

The Vacationers Study Guide

The Vacationers by Emma Straub

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Plot Summary

The Vacationers is a novel of family drama. The Post family, Jim, Franny, and 18-year-old Sylvia, ready themselves to fly to Mallorca, Spain for a two-week vacation. In the large rental house they will meet up with their older son, 28-year-old Bobby, his girlfriend Carmen, Franny's best friend Charles, and Charles's husband Lawrence. Sylvia is a short time away from leaving home for Brown University and Jim as recently lost his job of thirty years at a local magazine.

They arrive in Mallorca and Sylvia meets the young man her mother has hired as a native Spanish tutor for the two weeks they are on the island. Joan is a very handsome university student of 20, and fits nicely into Sylvia's goal to lose her virginity before she leaves for Brown. Her last few months of high school were punctuated with social difficulties which she hopes to move beyond.

The rest of the vacationers arrive in the next few days. Charles and Lawrence, married five years, are looking to adopt a baby and waiting anxiously. Bobby is a mostly unsuccessful real estate agent living in Miami, and his girlfriend Carmen, a personal trainer, is thirteen years older. It becomes clear that the rest of the Posts dislike Carmen because she is not New York enough and she is too old. She is barely tolerated.

Moreover, the reader soon finds that Jim was forcibly dismissed from his job at the magazine because he slept with a much, much younger editorial assistant. He confessed his indiscretion to Franny, and Sylvia knows because she lives in the house and hears the arguments, but Bobby has not been told. The vacation seems to be a last stop in Franny's decision process, during which she must move forward and either leave Jim or forgive him.

The day after they arrive, Lawrence receives an email that a mother in New York has selected them to adopt her baby. The adoption agent suggests they stay on in Spain for the duration of their trip, because she still had time to change her mind and there was plenty of waiting to do. The couple decides to stay. The tension between Jim and Franny is evident; Sylvia suspects he is not sleeping in their room.

Bobby is planning to ask his parents to help him pay off a large debt he incurred while trying to supplement his flagging real estate career. Carmen nags him to ask, but he is hesitant. The tension grows. Lawrence and Carmen hear what happened with Jim at the magazine, but nobody tells Bobby.

Charles tells Franny that he also cheated on Lawrence at the beginning of their relationship, before they were married. Franny never knew and has to consider the fact that her best friend also committed adultery. Meanwhile, she tells him he should confess it to Lawrence, no matter how old the transgression is.

Bobby grows irritated enough with Carmen that he goes to a bar one night without her, but he does take Sylvia, who watches him get drunk and kiss another girl. She is



disgusted with her brother and tells him so. Although the author does not specifically say Bobby has sex with the other girl, it is easy to assume he did. The next day he feels sick, but no remorse. Carmen does not ask what happened the night before. Sylvia is completely horrified and feels like everyone around her is betraying her.

That night at dinner, Carmen tells Bobby's secret to everyone at the table. The next day, the entire group goes to the beach. Franny and Jim hear about Bobby's indiscretion. Bobby says it is not a big deal, and Franny is grieved that her son would not take cheating seriously. Privately, Jim tells his son that he cheated on his mother and regrets it. Everyone but Carmen is gathering their things and Franny loses her composure, yelling at Jim and Bobby. Jim asks her to calm down, and Charles punches him. Everyone leaves for the house.

Once they return to the house, Carmen tells Bobby she is leaving him. She would have like to stay with him, but he showed so little remorse; in fact, he wished for her to apologize instead. She leaves the house immediately.

The next day, Sylvia's Spanish tutor takes her for a picnic on the beach for her last lesson, and they have sex. Meanwhile, Franny drives into town to have a lunch interview with a famous Mallorcan tennis player, and Jim follows her out of worry. When she catches him, he apologizes for how he cheated on her and begs her forgiveness.

The next day, Charles and Lawrence get word that the birth mother signed the baby over to them definitively. They leave for New York. The owner of the house, an art dealer named Gemma, returns a day early and acts obnoxiously. Jim and Franny make up. Bobby decides to return to New York with his parents rather than go back to Miami.



Day One

Summary

The Post family is preparing to leave on their vacation, panicking in normal, last-minute throes. Jim, the father, packs his bag and reflects on the past years' worth of regrets. Sylvia, aged 18, stands on the street to hail a taxi. She is waiting through the last few weeks before she leaves for college at Brown University. Sylvia's parents take a while getting to the taxi, and they are on their way.

At the airport, Jim walks the terminal as is his daily custom. During his walk he reflects on his family, Franny, Sylvia, and his son Bobby, who at twenty-eight has an established life as a real-estate agent in Miami. On the island of Mallorca they would spend two weeks, along with Franny's best friend Charles and his husband Lawrence. The house belonged to a woman named Gemma that was friends with Charles, a painter. He is one month out of a forced exit from his job of thirty years, at a local magazine. The two week vacation will do him good. He returns to the terminal to find his wife and daughter reading.

The plane takes off, Jim and Franny in first class and Sylvia in coach; Franny quickly goes to sleep but Jim stays awake for a while. He visits Sylvia in coach, interrupting her writing in her notebook. As he walks back to his seat, she reflects on her written-down goals to accomplish before college, among them is "lose my virginity."

Analysis

Day One of the Post vacation sees the trio leaving for the airport. There is little dialogue in Day One, but the reader learns about each of the characters: Jim is a slave to Routine, a fact that will be repeated throughout the novel. The wait for the plane sees him taking his daily walk through the terminal, as he does daily through Central Park. Jim has recently left his job of thirty years and feels the vacation will be a great break before he returns to his new life. This novel carries a strong theme of starting over and having new beginnings. Jim is one character that is facing a new normal. Although she has not said why yet, Straub insinuates that Jim's departure from his job at a local magazine was involuntary.

Travel, with all of its fashion and enviable glimpse into other places, is another symbol in this novel; Mallorca specifically is a place of pristine beauty, where for these characters time has stopped for two weeks so they can all get their lives together. On the first day, Franny and Jim both ponder the beauty of Mallorca and how the vacation will drive them forward. Sylvia also glories in travel; she mentions that she loves a trip to the airport so she can see where planes are going and who is taking them.

Because the Posts are a family in crisis, the author spends much of the novel emphasizing the benefit of a family that loves and fights for its people. On the plane, Jim



ponders how fortunate he is to have a daughter whom he really enjoys, and Sylvia reflects that she loves her father very much, although he has tried her patience in the preceding months.

Sex is another symbol in this novel. Sex is currency that allows the characters to move up and down some sort of social ladder. It is Sylvia's goal in the remaining weeks of the summer to lose her virginity, thus securing her position one rung higher.

Discussion Question 1

What are some clues that the Post family is in crisis?

Discussion Question 2

What early impression does Straub give of Bobby, the older brother?

Discussion Question 3

What role does physical contact play in the family dynamic?

Vocabulary

unencumbered, weepy, apex, scooped, processional, scolding, perspiring, ossify



Day Two

Summary

The Posts take a smaller plane from Madrid to Mallorca. It is early in the morning and their flight is filled with colorful characters. The house they are renting is just outside of Palma, a large enough town to provide plenty of entertainment. It also boasts a swimming pool, so Franny hopes that all of her family will be satisfied.

After a stint at the rental car agency, Jim drives Franny and Sylvia from Palma through the village and up the mountain towards the house. When they reach the house, Franny finds that Gemma had undersold its space and beauty. Sylvia is so taken with the view she feels she may stay, so she can avoid going home and watching her parents do “whatever had to be done” (22). She helps her father move the bags inside.

Jim moves the bags into bedrooms and marvels at the home. He is happy to see that his wife is by the pool, already enjoying herself. Franny had been uptight the past month; the timing of Jim’s job loss was not good. She put on a happy public face, but alone she was very difficult. Once settled, Sylvia and Jim quickly fall asleep, but Franny takes the car keys and drives to the village to buy food for dinner. While she is gone, Sylvia wakes up and takes a shower. She leaves the bathroom, holding an assortment of towels over herself, and runs into a young man in the hallway. He is Joan, her Spanish tutor.

Franny is delighted with the attractive Joan, while Sylvia is mortified when she is forced to appear in the living room for her lesson. They sit for a few minutes, Franny very aware of her attraction to the young man, before she realizes that the gap between her and Joan is the same of “Jim and that girl,” and she feels the attraction wane (38).

Sylvia and Jim swim before dinner. They discuss the plan for the next day: Bobby and his girlfriend, and Charles and Lawrence, would arrive on the morning flight and rent a car. Sylvia mentions she wishes her brother and Charles—a close friend of her mother’s—was coming without their significant others. Jim wants Sylvia to enjoy seeing brother; he hints at the looming “implosion” of his nuclear family, something Sylvia knows but Bobby does not, and wishes he was away from the vacation.

As they prepare for bed, Franny plans on driving to Palma to meet the arriving party, afterwards sending Bobby, Carmen, and Lawrence home in one car so she and Charles could drive alone and stop at the store. Jim dreads the next two weeks of Franny rearranging everything so she could be with Charles. Jim has no room to complain about Franny’s habits. Before climbing into bed, she tells him to sleep in the other room, while the other beds are still empty.



Analysis

Straub reminds the reader of the glamour of travel here, with several different languages spoken, different types of people all going to the same place for a grand summer experience. Franny and Jim both recall the different types of vacations they've taken with their kids; because Bobby is ten years older, they had to try different things with kids of such varying ages. The entire discussion lays a foundation for the different set of standards that apply to Bobby and Sylvia. As the novel progresses, the reader will meet two such different siblings it is a wonder they come from the same parents. All such reminiscences have an air of wistfulness about them, a nostalgic yearning for a simpler family life, and they foreshadow the truth of the tension between Franny and Jim.

Another symbol the author uses to tug at her characters' well-being is physical attractiveness. It is an absolute priority for many characters in this novel, whether they are chasing it or looking down on it. Franny spends some time pondering her body; in her youth she posed nude for Charles's paintings, and as a food writer she does not boast a svelte frame. She tried Overeaters Anonymous, but eventually made peace with being curvy. However, she envies Gemma for being thin and beautiful.

Sylvia also experiences a bout of dissatisfaction with her looks. She stares in the mirror at her nondescript features and wishes she were not so middle-of-the-road. It is no surprise that when Joan the Spanish tutor appears, he is completely handsome. He is so handsome, in fact, that both Franny and Sylvia are attracted to him. Franny even wants to "cover his body with olive oil and wrestle until dark" (35). Straub has already shared that Sylvia wants to lose her virginity before college. It seems that the author has provided her a means to achieve her goal.

Franny fantasizes about the young man until she realizes that he is young, just like "that girl" was too young for Jim. Although Straub has not shared any details yet, the picture of Franny's and Jim's precarious marriage becomes clearer.

Because Franny is a food writer, the author spends several glorious words describing what the family is eating. Food is Franny's way of connecting. It is her currency and her medium. She writes about it, she knows a lot about it, and it is the way she gives love to her family. As a result, Franny's work in the kitchen is a centerpiece of several scenes.

Discussion Question 1

What issues does the author hint will accompany Charles's arrival?

Discussion Question 2

How do the Posts feel about Bobby's life and his girlfriend?



Discussion Question 3

What are Franny's obvious strengths and weaknesses as a mother?

Vocabulary

natty, boisterous, acronym, shambled, averse, cobbling, divine



Day Three

Summary

Charles waits for Lawrence in Palma's airport. At age fifty-five, he is reviewing Lawrence's and his interest in adopting a baby. They have come close before and are in the running with several pregnant mothers. Bobby and Carmen appear. They have been together on and off for several years, and Carmen is a dozen years older than Bobby.

They meet with Fanny in the lobby. She is pleased to see Bobby, is pleasant to Carmen, and nearly bursts into tears when she sees Charles. The group splits up: Carmen, Bobby, and Lawrence drive back to the house while Franny and Charles buy groceries. They discuss Jim and the kids; Franny is very angry at Jim. Bobby and the others arrive at the house.

Sylvia has her first actual Spanish lesson with Joan and is very attracted to him. Jim ventures out for his daily walk in the streets around the house. He ponders his professional situation: asked to leave the magazine, with a promise never to try to work in the field again. "The details" of his dismissal would stay quiet as long as he kept himself scarce. He remembers "the girl"- Madison, only aged twenty-three. After thirty-five loyal years at the magazine, his career had fallen apart in a matter of weeks.

Although the newcomers are tired from their flight, Franny insists in dinner. As she gets the last few details finished, she ponders what will happen with Jim. Sylvia will soon be gone. Carmen interrupts her thoughts, and together they tote the dishes of food into the dining room for dinner.

Analysis

Day Two is a day of little activity. The most relevant thing that occurs is the rest of the party's arrival: Twenty-eight year old Bobby and his "north of forty" girlfriend, Carmen. The Post family does not hide their dislike for Carmen, although their reasons seem to be fluid. A personal trainer, Carmen is undeniably attractive and fit, and something about her devotion to her job seems to really bother both Franny and Sylvia. Both mother and daughter comment how tacky it is that Carmen wears eyeliner when there's no reason to. To Sylvia, it is tacky. To Franny, it shows insecurity. Then again, with over six years of experience in the Post family's obvious disdain, maybe Carmen has a reason for the insecurity.

The reader also meets Charles and Lawrence. Charles is Franny's best friend, and the author hints that they were young, attractive, and wild together; also, there are several mentions that Charles had painted Franny nude and otherwise. Their relationship is the biggest in the room, and it appears the spouses left behind - Jim and Lawrence- are little looking forward to the two weeks. The couple is adopting a baby, or hoping to. This event reflects both the author's emphasis on the importance of family, and the fact that



she has positioned each character on the brink of a major life change. At this point in the story, the men do not have an actual child assigned to them yet, but they are in the process.

Food is another consistent symbol in the novel, and the reader sees its emphasis in Day Two a couple of times. The author says that shopping is one of Charles's and Franny's favorite activities; they are practically in raptures over the foreign food. Furthermore, although the entire party is jet lagged and tired, Franny insists on cooking a huge meal and making a big production of it because it is how things are done.

This nod to routine, and how Franny must adhere to a fine family dinner, is also reflected in Jim's afternoon walk. The reader learns on Day One that Jim must take a long walk every day to maintain his good shape. On this walk, he ponders how he lost his career with such crippling swiftness. The recollection only skirts the actual reason, but he ponders the harshness with which he was dealt, and gives the reason a name, Madison, and an age, 23. With all of the questions of what will Franny and Jim do next, the reader can discern that Jim has had an affair with the girl in question, but the author has not said yet. Sex is an oft-used metaphor in this novel, and the author hints that Sylvia is likewise interested in trying it out with her Spanish tutor Joan.

Discussion Question 1

What are the discernible reasons the Posts dislike Carmen?

Discussion Question 2

How does Franny's and Charles's relationship set the vacation up for conflict?

Discussion Question 3

How is the author's slow reveal of Jim's indiscretion effective in building the story?

Vocabulary

mussed, unison, assiduous, flatulence, beatific, swiveled, salacious, vitriol, tribunal



Day Four

Summary

Bobby and Carmen wake up in their bedroom the next morning. They have been together for six years. Bobby admires the fierce, powerful nature of Carmen, who is such a popular trainer at the gym that she has dozens of devoted clients. Carmen asks Bobby when he will “talk to his parents about the money.” Bobby is in some amount of serious debt from a risky side venture.

In the kitchen, Lawrence is trying to send a few work emails with his spotty Wi-Fi while Franny prepares breakfast. Jim is swimming and Charles sits nearby, chatting with Franny. Lawrence feels a regular stab of envy at Charles’s and Franny’s relationship. When his email finally downloads, he finds one from the adoption worker, saying there is a baby boy, the mother of whom has narrowed her choice down. As Jim comes in from the pool, Lawrence asks him about his job to divert Charles’s attention. This causes Franny to burst into tears and Jim to leave the room in awkwardness.

Sylvia wakes up, groggy from wine and jet lag. Although there is no Wi-Fi, she opens Facebook on her phone and reviews the many pictures she is tagged in from a recent party, during which she drank too much and kissed several boys. She experiences several minutes of self-pity before realizing she has to get downstairs for Joan.

Lawrence gets Charles’s attention and shows him the email from the adoption agency. They call New York and learn that the birth mother will be choosing in a few weeks. She suggests they stay, enjoy Spain, and be ready. The couple decides to stay, worrying that if they rush home to prepare, and are not chosen, it would be devastating.

Sylvia and Joan have their lesson while she wistfully watches Lawrence and Charles sit by the pool, looking like actual love.

For dinner, Jim and Bobby grill steaks on the patio. Father and son stand over the grill and chat blithely about the meat; both men have more that they would like to discuss, but cannot. After dinner, Sylvia watches a movie with Jim and Charles; she cuddles with Charles and avoids her father. Meanwhile, Lawrence helps Franny clean the kitchen. He apologizes for mentioning Jim’s work at the magazine; he does not know why Jim was fired and feels bad for causing an awkward moment. Franny confesses that Jim had sex with a twenty-three-year-old intern. He apologizes; they share a moment and she goes back inside. Carmen overhears the conversation from her bedroom.

Analysis

During Day Four all of the action takes place inside of the house. Money is a recurrent symbol in the novel, really as more of a crutch than a way to freedom. It is a particular issue between Bobby and Carmen. The reader learns on Day Four that Bobby has



several financial problems. With the real estate market down, he borrowed money for a financial venture and it did not work out. The reader might find it odd that Bobby and Sylvia are so many years apart in age; it is an unusual family dynamic. However, it makes for an interesting comparison between the two Post children: Sylvia has all of the appearance of having it together, while Bobby is a bit of a mess. In this opening scene Bobby also makes much of Carmen's body shape, as well as her skill as a personal trainer.

Charles and Lawrence get an email from the adoption agency about a possible available child for them. Lawrence really wants to adopt a baby. For him, the baby symbolizes a way to immortalize his marriage. Without a child, they will wither and grow old together and die; a baby will be a way for their love to continue. Lawrence even says as much, that if they do not move quickly to get the baby, they will be "just the two of them and Charles's paintings of other people's children" (76). At this point in the story, they have not definitely been chosen to adopt the baby in question; in fact, the adoption worker advises them to stay in Spain and enjoy their vacation, that nothing can be done for a while. However, Baby Alphonse will be very present to Lawrence and Charles for the remainder of the vacation as if he is present, a symbol of possibility and hope.

Another prevalent theme in this novel is starting over. Most of these characters are about to embark on a new beginning. Sylvia lays in bed and scrolls through her Facebook, hating everyone she went to high school with, bursting with the need to get away from that life and start her new life in college. This desire is linked to her losing her virginity, and she goes straight from reliving her high school life online to having Joan over for her Spanish lesson. It is timely for Sylvia to move from one event to the other, one juvenile and the other very adult and filled with possibility. That evening, she almost feels like she will miss living at home, because she feels comfortable with her family.

Finally, on Day Four the author finally spells out what the reader has discerned: Jim had an affair with a young woman from the magazine he works for. One wonders if Franny would have been more or less angry had Madison not been so young. The revelation explains the tension between Jim and Franny. Moreover, Franny reveals that while Sylvia knows about the affair, Bobby does not, and so there is another layer of duplicity in the house.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss Sylvia's desire to lose her virginity. How does her place in life augment this desire?

Discussion Question 2

Given her self-awareness in comparison to the Posts, how is their strong dislike for Carmen ironic?



Discussion Question 3

How does the tension between Franny and Jim set the tone for the rest of the family?

Vocabulary

grazers, extricate, manse, slattern, relinquished, pantomime, rancid, detritus, wizened, scenario



Day Five

Summary

The party decides to drive to a small museum north of their house. Sylvia and Franny ride with Joan, who suggested the outing. Jim, Charles, and Lawrence follow in the second car. From the backseat, Sylvia's mind wanders to her high school friends. Two of them used to be her best friends; but then, she made out with one, and he turned around and made out with the other.

At the museum, the party putters around, marginally interested in what is on offer. Joan and Sylvia stay behind while the adults wander through the house.

Jim has flashes of memory of Madison Vance, the editorial assistant, how she had instigated the affair, and how easily he had assented. He regrets the affair, but at the same time, recalls the newness of being with a different person after so many years.

Back at the house, Carmen and Bobby have stayed behind, and Carmen is exercising. She and Bobby met six years before at the gym, when he had signed up for a six-week session. She had whipped him into shape, and they had started sleeping together at the end of the session. Now, at the house, Carmen goes through her workout, proud of her firm, strong body. Bobby watches her from the pool. She asks Bobby if he has noticed the tension between his parents; he has not.

After the trip to the museum, the group decides to drive into Palma for dinner, late, the way the Spaniards ate. They stroll through town before dinner, with Carmen and Franny popping into shops now and then. Franny attempts meaningful conversation with Carmen, but they have nothing in common so it falls flat. At the dinner table, everyone enjoys tapas while Jim attempts conversation with Franny. They share a few laughs before she remembers that she is supposed to be angry at him.

Analysis

The party splits up for a daytime outing on Day Five. Everyone except Bobby and Carmen travel to the home of a famous writer. Joan drives Sylvia and Franny, which affords plenty of flirting on Franny's part, where Sylvia would like to flirt but does not want to compete with her mother. Franny enjoys playing up to Joan for a time. "If Jim could objectify someone barely out of her teens, so could she" (94). Joan is attractive and provides a way for Franny to feel like she is getting revenge on her husband. However, eventually she feels the sting of it, the ghost of the young girl Jim slept with, and abandons her attention towards the handsome tutor. He is a very interesting addition to the cast of players; although he is best suited to Sylvia as a sexual conquest, Joan is also attractive to her mother, Charles, and Lawrence; there is one awkward moment in Day Five at the house when all four characters are feeling the heat of Joan's good looks.



These thoughts of Franny's are interwoven with Jim's recollection of his sexual encounter with the editorial assistant Madison Vance, and here the reader sees her as symbol for Jim's lost youth. Locked in the same job, and the same marriage, for thirty-five years, the young woman literally symbolizes a youthful adventure for Jim, and this explains why he is so easily taken in. In his recollections, he mentions how little work he had to do to attract the young woman; the thoughts are followed by guilt. Jim loves Franny, but has to admit that he loved the change of a new body in his arms.

Sylvia uses the drive up the mountain to reflect again on her high school friends, how eager she is to leave them behind and start over. Her two best friends betrayed her, and yet will be attending Brown with her, and so she is doubly ready to make herself over before college starts in a few weeks.

With all of the characters facing a sort of crossroads in their lives, Mallorca is this place where time is standing still for all of them. During their stay on the island, they have the chance to examine their lives and ready themselves to make new steps and new decisions. Each day out, each description of the scenery, is time to reflect before real life starts again at the end of the trip.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the complex feelings Jim has towards his affair with Madison Vance.

Discussion Question 2

How is Carmen good for Bobby?

Discussion Question 3

How does Madison's age make the affair so much worse?

Vocabulary

unfurled, chassis, chasm, shimmy, limbo, docent, posthumously, pouchy



Day Six

Summary

Jim sits by the pool and ponders his marriage. Divorce can come at you from all angles, and he had not seen their particular crisis coming. Carmen emerges from the house and joins him. After a moment of silence, Carmen shares sympathy for whatever is happening with Franny, saying she can just tell what is happening.

Franny and Sylvia drive into town for lunch and some shopping. On the way into town they pass the tennis center, run by a famous Spanish tennis player. They stop. Franny is trying to get Sylvia to have a lesson with the young, attractive player, but her attention is waylaid by the sight of an older, Mallorcan player, and signs up for lessons with him.

Later, Sylvia sits with Joan, who tells her all about the older player, Antoni Vert, and how handsome and popular he was. She ponders the past three months in her house, the tension growing between her parents and how Franny had finally told her what Jim had done.

During the afternoon, everyone in the house naps save for Franny and Charles. Franny is in the bath while Charles sits nearby. He asks about Jim and Franny cannot decide if she wants him to apologize or die. Franny asks what he would do in her place, and Charles confesses that he cheated on Lawrence long ago, in the beginning of their relationship, before they were married. Franny is shocked that Charles has not confessed this to his husband; he tells her if he was on the receiving end, he would not want to know. And if Lawrence had cheated on him, he would probably forgive him.

Analysis

Day Six provides little in the way of action. The strange way the family views Carmen is highlighted again when she offers her support and condolences to Jim on his marital problems with Franny. The Post family is so wholly lacking in self-awareness, while Carmen sees everything so clearly, that it seems they dislike rather than value her for her insight.

Sylvia and Franny go on an outing, which provides Sylvia the opportunity to reflect on the past few months of tension in their home. The author is very good at weaving past recollections into the present, even as each character's POV is in control of each section; and in each section, there is often little action to narrate, but the action drives on all the same. Sylvia recalls how her mother described Madison Vance as a "Problem" that she and her father needed to figure out. The young woman sees the entire thing with a sort of mathematical detachment herself, wondering why her parents even thought they would have true romantic love for the duration of their lives. Both mother and daughter and trying to find a way to forgive Jim.



With an extramarital affair as the centerpiece of the story, it is no surprise that forgiveness should be a running theme, and the author seems to think that there is value in forgiving for the long haul in a relationship, particularly when compared to the short-sighted excitement that comes from an affair. It is no accident that the author has written a sordid affair with a young person into Charles's past, in order to provide Franny with a basis for comparison. If Charles, her best friend, whom she seems to value and esteem over everyone else, made a similar mistake to Jim's, should her perspective be different? At the close of conversation, Franny has not decided, but it is a clever plot device for the author to add into the mix. In Charles's description of the quick affair, Sex and Physical Attractiveness show up again as the familiar pitfalls. Both Charles and Jim fall prey to them, and yet both of them ultimately yearn for the boring comfort of their steady and dependable partners. There is a lesson there for the readers.

The tennis star Antoni Vert provides some foreshadowing. Franny, in her anger towards her husband, is going to run to someone that will make her feel beautiful and wanted again.

Discussion Question 1

How does Charles's secret affect Franny's perspective on Jim?

Discussion Question 2

What does Sylvia mean when she says parents are "delusional"?

Discussion Question 3

How would the story's dynamic be different if Franny's best friend were a woman?

Vocabulary

static, diminutive, seductive, bisected, acclimate



Day Seven

Summary

Charles and Lawrence are occupied with the thought of adopting the baby Alphonse. Tired of sitting around, they take Sylvia and visit another museum. It is nice and quiet, and they talk lightly and briefly about how Charles is focused on Franny when they are together. Charles apologizes and Lawrence is mollified, saying he feels like Alphonse is everything.

Franny prepares for her tennis lesson with Vert. She is late and slightly unprepared, but is not fussed by his impatience. He asks how well she knows tennis and she exaggerates. They begin to play and she looks horrible, giggling and flubbing her way through several plays. Finally, she catches his seriousness and connects a few of his serves. He asks her to serve, and she accidentally smacks herself on the head and passes out.

At the house, Bobby and Carmen exercise by the pool while Lawrence reads nearby. When Bobby goes inside, Lawrence finds himself asking Carmen about their relationship. Like Carmen and Bobby, Lawrence and Charles's marriage has a ten-plus year age gap. They talk of marriage and commitment, and then each of them fades into their own fantasy: Carmen of her possible beach wedding to Bobby, and Lawrence of the baby.

Antoni drives Franny home from the tennis center with a goose egg on her head. She goes to bed early and they have dinner without her. Afterwards, Jim and Charles do the dishes. After a few pleasantries, Charles asks how Jim is, and Jim says he has no idea. Charles does not know what to say.

Analysis

Charles and Lawrence take Sylvia and flee the boredom of the house, mainly in hopes of making another day pass by quickly; another day that will hopefully get them closer to learning whether or not they will get Baby Alphonse. This section of the Day, which takes place in another art museum, is devoted chiefly to how desperately important it is to Lawrence that he and Charles start a family. As Charles says, all Lawrence was waiting on was for them to get married, and then he was "unstoppable" in his quest to get them a baby. The baby is their way of immortalizing their love and their marriage, and assurance that they will not grow old alone. Waiting for news is difficult in an circumstances, and while being in Mallorca may soothe some of the boredom, life with the Posts does add to the tension.

Meanwhile, Franny goes to her tennis lesson with the handsome, retired pro; in a way her vengeance against her husband. Still poised on the brink of forgiveness or divorce, Franny is acting out her confusion as would be expected, in this case with flirtation.



However, to add a level of hilarity to the story and to set up for Jim's final plea for his wife's forgiveness, Franny accidentally hurts herself. The mood of the book is discernibly quieter without her; dinner and poolside conversation passes without the strange combination of buoyancy and expectation that Franny brings to the table.

Carmen and Lawrence share a poolside conversation, during which the reader gets a clear glimpse of their positions in the novel. As outsiders to the Post family (Charles does not necessarily rank in this group), they are more self-aware than those in the family circle. Unlike the family, Lawrence and Carmen seem to see clearly. Further, they are not burdened by the extra pressure that comes from being a Post, so they are more relaxed even on the outside. Thus, they are able to share a productive and comfortable conversation in each other's presence. It is also interesting to note that they are near parallels: Lawrence the younger husband of Charles, Carmen the older girlfriend of Bobby, both on the periphery, both in unusual relationships. The author notes that they find they like each other more than expected. Indeed, Lawrence is the only member of the party that can like Carmen without strings attached.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss Carmen's and Lawrence's role as unaffected observers of the Post family's drama.

Discussion Question 2

Does Charles's own infidelity make him more sympathetic to Jim, or is he still more on Franny's side?

Discussion Question 3

Is Bobby a round or flat character?

Vocabulary

surreal, pamphlet, levitate, prowess, volleyed, exhilarated, impermeable, hoisted, craggy, gossamer



Day Eight

Summary

The day opens with rain, and Franny is angry at the forced rest. On her way downstairs to complain, she glances at herself in the mirror and is shocked to find the enormous bump on her scalp. The group takes to playing Scrabble, at which Lawrence wins easily. Carmen is not having a great time at the game. Also, the vacation is nothing like the last she and Bobby took, which was filled with drinking and sex. She summons Bobby to the kitchen alone and asks again if he has talked to his parents about the money. She reiterates the necessity, adding that she had no idea Jim had lost his job. Bobby seems unclear on what is going on with his parents: "I guess my mom told me, but I wasn't really listening" (158). He leaves the conversation and Carmen is dissatisfied, suddenly feeling like their relationship is out of balance.

After dinner, Bobby is stir crazy and irritated with Carmen, so he decides to go out to Palma and hit the bars. At the last minute, he asks Sylvia to come along. She gets a list of good places from Joan and they drive to the city together. Bobby mentions that he had to get away from Carmen, and Sylvia counters that their parents are not doing very well. The bar is cheesy and weird, but Bobby starts drinking too much and Sylvia watches him dance his way into a group of young women. Sylvia is disgusted, and reminded of her own indiscretions the last time she went out. An hour later, the club is full and Sylvia has not seen Bobby for a while. She goes to the bathroom to look for him there. He tumbles out of the locked bathroom door with a girl clinging to him. Sylvia berates him about Carmen in front of the girl. Bobby shoos the girl away and makes for the door of the club. Sylvia is disgusted with him, and tells him so. He is so casual that she begins punching him in the stomach.

On their way out they pass Joan, and Sylvia longs to stay with him but cannot find a way to say so.

When they arrive home, Bobby apologizes that Sylvia saw his behavior and begs her not to tell Carmen. Sylvia tells him that she does not like him at the moment.

Analysis

Day Eight is mainly concerned with the beginning of the end of Bobby's and Carmen's relationship. The first straw seems to be the money. Money is mentioned often in this novel, mainly regarding Bobby and Carmen; it is the chief proof of his professional failure. Carmen is trying to help Bobby find a way through the problem but he is weak and will not do what it takes--talking to his parents. During the conversation in question Bobby shows himself to be pretty childish and difficult. In response to Carmen's question about his dad losing his job at the magazine, Bobby's response is, "I don't know. It's fucked up, I guess" (158). In this answer he shows a mountain of immaturity,



and for the first time Carmen seems to realize how deep the immaturity runs in his character.

It only gets worse as Day Eight continues. Bobby takes Sylvia out with him, and the reader is allowed to see Bobby's actions through his younger sister's eyes. He finds a random girl from the dance floor and they have sex, the author insinuates, in the bathroom. Infidelity is now a running theme in the novel: the reader sees it with Jim, Charles, and now Bobby, and Sylvia, who is already aware of her father's indiscretion, is disgusted with men in general. She realizes for the first time that Bobby is not a great person. Like Carmen, she begins to see him for the immature, short-sighted person he currently is. The scene at the club is punctuated with the author's regular descriptions of the Spaniards and what they are wearing, their aim towards physical attractiveness, and how sex is a type of currency.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the author's effectiveness in making infidelity a more universal issue.

Discussion Question 2

How does the night out in Palma contribute to Sylvia's journey to self-discovery?

Discussion Question 3

Why did the author choose to narrate the bar scene from Sylvia's point of view rather than Bobby's?

Vocabulary

delineation, turban, impassioned, begrudgingly, nostalgic



Day Nine

Summary

Bobby wakes up to Carmen standing over him. She chides him for his behavior: how he smells, how he must have obviously behaved at the club, and for not having the maturity to deal with his problems. She leaves for a run and he is sick again.

Sylvia wakes, happy that it is Sunday and Joan will not see her while hungover. For a few minutes she wishes for her regular teenage life back home. While venturing into her mother's bedroom for some aspirin, she wonders if Jim has been sleeping in the room with Franny. The thought of him cheating on her makes Sylvia sad.

Lawrence sits in the kitchen trying to get some work done with the terrible internet. Charles will not talk about the adoption and Lawrence worries that Charles is changing his mind. Franny and Charles are nearby, reading; Lawrence recalls that Franny was the first in Charles's circle that he had had to impress. Bobby shows up, grumpy and surly, and, given Carmen's cold manner that morning, the room falls silent and awkward.

Meanwhile, Carmen exercises by the pool. If Bobby would try to apologize and fix things, she would let him. She recalls how immature he was when they met, how she had to teach him everything about being an adult. His parents never made him do anything, so Carmen had to teach him. Although she is responsible for any amount of maturity in Bobby, his family will not give her any credit.

Jim decides to spend the day alone, so he takes one of the cars into Palma and tours the town. Over coffee he ponders the decision Franny may or may not make; how the decision to leave him will spiral into others. He worries about where he will move if she kicks him out. Madison Vance intrudes his thoughts. A memory presents itself, when he told Franny about what he had done.

That evening, Carmen helps Franny in the kitchen. With her own children seldom making the effort, Franny is uncharacteristically moved by Carmen's offer. The family sits down to dinner. "People were all creatures of habit, the Posts no exception." (188) Bobby and Carmen still are not talking, and Carmen is annoyed at this. When Franny digs at her a bit for her eating habits and Bobby fails to defend her, Carmen announces to the table that Bobby is in debt. She announces that Bobby paid to sell protein powders at the gym, but has been unable to unload the product, and is in debt for over \$150,000.

Jim, for his part, is glad the focus has shifted from him for a moment. Bobby tells his family the whole story, and Jim tells him it will be okay. That evening, Jim and Franny lie in bed wondering how to help Bobby, and even if they should. Sylvia gets out of her bed and walks the dark house, checking to see if Jim is asleep on the living room couch. He is not, and she is relieved.



Analysis

Day Nine is a full day, and begins the long, slow climb towards the climax of the story. The author has clearly placed her characters at a crossroads, and Bobby and Carmen are the first to move in a definite direction. Bobby's behavior the evening before at the club, and subsequent refusal to apologize, puts Carmen in a desperate situation. Carmen has been, for nine days, one of the only self-aware individuals on the trip, but even she begins to see more clearly in the Mallorca air. Bobby was supposed to help her feel comfortable and fit in with the Posts, but when it came down to it, he was happy to let her feel isolated and let his parents care for him, like a child. He does not apologize for how he treated her, and he does not seek to help her assimilate into the family, and so she exposes his secret to his family.

Bobby's secret in question is interesting. The Posts are not especially fancy, wealthy people, but the fact that Bobby borrowed money to sell protein powders at a gym is still shocking to them because "it's just not done." The book makes several mentions of how things are "done" in the Post family- "People were all creatures of habit, the Posts no exception." (188) Their Manhattan snobbery is exposed in this scene, and it makes some interesting ripples aside from the most obvious one between Carmen and Bobby. Franny is upset enough to turn to Jim for comfort, and the reader must decide if everyone else's sin makes Jim's seem less egregious, or if Franny is just slowly moving towards forgiveness. It also bears repeating that, although Bobby is obviously the one in the wrong, Franny and Sylvia still blame Carmen. After watching Bobby's behavior at the gym, Sylvia still dislikes Carmen. For the Posts, the old adage that "Blood is thicker than water," definitely holds true. Family is family no matter who has done the sinning.

Sylvia experiences a few childlike moments on Day Nine. She wakes up hungover and thinking about what her friends may be doing back home, although she has spent odd moments during the past eight days thinking ill thoughts of them all. Secondly, she wanders into her parents' room and wonders if they are sharing the bed, or has Franny ejected Jim from the room? Suddenly the years of their comfortable bickering is sad, and she is sad for them and worried. At the end of the chapter, she checks again to see if her dad is on the couch, and is relieved to find that he is not.

During Jim's day in town alone, the ghost of Madison Vance appears in his head and he tries to eliminate the vision by dwelling hard on what he has done to Franny.

Discussion Question 1

Is Franny softening towards Jim naturally, or because she sees mistakes all around her?



Discussion Question 2

How does Bobby redeem himself just a little, when Carmen exposes him at the dinner table?

Discussion Question 3

Are the Posts on Bobby's or Carmen's side, and why does it actually not matter?

Vocabulary

reverberations, clinically, exploratory, implacable, coddling, mediocre, shambled, surly, bristling, oracle



Day Ten

Summary

Franny readies the family for a trip to the beach with snacks and a picnic. They choose a beach that should not be too crowded and everyone leaves together in the two cars. Bobby chooses to ride with Sylvia instead of Carmen, and his sister asks why she would have exposed him at dinner if he had not told her about the other girl. It is hard for Sylvia that Carmen does not know about it.

The beach is beautiful. Franny and Carmen immediately dive in. Charles and Lawrence set up umbrellas to read, and Sylvia lies down with them. Franny and Jim talk about what Bobby may have done at the club the other night. Bobby wanders into the water and is immediately stung by a jellyfish. Jim takes his son into the dunes and urinates on the sting, which actually soothes the pain immediately. While away from the crowd Jim asks Bobby what is the problem with Carmen. Bobby, exasperated, says the girl at the club was nothing. Jim confesses to his son that he cheated on Franny, and that it was awful, and that even in his guilt, he confessed the truth to Franny. Bobby is shocked.

Meanwhile, Franny asks Sylvia what Bobby did at the club. The debt is bad enough, and Franny wants more for Bobby. Sylvia confesses that she watched him cheat on Carmen. Franny is overwhelmed with surprise and worry that she had raised her children wrong. When Jim and Bobby return from the bathroom, Franny explodes. She announces to everyone within earshot how horribly things have gone, that Jim slept with an intern and Bobby with a stranger. She rounds on her son, telling him he should have known better and she should have taught him better. She begins to cry. When Jim says everyone should calm down, Charles punches him. He and Lawrence take Franny to the car, and Sylvia follows. On the drive home, Sylvia asks her mother if they are getting a divorce. Sylvia says she does not know.

Jim and Bobby remain on the beach. Two burly men in leather jackets approach, ironically, the biker gang that was on their flight from Madrid to Palma. One of them is a pediatrician; he looks at Jim's eye. He proclaims it fine, advising Jim to keep it cold. Bobby, Jim, and Carmen take the umbrellas and bags to the car, and drive home in silence.

Analysis

Franny's self-awareness is challenged when she hears of Bobby's indiscretion. Suddenly it seems as if everyone makes some amount of mistakes, not just Jim. In fact, humanity's universal tendency to make mistakes seems to be a running theme in this novel. Franny is hurt, upset, even feels guilty that she would raise a son with no respect for relationships. Jim may have made his own choices, but Franny had a hand in raising



Bobby. Furthermore, there is a strange role reversal at hand between Bobby and Sylvia. At ten years younger, she continues to be the more mature of the pair.

Jim experiences a similar sense of disappointment in his son, which prompts him to confess to Bobby all about Madison Vance. Bobby's response is characteristically childish. Jim and Franny have to deal with forgiving Bobby as well as each other.

There is a huge blowout on the beach. Sylvia is concerned that her parents are worse off than she thought; her desire to leave behind her childhood and plow into adulthood does not seem as appealing, if it means her parents are not together anymore. It is clear that infidelity and betrayal goes far beyond the two people directly involved.

It is revealing that, when Jim, Franny, Sylvia, Charles and Lawrence all hear of how Bobby treated Carmen. Everybody is chiefly concerned with themselves and how his behavior is a reflection on their family. Not one person feels bad for Carmen.

Discussion Question 1

How does Bobby's indiscretion both ease and intensify Jim's own mistake?

Discussion Question 2

How does forgiveness play a role in each character's life?

Discussion Question 3

How has the author managed to switch Bobby's and Sylvia's expected roles?

Vocabulary

functional, tandem, gauzy, cajoled, wheedled, cavalier, subjugated, trudging



Day Eleven

Summary

Jim spends the morning in Gemma's office, away from everyone. He watches Franny through the window and feels a renewed sense of guilt, because he truly loves his wife. The affair with Madison was not accidental; he ponders how it occurred. He feels terrible.

Carmen ponders her options. She has always had her pick of men, and did not have to put up with Bobby. She ponders how he was almost from another planet. He appears in the kitchen and she asks him to take a walk with her. They stroll in silence into the village, passing a wedding on the way. Carmen is enchanted with the sight of the two lovers, but all Bobby can say is that the bride had fat arms. Carmen is crushed. She tells him she is tired of waiting for him to grow up, and that she is going home, to Miami, without him.

The house is in a flutter with Carmen's departure. Joan comes and Sylvia tells him all about it. She feels like she will never get him to have sex with her, and she should have paid more attention to her Spanish lessons. At the last minute, Joan asks to take her "out" for their lesson the next day.

Charles finds Lawrence alone in their bedroom. He awkwardly confesses his affair of long ago, but Lawrence had known about it all along. He knew that it was just a random, midlife fling. Charles wanted to tell the truth before they start their family together.

At dinner, Bobby is acting pathetic and the family musters up some sympathy for him. Despite the events of the day before, dinner feels peaceful, like the tension was broken. Sylvia tells her family with some petulance that her friends had cheated on her, and Bobby encourages her that she gets to start a new life soon. The peace had extended to Bobby and Sylvia.

After dinner, Jim retreats to the study, Bobby goes to bed, Lawrence and Sylvia watch a movie, and Charles and Franny go swimming. He tells her about Baby Alphonse, and they both tear up in anticipation and joy.

Analysis

The inevitable demise of Bobby's and Carmen's relationship happens on a hillside in the village, where the couple watches a wedding procession. It is unfortunate for Bobby that Carmen's ultimate moment of self-awareness results in her leaving him. She takes her forward step into a new beginning, and although Bobby is not going to be with her, her step away from him will for him to take a similar step. At the moment she leaves him, he is incredulous; however, by the end of Day Eleven he seems to understand a bit of why she did so. He even says to his family that it was his fault. It is ironic that



Carmen's departure seems to ease a bit of a tension in the house, and yet dinner on Day Eleven is the most peaceful of the vacation so far.

Charles and Lawrence tie up their one loose end--Charles infidelity of many years ago--thus positioning themselves to receive their new family. The author emphasizes the importance of forgiveness with each of these transactions. Charles confesses and asks for Lawrence's forgiveness. It is simple for them. Carmen ponders on Day Nine and again on Day Eleven that if Bobby would have apologized, would have at least tried, she would have forgiven him and maybe they could have moved on together. However, Bobby did not apologize, did not seek reconciliation, and he lost. Franny and Jim seem to be less tense with each other as the trip goes on, and yet Jim, with all of his guilt-wallowing, has not, in this narrative, begged for his wife to stay.

In a playful interlude between these heavy conversations, the author hints that Sylvia may get her wish after all. Just when she feels that Joan cannot possibly be attracted to her and she will never lose her virginity to him, he asks her to have her lesson "away" the next day.

Discussion Question 1

What is the most vital realization that Carmen has, at the moment in the village, when they watch the wedding?

Discussion Question 2

What factors have contributed to the apparent peace among the vacationers?

Discussion Question 3

How does the Post family's adherence to a routine actually hinder the development of some of the other important themes, such as forgiveness?

Vocabulary

amateur, milliner, dilettantes, errant, mystified, affectionate



Day Twelve

Summary

Joan arrives early to take Sylvia on their outing. Franny calls Antoni Vert at the tennis center and asks if she can see him, because she could always write it up as an interview later. She leaves the men behind by the pool, making sure that Bobby is miserable enough to change, but not enough to do something stupid. Antonin wants Franny to tour the tennis center, and then she suggests an early lunch. Franny has the beginnings of writings back home, rants about Jim, ways to heal, but she doubts it will see the light.

Meanwhile, Jim has called Terry, the pediatrician, and asked him to help him follow Franny on his motorcycle. They drive to the tennis center, and when she leaves with Antoni, they follow her.

Joan and Sylvia drive for a while. She makes an insensitive comment about his music and he yells at her, calls her a typical American. She apologizes, but is hurt.

Franny and Antoni have lunch on a local pier. Franny talks a lot and asks him a lot of questions. Joan takes Sylvia to a monastery for a tour. She is distracted by how handsome he is. After the monastery, he takes a backpack and cooler from his car so they can walk down to the beach.

Franny and Antoni finish their lunch while Jim and Terry watch. They follow them back to the tennis center, and Jim watches nervously as Antoni embraces his wife. He feels exposed, out of his element, and remembers all the times Franny has told him he should get out of his comfort zone. Franny pulls back into traffic in the rental car, but she sees Jim and Terry and stops. When he reaches her, she asks with amusement if Jim has been following her. He says yes, that he cannot lose her. That he is sorry at his mistake, and cannot be without her. She allows him to kiss her.

Joan and Sylvia find the beach and run into the water. They tread water in the ocean, Sylvia babbling nervously, when Joan casually says he would kiss her if she liked. They kiss, and Sylvia suggests they have sex.

Charles, Lawrence, and Bobby are playing Scrabble at the house. Jim and Franny appear and disappear to their bedroom. Sylvia quickly follows, wet and hurried. Charles asks if she had been with Joan the whole time, and she says yes.

Analysis

After a few tense days on the vacation, the author provides a Day Twelve to make the reader smile. The most significant event of Day Twelve is Jim, taking the plunge and begging his wife not to leave him. He steps outside his box, rides a motorcycle, and acts



ridiculous to get Franny's attention. And Franny, after being treated well and feeling beautiful after her lunch with Antoni Vert, is moved by her husband's ridiculousness. He asks for forgiveness and she gives it.

The other significant event on Day Twelve is that Sylvia finally gets her wish, and loses her virginity to Joan. It seems like Joan has been planning it since Day One, and it is exactly as Sylvia would wish it. She does not hang the hopes and dreams of a young girl in love on the event, rather files it away as a brilliant memory that few people will be able to match. The author makes much of Joan's wonderful good looks, reminding the reader how important it is for Sylvia's fantasy that he be attractive.

There is an interesting parallel in Day Twelve, and the sections are even broken more to create a see-saw effect: both mother and daughter are out with handsome Mallorcans in romantic settings. Indeed, as the action goes from one couple to the other, the reader wonders if Franny is going to sleep with Antoni. The author effectively creates tension to this effect. However, the young goes forward and has sex, while the old enjoys the day, but in the end, goes back to her husband, patting his cheek and allowing him to kiss her after he declares his love for her.

Discussion Question 1

Why did Franny call Antoni and ask him to lunch?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the juxtaposition of Sylvia's argument with Joan and the sex that follows. How do the two fit together?

Discussion Question 3

How does the author use humor in Day Twelve to carry the reader through Jim's and Franny's reconciliation?

Vocabulary

starlet, thwacked, sanctity, condensed, stodgy, petulant, pedestrian



Day Thirteen

Summary

Lawrence wakes early to check his email, and there is one from the adoption agency announcing that the birth mother has chosen him and Charles. He screams and wakes Charles. They get ready to leave immediately while the Posts make a celebration breakfast. Bobby has settled into the idea of starting over without Carmen. He ponders out loud that he does not really like real estate, or the gym. Jim and Franny are convivial in the kitchen.

Sylvia wishes she could have sex with Joan again without her parents noticing. He is supposed to come that day, but cancels at the last minute, emailing that he will come by to say goodbye before she leaves for home. The doorbell rings and Sylvia answers; it is Gemma, the homeowner, who has apparently mixed up her dates. Gemma is slightly obnoxious, even aside from the fact that she intrudes on the Posts' last day of vacation. She says things like, "Oh, I never eat anything. Just the ice cream. I come for a week, eat only ice cream, then go home feeling like I've been on a cleanse" (272). When she learns that Charles and Lawrence have gone, she asks Franny if she and Jim would move into their room so she can have her own bed.

Bobby takes to the pool and swims until he cannot feel anything. He ponders how most of his friends have regular lives—marriage, kids, and steady jobs. He looks at the path his life took and wonders why it is different. Carmen never wanted kids, and Bobby does, and he realizes that he had somehow convinced himself it was okay to only be half into their relationship because he knew it was not permanent. "It was time for him to straighten out, and if nothing else, he could start with this, the length of this pool, over and over again" (279).

Franny is irritated at Gemma's rudeness. They go to the empty bedroom with their things, and discuss how to deal with Bobby; afterwards they have sex, proving they have truly made up.

Analysis

With the climactic events of Days 11 and 12 behind them, Day 13 is a denouement, with loose ends tying together and the vacation, as well as the action, waning.

The first significant event is Charles and Lawrence receiving an email from the adoption agency telling them they get to adopt Baby Alphonse. The prospective adoption has been a golden ring for the couple, an unknown but somehow vital missing piece of their lives. Baby Alphonse has danced out of their reach for the length of the novel, but the email announces that he is theirs. The couple rushes home to claim their new son. For the length of the story, the baby was their symbol of "forever happiness" but also a



driving force in Charles confessing his affair to Lawrence, thus clearing the slate for them to build their family with no secrets.

The Posts make breakfast to celebrate, mixing the process of cooking and feeding with the comfortable routine of the best pancake recipe, and because Franny says, "pancakes were celebration food" (268). The author takes a paragraph describing how seriously Sylvia takes making coffee with the French Press: how she delights in the routine of it, the strict measuring of coffee and water, the exact timing required for the coffee to steep, and the slow, methodical pushing down of the plunger. All of this enjoyment of the method is related to her sexual adventure with Joan from the day before, and as the coffee steeps she ponders how the even can be repeated that day.

Bobby muses how Sylvia has always been good at "being herself," and how far different he is from that truth. The real estate business, the gym business all seem pretend to him.

In a strange plot twist, the author introduces Gemma, the homeowner, on the last day. She has apparently mixed her days and come to Mallorca a day early, her vacation thus overlapping the Posts' for one day. Rather than stay in a hotel or try to remain out of the way of her paying guests, however, Gemma intrudes; her presence is a physical symbol that the vacation has come to an end. The time has stopped standing still, and real life is about to begin again. Other signals that this is true include Sylvia receiving an email from her prospective college roommate, and Franny and Jim having sex for the first time in months and months.

Discussion Question 1

How does Gemma's appearance drive Franny and Jim closer together?

Discussion Question 2

Where does Franny think they failed with parenting Bobby?

Discussion Question 3

Where does Bobby think he failed with Carmen?

Vocabulary

commotion, celebratory, extract, plunger, simultaneously, detonate, quaint, feign



Day Fourteen

Summary

The Posts are packed and ready to leave for the airport. Sylvia paces, waiting for Joan and his promised good-bye visit, but he is late. He arrives, treating Sylvia with cool casualness. Sylvia is shocked that Joan actually takes her mother's check, suddenly seeing their time on the beach as a meaningless transaction. She asks Franny to take their photo, because obviously, Joan is gorgeous and she would need to remember and also prove it to her friends. Bobby takes the phone, and Sylvia kisses Joan on the lips for a split second. Everyone is shocked. He offers to hug her before she gets in the car, and she turns her back on him with a breezy "good bye." It was not love, she muses as the car pulls away. It was a moment on a beach, and she had really gotten what she wanted out of Joan.

At the airport, Bobby has a last second to decide if he is flying to Miami or to New York. Carmen has not contacted him; she made it easier for them each to start over. He cannot imagine why he would return to Miami, and instead turns his mind towards what may await him in New York.

In the tentative haze of happiness surrounding his reconciliation with Franny, Jim wonders what he can do professionally when he returns, as he is still without a job. During his daily walk, in the airport, he thinks about what he would do next. He realizes he has walked too long and they are boarding his flight; hurrying back, he fears Franny will be worried. However, when he gets to the gate he sees his wife, standing and waiting for him patiently.

She is excited that Bobby is coming home with them, the family together once more for a while. She reminds herself not to baby her son but to treat him like an adult. All of them would need to learn to fend more for themselves, she ponders. As the plane lifts off, she likens it to their marriage, which can fly steady and true but needs some firm steering. She is ready to stay committed to it.

Analysis

Day Fourteen is the last day of the trip, and the Posts are leaving. The biggest event before their departure is for Sylvia to say goodbye to Joan. Their last minute together really effectively written. Sylvia, even in her broad few of the world, is looking for a grand romantic gesture from Joan, but when he arrives he treats her casually. In that moment she realizes what she actually already knew, that the sex was simply a physical interaction. Rather than wallow in that knowledge, however, she decides to finish well. In her parting photo with Joan, she boldly kisses him for the camera, so she will have proof of her interaction with him, and then brushes off his offer for a hug. It is equally



strong, impressive, and ridiculous, a fantastic ending to her time with him. It is the metaphorical equivalent to a leap from a precipice.

At the airport, Bobby has a moment to decide whether to fly to Miami or New York. Perhaps more than anyone in the family, his transition is the biggest: he is not only entering new circumstances, he is trying to become a different person. He sits by Sylvia in the terminal, their relationship also new from how the vacation impacted him, and he feels the safety and sanctity of family all around him.

Jim rounds out his routine by taking a walk in the terminal. When he returns, Franny is waiting for him. This perhaps is one of the most poignant moments in their new forgiveness, even more than the sex; that she will stand by and let the plane board while she awaits her husband. As the plane lifts off she decides she will forgive him and forget what he did, adding much needed grace and patience to their marriage. Bobby feeling the comfort of his family when he decides to go home with them. Jim takes his walk in the terminal.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Sylvia think Joan should not take her mother's payment for the Spanish lessons?

Discussion Question 2

What does Sylvia's sudden kiss with Joan symbolize?

Discussion Question 3

In what ways will all of the Posts need to stand on their own two feet?

Vocabulary

notoriously, squishy, ineffectual, acquiesced, apropos, impervious



Characters

Franny Post

Franny is the true matriarch of the family and of the plot line. Like the other characters on vacation, Franny has an issue that is an obstacle to overcome. Having recently learned that her husband Jim cheated on her and lost his job as a result, Franny is on the brink of deciding what is to come next: divorce or not? Truly, she cannot make a decision to move forward until she deals with her complicated feelings about the infidelity. The girl he chose was young and slim, a fact which bounces back on Franny and her mature figure and their thirty-five years of marriage.

The vacation seems to be the place where she will make her decision. On Mallorca, she is surrounded by her best friend, Charles, and her two children. As a character, Franny is a typical middle-aged mother. The author has done well at not painting her as a two-dimensional caricature. She is not an overbearing, bossy woman, but she does have her annoying quirks: Franny needs attention constantly and likes to create experiences, which can be draining for her companions. Her biggest challenge is whether or not she can move past her husband's mistake and live the rest of her life with him.

Jim Post

Jim is the other half of the Post parents. He represents a dying breed: a child of the 1960s that grew up, got a job, and stuck with it for over thirty years. The fact that his life has changed very little over three decades made him the perfect candidate to have a bit of a midlife crisis moment and allow himself to be seduced by a younger intern, aged 23.

In many ways, Jim is a placeholder of a character. The reader learns very little about him other than he feels deep shame for his infidelity, and that he is a slave to routines. He is not the one who drives the family--that is Fanny. Jim's personality is fairly indistinct and he is a person that things happen to, rather than a person who makes things happen. Throughout the novel, Jim goes along with whatever plan is hatched, does not know how to talk to his kids or his wife, and only gets the gumption to verbally apologize to Franny from riding the drama created by his son Bobby.

Sylvia Post

Although eighteen-year-old Sylvia Post has her own smaller issues to occupy her mind during the vacation, her role in the novel is that of observer. Because the novel has a third-person limited point of view, the reader has to see much of what occurs through Emily's eyes. The girl is a recent high school graduate, poised to leave for Brown University in a matter of weeks, and is sifting through her own high school ghosts in preparation for starting a new life on campus. Having recently been betrayed by her two



closest friends, Sylvia embarks on the vacation with a "let it all burn" kind of attitude. For a teen, she has a remarkably strong self-concept and seems to be happy with who she is. She knows of her father's infidelity but does not know what her parents are planning to do about it.

Throughout the trip, Sylvia does a lot of watching, and through her eyes the reader watches the relationship between Bobby and Carmen disintegrate just as she watches that of her parents reconcile. Through Charles and Lawrence she has a vague idea of a happy marriage and wonders if any of that sort of life is available to her. Sylvia's chief aim of the trip is to lose her virginity, a goal she achieves with her handsome Spanish tutor, Joan.

Bobby Post

Bobby is Sylvia's elder brother by a decade. The age difference between him and Sylvia makes for an interesting family dynamic--one would think that Sylvia, as an almost-afterthought, but have the personality of a spoiled child. On the contrary, Sylvia appears to have a strong self-concept while Bobby is a bit of a childish mess. The best word to describe him is "young" even though he is twenty-eight. He leaves behind him a string of failed business ventures and comes to the vacation with a massive debt that he needs his parents help to pay off. He also brings with him his girlfriend Carmen, a 40-year-old personal trainer. Their relationship is unpopular with the Posts and fairly strange. By the end of the novel, Bobby is decided to get his life straightened out start doing for himself.

Carmen Last Name

Carmen is Bobby's girlfriend of six years, although it has not always been a serious, exclusive relationship. Carmen is a self-made- successful personal trainer of Cuban descent. Where Bobby comes from a privileged, New York family, Carmen has worked her entire adult life and is strong and self-sufficient. Several times in the story she mentions that Bobby was "young" when she met him, and that he required training on her part to get him to resemble an adult. On the vacation, she represents a kind of "fish out of water." Although she is not an unpleasant person, she is obviously well disliked by all of the Post family for being different. Halfway through the vacation she urges Bobby to ask his parents for help with his debt, and this causes an increase in the tension in the house. By the end of the novel, Carmen has decided that Bobby will never grow up enough to suit her, and she leaves him.

Charles Last Name

Charles is a semi-famous painter from New England, and Franny Post's best friend. Their friendship predates her marriage to Jim. Because Charles is gay, there is no sexual tension or competition among them, but there is an obvious level of tension that



surrounds Franny's and Charles's friendship--both Jim and Charles's husband, Lawrence, feel ignored whenever Charles and Franny are together.

The relationship between Charles and Lawrence is the most stable romantic relationship in the novel. For the moment, they are the happy ones on the vacation, although they bring their own bit of tension from home. The couple is trying to adopt a baby, and the worry, pressure, and patience involved in that process makes both men short-tempered.

In the end, it is Charles who serves as the major catalyst for Jim. It is his angry outburst towards Jim that prompts him to finally beg for Franny's forgiveness.

Lawrence Last Name

Lawrence is Charles's younger husband of over a decade. He is a patient, faithful lover, which is a contrast to almost everybody else in the novel. Where the other characters push, pull, and nag at their partners, or react to such actions by cheating, Lawrence is steady and calm as a partner. The reader even finds that he had long known of a short term affair Charles had in the early years of their relationship, and bore with it. Although he bristles with feeling "extra" when Franny is around, and worries about the possibility of the adoption, he is otherwise a steady, pleasant presence in the story.

Joan Last Name

Joan is Sylvia's young, handsome Spanish tutor. He was lined up ahead of time by the owner of the vacation house, Gemma. His main purpose in the story a romantic counterpart for Sylvia, and this shows in how two-dimensional his character is. Their conversation is short and surface; the reader knows very little about him. However, by the end of the novel he fulfills his purpose, as he willingly takes Sylvia's virginity in the most idyllic of settings, giving her a unique memory to take back to Rhode Island.

Madison Vance

Madison is the young intern with which Jim has a short affair before the start of the novel. She does not appear in the novel and provides nothing except a memory for Jim. During several scenes in the novel, Jim recounts how the affair began: how devotedly she seduced him, how silly he felt for falling prey to it. She is a reminder of how easily his pride could be tampered with.

Gemma Last Name

Gemma is the owner of the Mallorca house, a wealthy gallery owner and friend of Charles. She appears in the last chapter of the novel, showing up a day early and throwing the Post family into turmoil. The only function she serves is that she appears

as a sort of threat to the Posts, and they band together in response. With so many days of inner tension that would threaten to break them apart, when Carmen appears they unite against a common enemy.



Symbols and Symbolism

Physical Attractiveness

For these characters and the ones surrounding them, being attractive is a symbol for one's ability to be loved. Like an adolescent, the characters that are focused on their looks are focused on being loved, which is somehow supposed to help them navigate their difficulties. Straub spends countless sentences describing what people look like, especially regarding the efforts they go to in order to appear more attractive.

Sex

In *The Vacationers*, sex is currency. It is used either to trade up or down a social ladder; it is used to exchange a bad relationship for a good. More often than not in this novel, sex is a transaction. Only a few times does it occur in a safe, joyful environment. .

Money

For the Post family, money is a status symbol. From the rapturous descriptions of Gemma's Mallorca home to the family's shock over how financially unsuccessful Bobby is, money is definitely a way that people are defined for good or for bad.

Mallorca

Mallorca is the metaphorical opportunity for these people to get their lives together. The characters mention often how in a place like Mallorca, time seemingly slows down. For these characters, the space in time is for them, for them to ask forgiveness and clear the air and get ready for their next stage of life.

Baby Alphonse

Baby Alphonse is the baby that hopefully awaits Charles and Lawrence back in New York, and he is their chance to make their love an eternal thing. Several times, Lawrence fears that if they do not adopt, they will simply grow old and die. With a child, they are able to pass on their love to a new generation, and the baby is a symbol for that.

Madison Vance

Madison Vance, the twenty-three-year old employee with whom Jim Post has an affair, is a symbol of youthful adventure. Jim is a man who has spent thirty-five years in the



same job and the same marriage, and she is the path not taken, the what-if, the ghost of Jim's young self. For the plot's purpose, it is no surprise that the girl in question is young--this allows the indiscretion to be more than just cheating. It is an exploration of the possibility of a separate life.

Food

The family gathers around food, and so food is a symbol for that one perfect moment in each day where the worries and tensions can be set aside in lieu of enjoying company and sustenance. Each dinner during the vacation is described, because it is the time in the novel where the cast of characters come together. For Franny especially, food is a vehicle, a way to show love and devotion without words and vulnerability. Rather than saying, "I love you," she would say, "have a pastry."

Self-Awareness

The Post family is almost universally lacking in self-awareness. They display an acute inability to be honest with themselves. This fact is both mentioned and observed by Carmen and Lawrence, the outsiders. This lack of self-awareness symbolizes the fear they all have of being open and vulnerable, even with one another.

Mistakes

Mistakes are a normal part of humanity. Many of these characters begin their journey on a metaphorical high horse, but as the story goes on, each person's humanity is revealed. No one in the Post family is innocent of betrayal or of judgment; however, the author ultimately wishes the reader to understand that nobody is. Humanity means making mistakes and moving on with the grace and forgiveness of your family.

Gemma's Intrusion

Just like Mallorca was a symbol for a frozen moment in time, during which the cast members had a chance to pull their lives together, Gemma's appearance on the penultimate day of the trip is like a switch thrown, the clock starting again. Suddenly it is clear that the house is not theirs and they will leave in a day, taking with them their grace and forgiveness and newfound strengths. Her appearance brings with it other signs that real life is poised to begin again: Charles and Lawrence receive word from the adoption agency, and Sylvia hears from her college roommate.



Settings

New York City

The Post family lives in New York. They have been in the same house and the same NYC jobs for over thirty years. The fact that the Posts are New Yorkers somehow adds to their lack of self-awareness, as if the author believes that being from New York brings a bit of arrogance to one's character. The Post family does have their arrogance, whether or not it is New York-based, and when Carmen reflects on how green and young Bobby was when she met him, she specifically blames it on his New York upbringing.

The house in Mallorca.

Most of the action in the house takes place in Gemma's house on Mallorca. Most of the conversations, ruminations, and recollections occur there.

The beach on Day Eleven.

This beach is significant because it is where Franny learns of Bobby's indiscretion and explodes in front of the entire family and any nearby Spaniards. It is hard for her because, while Jim made his own choice in cheating on her, Bobby was her son, so she feels responsible. His poor choice is too overwhelming for her.

A different unnamed beach, on Day Twelve.

The beach below the monastery is where Joan takes Sylvia for their "lesson." Whether or not Joan planned from the beginning to participate in Sylvia's fantasy about him, that is exactly what happened. For Sylvia, to lose one's virginity on a private beach in the Mediterranean with a beautiful man is the epitome of memorable.

Blu Nite

This is the club in Palma where Bobby takes Sylvia to blow off steam when he is angry at Carmen. For Bobby, it is a seemingly normal night of alcohol, dancing, and women. For Sylvia, she leaves a bit of her innocence behind as she sees that her brother is not a very nice guy.



Themes and Motifs

Starting Over

Almost everybody in this novel ends up at a place of beginning, where at the end of the story, they are starting anew. The author is all for new beginnings, as she nudges each character into a new place of the unknown.

Sylvia is ready to leave her high school life, which has its share of regrets that she rehashes throughout the novel, and step boldly into her new life as a freshman at Brown. One of her goals is to leave her virginity behind, and the author provides opportunity for that in her Spanish tutor. Her brother Bobby ends up alone, left by his girlfriend Carmen. Both of them are posed at a new beginning. Charles and Lawrence are about to adopt a baby; again, the author makes his happen for them with an email on the penultimate day of vacation.

Perhaps an exception to the author's nudging into new beginnings are Franny and Jim, who were poised at the possibility of divorce at the opening of the novel. However, by the end, they have decided to stay together and work through their problems. While they do stay together as a couple, in a way it is a new beginning because their marriage, having come through the hardest challenge, is new.

Family

Although the Posts and their extended family are imperfect, often difficult people, they are family, and everyone needs family.

This is especially evident in how thoroughly Franny, Jim, and Sylvia support Bobby over his girlfriend Carmen, even though Bobby is clearly the one that needs fixing in that relationship. Franny ultimately comes to this decision when she commits to forgiving Jim for his infidelity and keeping their family together, rather than leaving him.

Charles and Lawrence, although by no means young, decide that adding a baby to their family is the best and most important way they can imprint the world with their love. Sylvia, who starts the novel hating everyone and everything, ends the novel with a satisfied happiness with her parents and her brother.

In this way, the entire novel is like a "reset" button for the characters, reorienting them all to the truth that family should be their true north.

Routine

The Posts find safety in how things are always done.



The author begins the novel with a description of Jim's daily walks, a plug to his vanity. The walks are an anchor for Jim's day and he continues them as he can during the vacation. Other evidences of routine show up especially in the way Franny runs the vacation: food, family, fun. She is in charge of the meals, and although the food itself varies, Franny is devoted to certain type of eating experience that the family must adhere to because it's the Post way.

Perhaps the best judge of the Post way of doing things is Carmen. Bobby's older, Cuban girlfriend is a definite outsider and not a devotee to the Post routine, and thus through her eyes the reader can watch the idiosyncrasies of the family unfold during the vacation. Carmen, as a person, is smart and successful and by all accounts very good for Bobby, but the Posts dislike her because she is so different from their accepted norm. Late in the novel, when Bobby confesses that he borrowed money to sell protein powders, Carmen watches the explosion of disappointment across the family's faces with "it's just not done in the Post family."

One thing that is not done is talk about their feelings, but Jim is required to step outside of that norm in order to beg for Franny's forgiveness. It is not the easy or safe option, but it is needed for Jim to salvage his relationship.

Forgiveness

In order for the Post family to make their move into their new beginning, they each need to forgive something, either in themselves or in somebody else. Straub emphasizes this forgiveness in order for each character to move forward. Jim and Franny are the obvious examples: he has to forgive his lapse in judgment and his fallen pride in order to un-freeze himself and pledge his sorrow to Franny. Franny, in turn, must forgive him.

Jim's and Franny's issues lead Charles to remember his own infidelity to Lawrence; although it was in the early years of their relationship and before they were married, Charles feels guilty that he never confessed it to Lawrence. He feels the need to confess this long-over affair to Lawrence right then, on the cusp of their move to expand their family.

Bobby and Carmen are another study in forgiveness, except the reader sees it play out differently. In their relationship, Carmen simply decides she needs to leave Bobby. He is so dumbstruck by the conversation, he does not have the opportunity to ask her forgiveness, and she does not offer it. For days the reader sees Bobby struggle with how to move forward. By the end he decides he must forgive himself, since he does not have Carmen's, so he can move on with his life.

For many of these characters, forgiveness is a catalyst to take an important step forward.

Infidelity

Franny is understandably angry at her husband at the novel's beginning. He cheated on her with a much younger woman, and Franny is unsure of what the next step is. However, throughout the story, as both her best friend and her son reveal their own experiences with cheating, Franny has to reevaluate her hard thoughts about Jim's mistake. Ultimately, the author communicates that good people can cheat, even while they still love their mates. Sometimes, it is not a terrible, systemic character flaw. Sometimes, it is just a mistake. And all people can make mistakes.



Styles

Point of View

This novel is written in third-person limited, which means that the reader can only see what's happening from the character on which the chapter is currently focused. This is a clever way of writing the novel, because some characters are more observant, while others are very myopic. As a result, when the point of view is Sylvia's, for example, the reader gets a glimpse of what everyone is doing because she is an observant character. The same can be said of Carmen, who is an outsider anyway. By contrast, Bobby is so self-centered that when his point of view is controlling the reader only experiences his own thoughts and feelings, and the rest of the gang goes unnoticed.

Language and Meaning

Emma Straub's writing is very interesting. It is both simple and stark, but also requires the reader's full attention. In many novels, a reader can let their mind wander for a full page and not miss anything, but this is not so with Straub. Perhaps this is because her sentences are so simple and decisive, each word is carefully placed and lends to the whole of the passage. There is no fluff. She also has a tendency to use strong words to shock the reader into paying attention, particularly when she is discussing sex. For example, when Jim is recounting his affair with Madison Vance, he uses the word "pussy," which is a strong term and could be distasteful for some readers. As a result, the reader is left with a distasteful feeling about the affair. Likewise, when Sylvia has sex with Joan, she uses very youthful terminology to discuss what they are doing because she is only eighteen. Straub's writing is definitely well-considered and effective.

Structure

The structure of the novel is not exciting. The trip to Mallorca which occupies the whole novel is fourteen days long, so rather than chapters, the novel is divided into days. However, each day is divided into shorter sections, during which the POV and setting may shift from character to character.



Quotes

Sorry. My parents are on their way out. They're the worst. This had not always been true, but it was now, and she wasn't shy about saying so.

-- Sylvia (Day One paragraph 3)

Importance: This quote is one of the first clues that things are not especially well in the Post house; and further, that even if the issue is confined to Franny and Jim, its effects have spilled over onto Sylvia.

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.

-- Franny (Day Two paragraph 1)

Importance: Here the reader can see Franny's heart, even with its essence of bossiness. What she really desires is to have everyone together, under one roof, to enjoy a beautiful place together. However, she also wants some amount of forced togetherness that she is able to control.

Joan looked like an excellent candidate for sex. In fact, if sex had made a poster advertising its virtues, they might have put his face on it.

-- Sylvia (Day Three paragraph 4)

Importance: There is a lot of talk and thoughts about sex in this novel. It is almost used as currency, a way to lift oneself up and feel better or higher. Sylvia has set out to lose her virginity, and her Spanish tutor seems a perfect candidate.

He needed Franny to stop crying, and then he needed his husband's full attention, before someone else called the agency and claimed the child, before the open door was closed and their baby wasn't their baby, before they were old and creaky and alone forever and ever, just the two of them and Charles's paintings of other people's children."

-- Lawrence (Day Four paragraph 4)

Importance: The edge-of-your-seat tension that Charles and Lawrence experience regarding their possible adoption takes up the next nine days of the novel. Lawrence's feeling of desperation to have this baby, in comparison to years and years of an empty nest, is well put in this quote. Moreover, it demonstrates Lawrence's ever-so-slight feeling of envy towards Franny.

She was better than that, Sylvia knew, bigger and better and ready to shed her skin like a snake.

-- Sylvia (Day Five paragraph 4)

Importance: Sylvia, like most of the other characters, is poised on the brink of a new phase of life. This quote reflects how committed she is to remaking herself. The simile



involving the snake invokes odd reptilian connotations that display the author's unique writing. While the syntax of this sentence is not simple, the stream of consciousness narration seen here is evident throughout the novel.

Even if I hadn't, Fran, that's the truth. Marriage is hard. Relationships are hard. You know that I'm on your side, whatever your side is, but that's the truth. We've all done things.

-- Charles (Day Six paragraph 3)

Importance: Franny has just learned that Charles had a similar affair- with a young, flashy person- early in his relationship with Lawrence. That her best friend would make a similar mistake to Jim's sheds new light on the situation, and Charles's words here are in response to Franny's question, "what would you do?" It is important that Charles reminds Franny that everyone makes mistakes and that marriage is hard.

Waiting for a bay was like waiting for a heart attack- at a certain point, you had to just surrender and make other plans, not knowing if you'd have to cancel.

-- Lawrence (Day Seven paragraph 1)

Importance: This quote reminds the reader of the extra layer of tension that Baby Alphonse has added to the vacation for Charles and Lawrence. Instead of simply trying to enjoy Mallorca as is, the couple has to push through each day, hoping to hear good news from the adoption agency.

If he were a nice brother, the kind who asked her questions about her life... and less pathetic, she would have told him all about their parents and how the whole world was ending and no one seemed to care."

-- Sylvia (Day Eight paragraph 4)

Importance: Sylvia, aside from her 18-year-old angst, seems to be the most stable of the group. However, in the bar scene the reader is reminded that she is still young, as she watches her vision of her brother crumple; and really, with both her brother and her father showing themselves unfaithful, her vision of men and of true, loving relationships suffers.

When Jim thought about the worst moment in his marriage, he thought about watching Franny turn the book over, the straight line of her mouth. It was what he'd avoided thinking about when Madison was in front of him, when he thought he might be twenty-five again, if he wanted it badly enough. But there was no getting out of one's only life. Franny was a fact, and Madison was a mirage."

-- Jim (Day Nine paragraph 3)

Importance: This quote is Jim's recollection on his mistake cheating on his wife. It also demonstrates how Madison Vance was, for him, a symbol of his lost youth. As he says, a mirage to make him feel twenty-five again.



Parenting was a terrible curse—it was about subjugating your mistakes so well that your children didn't know they existed, and therefore repeated them ad nauseam. Was it better to be a hypocrite or a liar?"

-- Jim (Day Ten paragraph 2)

Importance: These thoughts go through Jim's mind when he realizes that Bobby cheated on Carmen. He realizes the importance of confessing his indiscretion to Bobby, so Bobby will know that it actually is a big deal.

You're just starting... in less than two months, you're going to be in a whole new place, surrounded by thousands of new people, people who have no idea who you are, or where you come from, or what your story is. And then you can be whoever you want. This kid, whoever he is, he doesn't matter. You're at the very beginning. It's good."

-- Bobby (Day Eleven paragraph 2)

Importance: This is probably the most decent thing Bobby says in the entire novel. It is directed at Sylvia, during the first calm, peaceful dinner of the vacation. It is not only the exact right thing to say to her, it encourages where she is in life, a young woman about to take her first steps in the world. And Bobby, who had never paid much attention to his sister, encourages her well with these words.

Joan was as handsome as a man in a Calvin Klein ad, one of the ones where it looked like clothes had never been invented, and thank God. He could have been steering a sailboat wearing only a skimpy pair of underwear and no one would have complained. Complained! Tourists would have paid money to have their photographs taken with him. Sylvia doubted that she would ever be so close to anyone that naturally good-looking ever again.

-- Sylvia (Day Twelve paragraph 2)

Importance: The author takes pains to describe people's outward appearance in this novel, even people that are insignificant to the story; and when someone is very attractive, even more so. Being good-looking is a way to get ahead, and a means to have personal confidence. And while Sylvia does not feel attractive herself, losing her virginity to Joan somehow helps her case anyway.