

THE  
VACATIONERS

*Emma Straub*

PICADOR

## *Day One*

LEAVING ALWAYS CAME AS A SURPRISE, NO MATTER HOW long the dates had been looming on the calendar. Jim had packed his suitcase the night before, but now, moments before their scheduled departure, he was wavering. Had he packed enough books? He walked back and forth in front of the bookshelf in his office, pulling novels out by their spines and then sliding them back into place. Had he packed his running shoes? Had he packed his shaving cream? Elsewhere in the house, Jim could hear his wife and their daughter in similar last-minute throes of panic, running up and down the stairs with one last item that had been forgotten in a heap by the door.

There were things that Jim would have taken out of his bags, if it had been possible: the last year of his life, and the five before that, when it came to his knees; the way Franny looked at him across the dinner table at night; the feeling of himself

inside a new mouth for the first time in three decades, and how much he wanted to stay there; the emptiness waiting on the other side of the return flight, the blank days he would have to fill and fill and fill. Jim sat down at his desk and waited for someone to tell him that he was needed elsewhere.



Sylvia waited in front of the house, staring down 75th Street, toward Central Park. Both of her parents were the type that believed that a taxi would always present itself at just the right moment, especially on summer weekends, when traffic in the city was lightest. Sylvia thought that was horseshit. The only thing worse than spending two of her last six weeks before leaving for college on vacation with her parents would be missing the flight and having to spend one of those final nights sleeping upright in an airport lounge, a stained seat cushion as her only comfort. She would get the taxi herself.

It wasn't as if she wanted to spend the whole summer in Manhattan, which turned into a melting concrete armpit. The idea of Mallorca was appealing, in theory: it was an island, which promised little waves and nice breezes, and she could practice her Spanish, which she had done well in during high school. Everyone—literally everyone—from her graduating class was doing nothing all summer long, just taking turns hosting parties when their parents went to Wainscott or Woodstock or somewhere else with wood-shingled houses that

looked distressed on purpose. Sylvia had looked at their faces enough for the last eighteen years, and couldn't wait to get the hell out. Sure, yes, there were four other kids from her class going to Brown, but she never had to speak to them again if she didn't want to, and that was the plan. Find new friends. Make a new life. Finally be somewhere where the name Sylvia Post came without the ghosts of the girl she'd been at sixteen, at twelve, at five, where she was detached from her parents and her brother and she could just be, like an astronaut floating in space, unencumbered by gravity. Come to think of it, Sylvia wished that they were spending the whole summer abroad. This way, she would still have to suffer through August at home, when the parties were sure to reach their weepy and desperate apex. Sylvia did not plan to weep.

A taxi with its light on rounded the corner and came slowly toward her, bouncing its way over the potholes. Sylvia stuck one arm in the air and dialed her home phone number with her other hand. It rang and rang, and was ringing still when the taxi came to a halt. Her parents were inside, doing god knows what. Sylvia opened the door to the taxi and leaned into the backseat.

"It'll just be a minute," she said. "Sorry. My parents are on their way out." She paused. "They're the worst." This had not always been true, but it was now, and she wasn't shy about saying so.

The taxi driver nodded and clicked the meter on, clearly happy to sit there all day, if need be. The cab would have been

blocking traffic, but there was no traffic to block. Sylvia was the only person in the city who seemed to be in a hurry. She hit redial, and this time her father answered after the first ring.

“Let’s go,” she said, without waiting for him to speak. “Car’s here.”

“Your mother is taking her time,” Jim said. “We’ll be out in five.”

Sylvia clicked the phone off and scooped her way across the backseat of the taxi.

“They’re on their way,” she said. Sylvia leaned back and closed her eyes, feeling some of her hair catch on a piece of duct tape that was holding the seat together. It seemed like a genuine possibility that only one of her parents would come out of the house, and that would be it, the whole thing wrapped up like a shitty soap opera, with no satisfying resolution.

The meter ticked away, and they sat in silence, Sylvia and the taxi driver, for ten whole minutes. When Franny and Jim finally came bustling out of the house, the horns of all the cars now stalled behind the cab acted as a processional march, scolding and triumphant. Franny slid in next to her daughter, and Jim sat up front, the knees of his khakis pressing against the dashboard. Sylvia was neither happy nor unhappy to have both of her parents in the taxi, but she did experience a moment of relief, not that she would have admitted it out loud.

“*On y va!*” Franny said, pulling the door shut behind her.

“That’s French,” Sylvia said. “We’re going to Spain.”

“*Andale!*” Franny was already perspiring, and she fanned at

her armpits with their passports. She was wearing her traveling outfit, carefully honed over flights and train rides in all corners of the world: a pair of black leggings, a black cotton tunic that reached her knees, and a gauzy scarf to keep her warm on the airplane. When Sylvia once asked her mother about her immutable travel habits, her mother spat back, "At least I don't travel with a handle of whiskey like Joan Didion." When people asked what kind of writer her mother was, Sylvia usually said that she was like Joan Didion, only with an appetite, or like Ruth Reichl, but with an attitude problem. She did not say this to her mother.

The taxi pulled forward.

"No, no, no," Franny said, yanking her body toward the plexiglass divider. "Make a left here, then left again on Central Park West. We want to go to the airport, not New Jersey. Thank you." She sank back against the seat. "Some people," she said quietly, and stopped there. No one said anything for the rest of the ride, except to answer which airline they were flying to Madrid.

Sylvia always liked driving to the airport, because it meant traveling through a whole different part of the city, as separate from the corner she knew as Hawaii from the rest of the United States. There were detached houses and chain-link fences and abandoned lots, and kids riding their bikes in the street. It seemed like the kind of place people drove their cars to, which thrilled Sylvia to no end. Having a car sounded like something out of the movies. Her parents had had a car when she

was little, but it grew creaky and expensive in the garage, and they'd finally sold it when she was still too young to appreciate what a luxury it was. Now whenever Franny or Jim spoke to someone who kept a car in Manhattan, they reacted with quiet horror, like people who'd been subjected to the rantings of a mentally ill person at a cocktail party.



Jim did his exercise walk around Terminal 7. He walked, or ran, for an hour every morning, and he didn't see why today should be any exception. It was something he and his son had in common, the need to move their bodies, to feel strong. Franny and Sylvia were quite content to sloth themselves into oblivion, to ossify on the sofa with a book or the godforsaken television blasting away. He could hear their muscles beginning to atrophy, but then, miraculously, they could still walk, and did, when properly motivated. Jim's usual route took him into Central Park, up to the reservoir, then across and back down the east side of the park, looping around the boathouse on his way home. The terminal had no such scenery to speak of, and no wildlife, save the few confused birds that had snuck their way in and were now trapped at JFK forever, chirping at one another about airplanes and misery. Jim kept his elbows high and his pace brisk. He was always astonished at how slowly people moved at airports—it was like being held captive in a shopping mall, all wide asses and deranged children. There

were a few leashes, which Jim actually appreciated, though in conversation he would agree with Franny that such things were degrading. In practice, parents yanked their children out of Jim's path, and he walked on and on, past the Hudson News and the sports bar, all the way to the Au Bon Pain and back. The moving sidewalks were too crowded with luggage, so Jim walked just beside them, his long legs nearly beating the motorized track.

Jim had previously been to Spain on three occasions: in 1970, when he graduated from high school and spent the summer bumming around Europe with his best friend; in 1977, when he and Franny were newlyweds and could barely afford to go and had nothing but the very best ham sandwiches in the world; and then in 1992, when Bobby was eight, and they'd had to go to bed early every night, which meant they didn't eat a proper dinner for a week, except for what they ordered in from room service, which was about as authentically Spanish as a *hamburguesa*. Who knew what Spain would be like now, its economic situation almost as tender as the Greeks'. Jim walked past their assigned gate and saw Franny and Sylvia deeply engaged in their books, sitting next to each other but not speaking, as comfortable being silent as only family members can be. Despite the many reasons not to, it was good that they were making this trip, he and Franny agreed. In the fall, Sylvia would be in Providence, smoking clove cigarettes with boys from her French cinema class, as far away from her parents as if she were in another galaxy. Her older brother, Bobby, now waist-deep



in swampy Floridian real estate, had done it, too. At first, the separations seemed impossible, like severing a limb, but then it was off, and walking, and running, and now Jim could hardly remember what it was like to have Bobby under his roof. He hoped he would never feel that way about Sylvia, but he guessed that he would, and sooner than he might admit. The greater fear was that when Sylvia was gone, and the whole world began to be dismantled, brick by brick, that the time they had all spent together would seem like a fantasy, someone else's comfortably imperfect life.

It would be all of them in Mallorca: he and Franny, Sylvia, Bobby and Carmen, his albatross of a girlfriend, and Franny's dear friend Charles and his boyfriend, Lawrence. Husband. They were married now, Jim sometimes forgot. They had all rented a house thirty minutes outside of Palma from Gemma Something-or-other, a British woman Franny knew a bit, an old friend of Charles's. The place looked clean in the photographs Gemma had sent via e-mail, sparsely furnished but with a good eye: white walls, odd rock clusters on the mantel, low leather sofas. The woman was in the art world, like Charles, and relaxed about having strangers in her house in a way that felt distinctly European, which made the whole exchange remarkably easy. All Jim and Fran had had to do was send a check, and it was all settled, the house and garden and swimming pool and a local Spanish tutor for Sylvia. Charles told them that Gemma would have been equally likely to let them have the house for nothing at all, but it was better this way, and

a million times simpler than preparing Sylvia for summer camp had been those years ago.

Two weeks was enough time, a good solid chunk. It had been a month since Jim's last day at *Gallant*, and the days had passed so slowly, dripping in molasses, sticking to every possible surface, unwilling to let go. Two weeks away would make Jim feel like he had made a change and chosen this new, free life, like so many people his age did. He was still slim at sixty, pale blond hair still mostly intact, if a bit thin. It had always been thin, though, as Franny sometimes said when she caught Jim patting it in the mirror. He could run as many miles as he could at forty, and he could tie a bow tie in under a minute. All told, he thought he was in pretty good shape. Two weeks away was just what he needed.

Jim circled back around to the gate and let himself drop into the seat next to Franny, which made her shift on her bottom, swiveling her hips slightly so that her crossed legs were pointing toward Sylvia. Franny was reading *Don Quixote* for her book club, a group of women she despised, and she made little clucking noises as she read, perhaps anticipating the mediocre discussion that would follow.

"Have you really not read it before?" Jim asked.

"When I was in college. Who remembers?" Franny flipped the page.

"It's funny, I think," Sylvia said. Her parents turned to look at her. "We read it in the fall. It's funny and pathetic. Sort of like *Waiting for Godot*, you know?"

“Mm-hmm,” Franny said, looking back to the book.

Jim made eye contact with Sylvia over Franny’s head and rolled his eyes. The flight would board soon, and then they’d be suspended in air. Having a daughter whose company he actually enjoyed was one of Jim’s favorite accomplishments. The odds were against you, in all matters of family planning. You couldn’t choose to have a boy or a girl; you couldn’t choose to have a child who favored you over the other parent. You could only accept what came along naturally, and Sylvia had done just that, ten years after her brother. Bobby liked to use the word *accident*, but Jim and Franny preferred the word *surprise*, like a birthday party filled with balloons. They had been surprised, that much was true. The woman at the gate picked up her microphone and announced the pre-boarding call.

Franny closed her book and immediately began to gather her belongings—she liked to be among the first on board, as if she would have to elbow someone else for her assigned seat. It was the principle, Franny said. She wanted to get where she was going as quickly as possible, not like all these other lollygaggers who seemed like they’d be just as happy to stay in the airport forever, buying overpriced bottles of water and magazines they would eventually abandon in a seat pocket.



Jim and Franny sat side by side in reclining pods, seats that lowered almost completely flat, with Franny at the window and

Jim on the aisle. Franny traveled enough to accrue the kind of frequent-flier miles that would make lesser women weep with envy, but she would have gladly paid for the larger seats regardless. Sylvia was thirty rows behind them, in coach. Teenagers and younger children did not need to sit in business class, let alone first—that was Franny’s philosophy. The extra room was for people who could appreciate it, truly appreciate it, and she did. Sylvia’s bones were still pliable—she could easily contort herself into a comfortable enough shape to fall asleep. Franny didn’t give it another thought.

The plane was somewhere over the ocean, and the dramatic sunset had already completed its pink-and-orange display. The world was dark, and Jim stared over Franny’s shoulder at the vast nothingness. Franny took sleeping pills, so that she could wake up feeling rested and have a leg up on the inevitable jet lag. She’d swallowed the Ambien earlier than usual, immediately following takeoff, and was now fast asleep, snoring with her parted lips toward the window, her padded silk eye mask tethered to her head with a taut elastic band.

Jim unbuckled his seat belt and stood up to stretch his legs. He walked to the back of the first-class cabin and pulled aside the curtain to peer at the rest of the plane. Sylvia was so far back that he couldn’t see her from where he stood, so he walked farther, and farther, until he could make her out. Hers was the only light on in the last several rows of the plane, and Jim found himself climbing over sleeping passengers’ socked feet as he made his way to his daughter.

“Hey,” he said, putting his hand on the seat in front of Sylvia’s. She had her earbuds in, and nodded to the music, creating a shadow on the open pages of her notebook. She was writing, and hadn’t noticed him approach.

Jim touched her on the shoulder. Startled, she looked up and yanked the white cord, pulling the headphones out. Tiny streams of music, unrecognizable to him, poured out of her lap. Sylvia hit an invisible button, and the music stopped. She folded her notebook closed and then crossed her wrists on top of it, further blocking her father’s vision of her most intimate inner thoughts.

“Hey,” she said. “What’s up?”

“Not much,” Jim said, crouching down to an uncomfortable squat, his back braced against the seat across the aisle. Sylvia didn’t like seeing her father’s body in unusual positions. She didn’t like to think about the fact that her father had a body at all. Not for the first time in the last few months, Sylvia wished that her wonderful father, whom she loved very much, was in an iron lung and able to be moved only when someone else was nice enough to wheel him around.

“Mom asleep?”

“Of course.”

“Are we there yet?”

Jim smiled. “Few more hours. Not so bad. Maybe you should try to sleep a little.”

“Yeah,” Sylvia said. “You, too.”

Jim patted her again, his long, squared-off fingers cupping

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Sylvia's shoulder, which made her flinch. He turned to walk back to his seat, but Sylvia called after him by way of apology, though she wasn't quite sure if she was sorry.

"It's going to be fine, Dad. We'll have a good time."

Jim nodded at her, and began the slow trip back to his seat.

When he was safely gone, Sylvia opened her notebook again and went back to the list she'd been making: Things to Do Before College. So far, there were only four entries: 1. Buy extra-long sheets. 2. Fridge? 3. Get a tan. (Fake?) (Ha, kill me first.) (No, kill my parents.) 4. Lose virginity. Sylvia underlined the last item on the list and then drew some squiggles in the margin. That about covered it.

## *Day Two*

MOST OF THE OTHER PASSENGERS ON THE SMALL PLANE from Madrid to Mallorca were nattily dressed, white-haired Spaniards and Brits in frameless glasses headed to their vacation homes, along with a large clutch of noisy Germans who seemed to think they were headed for spring break. Across the aisle from Franny and Jim were two men in heavy black leather jackets, both of whom kept turning around to shout obscenity-laced slang at their leather-jacketed friend in the row behind. Their jackets were covered with sewn-on patches with acronyms for various associations that Franny gathered had to do with riding motorcycles—one with a picture of a wrench, one with a Triumph logo, several with pictures of Elvis. Franny narrowed her eyes at the men, trying to summon the look that said *It Is Too Early for Your Voice to Be So Loud*. The most boisterous of the three was sitting by the window, a moon-

faced redhead with the complexion of a marathon runner in his twenty-fifth mile.

“Oi, Terry,” he said, reaching over the seatback to smack his dozing friend on the head. “Napping’s fer babies!”

“Yeah, well, you’d know all about it, then, wouldn’t ya?” The sleeping friend picked his face up off his hand, revealing a creased cheek. He turned toward Franny and glowered. “Morning,” he said. “Hope you’re enjoying your in-flight entertainment.”

“Are you an actual motorcycle gang?” Jim asked, leaning across the aisle. Younger editors at *Gallant* were always pitching features that had them test-driving expensive speed machines, but Jim had never ridden one himself.

“You could say that,” the sleepy one said.

“I always wanted to have a motorcycle. Never happened.”

“Not too late.” Then the sleepy one returned his face to his hand and began to snore.

Franny rolled her eyes aggressively, but no one else was paying attention.

The ride was quick, and they landed in sun-drenched Palma in under an hour. Franny put on her sunglasses and shambled from the tarmac to the baggage claim like a movie star who had relaxed into stout-bodied middle age. Commercial airlines were about as glamorous as Greyhound buses, but she could pretend. Franny had taken the Concorde twice, to Paris and back, and mourned the loss of the supersonic speed and the elaborately presented airplane food. Everyone in Palma seemed



to be speaking German, and for a moment, Franny worried that they'd gotten off at the wrong place, as if she'd been asleep on the subway and missed her stop. It was a proper Mediterranean morning, bright and warm, with a hint of olive oil in the air. Franny felt pleased with her choice of venue: Mallorca was less cliché than the South of France, and less overrun by Americans than Tuscany. Of course it had an overbuilt shoreline and its share of terrible tourist-infested restaurants, but they would avoid all that. Islands, being harder to get to, naturally separated some of the wheat from the chaff, which was the entire philosophy behind places like Nantucket, where children grew up feeling entitled to private beaches and loud pants. But Franny didn't want too much of that elitist hooey—she wanted to please everyone, including the children, which meant having a big enough town nearby that people could go see movies dubbed into Spanish, if they wanted to fly the coop for a few hours. Jim had grown up in Connecticut and was therefore used to being marooned with his terrible family, but the rest of them were New Yorkers, which meant that having an escape route was necessary for one's sanity.

The house they'd rented was a twenty-minute drive from Palma proper, "straight up a hill," according to Gemma, which made Franny groan, averse as she was to location-mandated forms of cardiovascular exercise. But who needed to walk anywhere when they had so many bedrooms, and a swimming pool, within minutes of the ocean? The idea had been to be together, everyone nicely trapped, with card games and wine and

all the fixings of satisfying summers at their fingertips. Things had changed in the last few months, but Franny still wanted it to be true that spending time with her family wasn't punishment, not like it would be with her parents, or with Jim's. Franny thought that the major accomplishment of her life was producing two children who seemed to like each other even when no one else was looking, though with ten years between them, Sylvia and Bobby had had very separate childhoods. Maybe that was the key to all good relationships, having oceans of time apart. It might not even have been true anymore—the children saw each other only on holidays, and on Bobby's infrequent visits home. Franny hoped that it was.

Jim sorted out the rental car while Franny and Sylvia waited for the bags. Even on vacation, Franny didn't see the point in being anything less than efficient—why should they all have to wait to do everything? Jim had to drive, anyway, because all European rental cars were stick, and Franny had only very rarely driven a stick since her high school drivers' education class in 1971. And anyway, there was no reason to spend more time than necessary at the airport. Franny wanted to get a good look at the house, go grocery shopping, pick bedrooms for everyone, find a spot where she could write, know which closet held the extra towels. She wanted to buy shampoo, and toilet paper, and cheese. The vacation wouldn't officially start until she'd taken a shower and eaten some olives.

"Mom," Sylvia said. She pointed to a black suitcase the size of a small coffin. "Is that yours?"

“No,” Franny said, watching an even larger bag slide down the luggage chute. “That one.”

“I don’t know why you packed so much,” Sylvia said. “It’s only two weeks.”

“It’s all presents for you and your brother,” Franny said, pinching Sylvia’s narrow biceps. “All I brought is one extra shroud. Mothers don’t need anything else, do they?”

Sylvia fluttered her lips like a horse and went to fetch her mother’s bag.

“Oh, those guys,” Sylvia said, and gestured with her chin toward the Too-Loud Motorcyclists. “I love them.”

“They’re overgrown children,” Franny said, sighing loudly through her open mouth. “They should have gone to Ibiza.”

“No, Mom, they’re The Sticky Spokes Rock ‘n’ Roll Squad, see?”

Sleepy Terry had turned around to pick up his suitcase, a slightly incongruous orange rollie, exposing not only the pale crack of his bottom but also the back of his leather jacket, which read in giant block letters just as Sylvia had dictated.

“That’s a terrible name,” Franny said. “I bet they’ll spend the whole week drunk and killing themselves on tiny little roads.”

Sylvia had lost interest and was hurrying over to her own bag, now skidding down to the lip of the conveyer belt with a soft plop.

The Posts hadn’t vacationed in years, not like this. There

were the summer rentals in Sag Harbor, the *unhampton*, as Franny liked to call it until it wasn't true anymore, and then the one-month-long stint in Santa Barbara when Sylvia was five and Bobby was fifteen, two entirely different trips happening at once, a nightmare at mealtimes. It was too hard to travel all together, Franny had decided. She took Bobby to Miami by himself when he was sixteen, and granted him mother-free afternoons in South Beach, a trip he would later claim as the inspiration for attending the University of Miami, a dubious honor for his mother, who then wished she'd taken him on a trip to Cambridge instead. Jim and Franny and Sylvia once spent a weekend in Austin, Texas, doing nothing but eating barbecue and waiting for the bats to emerge from under the bridge. And of course Franny was often traveling on her own, covering trends in Southern Californian cuisine for this magazine, or a New Mexican chili festival for that one, or eating her way across France, one flaky croissant after another. Most days of the year, Jim and Sylvia were at home, cobbling together an elaborate meal out of the leftovers in the fridge, or ordering in from one of the restaurants on Columbus Avenue, pretending to argue over the remote control. Franny's own parents, the Golds of 41 Eastern Parkway, Brooklyn, New York, had never once taken her out of the country, and she took it as her duty to provide new experiences for her children. Sylvia's tongue would soften, her Spanish would go from New York Puerto Rican Spanish to Actual Spanish Spanish, and someday, some thirty

or forty years down the road, when she was in Madrid or Barcelona and the language came back to her like her first lover, Franny knew that Sylvia would thank her for this trip, even if she was already dead.



The house was in the foothills of the Tramuntana Mountains, on the far side of the town of Puigpunyent, on the winding road that would eventually lead to Valldemossa. No one could pronounce *Puigpunyent* (the car rental agent had said *Pooch-poon-yen*, or something of the sort, unrepeatable with an American tongue), and so when Sylvia insisted on calling it Pigpen, Jim and Franny couldn't correct her, and Pigpen it was. Mallorcan Spanish wasn't the same as proper Spanish, which wasn't the same as Catalan. Franny's plan was to ignore the differences and just plow ahead—it was how she usually got along in foreign countries. Unless you were in France, most people were delighted to hear you try and fail to form the right words. Franny and Sylvia stared out opposite windows, Franny in the front and Sylvia in the back, while Jim drove. It was only twenty-five minutes from the airport, according to Gemma, but that seemed to be true only if you knew where you were going. Gemma was one of Franny's least favorite humans on the planet, for a number of reasons: 1. She was Charles's second-closest female friend. 2. She was tall and thin and blond, three automatic strikes. 3. She'd been shipped off to

boarding school outside Paris and spoke perfect French, which Franny found profoundly show-offy, like doing a triple axel at the Rockefeller Center skating rink.

Heading up the mountain, Jim took several wrong turns on roads that looked too narrow to be two-way streets and not just someone's well-paved driveway, but no one particularly minded, because it gave them a better introduction to the island. Mallorca was a layer cake—the gnarled olive trees and spiky palms, the green-gray mountains, the chalky stone walls along either side of the road, the cloudless pale blue sky overhead. Though the day was hot, the mugginess of New York City was gone, replaced by unfiltered sunshine and a breeze that promised you'd never be too warm for long. Mallorca was summer done right, hot enough to swim but not so warm that your clothing stuck to your back.

Franny laughed when they pulled into the gravel drive, so drastically had Gemma undersold her house—another reason to despise her: modesty. In the distance, there were proper mountains, with ancient trees ringing the slopes like Christmas ornaments, and the house itself looked like an actual present: two stories tall and twice as wide as their limestone at home, it was a sturdy-looking stone building, painted a light pink. It glowed in the mid-morning sunlight, the black shutters on the open windows eyelashes on a beautiful face. A good third of the house's front was covered with rich green vines, which crept across from edge to edge, threatening to climb into the windows and consume the house entirely. Tall, narrow pine trees

lined the edge of the property, their tippy-tops poking at the wide and empty sky. It was a child's drawing of a house, a large square with an angled roof on top, colored in with some ancient terra-cotta crayon that made the whole thing radiate. Franny clapped.

The back of the house was even better—the swimming pool, which had looked merely serviceable in the single backyard photograph, was in fact divine, a wide blue rectangle tucked into the hillside. A cluster of wooden chaise longues sat at one end, as if the Posts had walked in on a conversation already in progress. Sylvia hurried behind her mother, holding on to the sides of her tunic like a horse's reins. From the lip of the pool, they could see other houses tucked into the side of the mountain, as small and perfectly shaped as Monopoly pieces, their gleaming faces poking out from a blanket of shifting green trees and craggy rocks. The ocean was somewhere on the other side of the mountains, another ten minutes west, and Sylvia huffed in the fresh air, sniffing for salt particles. There was probably a university in Mallorca—at the very least, a swimming and tennis academy. Maybe she would just stay and let her parents go home alone and do whatever had to be done. If she was on the other side of the world, what difference would it make? For the first time in her life, Sylvia envied her brother's distance. It was harder to mourn something you weren't used to seeing on a daily basis.

Jim left the bags in the car and found the front door, which was oversized, heavy, and unlocked. It took a moment for his

eyes to adjust to the relative dark. The house's foyer was empty except for a console table on the left-hand side, a large mirror hanging on the wall, and a ceramic pot the size of a small child on the right.

"Hello?" Jim called out, even though the house was supposed to be empty, and he wasn't expecting an answer. In front of him, a narrow hall led straight to a door to the garden, and he could see a sliver of the swimming pool, backed by the mountains. The room smelled of flowers and earth, with a soupçon of cleaning products. Bobby would like that, when he arrived—ever since he was a child, when Jim and Franny would drag him along on their trips to Maine or New Orleans or wherever, staying in crumbling vacation houses with mismatched forks, Bobby made his disgust for the unclean known. He detested antique furniture and vintage clothing, anything that had had a previous life. It was why he liked Florida real estate so much, Jim thought—everything was always brand-new. Even the gigantic piles in Palm Beach were gutted every few years, their insides replaced with shinier parts. Florida suited Bobby in a way that New York never had, but he wouldn't mind this, either. At least not for two weeks.

Jim walked through the archway on his left, into the living room. As in the photos, it was stylishly underfurnished, with only two low sofas and a nice rug, with paintings on the walls in places where the sun wouldn't hit them directly. Gemma was an art dealer, or a gallerist, or something. Jim's vague understanding was that she had so much money that a strict job de-



scription was superfluous. The living room led into a dining room, with a long wooden farm table and two rustic-looking benches, which in turn led into the large kitchen. The windows above the sink looked out onto the pool, and Jim paused there. Sylvia and Franny were lying on neighboring chaises. Franny had unwrapped her shawl from her shoulders and placed it over her face. Her sleeves were rolled up, and her legs splayed out to the sides—she was sunbathing, albeit with most of her clothes on. Jim exhaled with satisfaction—Franny was already having a good time.

To say that Franny had been uptight in the preceding month would be too delicate, too demure. She had been ruling the Post house with an iron sphincter. Though the trip had been meticulously planned in February, months before Jim's job at the magazine had slid out from under him, the timing was such that Fran could be counted on to have at least one red-faced scream per day. The zipper on the suitcase was broken, Bobby and Carmen's flights (booked on Post frequent-flier points) were costing them hundreds of dollars in fees because they had to shift the flights back a day. Jim was always in the way and in the wrong. Franny was expert in showing the public her good face, and once Charles arrived, it would be nothing but petting and cooing, but when she and Jim were alone, Franny could be a demon. Jim was grateful that, at least for the time being, Franny's horns seemed to have vanished back inside her skull.

The far end of the kitchen spat Jim out into the narrow hall opposite the entrance. On the other side of the foyer were a

small bathroom with only a toilet and a shower stall, a laundry room, a study, and a single bedroom with its own bathroom attached, what Americans called mother-in-law suites, a place where you could stash the person everyone wanted to see the least. Normally, Jim would have claimed the study for his own, or at least fought Franny hard for it, but then he realized that he wouldn't have anything to do there—there were no deadlines looming, no pieces to edit, no writing to do, no queries to be made, no books to read for any purpose other than his own pleasure and edification. He needed a desk like a fish needed a bicycle, that's what the bumper sticker would have read. *Gallant* would soldier on without him, telling the intelligent American man which books to buy, which soap to use, and how to tell the difference between Scotch and Irish whiskey. Jim tried to shake off his discomfort with this, but it lingered as he made his way into the bedroom.

The room was cozy, with a quilt covering the double bed, a large dresser, and a writing desk in front of the window that faced the far side of the house. Uncharitably, Jim thought about whether they could put Bobby and Carmen in that room, and not upstairs, where the rest of the bedrooms must be, but no, of course they would give Charles and Lawrence the most privacy. There was an old-fashioned key sitting in the lock on the inside of the bedroom door, which made Jim happy. If they were all going to be in this house together, at least they could lock the doors. Jim briefly fantasized about locking himself in and playing possum for the rest of the day, a lazy man's Walter Mitty.