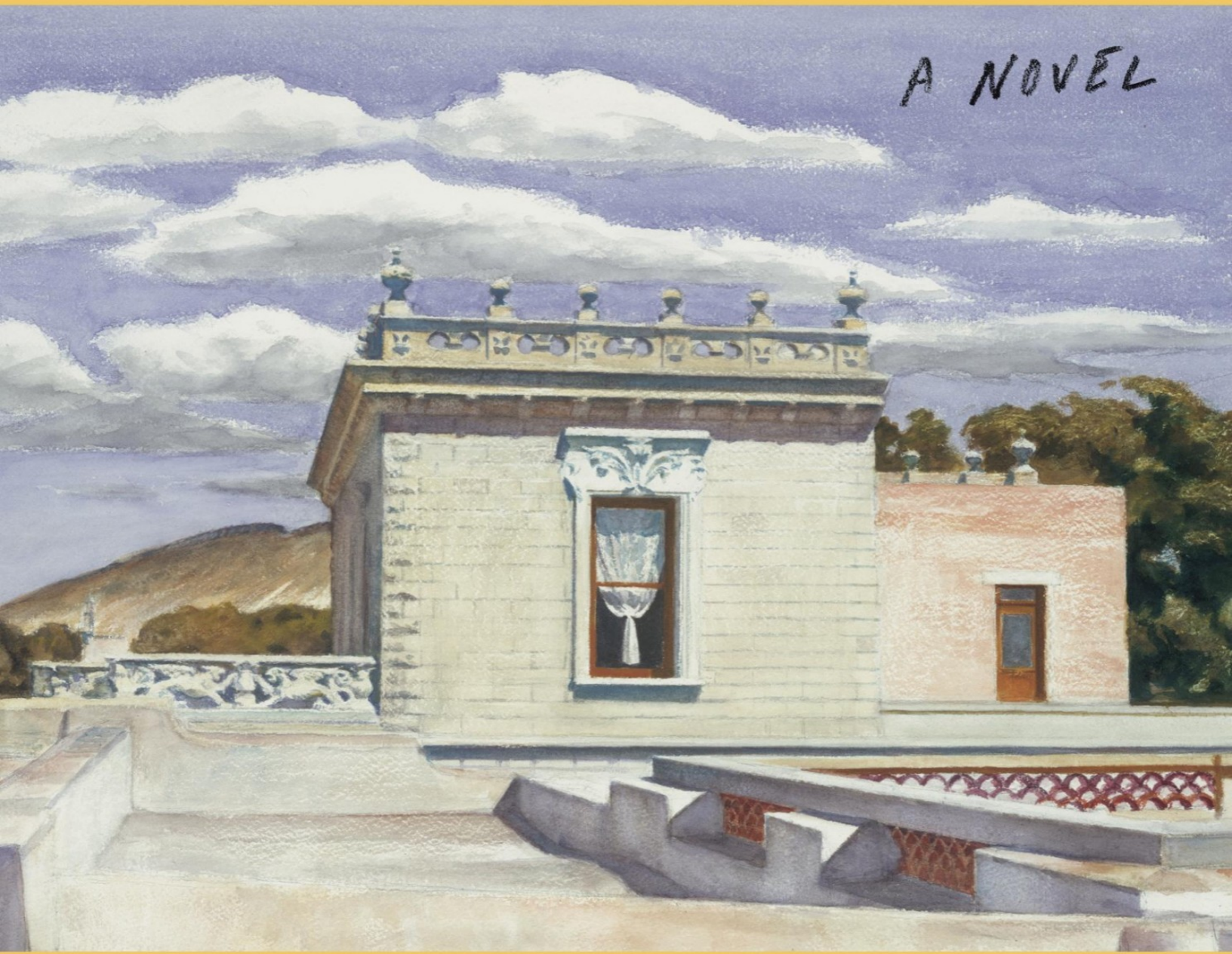


FONSECA

A NOVEL



JESSICA FRANCIS KANE

Author of the national bestseller **RULES FOR VISITING**

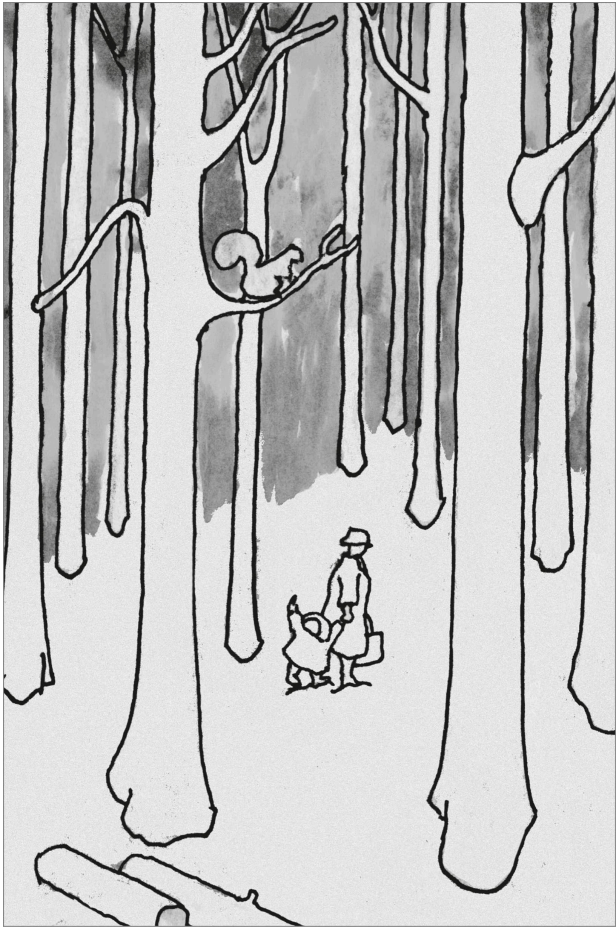
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Bending Heaven

The Report

This Close

Rules for Visiting





JESSICA FRANCIS KANE

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Author's Note

Acknowledgments

About the Author

For Mitchell, who always knew what Fonseca meant

Unfortunate are the adventures which are never narrated.

—Penelope Fitzgerald



NOVEMBER

.. *Day of the Dead* ..

In 1952 November 2 fell on a Sunday, and that afternoon a mother and son stood in front of the Delaney house in Fonseca, Mexico, poised to knock. They had traveled a long way, were quite stunned, mainly from the last leg of their journey through the American South, and now it was late afternoon the day after the day they were supposed to have arrived. The season was warm, and in the square behind them people were wearing calaveras and the air smelled of smoke and marigolds. In the distance and also quite nearby they heard the pop and spray of fireworks. A band was playing in the square, the music brassy and bright, punctuated by shouts. It was all very disconcerting, and even though he didn't know who or what was behind the door, the boy wanted to go inside. In all his six years, he had never entered a house that did not have someone making or about to make tea. But his mother would not knock.

"This isn't a holiday," Valpy said, turning to sit down on the front step. A young woman passed chewing a large sugar calavera with the name Pedro across the forehead. She was sobbing and laughing at the same time.

Penelope sat down next to him. "How can you tell?"

"I've never had new clothes for a holiday before."

"That's not true. What about your bathing costume last summer?"

He didn't say anything. They both knew bathing costumes didn't count.

"And this is a very strange house." The gray stone with wood shutters in the French style was at odds with all the buildings around it, every one stucco in the colors of sunset. The house stood right up against the pavement, three gabled sections around a shallow front courtyard. Five steps led up from the front wall to what looked like the door of a castle keep, old

oak with iron bolts and bars. Above and to the left was a heavy, rounded balcony that reminded Penelope of a pulpit. There were several tall chimneys, two dormers, and a number of mullioned windows in various sizes, all shuttered. Old, twisted pecan trees on the street further darkened the front.

“Yes, but there’s nothing to be afraid of,” Penelope said.

This was an error. Valpy had not said he was afraid, and now Penelope saw that he was looking at the trees and the heavy little balcony and wondering if he should be. “We were invited,” she reminded him quickly.

“But why were we invited?”

“The Delaneys are old friends.”

“But why do they want to see us?”

Later, when the house in Southwold was emptied, and even later, when their houseboat *Grace* went down, Penelope would remember this moment on the step of the house in Fonseca. Everyone has a point to which the mind reverts naturally when it is left on its own. This was hers.

“It’s hard to explain,” she said.

This was not untrue. The Delaneys, two wealthy old women, had written to Penelope more than half a year ago to say they were alone in the world, all their relations in Ireland were gone, and because of some distant friendship between their families, they hoped to meet Valpy. Indeed, if Penelope had understood their letters correctly, they suggested they might leave him all their money. This possibility was tantalizing for a number of very pressing reasons. She stood and knocked quickly, pecan shells cracking underfoot.

“Dios mío, two of you!” the housekeeper exclaimed, pulling open the heavy door. “Have you just come from the bus?” She was about fifty, with wide, bare arms under a red apron. Her dark hair was pulled into a middle part, the length of it braided and wound on top of her head, a yellow marigold tucked behind one ear, heavy cheeks flushed under blue eyes. Penelope, who was not particularly tall, towered over her.

Valpy bravely cleared his throat. “Yes, but first we were on the *Queen Mary*, then the bus. It was a long and terrible ride. Actually, first we were on

a train, but that wasn't part of the adventure because it was still in England."

"That sounds right. Very few adventures begin and end in England. Where was the boat's port of call?"

"New York," Valpy answered.

"Good. One of you can take the bus back there." She took Valpy's hand, suggesting Penelope would be the one returning.

Penelope countered with a hand to Valpy's shoulder. "But I notified Doña Elena that we were both coming."

"I don't remember that letter."

"Yet you know it *was* a letter."

"How else would you have told her?"

"I might have sent a telegram. Or phoned."

The housekeeper narrowed her eyes. "Too expensive." She adjusted the marigold behind her ear. "We expected you yesterday."

"I'm sorry. We were delayed in San Antonio."

"That was the terrible part," Valpy said.

The housekeeper nodded as if she understood, but how could she have known what happened?

The three stood on the doorstep, seemingly at an impasse. Finally Penelope said, "This is ridiculous! He's only six years old. He never could have made this journey alone."

"Why?" the housekeeper said, scrutinizing Valpy. "Is there something wrong with him?"

Valpy shook his head.

"Of course not," Penelope said. "But it would be a very long journey for so young a child."

"How far is it?"

Valpy knew the exact mileage from the front door of their house, Chestnut Lodge, Hampstead, London, to the doorstep where they were standing in Zona Centro, Fonseca, Mexico.

"That is far," the housekeeper said. "He should be with his mother."

Penelope was relieved. "Now we agree. I am his mother."

The housekeeper sighed. She stepped backward, pulling the door with her. "I am Chela. Welcome to Mirando."

Penelope didn't move. "I thought this was the Delaney house?"

"Yes, yes, come in."

It was an inauspicious, topsy-turvy start, and Penelope never forgot it.

THE LARGE, WOOD-PANELED front hall was decorated for the holiday with potted marigolds lining both sides of the wide center staircase. These were mostly orange, orange threaded with darker orange, and a few yellow here and there. They must have just been watered, for the smell of damp soil filled the hall. Convivial sounds came from the floor above, and there was opera playing somewhere.

"Are you having a party?" Valpy looked hopeful for the first time since they'd knocked.

"No," Chela said. "Those people are here just like you. The Doñas are in the cemetery. Leave your trunk for Jesús." Chela looked at Valpy and then spelled for his benefit. "That's J-E-S-U-S. He will bring it up."

Penelope was troubled by some of this information and Valpy was wide-eyed, but there was no time for questions. Chela moved fast for one so round around the middle. At the top of the staircase, she turned left, then right to the bottom of a smaller staircase. She took this to the third floor and turned right again down a tiled hall, where she stopped in front of a door that looked like it might have once been painted blue.

"Come down when you're ready," she said, not in the least out of breath, "but not before five o'clock. Mr. Azuela will be finished with his report by then. The washroom is down the hall. You'll be sharing with the Tuttles. For some reason they like to say their room faces the sea, but it is six hundred kilometers to the east. Your room faces the mountains, the beautiful Sierra Madre. But don't be fooled. They are farther than they seem."

"Tuttles?" Penelope said.

“An organist and his wife from Ireland. Penniless. No one can remember how long they’ve been here.”

“Do they also have a son?” She had not expected competition.

Chela laughed. “Not that I’ve seen!” She looked more seriously at Valpy. “Why? Are you worried about being lonely? There is plenty to do at Mirando. We have a garden and chickens, and a flock of mourning doves roosts on the roof. There is also a cat, Pax. He does what he likes and goes where he pleases.”

“Thank you,” Penelope said. “I’m sure we’ll be fine.”

“We’ll see.” Chela opened the once-blue door with a key and ushered them in. “Laundry is on Mondays, bedclothes every other week.” She closed the door and left them, the peppery scent of marigolds lingering behind her.

Valpy looked as if he were about to cry. “Are Mr. and Mrs. Tuttle old friends too?”

“I’m sure they are,” Penelope said.

The room, up under the eaves of Mirando, had a sloped ceiling and a set of mullioned windows that did indeed, when Penelope opened the shutters, look over rooftops toward the blue-tinged mountains. There was a double bed with a blue quilt, a small desk without a chair, and a wardrobe in the back left corner. To the right was a chaise upholstered in dark red velvet that felt large for the room, but would do nicely as a second bed. There was a glazed jug and basin under a shelf and mirror on the wall, a little wooden bench, and a small electric fan. The room was clean and tidy though the air was still. Penelope turned on the fan.

“Is Jesús going to bring the trunk? Is that really what’s going to happen?”

Penelope explained that it was probably not an uncommon name in Spanish.

“We are very far from home,” Valpy said.

She was prepared for this and gave him the best advice she had based on her own experience being sent away to school at eight. The words came out with a ferocity that startled them both.

“Homesickness is a real illness, Valpy. Don’t believe anyone who tells you it isn’t.”

Dear —

I was so interested in your letter with its description of how you came to know my mother's work. Interested and also reassured because I can see that you understand her and her life as far as one can ever know or understand other people's lives. I often wonder why I didn't ask her more about herself and decisions she made and then I remember that she always evaded questions and never gave direct or detailed answers.

My brother Valpy lives in a remote mountain village in Spain most of the year though he also has a small town house in Oxford where he was a professor. He would like to get in touch to share his memories of the 1952 trip to Mexico (to Saltillo, not "Fonseca").

Thank you for telling us about Hopper. His Mexican paintings are so atmospheric and you can feel the heat. I think the dividing line between fiction and fact is quite blurred in her biographies and her novels so you push on.

With all best wishes,
Tina

.. *Greed?* ..

Doña Elena's first letter arrived at Chestnut Lodge in the spring. She introduced herself as a family friend who, in spite of the recent nationalization, lived comfortably off the proceeds of her family's silver mine. She and her sister-in-law, Anita, had lived in Fonseca since they were girls. Would Penelope and her family—they believed she had a son?—like to come for a visit?

Penelope had no memory of friends named Delaney. Nor did Desmond, whose family was Irish. He said it was a lark. They'd never hear from this person again.

But a few days later, a second letter arrived, this one from Doña Anita, though the handwriting looked similar. The plan it suggested was more detailed. It was, specifically, Valpy they were interested in. Could they send him? To put it plainly—and Doña Anita did, Penelope believed—they were in need of an heir.

"Could Doña Anita have been drinking?" Penelope said. The hand was wobbly and grew larger and looser as it progressed down the page. "What do you think?"

Desmond shook his head.

Penelope wrote back. Of course she did. Anyone who has ever been in need of money will understand this. She and Desmond were coeditors of a struggling literary journal, had just made an ill-advised move to a larger house, and had two children under six. A legacy of any kind would be a godsend, and she did not use that word lightly. If their financial situation didn't improve, they would have to leave London, a thought she couldn't abide.