

STRANGE PILGRIMS

filled with brilliant summer light. The worried voice on the phone, which I did not recognize right away, pulled me out of sleep.

"Do you remember the boy they took to Cadaqués last night?"

I did not have to hear another word. Except that it was even more dramatic than I had imagined. The boy, terrified by his imminent return to Cadaqués, took advantage of a moment's carelessness on the part of the demented Swedes, and in an effort to escape an ineluctable death, threw himself from the speeding van into the abyss.

JANUARY 1982

Miss Forbes's

Summer of Happiness

WHEN WE CAME back to the house in the afternoon, we found an enormous sea serpent nailed by the neck to the door frame. Black and phosphorescent, it looked like a Gypsy curse with its still-flashing eyes and its sawlike teeth in gaping jaws. I was about nine years old at the time, and at the sight of that vision out of a delirium I felt a terror so intense that I lost my voice. But my brother, who was two years younger, dropped the oxygen tanks, the masks, the fins, and fled, screaming in panic. Miss Forbes heard him from the tortuous stone steps that wound along the reefs from the dock to the house, and she ran to us, panting and livid, yet she had only to see the beast crucified on the door to understand the cause of our horror. She always said that when two

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children were together they were both guilty of what each did alone, and so she scolded the two of us for my brother's screams and continued to reprimand us for our lack of self-control. She spoke in German, not in the English stipulated in her tutor's contract, perhaps because she too was frightened and refused to admit it. But as soon as she caught her breath she returned to her stony English and her pedagogical obsession.

"It is a *Muraena helena*," she told us, "so called because it was an animal sacred to the ancient Greeks."

All at once Oreste, the local boy who taught us how to swim in deep waters, appeared behind the agave plants. He was wearing his diving mask on his forehead, a minuscule bathing suit, and a leather belt that held six knives of different shapes and sizes, for he could conceive of no other way to hunt underwater than by engaging in hand-to-hand combat with his prey. He was about twenty years old and spent more time at the bottom of the sea than on solid ground, and with motor oil always smeared over his body he even looked like a sea animal. When she saw him for the first time, Miss Forbes told my parents that it was impossible to imagine a more beautiful human being. But his beauty could not save him from her severity: He too had to endure a reprimand, in Italian, for having hung the moray eel on the door, with no other possible reason than his desire to frighten the children. Then Miss Forbes ordered him to take it down with the respect due a mythical creature, and told us to dress for supper.

We did so without delay, trying not to commit a single error, because after two weeks under the regime of Miss

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Forbes we had learned that nothing was more difficult than living. As we showered in the dim light of the bathroom, I knew that my brother was still thinking about the moray. "It had people's eyes," he said. I agreed, but made him think otherwise and managed to change the subject until I finished washing. Yet when I stepped out of the shower he asked me to stay and keep him company.

"It's still daytime," I said.

I opened the curtains. It was the middle of August, and through the window you could see the burning lunar plain all the way to the other side of the island, and the sun that had stopped in the sky.

"That's not why," my brother said. "I'm just scared of being scared."

But when we came down to the table he seemed calm, and he had done everything with so much care that he earned special praise from Miss Forbes and two more points in the week's good-conduct report. I, on the other hand, lost two of the five points I had already earned, because at the last minute I permitted myself to hurry and came into the dining room out of breath. Every fifty points entitled us to a double portion of dessert, but neither of us had earned more than fifteen. It was a shame, really, because we never again tasted any desserts as delicious as those made by Miss Forbes.

Before beginning supper we would stand and pray behind our empty plates. Miss Forbes was not Catholic, but her contract stipulated that she would have us pray six times a day, and she had learned our prayers in order to fulfill those terms. Then the three of us would sit down, and we held our breath while she scrutinized our de-

partment down to the slightest detail, and only when everything seemed perfect would she ring the bell. Then the cook, Fulvia Flaminea, came in, carrying the eternal vermicelli soup of that abominable summer.

At first, when we were alone with our parents, meals were a fiesta. Fulvia Flaminea giggled all around the table as she served us, with a vocation for disorder that brought joy to our lives, and then sat down with us and ate a little bit from everyone's plate. But ever since Miss Forbes had taken charge of our destiny, she served in such dark silence that we could hear the bubbling of the soup as it boiled in the tureen. We ate with our spines against the back of our chairs, chewing ten times on one side and ten times on the other, never taking our eyes off the iron, languid, autumnal woman who recited etiquette lessons by heart. It was just like Sunday Mass, but without the consolation of people singing.

On the day we found the moray eel hanging from the door, Miss Forbes spoke to us of our patriotic obligations. After the soup, Fulvia Flaminea, almost floating on the air rarefied by our tutor's voice, served a broiled fillet of snowy flesh with an exquisite aroma. I have always preferred fish to any other food on land or in the sky, and that memory of our house in Guacamayal eased my heart. But my brother refused the dish without tasting it.

"I don't like it," he said.

Miss Forbes interrupted her lesson.

"You cannot know that," she told him. "You have not even tasted it."

She shot a warning glance at the cook, but it was too late.

"Moray is the finest fish in the world, *figlio mio*," Fulvia Flaminea told him. "Try it and see."

Miss Forbes remained calm. She told us, with her unmerciful methodology, that moray had been a delicacy of kings in antiquity and that warriors fought over its bile because it gave them supernatural courage. Then she repeated, as she had so often in so short a time, that good taste was not an innate faculty, nor was it taught at any particular age; rather, it was imposed from infancy. Therefore we had no valid reason not to eat. I had tasted the moray before I knew what it was, and remembered the contradiction forever after: It had a smooth, rather melancholy taste, yet the image of the serpent nailed to the door frame was more compelling than my appetite. My brother made a supreme effort with his first bite, but he could not bear it: He vomited.

"You will go to the bathroom," Miss Forbes told him without losing her calm, "you will wash yourself with care, and you will come back to eat."

I felt great anguish for him, because I knew how difficult he found it to cross the entire house in the early darkness and stay alone in the bathroom for the time he needed to wash. But he returned very soon in a clean shirt, pale and quivering with a hidden tremor, and he bore up very well under the rigorous inspection of his cleanliness. Then Miss Forbes sliced a piece of moray and ordered us to continue. I just managed a second bite. But my brother did not even pick up his knife and fork.

"I'm not going to eat it," he said.

His determination was so obvious that Miss Forbes withdrew.

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"All right," she said, "but you will have no dessert."

My brother's relief filled me with his courage. I crossed my knife and fork on my plate, just as Miss Forbes had taught us to do when we were finished, and said:

"I won't have dessert either."

"And you will not watch television," she replied.

"And we will not watch television," I said.

Miss Forbes placed her napkin on the table, and the three of us stood to pray. Then she sent us to our bedroom, with the warning that we had to be asleep by the time she finished eating. All our good-conduct points were canceled, and only after we had earned twenty more would we again enjoy her cream cakes, her vanilla tarts, her exquisite plum pastries, the likes of which we would not taste again for the rest of our lives.

The break was bound to come sooner or later. For an entire year we had looked forward to a summer of freedom on the island of Pantelleria, at the far southern end of Sicily, and that is what it really had been for the first month, when our parents were with us. I still remember as if it were a dream the solar plain of volcanic rock, the eternal sea, the house painted with quicklime up to the brickwork; on windless nights you could see from its windows the luminous beams of lighthouses in Africa. Exploring the sleeping ocean floor around the island with our father, we had discovered a row of yellow torpedoes, half buried since the last war; we had brought up a Greek amphora almost a meter high, with petrified garlands and the dregs of an immemorial and poisonous wine in its depths; we had bathed in a steaming pool of waters so dense you almost could walk on them. But the most daz-

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zling revelation for us had been Fulvia Flaminea. She looked like a cheerful bishop and was always accompanied by a troop of sleepy cats who got in her way when she walked. But she said she put up with them not out of love but to keep from being devoured by rats. At night, while our parents watched programs for adults on television, Fulvia Flaminea took us to her house, less than a hundred meters from ours, and taught us to distinguish the remote babbling, the songs, the outbursts of weeping on the winds from Tunis. Her husband was a man too young for her, who worked in the summer at the tourist hotels on the far end of the island and came home only to sleep. Oreste lived a little farther away with his parents, and always appeared at night with strings of fish and baskets of fresh-caught lobster, which he hung in the kitchen so that Fulvia Flaminea's husband could sell them the next day at the hotels. Then he would put his diving lantern back on his forehead and take us to catch the field rats as big as rabbits that lay in wait for kitchen scraps. Sometimes we came home after our parents had gone to bed, and it was hard for us to sleep with the racket the rats made as they fought over the garbage in the courtyards. But even that annoyance was a magical ingredient in our happy summer.

The decision to hire a German governess could have occurred only to my father, a writer from the Caribbean with more presumption than talent. Dazzled by the ashes of the glories of Europe, he always seemed too eager to excuse his origins, in his books as well as in real life, and he had succumbed to the fantasy that no vestige of his own past would remain in his children. My mother was

still as unassuming as she had been when she was an itinerant teacher in Alta Guajira, and she never imagined her husband could have an idea that was less than providential. And therefore they could not have asked themselves in their hearts what our lives would be like with a sergeant from Dortmund intent on inculcating in us by force the most ancient, stale habits of European society, while they and forty other fashionable writers participated in a five-week cultural encounter on the islands of the Aegean Sea.

Miss Forbes arrived on the last Saturday in July on the regular boat from Palermo, and from the moment we first saw her we knew the party was over. She arrived in that southern heat wearing combat boots, a dress with overlapping lapels, and hair cut like a man's under her felt hat. She smelled of monkey urine. "That's how every European smells, above all in summer," our father told us. "It's the smell of civilization." But despite her military appearance, Miss Forbes was a poor creature who might have awakened a certain compassion in us if we had been older or if she had possessed any trace of tenderness. The world changed. Our six hours in the ocean, which from the beginning of the summer had been a continual exercise of our imagination, were turned into one identical hour repeated over and over again. When we were with our parents we had all the time we wanted to swim with Oreste and be astonished at the art and daring with which he confronted octopuses in their own environment murky with ink and blood, using no other weapons than his combat knives. He still arrived as always at eleven o'clock in his little outboard motorboat, but Miss Forbes

did not allow him to stay with us a minute longer than required for our lesson in deep-sea diving. She forbade us to go to Fulvia Flaminea's house at night because she considered it excessive familiarity with servants, and we had to devote the hours we had once spent in the pleasurable hunting of rats to analytical readings of Shakespeare. Accustomed to stealing mangoes from courtyards and stoning dogs to death on the burning streets of Guacamayal, we could not imagine a crueler torture than that princely life.

But we soon realized that Miss Forbes was not as strict with herself as she was with us, and this was the first chink in her authority. In the beginning she stayed on the beach under the multicolored umbrella, dressed for war and reading ballads by Schiller, while Oreste taught us to dive, and then, for hours and hours, she gave us theoretical lectures on proper behavior in society, until it was time for lunch.

One day she asked Oreste to take her in his boat to the hotel tourist shops, and she came back with a one-piece bathing suit as black and iridescent as a sealskin, yet she never went in the water. She sunbathed on the beach while we swam, and wiped away the perspiration with a towel but did not take a shower, so that after three days she looked like a boiled lobster and the smell of her civilization had become unbreathable.

At night she gave vent to her emotions. From the very start of her reign we heard someone walking through the house, feeling his way in the darkness, and my brother was tormented by the idea that it was one of the wandering drowning victims that Fulvia Flaminea had told us so

much about. We soon discovered, however, that it was Miss Forbes, who spent the night living her real life as a lonely woman, which she herself would have censured during the day. One morning at dawn we surprised her in the kitchen in her schoolgirl's nightdress, preparing her splendid desserts. Her entire body, including her face, was covered with flour, and she was drinking a glass of port with a mental abandon that would have scandalized the other Miss Forbes. By then we knew that after we were in bed she did not go to her bedroom but went down to swim in secret, or stayed in the living room until very late, watching movies forbidden to minors on television, with the sound turned off, eating entire cakes and even drinking from the bottle of special wine that my father saved with so much devotion for memorable occasions. In defiance of her own sermons on austerity and composure, she wolfed everything down, choking on it with a kind of uncontrolled passion. Later we heard her talking to herself in her room, we heard her reciting complete excerpts from *Die Jungfrau von Orleans* in melodious German, we heard her singing, we heard her sobbing in her bed until dawn, and then she would appear at breakfast, her eyes swollen with tears, more gloomy and authoritarian than ever. My brother and I were never again as unhappy as we were then, but I was prepared to endure her to the end, for I knew that in any case her word would prevail over ours. My brother, however, confronted her with all the force of his character, and the summer of happiness became hellish for us. The episode of the moray eel was the final straw. That same night, as we lay in our beds listening to the incessant com-

ing and going of Miss Forbes in the sleeping house, my brother released all the hatred rotting in his soul.

"I'm going to kill her," he said.

I was surprised, not so much by his decision as by the fact that I had been thinking the same thing since supper. I tried, however, to dissuade him.

"They'll cut off your head," I told him.

"They don't have guillotines in Sicily," he said. "Besides, nobody will know who did it."

I thought about the amphora salvaged from the water, where the dregs of fatal wine still lay. My father had kept it because he wanted a more thorough analysis to determine the nature of the poison, which could not be the product of the simple passage of time. Using the wine on Miss Forbes would be so easy that nobody would think it was not an accident or suicide. And so at dawn, when we heard her collapse, exhausted by the rigors of her vigil, we poured wine from the amphora into my father's bottle of special wine. From what we had heard, that dose was enough to kill a horse.

We ate breakfast in the kitchen at nine o'clock sharp, Miss Forbes herself serving us the sweet rolls that Fulvia Flaminea left on the top of the stove very early in the morning. Two days after we had substituted the wine, while we were having breakfast, my brother let me know with a disillusioned glance that the poisoned bottle stood untouched on the sideboard. That was a Friday, and the bottle remained untouched over the weekend. Then on Tuesday night, Miss Forbes drank half the wine while she watched dissolute movies on television.

Yet on Wednesday she came to breakfast with her

customary punctuality. As usual, her face looked as if she had spent a bad night; as always, her eyes were uneasy behind the heavy glasses, and they became even more uneasy when she found a letter with German stamps in the basket of rolls. She read it while she drank her coffee, which she had told us so many times one must not do, and while she read, flashes of light radiating from the written words passed over her face. Then she removed the stamps from the envelope and put them in the basket with the remaining rolls so that Fulvia Flaminea's husband could have them for his collection. Despite her initial bad experience, she accompanied us that day in our exploration of the ocean depths, and we wandered through a sea of delicate water until the air in our tanks began to run out, and we went home without our lesson in good manners. Not only was Miss Forbes in a floral mood all day, but at supper she seemed even more animated. My brother, however, could not tolerate his disappointment. As soon as we received the order to begin, he pushed away the plate of vermicelli soup with a provocative gesture.

"This worm water gives me a pain in the ass," he said.

It was as if he had tossed a grenade on the table. Miss Forbes turned pale, her lips hardened until the smoke of the explosion began to clear away, and the lenses of her glasses blurred with tears. Then she took them off, dried them with her napkin, placed the napkin on the table with the bitterness of an inglorious defeat, and stood up.

"Do whatever you wish," she said. "I do not exist."

She was locked in her room from seven o'clock on. But before midnight, when she supposed we were asleep,

we saw her pass by in her schoolgirl's nightdress, carrying half a chocolate cake and the bottle with more than four fingers of poisoned wine back to her bedroom. I felt a tremor of pity.

"Poor Miss Forbes," I said.

My brother did not breathe easy.

"Poor us if she doesn't die tonight," he said.

That night she talked to herself again for a long time, declaimed Schiller in a loud voice inspired by a frenetic madness, and ended with a final shout that filled the entire house. Then she sighed many times from the depths of her soul and succumbed with a sad, continuous whistle like a boat adrift. When we awoke, still exhausted by the tension of the night, the sun was cutting through the blinds but the house seemed submerged in a pond. Then we realized it was almost ten and we had not been awakened by Miss Forbes's morning routine. We did not hear the toilet flush at eight, or the faucet turn in the sink, or the noise of the blinds, or the metallic sound of her boots, or the three mortal blows on the door with the flat of her slave driver's hand. My brother put his ear to the wall, held his breath in order to detect the slightest sign of life from the next room, and at last breathed a sigh of liberation.

"That's it!" he said. "All you can hear is the ocean."

We prepared our breakfast a little before eleven, and then, before Fulvia Flaminea arrived with her troop of cats to clean the house, we went down to the beach with two air tanks each and another two as spares. Oreste was already on the dock, gutting a six-pound gilthead he had just caught. We told him we had waited for Miss Forbes

until eleven, and since she was still sleeping we decided to come down to the ocean by ourselves. We told him too that she had suffered an attack of weeping at the table the night before, and perhaps she had not slept well and wanted to stay in bed. Just as we expected, Oreste was not very interested in our explanation, and he accompanied us on our pillaging of the ocean floor for a little more than an hour. Then he told us we should go up for lunch, and left in his boat to sell the gilthead at the tourist hotels. We waved good-bye from the stone steps, making him think we were about to climb up to the house, until he disappeared around the cliff. Then we put on our air tanks and continued to swim without anyone's permission.

The day was cloudy and there was a rumble of dark thunder on the horizon, but the sea was smooth and clear and its own light was enough. We swam on the surface to the line of the Pantelleria lighthouse, then turned a hundred meters to the right and dove at the spot where we calculated we had seen the torpedoes at the beginning of the summer. There they were: six of them, painted sun-yellow with their serial numbers intact, and lying on the volcanic bottom in an order too perfect to be accidental. We kept circling the lighthouse, looking for the submerged city that Fulvia Flaminea had told us about so often, and with so much awe, but we could not find it. After two hours, convinced there were no new mysteries to discover, we surfaced with our last gulp of oxygen.

A summer storm had broken while we were swimming, the sea was rough, and a flock of bloodthirsty birds flew with fierce screams over the trail of dying fish on

the beach. Yet without Miss Forbes the afternoon light seemed brand-new and life was good. But when we finished struggling up the steps cut into the cliff, we saw a crowd of people at the house and two police cars by the door, and for the first time we were conscious of what we had done. My brother began to tremble and tried to turn back.

"I'm not going in," he said.

I, on the other hand, had the confused notion that if we just looked at the body we would be safe from all suspicion.

"Take it easy," I told him. "Take a deep breath, and think about just one thing: We don't know anything."

No one paid attention to us. We left our tanks, masks, and flippers at the gate and went to the side veranda, where two men sat on the floor next to a stretcher and smoked. Then we realized there was an ambulance at the back door, and several soldiers armed with rifles. In the living room women from the area were sitting on chairs that had been pushed against the wall and praying in dialect, while their men crowded into the courtyard talking about anything that did not have to do with death. I squeezed my brother's hard, icy hand even tighter, and we walked into the house through the back door. Our bedroom door was open, and the room was just as we had left it that morning. In Miss Forbes's room, which was next to ours, an armed *carabiniere* stood guarding the entrance, but the door was open. We walked toward it with heavy hearts, and before we had a chance to look in, Fulvia Flaminea came out of the kitchen like a bolt of lightning and shut the door with a scream of horror:

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"For God's sake, *figlioli*, don't look at her!"

It was too late. Never, for the rest of our lives, would we forget what we saw in that fleeting instant. Two plain-clothesmen were measuring the distance from the bed to the wall with a tape, while another was taking pictures with a black-sleeve camera like the ones park photographers used. Miss Forbes was not on the unmade bed. She was stretched on her side, naked in a pool of dried blood that had stained the entire floor, and her body was riddled by stab wounds. There were twenty-seven fatal cuts, and by their number and brutality one could see that the attack had been made with the fury of a love that found no peace, and that Miss Forbes had received it with the same passion, without even screaming or crying, reciting Schiller in her beautiful soldier's voice, conscious of the fact that this was the inexorable price of her summer of happiness.

1976

Light Is Like Water

AT CHRISTMAS the boys asked again for a rowboat.

"Okay," said their papa, "we'll buy it when we get back to Cartagena."

Totó, who was nine years old, and Joel, who was seven, were more determined than their parents believed.

"No," they said in chorus. "We need it here and now."

"To begin with," said their mother, "the only navigable water here is what comes out of the shower."

She and her husband were both right. Their house in Cartagena de Indias had a yard with a dock on the bay, and a shed that could hold two large yachts. Here in Madrid, on the other hand, they were crowded into a fifth-floor apartment at 47 Paseo de la Castellana. But in the end neither of them could refuse, because they had promised the children a rowboat complete with sextant and compass if they won their class prizes in elemen-