamano, my neighbor across the landing. He was with his dog. The two of them have been inseparable for eight years. The spaniel has a skin disease—mange, I think—which makes almost all its hair fall out and leaves it covered with brown sores and scabs. After living together for so long, the two of them alone in one tiny room, they've ended up looking like each other. Old

Salamano has reddish scabs on his face and wispy yellow hair. As for the dog, he's sort of taken on his master's stooped look, muzzle down, neck straining. They look as if they belong to the same species, and yet they hate each other. Twice a day, at eleven and six, the old man takes the dog out for a walk. They haven't changed their route in eight years. You can see them in the rue de Lyon, the dog pulling the man along until old Salamano stumbles. Then he beats the dog and swears at it. The dog cowers and trails behind. Then it's the old man who pulls the dog. Once the dog has forgotten, it starts dragging its master along again, and again gets beaten and sworn at. Then they both stand there on the sidewalk and stare at each other, the dog in terror, the man in hatred. It's the same thing every day. When the dog wants to urinate, the old man won't give him enough time and yanks at him, so that the spaniel leaves behind a trail of little drops. If the dog has an accident in the room, it gets beaten again. This has been going on for eight years. Céleste is always saying, "It's pitiful," but really, who's to say? When I ran into him on the stairs, Salamano was swearing away at the dog. He was saying, "Filthy, stinking bastard!" and the dog was whimpering. I said "Good evening," but the old man just went on cursing. So I asked him what the dog had done. He didn't answer. All he said was "Filthy, stinking bastard!" I could barely see him leaning over his dog, trying to fix something on its collar. I spoke louder. Then, without turning around, he answered with a kind of suppressed rage, "He's always

there." Then he left, yanking at the animal, which was letting itself be dragged along, whimpering.

Just then my other neighbor came in. The word around the neighborhood is that he lives off women. But when you ask him what he does, he's a "warehouse guard." Generally speaking, he's not very popular. But he often talks to me and sometimes stops by my place for a minute, because I listen to him. I find what he has to say interesting. Besides, I don't have any reason not to talk to him. His name is Raymond Sintès. He's a little on the short side, with broad shoulders and a nose like a boxer's. He always dresses very sharp. And once he said to me, talking about Salamano, "If that isn't pitiful!" He asked me didn't I think it was disgusting and I said no.

We went upstairs and I was about to leave him when he said, "I've got some blood sausage and some wine at my place. How about joining me?" I figured it would save me the trouble of having to cook for myself, so I accepted. He has only one room too, and a little kitchen with no window. Over his bed he has a pink-and-white plaster angel, some pictures of famous athletes, and two or three photographs of naked women. The room was dirty and the bed was unmade. First he lit his paraffin lamp, then he took a pretty dubious-looking bandage out of his pocket and wrapped it around his right hand. I asked him what he'd done to it. He said he'd been in a fight with some guy who was trying to start trouble.