

who'd promised to take the same tests at the same time as I did, was forced to postpone this one, to his fury, because he hadn't followed the instruction to fast before having the test. He waited while they finished with me. Looking over my lab slip, the nurse asked me, "How long have you known that you're seropositive?" I was so surprised I couldn't answer her. The results of the blood analysis were to be sent to us in about ten days, before the results of the seropositivity test would be known, in that precise interval of uncertainty, or feigned uncertainty, and since I couldn't have the blood analysis lab report sent to my apartment, because my mail there was being automatically forwarded to Rome, I'd given Jules's address as my own, and he kept the results of my analysis (which he'd pored over attentively) to himself until the morning we went to find out about the seropositivity tests. I picked him up at his home in a taxi, and it was while we were on our way to the dispensary run by Médecins du Monde on the Rue du Jura that he told me my blood workup wasn't good, that they'd already seen the bad news there even without knowing the results of the other test. At that instant I understood that a calamity had hit us, that we were beginning a period of rampant misfortune from which there would be no escape. I was like that poor boy devastated by his test results, apparently on his feet, but laid low on that bit of sidewalk that kept cracking and heaving under him. I felt an immense pity for us. What frightened me the most was that I knew, despite everything he'd said to steel me for the death sentence, that Jules still hoped our tests, or perhaps his, would turn out negative. We each had in our pockets a piece of cardboard with a number, to which we'd refused to attach any good or bad luck during the whole week of waiting. A doctor was going to open an envelope with the same number containing the verdict, and it was his job to pass on this verdict using

the appropriate psychological recipe. A daily newspaper published a study showing that about 10 percent of the people taking the test in this center were seropositive, but that this figure wasn't symptomatic for the general population, given that the center was geared precisely to the fringe populations considered to be most at risk. Since I didn't like the doctor who gave me my results, of course I took the news calmly so that I could escape as soon as possible from this man who did his work on the assembly line, thirty seconds and a smile plus a brochure for the seronegatives, a five- to fifteen-minute "personalized" interview for the seropositives: asking me if I lived alone, showering me with ads for Dr. Nacier's new association, and advising me (to deaden the blow) to come back the following week, time enough for them to do a follow-up test that might contradict the first one (there was one chance in a hundred, he said). I don't know what happened in the cubicle where Jules was, however, and in fact I didn't want to find out, but I'd finished with my interview and watched the door as it opened and shut several times while people rushed in and out, so I could see that Jules's presence in that little room was creating a huge disturbance in the center, as the receptionist called for a second doctor, and then a social worker. I think that Jules, who seemed so strong, fainted dead away when he heard a stranger tell him what he already knew, that when this certainty became official, even though it remained anonymous, it became intolerable. That was probably the hardest thing to bear in this new era of misfortune that awaited us: to feel one's friend, one's brother, so broken by what was happening to him—that was physically revolting. I went along with Jules to the Ruggieri fireworks store on Boulevard du Montparnasse, where he planned to buy novelties and firecrackers for his children for the coming Mardi Gras Carnival.