

THE MISFIT

(aka "THE OUTSIDER")

**a new translation
and adaptation for the stage
by Colin Duckworth
of
Albert Camus' novel**

L'ETRANGER

**First performed at the Stork Hotel Melbourne by
MATT KELLY
27 April – 28 May 2005**

**Directed by Laurence Strangio
Produced by Helen Madden**

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NOTES FOR DIRECTOR AND ACTOR**SETTING:**

Camus set this in 1930s Algeria, then a French colony. But production does not have to be place/period specific.

CHARACTERS:

The solo actor will have to portray several characters, with different accents and mannerisms, switching fast from one to the other.

MEURSAULT: Mid-twenties to early thirties. Like Camus, a "pied-noir", a French white colonist in Algeria. One of the poor whites, like Camus again. Impoverished background but has been to university, so quite educated speech.

Raymond SINTES: A young "wide boy", pimp, tough guy. Ocker accent.

DEFENCE LAWYER: Thirties, smooth-talking.

INVESTIGATING MAGISTRATE: Forties, sympathetic. Avuncular.

PROSECUTOR: Older, ruthlessly "old order". Harsh voice and attitude.

JUDGE: Educated voice. Authoritarian but tries to be fair.

CHAPLAIN: Educated, pious, self-righteous. A good man, but hopelessly narrow-minded.

[I am available for guidance on French pronunciation. – Colin D.]

Albert Camus
THE MISFIT
 (aka “The Outsider”)

L'ETRANGER

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 by Colin Duckworth**

ACT ONE

The scene is a prison cell. A high bed with only a bare mattress, a rickety chair, and a slop-bucket. Left, a barred window with no glass in it. Grey light.

Meursault is sitting on the bed, staring vacantly in front of him. He has a few days' stubble. White shirt, sleeves rolled up, crumpled trousers, sneakers but no laces. Clean but not smart.

Meursault moves off the bed and crosses slowly to the barred window. He holds on to the bars, gripping them fiercely, staring out hungrily. Fade up sounds of the sea, children playing on the beach, seagulls. Fade out. Meursault turns centre.

My lawyer came to see me today. He's a plump little man, quite young, with hair plastered down. He was wearing a suit and tie in spite of the heat. He said...

Meursault now does a dialogue with the lawyer.

LAWYER: I've studied your case very carefully. It's a tricky one, but I've no doubt we'll win — if you take my advice.

MEURSAULT: Thank you.

LAWYER: Right. Let's get on with it. They've been making some enquiries about your private life. Apparently your mother died recently in a Home?

MEURSAULT: Yes, she did. What's that got to do with why I'm here?

LAWYER: Well, you see, it is alleged that you showed a lack of feeling at your mother's funeral. I find it frankly embarrassing to question you about this, but it's very important, you see? It'll be one up to the prosecution if I don't have any answer. So I need you to help me here. Were you distressed at all that day?

Light changes to warm and bright. Meursault sits on his bed again.

I remember the day she died. Or maybe she'd died the day before, I'm not sure. I got a telegram from the Home: "Mother deceased. Funeral tomorrow. Yours faithfully."

The Old People's Home at Marengo was 80 kilometres away from Algiers, so I asked the boss for two days off, which didn't please him at all, so I said, "It's not my fault."

I caught the 2 o'clock bus. It was stinking hot, and there was a couple of kays walk the other end. I wanted to see Mother straight away, but I had to wait to see the Warden first. He was a little chap with grey hair and a Legion of Honour ribbon in his lapel. He held my hand for such a long time I began to feel embarrassed. Then he looked at a file.

"Madame Meursault came here three years ago. You were her only means of support. No need to apologise for that, dear boy, young men like you don't earn much. Anyway, she was much happier here with people of her own age." That was true.

I went to see her in the mortuary, a lovely bright, clean room with whitewashed walls and a big skylight. They'd screwed the coffin down, so I told the porter not to bother to open it. He asked me "Why not?" and I said, "I don't know." He tugged at his white moustache and without looking at me he said "I understand." So he put his screwdriver back in his pocket.

Night fell very quickly. The porter flicked a switch and I was blinded by the blaze of lights. He suggested I go to the refectory to get some dinner, but I wasn't hungry, so he offered to bring me a café latte. When I'd drunk it, I felt like a smoke, but it didn't seem right with Mother lying there. I thought about it some more, and it didn't really seem to matter, so I offered a cigarette to the porter and we both had a smoke.

A dozen or so of Mother's friends sidled in silently like ghosts for the vigil. Skinny old men with walking sticks, and old women with pot bellies. Somehow the night went by. One of the women kept on making little sobbing noises. I thought she'd never stop. As dawn broke I saw the men were asleep hunched up in their

chairs. All except one. He was clasping his stick and resting his chin on his hands, and was staring at me.

When I went out the sun was up and the wind smelt of salt. It was going to be a fine day. I thought it would be lovely to go for a walk in the countryside if it wasn't for Mother.

The Warden asked me if I wanted a last look at Mother, but I said "No", and he told the undertaker's men they could go ahead. He told me the only other mourner would be Thomas Pérez. "He and your mother had become inseparable, they used to go for walks together in the cool of the evening, accompanied by a nurse, of course. He's very upset now she's dead," he explained. "But I wouldn't let him sit up with her last night, on medical advice."

I spotted Pérez standing by the hearse, an old man looking stiff and embarrassed, with a wide-brimmed hat, crumpled trousers, and a pimply nose. His big blood-red ears stood out through the wisps of white hair.

By the time the procession moved off the sun was weighing heavily upon the earth and the heat rising rapidly.

The undertaker's man asked me how old Mother was, and as I wasn't sure, I just said, "She was getting on."

All around, the same sun-drenched countryside, shimmering in the heat-haze. I couldn't stand the glare and my head was throbbing. I felt I was trapped between the blue-white of the sky and the monotonous black of the road, our hot black suits, and the shiny black hearse. Our feet sank into the tar on a newly repaired stretch of road.

Pérez had fallen behind, but kept on taking short cuts, limping across fields. When the red earth clattered down on Mother's coffin, his face was shining with tears, and then he fainted, just crumpled up like a puppet without strings.

I remember waiting for the bus outside a café, the engine rumbling, and thinking how glad I'd be when I was back in the bright lights of Algiers. I looked forward to getting to bed and sleeping solidly for twelve hours.

Grey light again. Meursault stands in front of the bed.

LAWYER: So? Were you distressed on that sad occasion?

MEURSAULT: That's an odd question. I don't know. I've got out of the habit of asking myself how I feel about anything. I was probably fond of Mother, but that doesn't mean much, does it? All normal healthy people sometimes wish those they love would die.

LAWYER (*puts up his hand*): Stop! You've got to promise me you won't say that to the examining magistrate, or at the trial.

MEURSAULT: Yes, all right. But I should explain that very often my physical state upsets the way I feel. On the day of the funeral I was worn out. Knackered. So I didn't take in what was happening. What I can say is this: I'd have preferred it if Mother hadn't died.

LAWYER: That isn't good enough. Can I say that on that day you kept your feelings under control?

MEURSAULT: No. That wouldn't be true.

LAWYER (*with impatient disgust*): You'd better know that the warden and others from the Old People's Home will be called as witnesses. That isn't going to do you any favours, to put it mildly!

MEURSAULT: I still don't see the connection between that and my case.

LAWYER: (*very annoyed*) It's obvious you don't know the first thing about how the Law works.

Meursault sits on bed.

The lawyer went off in a huff. I could see I'd annoyed him. He didn't understand me at all. I'd have liked to stop him going and tell him I wanted some sympathy, and that I was just like everyone else. But what was the point? It was too much effort.

He crosses to the window. Grips the bars, looks out. Sounds of sea, beach, seagulls. Slow fade sounds. Light a little brighter.

At 2 o'clock that day I was taken before the examining magistrate again. He told me that due to "unforeseen circumstances" my lawyer couldn't be there, so I had the right to refuse to answer any of his questions and to wait till the lawyer could attend.

I said I could answer for myself. A young clerk came in and sat right behind me and started tapping away.

Meursault crosses to the chair and places it centre stage. Sits.

The magistrate sat me down, very politely. His office was full of light that filtered in through a flimsy curtain, and it was very hot. He sat down opposite me. Then the interrogation began.

MAGISTRATE: You have the reputation of being a man of few words. What do you say to that?

MEURSAULT: I never have much to say. So I keep my mouth shut.

MAGISTRATE (*smiles*): That's a very good reason. Anyway, it's of no importance. (*Pause. He stands suddenly.*) What I really find interesting is ... you. There are things I simply don't get about the crime you committed. I'm sure you'll help me to understand.

MEURSAULT: You know, it's all very simple.

MAGISTRATE: Right. Now, I want you to think back and tell me what happened after your mother's funeral.

Lighting change to warm light.

MEURSAULT (*sits on bed*): Well, I slept in on the Saturday morning when I got back home. The previous day and night had been really exhausting. I decided to go for a swim and met a lot of young people at the pool. One of them was Marie Cardona, a girl I'd been keen on when she was a typist in our office. We had fun together, swimming and messing about. I asked her if she'd like to go to the cinema that evening and she suggested a comedy starring Fernandel. As we were getting dressed she noticed I was wearing a black armband so I told her I'd been to my mother's funeral the day before. She seemed surprised at that but didn't say anything. I felt like saying it wasn't my fault, but I didn't because it doesn't mean anything. Anyway you always feel a bit responsible for things like that, don't you? The film was quite funny, and Marie was very friendly and affectionate in the back

row, know what I mean? Then we went back to my place. When I woke up next morning, Marie had already gone, so I...

MAGISTRATE: Let me stop you there. Let's move on to the day of the murder.

MEURSAULT: Yes, all right. It was the following Sunday. Marie had to shake me and yell my name to make me wake up. We went without breakfast because we wanted to get into the sea early. I had a funny empty feeling, and a headache. My first cigarette tasted bitter. Marie laughed and said I looked like death warmed up. She was wearing a white linen dress and had her hair loose, so I told her she was pretty, and she laughed with pleasure.

On the way downstairs we knocked on my friend Raymond's door, and he said he was just coming. We were all going to the beach together. When we got out into the street the light was so blinding it hit me like a smack in the face. I suppose it was because I was so tired. Marie kept jumping up and down and saying "What a beautiful day!". Raymond was wearing blue pants and a white short-sleeved shirt that showed his hairy white arms. They rather disgusted me. He called Marie "Mademoiselle".

I'd better mention that the previous evening Raymond and I had had to go to the police station. I'd testified that the girl he'd hit had cheated on him. He got off with a warning. They didn't check my statement at all.

We were just walking to the bus stop when Raymond quietly told me to look across the street. I saw a bunch of Arabs loitering outside a tobacconist's. They stared at us, silently, the way Arabs do, as if we were blocks of stone or dead wood. Raymond looked worried and said the second from the left was the guy who was after him. Then Raymond said "That's all over and done with now." I explained to Marie that the Arabs over the road had it in for Raymond. He stuck out his chest and said we must hurry. On the bus he kept telling Marie jokes and I could see she liked him.

The beach was not far from the bus stop where we got off. We walked past rows of little cottages with green or white fences and verandas covered with tamarisk. Then we saw the sea, smooth as silk, and in the distance an immense promontory rising darkly from the clear water. Far away a little fishing boat was putting slowly across the shining sea. There were a few people bathing.

Raymond's friend, Masson, lived in a little wooden cabin at the end of the beach, right on the water's edge. Masson was a big powerful chap with a Parisian accent and a nice plump little wife.

We went swimming and had lunch, then we three men went for a walk. The sun was now overhead, and the glare from the sea was unbearable. I was half asleep, what with the sun on my bare head. Then we saw them. The Arabs. Just two of them, coming towards us. Raymond said, "That's him all right. If there's a fight, I'll take on my guy. Masson, you take the second, and Meursault, you stand by in case you're needed."

Even brighter, hot light, if possible. Meursault jumps down from the bed ready to re-enact the fight.

The sand seemed red-hot as we got closer to the Arabs. Raymond went straight up to his guy, who looked as if he was about to head-butt him, so Raymond hit him once and called out to Masson. Masson went to his man and thumped him twice. He fell down face first in the water and stayed there for a few seconds with bubbles coming up round his head. Raymond had slugged his man whose face was all bloody. Raymond turned to me and said, "He's going to get what's coming to him," and I shouted, "Look out, he's got a knife!" But it was too late, he'd slashed Raymond on his arm and his mouth. Then there was a stand-off, and the Arabs slowly retreated.

Masson took Raymond to the doctor's, while I explained to the women what had happened. Madame Masson wept, and Marie went very pale. I got fed up with talking about it and went out for a smoke and a look at the sea.

Raymond came back with bandaged arm and sticking plaster on his face, in a foul mood. He insisted on going for a walk, so I went with him. At the other end of the beach there was a little stream coming from behind a big rock and flowing over the sand. There, we found our two Arabs, stretched out in their greasy overalls. They looked very happy and peaceful. The one who'd slashed Raymond just looked at him. The other one was blowing into a little reed and playing the same three notes over and over.

For a while there was only the sun and silence, apart from the babbling stream and those three notes. Then Raymond put his hand in his revolver pocket. The others didn't move. Raymond asked me, "Shall I let him have it?"

I thought quickly, if I say "No", he'll get mad and do it anyway.

So I said, "He hasn't said a word yet. Best not to shoot him just like that."

Raymond said, "O.K., I'll insult him then when he opens his trap I'll shoot him."

I said, "Yes, O.K., but if he doesn't pull out his knife, you can't shoot."

Raymond was getting fidgety. So I said, "You take on the musician and give me your gun. If the other one pulls out his knife, I'll shoot."

The sun glinted on the revolver as he passed it to me. Nobody moved. Everything seemed to close in around us — the sun, the sand, the stream, the flute. We watched one another like hawks. Then suddenly the Arabs slipped away behind the rocks. So Raymond and I went back to the cabin. Raymond went up the steps, but I stayed down at the bottom with my head thudding from the glare. I couldn't make the effort to climb the steps, but it was hell out in that blinding light and heat. Stay there, or move, it didn't matter, same thing. After a moment, I turned back towards the beach.

Dazzling red, everywhere the same blinding glare. I walked quickly towards the rocks. I could feel my forehead about to burst full of sunlight. I gritted my teeth and clenched my fists in my pockets. I wasn't going to let that sun cast its spell over me. With each flash and reflection I set my jaw and went on walking, a long long way. Then in the distance I saw the rock, surrounded by a blinding halo of sunlight and sea spray. All I wanted was to hear the tinkling stream, to get away from the sun, the pain of making an effort, the sound and sight of weeping women. I just wanted shade and a bit of peace. *(He pauses, to calm down.)*

Then I saw Raymond's Arab. All by himself. It gave me a surprise, seeing him there — I'd thought that business was over and done with. I wasn't giving it another thought.

He was lying on his back with his face in the shadow of the rock and his body in the sun. His overalls were steaming from the heat, it was so hot. The moment he saw me he raised himself up a bit and put his hand in his pocket. Naturally, I gripped Raymond's pistol in my pocket. Then he lay back again, resting his head on his arm.

I was about ten metres away from him, and he looked blurred in the heat-haze. But I could feel his half-closed eyes fixed on me. The waves sounded even lazier and slacker than at noon. The sun hadn't moved for a couple of hours, as if it was riding at anchor in a sea of molten metal.

It occurred to me that I only had to do an about-turn and that would be it, over and done with. But there was all that beach throbbing with heat behind me, so I took a few steps towards the stream. The Arab didn't budge. After all, we were still quite a way from each other. He seemed to be laughing, but it might have been the shadows playing on his face. I waited. I could feel drops of sweat running down into my eyebrows and the sun was burning my cheeks.

It was the same sun that was beating down on Mother's funeral and my head hurt the same way and all my veins were throbbing under my skin. I couldn't stand that scorching sensation any longer, so I took a step forward. Just one step. I knew it was stupid, I knew one step wouldn't get the sun off me.

The Arab didn't get up, but he drew his knife, and held it out towards me. The sunlight trickled down the steel, and it was like a long flashing blade stabbing me in the forehead. Sweat ran down into my eyes and drew a blinding, salty veil over them. All I could feel was the sun crashing like cymbals on to my forehead and that glistening dagger picking my eyes out.

That's when everything began to go sort of hazy. A hot gust of wind hit me from the sea. It was as if the whole sky had opened up and was raining down fire. Every muscle in my body was taut, and I tightened my grip on the round, smooth butt of the revolver. The trigger moved a bit, and with a deafening cracking noise I shattered the calm and the silence of the beach where I'd been so happy. I then fired four more times into the inert body. They didn't leave any marks.

Light change back to warm office. Meursault sits.

MEURSAULT (*softly, as if to himself*) Not just once, but four times.

Silence.

MAGISTRATE (*stands, clears his throat*): Right. Meursault, I want to help you. Frankly, you interest me and with God's help I can do something for you. But first, I have a few more questions. (*Without pause*) Did you love your mother?

MEURSAULT: Well, yes, like everybody else.

MAGISTRATE: Did you fire the five shots straight off? One after the other?

MEURSAULT (*pauses to think*): I fired once first, then after a few seconds, the other four.

MAGISTRATE: Why did you wait between the first and the second?

Long silence. Meursault bows his head, puts hands over eyes.

MAGISTRATE (*irritated*): Meursault, why, why did you fire into a body lying on the ground? (*Pause*) You must tell me! Why?

(*Pause. Magistrate stands, walks over to a shelf, picks up a silver crucifix with the figure of Christ hanging from it. Holds it up towards the chair.*) Do you know who this is? (*Meursault nods. Good. (Magistrate speaks fast and with great passion.)*) I believe in God, and I am convinced that nobody, however guilty, is beyond God's forgiveness. (*With great emphasis*) But... but... for that to happen, the sinner must be like a little child, he must repent, empty his soul, and let God in.

MEURSAULT: It's no good, I don't understand any of that.

MAGISTRATE (*thundering*): Do you believe in God?

MEURSAULT: No!

MAGISTRATE: That's impossible! Everybody believes in God! Otherwise life would have no meaning. Do you want my life to have no meaning?

MEURSAULT: That's your problem. (*He mops his brow.*) Look, none of this matters, it's simply not important.

MAGISTRATE (*pushes the crucifix into Meursault's face*): As a Christian I ask Him to pardon your sins. Surely you must believe that Christ suffered for you, my dear young fellow? Don't you? (*Meursault shrugs, then nods just to stop the Magistrate going on at him.*) There, you see? You do believe, don't you? And you are going to put yourself in His hands?

MEURSAULT: No.

MAGISTRATE (*defeated. Pause.*): I have never encountered a soul as hard as yours. Even the worst criminals break down and weep when I show them Christ suffering. (*Suddenly quite cordial*) Oh well, that's all for the moment, Mr. Antichrist. (*He goes.*)

Lighting change to cell grey. Meursault goes to the window, grips the bars, looks out. Sea and beach sounds up then fade.

MEURSAULT: Marie came to visit me. I was taken down a long corridor to the visitors' room, and when I went in I was nearly knocked over by the noise of voices and the bright light bouncing off the bare walls. My cell was more peaceful. There were two rows of high grilles ten metres apart, to separate prisoners and visitors. I spotted Marie, surrounded by Moorish women. She was wearing her striped dress and her smiling face was tanned and she looked very pretty, but I couldn't tell her that.

She pressed her face against the metal grille, and shouted to me, "Well? You O.K.? Got everything you want?" So I said "Yes. All I want." Marie said "Raymond sends his best wishes," and I said, "Thanks." She went on smiling and she said, "We mustn't give up hope." I said "No, we mustn't." My eyes focused on her shoulders and I felt the urge to squeeze them through her dress. I longed to touch that thin material, it was all I had to hope for. Maybe Marie felt that too because she was still smiling. Her teeth flashed white and her eyes crinkled up as she shouted "You'll get out all right, and then we'll go swimming again."

I replied, "Do you think so?" She shouted, "Yes, you'll be acquitted, and we'll get married!"

(*Pause.*)

Married! I remembered the evening Marie came round to my flat and asked me if I'd marry her.

I said, "Yeah, O.K., if that's what you want."

Then she asked me, yet again, if I loved her.

I said, yet again, "Probably not."

"So why marry me?" she asked.

So I explained: "That isn't the least bit important. But if that's what you want, fine."

"Marriage is a serious thing," she said, and I said, "No, it isn't."

She said she wondered if she loved me, and I told her I couldn't help her there.

I remember she said, "You're a strange boy. Maybe that's why I love you."

(Pause.)

Here in the visitors' room people were yelling all the time around us, prisoners and wives and mothers. I wasn't feeling too well and wanted to go, but at the same time I wanted to make the most of it while Marie was there. She told me about what she was doing at work, and never stopped smiling. Then it was my turn to go. Marie blew me a kiss. I looked back just before I went out and saw her standing there with her face pressed up against the grille, still with that fixed, tortured smile on her lips.

Soon after, I got a letter from Marie saying they wouldn't let her visit me again because she wasn't my wife. From that time on I felt that my cell was my home and my life would end there. Even so, I began to get strange thoughts, as if I was a free man. I'd suddenly think, "Oh, I'll go to the beach and have a swim." I'd hear the little waves lapping round my feet and have the wonderful liberating feeling of plunging into the sea. Then I'd feel the walls of my cell closing in round me. But I mustn't grumble. There are worse off than me. That's what Mother used to say: you end up getting used to anything life throws at you.

The first months were the hardest. I longed for a woman, like any young bloke would. Not Marie in particular, any of the women I'd had. My cell became full of their faces. I lusted after them but had to manage by myself. Women — and cigarettes. "No smoking allowed" they said. I even had to tear bits of wood off my bed and suck them. But the moment I realised this was part of the punishment, the craving left me.

How to kill time — that was the big problem. But I solved it thanks to memory. Yeah, remembering things. I'd think of my bedroom at home, start in one corner and go right round counting off every object in it. First I got through it in no time, but then I'd recall details. The grain in the wood of each article of furniture, every crack and chip and colour. I came to realise that one day's experience would provide enough memories for a hundred years in prison. No need to get bored.

Pause.

Evening. This is always the hardest time of day. When sounds shuffle up to me from all over the prison, quietly, through the dusk. But I can hear one voice quite distinctly, ringing in my ears. I haven't heard it for months. Yes — of course — it's my own voice! I must have been talking to myself for days and days.

Five months passed. Another summer came in. My case was set for the last session of the Assizes in June. My lawyer said it wouldn't take more than two or three days, as it wasn't the most important one. They would want to get on with an interesting case of parricide immediately after mine.

INTERVAL

ACT TWO

Meursault sitting on his bed. Grey cell light.

At 7.30 in the morning they came and took me to the law courts in the prison van. One of the policemen asked me if I was scared, and I said No, I was interested to see what a trial was like. The other cop said, "You'll have had enough of it before long".

When a little bell rang, they took off my handcuffs, opened a door, and there I was in the dock. The courtroom was full to bursting. Opposite me was a row of faces, staring at me intently, and I guessed they were the jury. Of course, I realised they were looking for signs of criminality in me. I felt a bit dizzy in that stuffy room with that crowd. I couldn't pick out any face I knew. All those people were there because of me! The cop standing next to me said it was because of the Press. He beckoned to one of the journalists who came over to us and said he hoped things would go well for me. I thanked him, and he added, "We've been featuring your story a bit. Summer's the silly season and there's not much else to cover. Just you and the young guy who killed his father, coming up next."

My lawyer arrived, dressed up in his gown. He chatted to a few journalists, it was all very relaxed. Then he came and shook me by the hand and advised me to stick to short answers, to keep to the point, and otherwise leave it to him.

A chair scraped on my left. It was the public prosecutor, a tall thin man in a red gown and pince-nez on his nose. There were three judges, two in black and one in scarlet who sat in the middle. He put his cap down on the table, wiped his little bald head with his handkerchief, and we were off.

The judge called out the names of the witnesses. Some of them surprised me. In the crowd I spotted Raymond, Masson, the porter at the Old People's Home, old Pérez, and Marie. She gave me an anxious little wave.

It was getting hotter by the minute, and people were fanning themselves with newspapers. The interrogation began straight away. The presiding judge said he was there to run the proceedings with impartiality and objectivity, and that he'd clear the court if there were any interruptions.

He began to ask me questions, in quite a friendly way, I thought. I had to say my name, yet again, which annoyed me till I reasoned it wouldn't be very good if they tried the wrong man. Then the judge went through the incident in a lot of detail, asking me every couple of sentences "Is that right?" and I answered "Yes, your Honour," as my lawyer had told me to. The journalists scribbled away.

Then the chief judge said he had to bring up matters that might seem irrelevant to my case but might in fact have a lot to do with it. I just knew he was going to talk about Mother again, and that really bugged me. (*With mock resignation.*) Why did I put her in a Home? Because I couldn't afford to keep her and care for her. Did that make me unhappy? No, Mother and I didn't expect anything from one another, or anyone else for that matter, and we soon got used to life apart.

He asked the prosecutor if he had any questions. He said Yes, and with his back half turned towards me, not even looking at me, he asked: "Did you return to the stream with the intention of killing the Arab?" I said No. "In that case, why were you armed? And why go back to that precise spot?" I said that was pure chance. Then the prosecutor said, "That will be all for the moment," in a nasty tone of voice.

It was much hotter in the afternoon, and I switched off until I heard the warden of the Home called. They asked him if Mother reproached me for putting her in there, and he said Yes, she did, but he added that the inmates regularly complained about their relatives. In response to another question he said he was surprised how calm I'd been the day of the funeral. I hadn't wanted to see Mother, I didn't shed one tear, and I'd left her grave straight away without paying my respects. What's more, he said, I didn't know how old she was. When he'd finished I wanted to weep, for the first time in years, because I sensed how much everyone there hated me.

Then came the porter, who told all about me smoking and drinking a cup of coffee, which the prosecutor said was a terrible thing to do beside the body of the woman who'd given birth to me.

Marie was next. She looked pretty in her hat but I liked her better with her hair free. I could just make out the shape of her small round breasts. Her lower lip had that fullness I knew so well. She seemed very nervous.

The judge asked her how long she'd known me. Since the time she used to work in our office, she said. What was her connection with me? "I'm his girlfriend," she said, "we're going to get married."

Then that prosecutor got up and asked her bluntly when we'd first slept together. She didn't want to answer, but he said that even though he quite understood this was a delicate area, it was his duty to insist. So she gave the date. He said, in a casual sort of way, "That's to say, the day after the accused's mother died. Tell the court," he ordered, "exactly what the two of you did that day." Marie had no choice, so she went through the things we had done that day: went for a swim, then to the cinema, then back to my place. "Which film did you see?" he asked, although he obviously knew already. We could hardly hear her reply, it was so soft: "A comedy with Fernandel."

The courtroom fell silent. The prosecutor put on a very serious expression and pointed at me. "Gentlemen of the jury, the day after his mother died, that man went swimming, began a sexual affair with a girl, and went to have a laugh at a funny film. That is all I have to say."

Marie burst into tears and protested that it wasn't like that at all, she'd been forced to say the opposite of what she thought, she knew me well and I hadn't done anything wrong. But the judge told the usher to take her out.

Then it was Raymond's turn. The last witness. He said straight out I was innocent, but the chief judge told him he was here to give evidence, not opinions, and he must restrict himself to answering questions. The judge asked him what his job was, and he said "Storeman". What was his relationship with the victim? He replied that the Arab had it in for him, not me, because he had slapped his sister. It was pure chance I was on the beach. Then the prosecutor stood up and asked him, "How is it that the letter which had been the root cause of this drama was written by the accused?" Again, Raymond said it was chance.

Takes on prosecutor's voice and stance.

PROSECUTOR: It seems chance has a lot an answer for in this case. Was it by chance that your friend Meursault didn't intervene when you assaulted your mistress? Was it by chance that he testified in your favour at the police station? By chance that his statement proved unreliable? You describe yourself as a storeman; it is generally known you earn your living as a pimp. And your accomplice is... your

good friend, your *mate* Meursault, the accused! What we have here, gentlemen of the jury, is a sordid drama in which this witness, Raymond Sintès, a moral monster, played the main part!

And his *mate*, Meursault, the man who engaged in shameful debauchery with his mistress the very day after his mother died, acted in collusion, committed murder in cold blood, just to settle a score in a most squalid and immoral affair. Is there, you ask, any connection between his attitude at his mother's funeral and the murder? Yes, there is! A profound and fundamental connection. At his mother's graveside, the accused already revealed that he has the callous heartlessness of a criminal mind.

Meursault is himself again.

The next day we had the final speeches for and against. It's interesting hearing yourself being talked about, even if you're in the dock, but it soon gets boring. They both talked more about me than about the murder. The truth is there wasn't much difference between the two speeches.

What the prosecutor was aiming at, basically, was to prove I'd acted with premeditation. He went through the facts yet again, very cleverly skewing everything, distorting it. He kept talking about "the prisoner's mistress" when he meant Marie! One thing that puzzled me was when he asked the jury to remember that I was an intelligent, educated man who knew the value of words, so I must have been aware of what I was doing. That's odd, I thought: being intelligent counts against me!

He was quite indignant that I'd shown no remorse. He wagged his finger at me and in my view he went over the top. Well, he was right, I wasn't very sorry for what I'd done, but I'd have liked to point out to him, with all due respect of course, that I have never in my life been able to regret anything. I've always been too bound up in the here and now and what's going to happen next to bother about the past.

The prosecutor went on to say that he'd looked into my soul and hadn't found anything there. No soul, nothing human, and no moral principles. "In my view," he said, "this man who was morally guilty of killing his mother set a precedent for the man whose case is due to come up tomorrow, the one who killed his father."

Then the prosecutor wiped the sweat from his face, raised his hands and demanded a verdict of "Guilty of premeditated murder, with no extenuating circumstances."

When he sat down there was a hush. I was overcome by the heat and by what I'd heard. Then the chief judge gave a little cough and asked me gently if I had anything to say. I said I hadn't intended to kill the Arab. He said he was having difficulty understanding the basis of my defence so he'd be happy to hear the precise reasons for what I'd done.

I spoke too fast, tripped over my words, realised I was making a fool of myself, and ended up saying it was because of the sun. That made a few people laugh. My lawyer had warned me at the start it would be better if I kept my mouth shut. It seemed like there was a plot to exclude me from my own case and replace me by my lawyer.

It was his turn to address the court and speak on my behalf. Frankly, I thought he was laughable, not half as clever as the prosecutor. He pleaded provocation, and then turned to my soul as well. What he found there was quite different from the prosecutor: I was a decent young man, a model employee, popular, and a sympathetic friend, always willing to lend a hand or ear to those in trouble. He found me to be a model son — I'd supported my old mother for as long as I was able, then handed her over to the care of a retirement home in the hope she would enjoy a more comfortable life than I could give her. Unfortunately, he didn't mention the funeral at all.

However, he used such a lot of long sentences, and what with the interminable hours and days and all this talk about my soul, I lost interest. I heard an ice cream van outside, and suddenly I was overwhelmed by memories of a life I was no longer part of — the smells of summer, the colour of the evening sky, the neighbourhood I lived in, Marie's laughter and the dresses she wore. The sheer futility of these court proceedings sickened me. I just wanted them over and done with and get back to my cell and sleep. My lawyer finally raised his arms and pleaded "Guilty but with extenuating circumstances".

The judges went out and I was taken back to the little waiting room. My lawyer was confident things had gone well for us, and said if not we could always appeal. After forty-five minutes the bell rang. The chief judge announced in a funny sort of

way that in the name of the French People I was to have my head cut off in a public place. Everyone looked very sympathetic. Even the policemen handled me gently. My mind was a blank when the judge asked me if I had anything to say, so I just said "No".

Then they led me away.

Lighting back to cell grey.

Months have passed. Day after day I have thought about my appeal. Would it be dismissed? Whenever I thought it would be, I tried to convince myself that life wasn't worth living anyway, they could stuff it! You die at 30 or at 70, what does it matter? But when I opened myself up to the other possibility, that my appeal would succeed, I got into an unbearable state of pure joy and had to forcibly calm myself down.

Eventually I grew tired of constantly swinging from resignation to elation, so I took the decision myself: I said I didn't want to appeal. Then I could feel my blood coursing through my veins steadily again. For the first time in months I thought of Marie. She'd given up writing to me. I suppose she'd got tired of being the mistress of a man about to have his head chopped off. Or perhaps she was ill, or had died? So what? I couldn't care less. If she was dead she didn't interest me any more, just like nobody would care about me once I was dead.

The prison chaplain had tried several times to see me and I'd always refused point blank. But he finally came to see me anyway. He seemed very nice and friendly. He sat himself on my bed and asked me to sit next to him, which I refused to do. He asked me why I'd refused to see him, and I said I didn't believe in God. The subject simply didn't interest me, I said.

He asked, "What does interest you?" and I told him, "I don't know what interests me, but I do know what doesn't."

Then he said, "You speak like that because you are in a state of despair."

"Not at all," I said, "I'm afraid, but that's only natural."

"In that case, God can help you," he said. "I've seen that often with people in your situation."

I said they had the right to do what they wanted, but I didn't have time to take up a new interest.

Then he stood up suddenly. "So you really have no hope? You believe that you are going to be completely extinguished when you die?"

I said "Yes".

He couldn't accept that anyone could believe that. All I knew was that he was beginning to bore me. But he began to speak again, and I could tell he was very emotional, so I listened a bit more carefully.

"I'm sure your appeal would be successful," he assured me, "but you carry the weight of a sin that you must atone for. Human justice means nothing, divine justice is everything."

I pointed out that it was human justice that put me in here, and anyway I didn't know what sin meant. I was guilty of a crime, I was paying the penalty, and nobody could expect more of me.

"You are wrong!" he thundered, "in these stones around you, stones that sweat suffering, you will see the divine countenance. That's what is expected of you!"

Then I really got fired up. "I've been looking at these bloody walls for months, I know them better than anybody. A long time ago I looked for a face in them, one that had the warm light of the sun and the heat of desire. It was my girl's face. But I looked in vain. So I've finished with that. There's no face in these walls, and no point hoping in life to come."

He wanted to talk to me about God again, but I stopped him pretty smartly. "For the last time," I said, "I don't have much time left, and I don't intend to waste it on God."

When he put his hand on my shoulder and said he'd pray for me, something burst inside me. I yelled at him, swore at him, and ordered him not to pray for me. I took him by the collar of his cassock and poured out torrents of heartfelt joy and anger.

He addresses the invisible chaplain, with increasing speed and intensity.

You are so certain you're right, aren't you? Well, not one of your certainties is worth one hair of a woman's head. But I'm certain too, in fact I'm more sure than you are, sure of myself, sure of everything, sure of my life and sure of my approaching death. It is suddenly dawning on me I possess the truth and the truth possesses me. It's as if I've always been waiting for this revelation.: nothing, absolutely nothing has the

slightest importance, and now I know why. You know why as well. During the whole of my absurd and meaningless life, a mysterious wind has been blowing over me from the years yet to come. And that wind is — the great equaliser, yes, it has levelled to the ground the ideas forced into me during those years. Nothing matters to me any more — the death of other people, a mother's love, your god, the life one leads, the fate one chooses. The same fate befalls me and millions of privileged people who say they're my brothers, as you do. Do you understand what I'm saying? Eh? Everybody's privileged. And everybody will be condemned, including you. What's it matter if a murderer is executed because he didn't weep at his mother's funeral? Or if Marie is kissing some new Meursault? You've been condemned as well, so you must understand what I'm trying to say?..."

Silence. Meursault sags.

But they were already dragging me off the chaplain. He looked at me with tears in his eyes, then left.

Meursault lies full length on his bed. Light dims — just his face is visible as he stares upwards. Distant sounds of police or ambulance sirens and of a city awakening. Fade sound.

That outburst of anger calmed me down. It purged me of a sickness, it emptied me of hope. I look up through the roof-light of my little cell at the dark sky full of signs and stars, and I can feel, *feel* the affectionate indifference of the universe.

It is just like me! Like a brother! For the first time I realise I have been happy. And I still am.

All that remains now, the only thing that will make me feel less alone, is that there will be a big crowd at my execution, and that they will welcome me... with howls of hatred and loathing.

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