

PHILIP ROSENTHAL

Point, 2011
Enamel on Panel, 36 x 48 in.



courtesy: the artist

VANESSA BLUMBERG

Botanical Gardens of Vallarta

The Kempers were in Puerto Vallarta for eight days and seven nights at a beachfront resort hotel, all-inclusive. Malcolm Kemper, a businessman, needed a relaxing vacation, and his young wife, Frances, had never been to Mexico. The hotel advertised tourist excursions (Swim with the dolphins! Ride the Water Slide! Visit the Botanical Gardens of Vallarta!), and at breakfast, on the mezzanine overlooking the azure kidney-shaped pool, Malcolm suggested that Frances go without him. A fat American couple at the table to their left was engrossed in seconds from the buffet. A few feet away, in the direction of the swimming pool, the couple's fat little boy taunted a magnificent iguana with a magenta hibiscus flower tied to the end of a string. The boy tossed the flower, aiming to hit the iguana, and then yanked the bloom quickly away.

"Someone should stop that child," Frances said, anxious, wondering when Malcolm had decided about the excursion, that she would go and he would stay.

"Someone else," Malcolm told her, his back to the boy. "Relax, it's why we're here remember?"

Weren't they also here to be together, a Romantic Getaway? Typical Malcolm—he tipped generously for secluded corner tables with views of the ocean, then proceeded to introduce himself to whoever sat at the table next to theirs, and today, except for his bare feet, he was dressed for tennis.

If I go, Frances realized, he'll find someone among the guests to return his serve. Forgetting her, he could unwind, have fun. She took in a long slow breath, tasted the salt in the air—the sea or her own sweat. She knew he didn't regret bringing her, his secretary and now his wife. On the contrary, he would never have come to relax at this vacation resort without her. They'd been married only two years. He still loved her. And she loved him. Except this morning, since he wanted to play tennis, he was sending her off alone.

"I better wear my hat, then," she said. It was an eye-catching, narrow-brimmed, pink straw hat with a large, blown-open silk rose on the band—for show, not for sun, but that wasn't why Malcolm objected to it. Though he had no interest in or eye for women's clothes, it was just wrong for her.

"More coffee, señora?" the waiter asked.

Señora. It was only customary, but it made Frances

Above her the tall coconut palms rustled, whispering. If there was a breeze, Frances couldn't feel it.

shudder. As if it were her name, and the name of every other woman in need of pampering at the resort hotel. She placed the hat on her head, the ravished rose face-forward, and said, “No, thank you,” though it hardly mattered. There would be another waiter with more coffee in a moment.

The hotel was grand, nine stories high, more than four hundred rooms. This morning in the courtyard below their window stood a bride, dressed in white, posing for photographs between faux marble columns under wrought iron balconies distended with the vines of purple bougainvillea. In the evening there was a fiesta. Last night Malcolm had slept through most of the entertainment: a nine-person mariachi band. For three-quarters of the show his head weighed on her shoulder. Every time she shifted under him, he started up so suddenly and gave her a look of such child-like rage that she had to smile.

After the show, back in their hotel room, Malcolm had farted frankly and laughed about the Mexican diet, patted his stomach, and said he’d have to be more careful or he’d lose his girlish figure. Then he dropped his clothes in a pile on the floor, kissed her wetly on the neck, reminded her that he loved her, wanted her, and pulled back the sheets to get into bed. He patted the place next to his. “Come on in.”

“I think I’ll read,” Frances said, looking for her book of Bowles’s stories, finding it on the bedside table. She had a bachelor’s degree in American literature from a good college back East and always planned to return for a master’s in occupational therapy. She wanted to help people. Then she got the job as Malcolm’s secretary and married him instead. She still loved to read.

“Well, I can read, too, you know,” he joked, and loudly cracked the spine on his crime novel.

Five minutes passed and he was asleep. His glasses pinching the tip of his nose, his mouth open. He snorted.

The paperback fell from his lap, whack, onto the tile floor of the hotel bedroom. It didn’t wake him, and Frances didn’t bother to pick it up.

Now, on the mezzanine by the pool, Malcolm waved to someone a few tables away.

“Who’s that?” Frances asked.

“He’s Canadian. Smith, I think, or James. Here with his wife and children. We met yesterday by the pool.”

Frances avoided the pool. Languid, nearly naked bodies, curing in the hot sun, the same bodies sleeping in the rooms above and below theirs, eating at the same tables where she and Malcolm had eaten the day before. Intimacy thrust on her by repeated meetings with the same strangers loosely draped in loungewear and bathrobes.

“I told him we’d play tennis,” Malcolm said.

“You could come with me.”

He stood. “Tonight,” he said, apparently feeling guilty for deserting her, “we’ll have dinner. No fiesta. Just the two of us. Room service.”

Above her the tall coconut palms rustled, whispering. If there was a breeze, Frances couldn’t feel it. She got up from the table and brushed his rough vacation shave with her lips. Malcolm was a successful businessman in need of a relaxing vacation. And Frances, not quite twenty-six years old, could still become anything.

* * *

A few months ago, several drinks into a company party at an associate’s home, she had overheard one of Malcolm’s interns say to him, “Really? And what does your wife think about that?”

“My wife?” Malcolm had said. His voice sounded loving, filled with bravado. “She thinks whatever I tell her to think.”

Frances had excused herself to whomever she’d been standing with, a few women, other wives or maybe girlfriends, set down her drink on a brightly polished side table, and walked down the long carpeted hallway to the bathroom. From the hallway the bathroom doorknob was brass and cool; inside the bathroom the knob was cut glass, smooth, the same temperature as her hand. The toilet seat was white and low to the ground and hard. She desperately recalled a fact. From biology class. Muscles fire electrical impulses. The heart was a muscle. The brain—a muscle,

too? She was all muscle, firing. At some point she heard a knock, and the door to the bathroom opened and quickly shut again. Pardon me, someone said. And the next time, Use the lock, why don’t you? When she found her way back, Malcolm was ready to go—Good God, he’d only half-joked, I thought I’d lost you. It was two o’clock in the morning, three hours gone somewhere, and as if it were any other night, she went home with him.

* * *

“He won’t move, you know.” Frances whispered it to the child, her eyes on the giant iguana. She intended to take the hibiscus flower away from him, explaining why what he was doing was dangerous. It was what any good mother would do. Instead, she got down on one knee, the same height as the boy. “Not until the sun warms him. He’s cold-blooded. Wild. Indifferent.” It was the reptile’s biology. “Once he’s warm,” she told the boy, “he’ll move very fast.” The glass eyes of the giant lizard were wide open, unblinking. “In an hour,” Frances said, looking toward where the sun would eventually peak the resort hotel. Maybe less. Her arms were gooseflesh. How would it feel, she wondered, to be the one holding the flower when the giant lizard rushed?

“It’s not gonna move?” the boy said.

“No.”

“An alligator,” the boy said very seriously, “can go ten miles an hour. That’s faster than you think.”

Frances shook her head. “No,” she said, “when I think I go fifteen miles an hour.”

Quickly his eyes were on her. He raised both eyebrows as if undecided—was she a fool? Probably. “Well,” he said, smiling now, “I think forty miles an hour.”

He kicked at the grass. “At home I have a stupid dog and a stupid cat. Stupid, stupid, stupid,” he repeated, as if he hated the word but liked the sound of it. Then, still holding the string, he turned and walked away from Frances and the iguana. After a few steps, he stopped, turned, waved to her, and then continued on. The flower, still attached to the string but damaged, followed behind him, dragging purple in the green grass.

* * *

Less than an hour later, the cab driver nodded when Fran-

ces told him the Botanical Gardens of Vallarta. To be sure he understood, she reached far forward from the backseat to show the glossy promotional postcard with the photographs of flowers and birds.

The driver nodded again, moving a toothpick along his bottom lip with his tongue. Several of his teeth were missing. “El Tuito,” he said. It would be seventy pesos.

The concierge at the front desk had told Frances three hundred, maybe more, each way. The Gardens were inland from the coast and south, remote from the tourist city and the beach hotels. When Frances tried to indicate the discrepancy to the driver in her faltering Spanish, he shook his head firmly. He must have thought she was haggling with him.

“Está bien,” she said, and then she repeated the words in English. “It’s fine.” The cab, stinking of fuel, pulled away and into the stream of traffic, the resort quickly indistinguishable from the other giant hotels.

It took maybe twenty minutes to reach the town of Puerto Vallarta; Frances wasn’t sure she’d never liked the feel of a watch on her wrist and Malcolm always wore one. The streets and buildings looked flat and hot; only a few pale-skinned tourists in short pants and baseball caps or wide-banded fedoras walked along the narrow sidewalks. Her driver pulled to a curb and stopped.

“El Tuito,” he said.

Frances shook her head. “Botanical Gardens,” she said. “El Jardin Botanico,” she tried again.

He turned around to look at her, removed the toothpick from between his lips, and used it to point out the dirty rear window at the street. “Bus,” he said. “No taxi.” He was not smiling. “You wait.”

Mud-colored pavement and a length of wooden fence. There was nothing on the street corner to indicate a bus stopped there. No sign. Nobody waiting. Frances hesitated. Offer the driver more money. Enough pesos and he’ll take me. Don’t get out of the cab. This isn’t a bus stop. There won’t be a bus. Her shirt clung to the small of her back, she could smell herself, and stupidly, she had left her hat back in their hotel room.

“Por favor,” Frances started to say, “please—” but the driver cut her off with a stream of Spanish so rapid she couldn’t follow it. He was still talking when she slammed the cab door shut behind her.

Across the street was a store, bags of plastic-wrapped items she didn't recognize hanging from the frame of a dirty green awning. She crossed the street to ask inside about finding another taxi when a dusty blue bus pulled up to the curb, all of its windows pushed open, El Tui-to written in white chalk in the upper-left corner of the windshield.

"Do you go to the Botanical Gardens?" she asked the young Mexican driver when he opened the large folding door.

"Quince pesos," he said.

"Is it far?"

He looked at her blankly. "Quince pesos," he said again.

The sun's glare made it impossible to peer too deeply into the dark interior of the bus, but it was shaded inside. That much she could tell. It would be cooler, even if only a little. One hesitant step up, out from under the sun, and she felt as if it had been decided for her.

There were no other foreigners on the bus. Only a few of the seats were empty. An older man in a cowboy hat and boots got on soon after she did and took the seat across the aisle. Without glancing at her, he leaned forward over his belly and his large silver belt buckle and spat on the floor by his boots. Then he placed his hat on the seat next to him, sat back, and closed his eyes. In the narrow space between the two seats in front of her, Frances saw the hands of an old woman: knuckles of swollen bone, fingers worrying the beads of a rosary. There was the smell of hot plastic and spoiled fruit.

Another man, slight and burnt very brown, with two buttons missing from his shirt front, began moving from the front of the bus down the aisle to the back, between the rows of seats, handing out small white pill bottles with a red label. The old woman with the rosary took one; Frances saw it resting in her lap. So did the man in boots across the aisle. Frances wasn't offered any pills. The man walked past without looking at her. At the back of the bus he turned around and came again to the front, where he started to speak in a loud rapid Spanish, holding one of the pill bottles like a Marx brother smoking a cigar, his fingers wagging, the bottle moving toward and away from his lips. The movement, modulating the volume and tone of his voice, had a strange mesmerizing effect on Frances

so that initially she didn't hear the man in the seat behind hers speaking to her in English.

"He is selling them," the man repeated.

Frances turned around. His face was young but hard-lined and sensual. He wore a T-shirt, faded blue jeans, and sandals, and his arms were slender like his body and muscled, his hands thick and dirty under the nails. It was easy to imagine him working at one of the hotels, on the grounds maybe. One of the strong young men she'd seen from their window in the early morning climbing the coconut palms with a machete, hacking down the large brown fruits. "Yes," she said, "I see. But then why didn't he give me one?"

"It is for old people. For the muscles and the joints." To illustrate, the man in the seat behind hers grasped and squeezed first his own forearm and then his elbow. "Right now he is saying it will help with stress. It is for before work and after. Now he says it is also for the bedroom."

Frances looked around her. Not everyone with a bottle was old. There was a woman, hardly more than a girl, with a small child on her lap, who held the pill bottle loosely without looking at it.

The man in the seat behind hers was smiling, amused, while his eyes appraised her. "You are American?"

"Yes, American."

"You are traveling alone?" He didn't wait for her answer but left his seat and took the empty one next to hers. "Now he is saying it will make you feel young again, give energy and strength. Only ten pesos. One American dollar. Look, you see, some of them are buying it." His grin said they were ignorant people.

The vendor was walking the aisle again, taking bottles back from those who wouldn't buy, collecting pesos from those who would. The girl with the child on her lap gave the pill bottle back.

"Tell him I'd like one," Frances said.

The man sitting next to her laughed. "No," he said, but he took her coins and signaled the vendor, glancing at the red label before giving the bottle to Frances. "A souvenir?"

There was something about the small, nearly weightless bottle, cool and smooth in her hand, that made Frances feel like a child with a secret hope. There were magic beans inside. Not meant for her, and yet she held them. No

one sitting on the bus looked frightened or aroused by the laughing man or the vendor or even remotely interested in Frances and her bottle. Along the roadside, strangler figs with thick yellow cords and shiny leaves throttled a length of wire fence, threatening to topple it.

"Yes," Frances said, tucking the medicine in her purse, "a souvenir."

"You are going to the Gardens?"

Frances nodded. "Is it far?"

He shrugged. Either the distance was nothing or it meant nothing to him. "I am also going there," he said, offering her his hand. "I am called Javier."

He was confident. Everything about him said so, the smile on his lips and the lazy strength in his hand. The way he had sat next to her, and now, the way he lied so easily about the Gardens. If I get off at the next stop, Frances thought, so will he. He was going to the Gardens because she was.

The child on its mother's lap dropped its head and jerked it up again, asleep. The bus took a curve, shifting and rattling. Frances braced her feet on the floor, gripping the armrest to keep from leaning into Javier. A car sped toward them and passed on the other side of the narrow road. Frances thought of Malcolm, playing tennis. The twenty, maybe thirty kilometers that separated them felt enormous. The road straightened and then curved in the other direction.

"Perdón," Javier said, without bracing, so his body pressed against hers at the shoulder, the elbow, the hip, along the length of her thigh.

* * *

As she left the bus, the heat from the sun bore down on her. The vehicle, disappearing now behind a dusty curve in the road, gave Frances an indistinct but lasting impression: no bus would be coming back for her. It was foolishness, of course. The heat. Her own childish fears. Malcolm: a vivid flash, him leaping for the ball on the hotel's clay courts. This followed by a ridiculous rage that formed a thin film of sweat like a second skin on her face, the nape of her neck, between her breasts. And a longing. Not toward the disappeared bus or her present situation or even Malcolm, but for her hat. She longed for the impractical blunt-rimmed straw and the blown-out rose,

*A great methodical
whirring noise shimmered
around them like waves
of heat from the sun.*

which she'd chosen on impulse and felt now, desperately, embodied something true about herself that she could not remember.

She stumbled over loose rocks on the dirt road into the Gardens, Javier walking beside her. A great methodical whirring noise shimmered around them like waves of heat from the sun. It was the sound, Javier told her, of insects, thousands of male cicadas, vibrating. The cicadas whirring, a fly buzzing by her ear, the cry of a circling black frigate bird, made her aware that there were no people, no other visitors to the Gardens. He would be her guide, he said. "Me gustaria." It would please him.

When Javier reverted to Spanish, it seemed purposeful—to confuse her. The words she knew meant one thing, while his eyes and his tone suggested something more formal and more intimate and also opposite, like his "Perdón" on the bus.

"How much?" Frances asked, thinking to give him twice the amount to leave her alone.

"No, no, señora." Javier pretended to be offended. His manner was comic and a little threatening. He stopped her hand moving toward her purse and her wallet, stopped her whole body from moving forward by stepping in front of her, blocking the path.

She would have walked right past the simple wooden box with a statue of the Virgin inside, large rosary beads wound around her neck. The glass pane in front was broken. Several bunches of flowers had been left there, now dried and brittle. The remains of five or six votive candles in a row at Mary's feet.

"Each week," Javier said as he lit a candle, the short black wick almost drowned in the liquid wax at the bottom of the glass. He came to the Gardens each week, and he always lit a candle. "For my grandmother," he told Frances.

"Your grandmother?" She doubted it. He came here in

the heat on that bus to light a candle? Every week? What was he atoning for?

Now he walked briskly. Frances had to jog to keep pace. Along winding dirt paths that scaled dry, eroding hills, there was almost no shade and very few unusual plants. Frances recognized most of the species: orchids, tree ferns, a few bromeliads dangling from strangled branches. Wilted hibiscus flowers, dusty azaleas. One hillside planted entirely with the sharp spines of blue agave.

The day was so hot her body seemed to be expanding, swelling against the pressure of the atmosphere: the ring on her finger, the straps of her sandals, the button at her waist all seemed too tightly fastened. Clusters of kniphofia, shocking blazes of orange-and-red needle-shaped bundles on spindly green stalks, lined the road, compact infernal sentries standing at attention.

Javier started descending a steep rocky path. He paused, turned back toward her. Offered her his hand. “Come,” he said.

The gesture, his hand reaching for hers, was so simple, utilitarian—coming from him, as it seemed to, without any thought—it didn’t frighten her. The tone of his voice was neither pleading nor harsh, and that tone, together with the cool feeling of his hand, reassured her: We are animals, the way dogs and cats are. Not men, not women. She didn’t need to find a motive for his every action. But when she tried to pull away, he squeezed, and she felt the bones in the middle of her hand roll and crush against each other.

Where was she? And what was she doing here? The ceaseless mechanical whirring of the cicadas came now from inside her head.

“The bus,” Frances said. “I want to go back to the bus.”

But Javier continued down the steep hill, her arm twisting to accommodate his hold on her hand. “No bus,” he said. “Not for another forty minutes.” Like Frances, he was not wearing a watch.

Her breath came unevenly, the taut cord inside her chest pulling on her ribs, closing them flat like blinds, shutting out the air and light. Every inch of her was alive with a fear she hadn’t felt in a long time. How long? How long had it been since she’d felt real fear? Her life in her own hands.

She ran. She yanked herself free and ran without stopping, without looking back.

* * *

There were no seats left on the bus. People stood in the aisle, moving to make room for her, the metal pole hot where someone else’s hand had been a moment before. Jostled on each winding turn, Frances gripped the metal pole with her damp hand, breathed the tired body-warm air in the bus, heard the shrieks of laughter way in the back, the smell of cigarettes and the fainter odor of tequila—signs that the workday was over. She pressed against the backs and bare arms and cloth bags of people just beginning their time off, their evening fun. Frances remembered something: a college freshman in Middletown, riding the local bus, on her way to a tavern hosting an open-mike—she was going to read her poetry—the butting bodies crowded together, standing room only. The shouts, the threat and the promise, the incredible raw energy of the bus ride at rush hour. It had thrilled her the way she believed love should. She remembered it now—that thrill. It was something she hadn’t thought of in years.

Vanessa Blumberg is a writer and occupational therapist in Santa Cruz, California where she lives with her husband and daughter.

PHILIP ROSENTHAL

Fish, 2011
Enamel on Panel, 36 x 48 in



courtesy: the artist