Chapter 11

For the third time I've refused to see the chaplain. I don't have anything to say to him; I don't feel like talking, and I'll be seeing him soon enough as it is. All I care about right now is escaping the machinery of justice, seeing if there's any way out of the inevitable. They've put me in a different cell. From this one, when I'm stretched out on my bunk, I see the sky and that's all I see. I spend my days watching how the dwindling of color turns day into night. Lying here, I put my hands behind my head and wait. I can't count the times I've wondered if there have ever been any instances of condemned men escaping the relentless machinery, disappearing before the execution or breaking through the cordon of police. Then I blame myself every time for not having paid enough attention to accounts of executions. A man should always take an interest in those things. You never know what might happen. I'd read stories in the papers like everybody else. But there must have been books devoted to the subject that I'd never been curious enough to look into. Maybe I would have found some accounts of escapes in them. I might have

discovered that in at least one instance the wheel had stopped, that in spite of all the unrelenting calculation, chance and luck had, at least once, changed something. Just once! In a way, I think that would have been enough. My heart would have taken over from there. The papers were always talking about the debt owed to society. According to them, it had to be paid. But that doesn't speak to the imagination. What really counted was the possibility of escape, a leap to freedom, out of the implacable ritual, a wild run for it that would give whatever chance for hope there was. Of course, hope meant being cut down on some street corner, as you ran like mad, by a random bullet. But when I really thought it through, nothing was going to allow me such a luxury. Everything was against it; I would just be caught up in the machinery again.

Despite my willingness to understand, I just couldn't accept such arrogant certainty. Because, after all, there really was something ridiculously out of proportion between the verdict such certainty was based on and the imperturbable march of events from the moment the verdict was announced. The fact that the sentence had been read at eight o'clock at night and not at five o'clock, the fact that it could have been an entirely different one, the fact that it had been decided by men who change their underwear, the fact that it had been handed down in the name of some vague notion called the French (or German, or Chinese) people—all of it seemed to detract from the seriousness of the decision. I was forced

to admit, however, that from the moment it had been passed its consequences became as real and as serious as the wall against which I pressed the length of my body.

At times like this I remembered a story Maman used to tell me about my father. I never knew him. Maybe the only thing I did know about the man was the story Maman would tell me back then: he'd gone to watch a murderer be executed. Just the thought of going had made him sick to his stomach. But he went anyway, and when he came back he spent half the morning throwing up. I remember feeling a little disgusted by him at the time. But now I understood, it was perfectly normal. How had I not seen that there was nothing more important than an execution, and that when you come right down to it, it was the only thing a man could truly be interested in? If I ever got out of this prison I would go and watch every execution there was. But I think it was a mistake even to consider the possibility. Because at the thought that one fine morning I would find myself a free man standing behind a cordon of police—on the outside, as it were—at the thought of being the spectator who comes to watch and then can go and throw up afterwards, a wave of poisoned joy rose in my throat. But I wasn't being reasonable. It was a mistake to let myself get carried away by such imaginings, because the next minute I would get so cold that I would curl up into a ball under my blanket and my teeth would be chattering and I couldn't make them stop.

But naturally, you can't always be reasonable. At other times, for instance, I would make up new laws. I would reform the penal code. I'd realized that the most important thing was to give the condemned man a chance. Even one in a thousand was good enough to set things right. So it seemed to me that you could come up with a mixture of chemicals that if ingested by the patient (that's the word I'd use: "patient") would kill him nine times out of ten. But he would know this—that would be the one condition. For by giving it some hard thought, by considering the whole thing calmly, I could see that the trouble with the guillotine was that you had no chance at all, absolutely none. The fact was that it had been decided once and for all that the patient was to die. It was an open-and-shut case, a fixed arrangement, a tacit agreement that there was no question of going back on. If by some extraordinary chance the blade failed, they would just start over. So the thing that bothered me most was that the condemned man had to hope the machine would work the first time. And I say that's wrong. And in a way I was right. But in another way I was forced to admit that that was the whole secret of good organization. In other words, the condemned man was forced into a kind of moral collaboration. It was in his interest that everything go off without a hitch.

I was also made to see that until that moment I'd had mistaken ideas about these things. For a long time I believed—and I don't know why—that to get to the

guillotine you had to climb stairs onto a scaffold. I think it was because of the French Revolution—I mean, because of everything I'd been taught or shown about it. But one morning I remembered seeing a photograph that appeared in the papers at the time of a much-talked-about execution. In reality, the machine was set up right on the ground, as simple as you please. It was much narrower than I'd thought. It was funny I'd never noticed that before. I'd been struck by this picture because the guillotine looked like such a precision instrument, perfect and gleaming. You always get exaggerated notions of things you don't know anything about. I was made to see that contrary to what I thought, everything was very simple: the guillotine is on the same level as the man approaching it. He walks up to it the way you walk up to another person. That bothered me too. Mounting the scaffold, going right up into the sky, was something the imagination could hold on to. Whereas, once again, the machine destroyed everything: you were killed discreetly, with a little shame and with great precision.

There were two other things I was always thinking about: the dawn and my appeal. I would reason with myself, though, and try not to think about them anymore. I would stretch out, look at the sky, and force myself to find something interesting about it. It would turn green: that was evening. I would make another effort to divert my thoughts. I would listen to my heartbeat. I couldn't imagine that this sound which had been with me for so long could ever stop. I've never really

had much of an imagination. But still I would try to picture the exact moment when the beating of my heart would no longer be going on inside my head. But it was no use. The dawn or my appeal would still be there. I would end up telling myself that the most rational thing was not to hold myself back.

They always came at dawn, I knew that. And so I spent my nights waiting for that dawn. I've never liked being surprised. If something is going to happen to me, I want to be there. That's why I ended up sleeping only a little bit during the day and then, all night long, waited patiently for the first light to show on the pane of sky. The hardest time was that uncertain hour when I knew they usually set to work. After midnight, I would wait and watch. My ears had never heard so many noises or picked up such small sounds. One thing I can say, though, is that in a certain way I was lucky that whole time, since I never heard footsteps. Maman used to say that you can always find something to be happy about. In my prison, when the sky turned red and a new day slipped into my cell, I found out that she was right. Because I might just as easily have heard footsteps and my heart could have burst. Even though I would rush to the door at the slightest shuffle, even though, with my ear pressed to the wood, I would wait frantically until I heard the sound of my own breathing, terrified to find it so hoarse, like a dog's panting, my heart would not burst after all, and I would have gained another twenty-four hours.

All day long there was the thought of my appeal. I

think I got everything out of it that I could. I would assess my holdings and get the maximum return on my thoughts. I would always begin by assuming the worst: my appeal was denied. "Well, so I'm going to die." Sooner than other people will, obviously. But everybody knows life isn't worth living. Deep down I knew perfectly well that it doesn't much matter whether you die at thirty or at seventy, since in either case other men and women will naturally go on living—and for thousands of years. In fact, nothing could be clearer. Whether it was now or twenty years from now, I would still be the one dying. At that point, what would disturb my train of thought was the terrifying leap I would feel my heart take at the idea of having twenty more years of life ahead of me. But I simply had to stifle it by imagining what I'd be thinking in twenty years when it would all come down to the same thing anyway. Since we're all going to die, it's obvious that when and how don't matter. Therefore (and the difficult thing was not to lose sight of all the reasoning that went into this "therefore"), I had to accept the rejection of my appeal.

Then and only then would I have the right, so to speak—would I give myself permission, as it were—to consider the alternative hypothesis: I was pardoned. The trouble was that I would somehow have to cool the hot blood that would suddenly surge through my body and sting my eyes with a delirious joy. It would take all my strength to quiet my heart, to be rational. In order to

make my resignation to the first hypothesis more plausible, I had to be level-headed about this one as well. If I succeeded, I gained an hour of calm. That was something anyway.

It was at one such moment that I once again refused to see the chaplain. I was lying down, and I could tell from the golden glow in the sky that evening was coming on. I had just denied my appeal and I could feel the steady pulse of my blood circulating inside me. I didn't need to see the chaplain. For the first time in a long time I thought about Marie. The days had been long since she'd stopped writing. That evening I thought about it and told myself that maybe she had gotten tired of being the girlfriend of a condemned man. It also occurred to me that maybe she was sick, or dead. These things happen. How was I to know, since apart from our two bodies, now separated, there wasn't anything to keep us together or even to remind us of each other? Anyway, after that, remembering Marie meant nothing to me. I wasn't interested in her dead. That seemed perfectly normal to me, since I understood very well that people would forget me when I was dead. They wouldn't have anything more to do with me. I wasn't even able to tell myself that it was hard to think those things.

It was at that exact moment that the chaplain came in. When I saw him I felt a little shudder go through me. He noticed it and told me not to be afraid. I told him that it wasn't his usual time. He replied that it was just

a friendly visit and had nothing to do with my appeal, which he knew nothing about. He sat down on my bunk and invited me to sit next to him. I refused. All the same, there was something very gentle about him.

He sat there for a few seconds, leaning forward, with his elbows on his knees, looking at his hands. They were slender and sinewy and they reminded me of two nimble animals. He slowly rubbed one against the other. Then he sat there, leaning forward like that, for so long that for an instant I seemed to forget he was there.

But suddenly he raised his head and looked straight at me. "Why have you refused to see me?" he asked. I said that I didn't believe in God. He wanted to know if I was sure and I said that I didn't see any reason to ask myself that question: it seemed unimportant. He then leaned back against the wall, hands flat on his thighs. Almost as if it wasn't me he was talking to, he remarked that sometimes we think we're sure when in fact we're not. I didn't say anything. He looked at me and asked, "What do you think?" I said it was possible. In any case, I may not have been sure about what really did interest me, but I was absolutely sure about what didn't. And it just so happened that what he was talking about didn't interest me.

He looked away and without moving asked me if I wasn't talking that way out of extreme despair. I explained to him that I wasn't desperate. I was just afraid, which was only natural. "Then God can help you," he said. "Every man I have known in your position has

turned to Him." I acknowledged that that was their right. It also meant that they must have had the time for it. As for me, I didn't want anybody's help, and I just didn't have the time to interest myself in what didn't interest me.

At that point he threw up his hands in annoyance but then sat forward and smoothed out the folds of his cassock. When he had finished he started in again, addressing me as "my friend." If he was talking to me this way, it wasn't because I was condemned to die; the way he saw it, we were all condemned to die. But I interrupted him by saying that it wasn't the same thing and that besides, it wouldn't be a consolation anyway. "Certainly," he agreed. "But if you don't die today, you'll die tomorrow, or the next day. And then the same question will arise. How will you face that terrifying ordeal?" I said I would face it exactly as I was facing it now.

At that he stood up and looked me straight in the eye. It was a game I knew well. I played it a lot with Emmanuel and Céleste and usually they were the ones who looked away. The chaplain knew the game well too, I could tell right away: his gaze never faltered. And his voice didn't falter, either, when he said, "Have you no hope at all? And do you really live with the thought that when you die, you die, and nothing remains?" "Yes," I said.

Then he lowered his head and sat back down. He told me that he pitied me. He thought it was more than a man could bear. I didn't feel anything except that he

was beginning to annoy me. Then I turned away and went and stood under the skylight. I leaned my shoulder against the wall. Without really following what he was saying, I heard him start asking me questions again. He was talking in an agitated, urgent voice. I could see that he was genuinely upset, so I listened more closely.

He was expressing his certainty that my appeal would be granted, but I was carrying the burden of a sin from which I had to free myself. According to him, human justice was nothing and divine justice was everything. I pointed out that it was the former that had condemned me. His response was that it hadn't washed away my sin for all that. I told him I didn't know what a sin was. All they had told me was that I was guilty. I was guilty, I was paying for it, and nothing more could be asked of me. At that point he stood up again, and the thought occurred to me that in such a narrow cell, if he wanted to move around he didn't have many options. He could either sit down or stand up.

I was staring at the ground. He took a step toward me and stopped, as if he didn't dare come any closer. He looked at the sky through the bars. "You're wrong, my son," he said. "More could be asked of you. And it may be asked." "And what's that?" "You could be asked to see." "See what?'

The priest gazed around my cell and answered in a voice that sounded very weary to me. "Every stone here sweats with suffering, I know that. I have never looked

at them without a feeling of anguish. But deep in my heart I know that the most wretched among you have seen a divine face emerge from their darkness. That is the face you are asked to see."

This perked me up a little. I said I had been looking at the stones in these walls for months. There wasn't anything or anyone in the world I knew better. Maybe at one time, way back, I had searched for a face in them. But the face I was looking for was as bright as the sun and the flame of desire—and it belonged to Marie. I had searched for it in vain. Now it was all over. And in any case, I'd never seen anything emerge from any sweating stones.

The chaplain looked at me with a kind of sadness. I now had my back flat against the wall, and light was streaming over my forehead. He muttered a few words I didn't catch and abruptly asked if he could embrace me. "No," I said. He turned and walked over to the wall and slowly ran his hand over it. "Do you really love this earth as much as all that?" he murmured. I didn't answer.

He stood there with his back to me for quite a long time. His presence was grating and oppressive. I was just about to tell him to go, to leave me alone, when all of a sudden, turning toward me, he burst out, "No, I refuse to believe you! I know that at one time or another you've wished for another life." I said of course I had, but it didn't mean any more than wishing to be rich, to be able to swim faster, or to have a more nicely shaped

mouth. It was all the same. But he stopped me and wanted to know how I pictured this other life. Then I shouted at him, "One where I could remember this life!" and that's when I told him I'd had enough. He wanted to talk to me about God again, but I went up to him and made one last attempt to explain to him that I had only a little time left and I didn't want to waste it on God. He tried to change the subject by asking me why I was calling him "monsieur" and not "father." That got me mad, and I told him he wasn't my father; he wasn't even on my side.

"Yes, my son," he said, putting his hand on my shoulder, "I am on your side. But you have no way of knowing it, because your heart is blind. I shall pray for you."

Then, I don't know why, but something inside me snapped. I started yelling at the top of my lungs, and I insulted him and told him not to waste his prayers on me. I grabbed him by the collar of his cassock. I was pouring out on him everything that was in my heart, cries of anger and cries of joy. He seemed so certain about everything, didn't he? And yet none of his certainties was worth one hair of a woman's head. He wasn't even sure he was alive, because he was living like a dead man. Whereas it looked as if I was the one who'd come up emptyhanded. But I was sure about me, about everything, surer than he could ever be, sure of my life and sure of the death I had waiting for me. Yes, that was all I had. But at least I had as much of a hold on

it as it had on me. I had been right, I was still right, I was always right. I had lived my life one way and I could just as well have lived it another. I had done this and I hadn't done that. I hadn't done this thing but I had done another. And so? It was as if I had waited all this time for this moment and for the first light of this dawn to be vindicated. Nothing, nothing mattered, and I knew why. So did he. Throughout the whole absurd life I'd lived, a dark wind had been rising toward me from somewhere deep in my future, across years that were still to come, and as it passed, this wind leveled whatever was offered to me at the time, in years no more real than the ones I was living. What did other people's deaths or a mother's love matter to me; what did his God or the lives people choose or the fate they think they elect matter to me when we're all elected by the same fate, me and billions of privileged people like him who also called themselves my brothers? Couldn't he see, couldn't he see that? Everybody was privileged. There were only privileged people. The others would all be condemned one day. And he would be condemned, too. What would it matter if he were accused of murder and then executed because he didn't cry at his mother's funeral? Salamano's dog was worth just as much as his wife. The little robot woman was just as guilty as the Parisian woman Masson married, or as Marie, who had wanted me to marry her. What did it matter that Raymond was as much my friend as Céleste, who was worth a lot more than him? What did it matter that Marie now offered

her lips to a new Meursault? Couldn't he, couldn't this condemned man see . . . And that from somewhere deep in my future . . . All the shouting had me gasping for air. But they were already tearing the chaplain from my grip and the guards were threatening me. He calmed them, though, and looked at me for a moment without saying anything. His eyes were full of tears. Then he turned and disappeared.

With him gone, I was able to calm down again. I was exhausted and threw myself on my bunk. I must have fallen asleep, because I woke up with the stars in my face. Sounds of the countryside were drifting in. Smells of night, earth, and salt air were cooling my temples. The wondrous peace of that sleeping summer flowed through me like a tide. Then, in the dark hour before dawn, sirens blasted. They were announcing departures for a world that now and forever meant nothing to me. For the first time in a long time I thought about Maman. I felt as if I understood why at the end of her life she had taken a "fiance," why she had played at beginning again. Even there, in that home where lives were fading out, evening was a kind of wistful respite. So close to death, Maman must have felt free then and ready to live it all again. Nobody, nobody had the right to cry over her. And I felt ready to live it all again too. As if that blind rage had washed me clean, rid me of hope; for the first time, in that night alive with signs and stars, I opened myself to the gentle indifference of the world. Finding it so much like myself—so like a

brother, really—I felt that I had been happy and that I was happy again. For everything to be consummated, for me to feel less alone, I had only to wish that there be a large crowd of spectators the day of my execution and that they greet me with cries of hate.