Chapter 8

There are some things I've never liked talking about. A few days after I entered prison, I realized that I wouldn't like talking about this part of my life.

Later on, though, I no longer saw any point to my reluctance. In fact, I wasn't really in prison those first few days: I was sort of waiting for something to happen. It was only after Marie's first and last visit that it all started. From the day I got her letter (she told me she would no longer be allowed to come, because she wasn't my wife), from that day on I felt that I was at home in my cell and that my life was coming to a standstill there. The day of my arrest I was first put in a room where there were already several other prisoners, most of them Arabs. They laughed when they saw me. Then they asked me what I was in for. I said I'd killed an Arab and they were all silent. A few minutes later, it got dark. They showed me how to fix the mat I was supposed to sleep on. One end could be rolled up to make a pillow. All night I felt bugs crawling over my face. A few days later I was put in a cell by myself, where I slept on wooden boards suspended from the wall. I had a bucket

for a toilet and a tin washbasin. The prison was on the heights above the town, and through a small window I could see the sea. One day as I was gripping the bars, my face straining toward the light, a guard came in and told me I had a visitor. I thought it must be Marie. It was.

To get to the visiting room I went down a long corridor, then down some stairs and, finally, another corridor. I walked into a very large room brightened by a huge bay window. The room was divided into three sections by two large grates that ran the length of the room. Between the two grates was a space of eight to ten meters which separated the visitors from the prisoners. I spotted Marie standing at the opposite end of the room with her striped dress and her sun-tanned face. On my side of the room there were about ten prisoners, most of them Arabs. Marie was surrounded by Moorish women and found herself between two visitors: a little, thin-lipped old woman dressed in black and a fat, bareheaded woman who was talking at the top of her voice and making lots of gestures. Because of the distance between the grates, the visitors and the prisoners were forced to speak very loud. When I walked in, the sound of the voices echoing off the room's high, bare walls and the harsh light pouring out of the sky onto the windows and spilling into the room brought on a kind of dizziness. My cell was quieter and darker. It took me a few seconds to adjust. But eventually I could see each face clearly, distinctly in the bright light. I noticed there was a

guard sitting at the far end of the passage between the two grates. Most of the Arab prisoners and their families had squatted down facing each other. They weren't shouting. Despite the commotion, they were managing to make themselves heard by talking in very low voices. Their subdued murmuring, coming from lower down, formed a kind of bass accompaniment to the conversations crossing above their heads. I took all this in very quickly as I made my way toward Marie. Already pressed up against the grate, she was smiling her best smile for me. I thought she looked very beautiful, but I didn't know how to tell her.

"Well?" she called across to me. "Well, here I am." "Are you all right? Do you have everything you want?" "Yes, everything."

We stopped talking and Marie went on smiling. The fat woman yelled to the man next to me, her husband probably, a tall blond guy with an honest face. It was the continuation of a conversation already under way.

"Jeanne wouldn't take him," she shouted as loudly as she could. "Uh-huh," said the man. "I told her you'd take him back when you get out, but she wouldn't take him."

Then it was Marie's turn to shout, that Raymond sent his regards, and I said, "Thanks." But my voice was drowned out by the man next to me, who asked, "Is he all right?" His wife laughed and said, "He's never been better." The man on my left, a small young man with delicate hands, wasn't saying anything. I noticed that

he was across from the little old lady and that they were staring intently at each other. But I didn't have time to watch them any longer, because Marie shouted to me that I had to have hope. I said, "Yes." I was looking at her as she said it and I wanted to squeeze her shoulders through her dress. I wanted to feel the thin material and I didn't really know what else I had to hope for other than that. But that was probably what Marie meant, because she was still smiling. All I could see was the sparkle of her teeth and the little folds of her eyes. She shouted again, "You'll get out and we'll get married!" I answered, "You think so?" but it was mainly just to say something. Then very quickly and still in a very loud voice she said yes, that I would be acquitted and that we would go swimming again. But the other woman took her turn to shout and said that she had left a basket at the clerk's office. She was listing all the things she had put in it, to make sure they were all there, because they cost a lot of money. The young man and his mother were still staring at each other. The murmuring of the Arabs continued below us. Outside, the light seemed to surge up over the bay window.

I was feeling a little sick and I'd have liked to leave. The noise was getting painful. But on the other hand, I wanted to make the most of Marie's being there. I don't know how much time went by. Marie told me about her job and she never stopped smiling. The murmuring, the shouting, and the conversations were crossing back and forth. The only oasis of silence was next to me where

the small young man and the old woman were gazing at each other. One by one the Arabs were taken away. Almost everyone stopped talking as soon as the first one left. The little old woman moved closer to the bars, and at the same moment a guard motioned to her son. He said "Goodbye, Maman," and she reached between two bars to give him a long, slow little wave.

She left just as another man came in, hat in hand, and took her place. Another prisoner was brought in and they talked excitedly, but softly, because the room had once again grown quiet. They came for the man on my right, and his wife said to him without lowering her voice, as if she hadn't noticed there was no need to shout anymore, "Take care of yourself and be careful." Then it was my turn. Marie threw me a kiss. I looked back before disappearing. She hadn't moved and her face was still pressed against the bars with the same sad, forced smile on it.

Shortly after that was when she wrote to me. And the things I've never liked talking about began. Anyway, I shouldn't exaggerate, and it was easier for me than for others. When I was first imprisoned, the hardest thing was that my thoughts were still those of a free man. For example, I would suddenly have the urge to be on a beach and to walk down to the water. As I imagined the sound of the first waves under my feet, my body entering the water and the sense of relief it would give me, all of a sudden I would feel just how closed in I was by the walls of my cell. But that only lasted a few months.

Afterwards my only thoughts were those of a prisoner. I waited for the daily walk, which I took in the courtyard, or for a visit from my lawyer. The rest of the time I managed pretty well. At the time, I often thought that if I had had to live in the trunk of a dead tree, with nothing to do but look up at the sky flowering overhead, little by little I would have gotten used to it. I would have waited for birds to fly by or clouds to mingle, just as here I waited to see my lawyer's ties and just as, in another world, I used to wait patiently until Saturday to hold Marie's body in my arms. Now, as I think back on it, I wasn't in a hollow tree trunk. There were others worse off than me. Anyway, it was one of Maman's ideas, and she often repeated it, that after a while you could get used to anything.

Besides, I usually didn't take things so far. The first months were hard. But in fact the effort I had to make helped pass the time. For example, I was tormented by my desire for a woman. It was only natural; I was young. I never thought specifically of Marie. But I thought so much about a woman, about women, about all the ones I had known, about all the circumstances in which I had enjoyed them, that my cell would be filled with their faces and crowded with my desires. In one sense, it threw me off balance. But in another, it killed time. I had ended up making friends with the head guard, who used to make the rounds with the kitchen hands at mealtime. He's the one who first talked to me about women. He told me it was the first thing the others complained

about. I told him it was the same for me and that I thought it was unfair treatment. "But," he said, "that's exactly why you're in prison." "What do you mean that's why?" "Well, yes—freedom, that's why. They've taken away your freedom." I'd never thought about that. I agreed. "It's true," I said. "Otherwise, what would be the punishment?" "Right. You see, you understand these things. The rest of them don't. But they just end up doing it by themselves." The guard left after that.

There were the cigarettes, too. When I entered prison, they took away my belt, my shoelaces, my tie, and everything I had in my pockets, my cigarettes in particular. Once I was in my cell, I asked to have them back. But I was told I wasn't allowed. The first few days were really rough. That may be the thing that was hardest for me. I would suck on chips of wood that I broke off my bed planks. I walked around nauseated all day long. I couldn't understand why they had taken them away when they didn't hurt anybody. Later on I realized that that too was part of the punishment. But by then I had gotten used to not smoking and it wasn't a punishment anymore.

Apart from these annoyances, I wasn't too unhappy. Once again the main problem was killing time. Eventually, once I learned how to remember things, I wasn't bored at all. Sometimes I would get to thinking about my room, and in my imagination I would start at one corner and circle the room, mentally noting everything there was on the way. At first it didn't take long. But

every time I started over, it took a little longer. I would remember every piece of furniture; and on every piece of furniture, every object; and of every object, all the details; and of the details themselves—a flake, a crack, or a chipped edge—the color and the texture. At the same time I would try not to lose the thread of my inventory, to make a complete list, so that after a few weeks I could spend hours just enumerating the things that were in my room. And the more I thought about it, the more I dug out of my memory things I had overlooked or forgotten. I realized then that a man who had lived only one day could easily live for a hundred years in prison. He would have enough memories to keep him from being bored. In a way, it was an advantage.

Then there was sleep. At first, I didn't sleep well at night and not at all during the day. Little by little, my nights got better and I was able to sleep during the day, too. In fact, during the last few months I've been sleeping sixteen to eighteen hours a day. That would leave me six hours to kill with meals, nature's call, my memories, and the story about the Czechoslovakian.

Between my straw mattress and the bed planks, I had actually found an old scrap of newspaper, yellow and transparent, half-stuck to the canvas. On it was a news story, the first part of which was missing, but which must have taken place in Czechoslovakia. A man had left a Czech village to seek his fortune. Twenty-five years later, and now rich, he had returned with a wife and a child. His mother was running a hotel with

his sister in the village where he'd been born. In order to surprise them, he had left his wife and child at another hotel and gone to see his mother, who didn't recognize him when he walked in. As a joke he'd had the idea of taking a room. He had shown off his money. During the night his mother and his sister had beaten him to death with a hammer in order to rob him and had thrown his body in the river. The next morning the wife had come to the hotel and, without knowing it, gave away the traveler's identity. The mother hanged herself. The sister threw herself down a well. I must have read that story a thousand times. On the one hand it wasn't very likely. On the other, it was perfectly natural. Anyway, I thought the traveler pretty much deserved what he got and that you should never play games.

So, with all the sleep, my memories, reading my crime story, and the alternation of light and darkness, time passed. Of course I had read that eventually you wind up losing track of time in prison. But it hadn't meant much to me when I'd read it. I hadn't understood how days could be both long and short at the same time: long to live through, maybe, but so drawn out that they ended up flowing into one another. They lost their names. Only the words "yesterday" and "tomorrow" still had any meaning for me.

One day when the guard told me that I'd been in for five months, I believed it, but I didn't understand it. For me it was one and the same unending day that was unfolding in my cell and the same thing I was trying to

do. That day, after the guard had left, I looked at myself in my tin plate. My reflection seemed to remain serious even though I was trying to smile at it. I moved the plate around in front of me. I smiled and it still had the same sad, stern expression. It was near the end of the day, the time of day I don't like talking about, that nameless hour when the sounds of evening would rise up from every floor of the prison in a cortege of silence. I moved closer to the window, and in the last light of day I gazed at my reflection one more time. It was still serious—and what was surprising about that, since at that moment I was too? But at the same time, and for the first time in months, I distinctly heard the sound of my own voice. I recognized it as the same one that had been ringing in my ears for many long days, and I realized that all that time I had been talking to myself. Then I remembered what the nurse at Maman's funeral said. No, there was no way out, and no one can imagine what nights in prison are like.