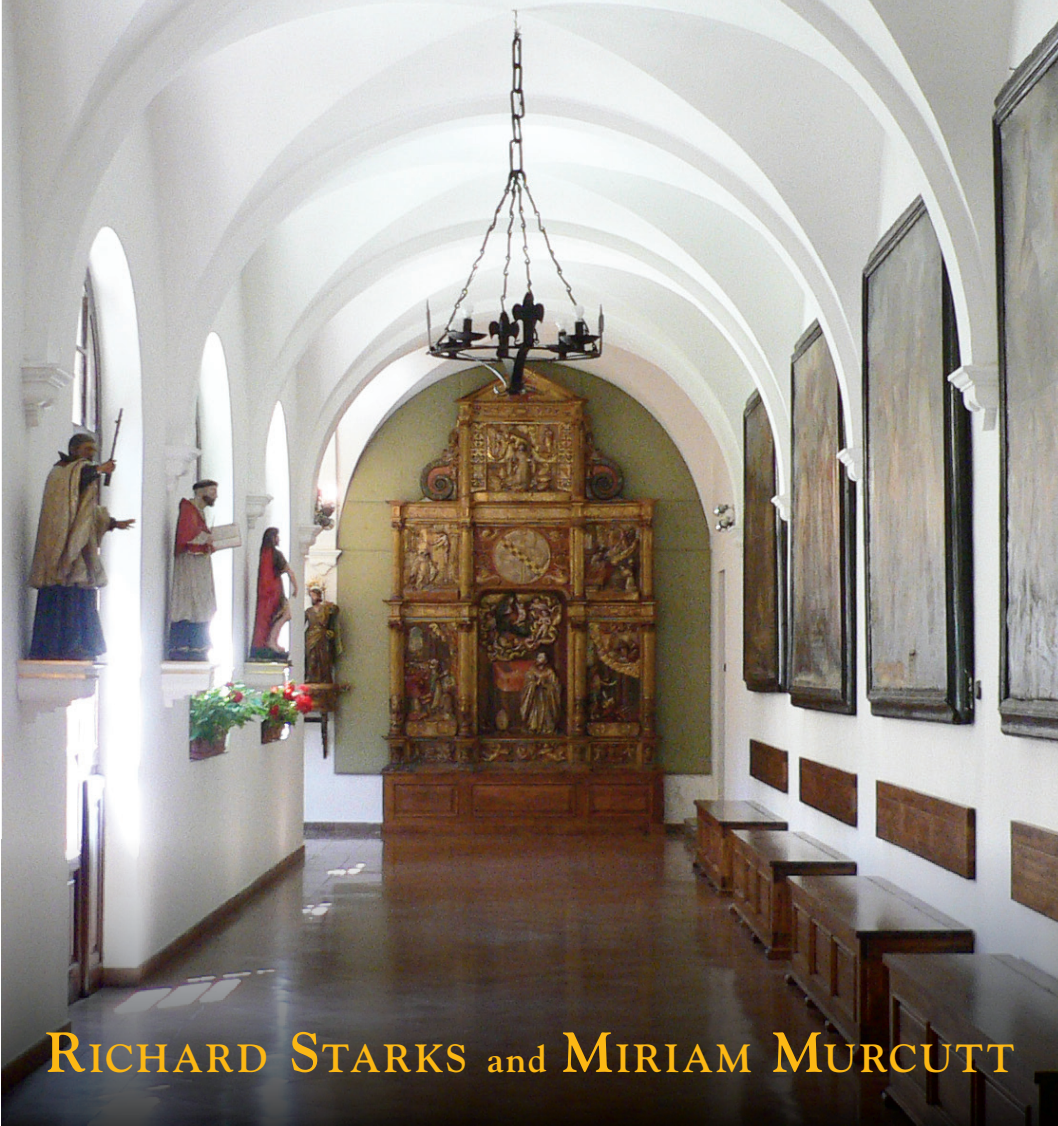


# *A Room with a Pew*



SLEEPING OUR WAY THROUGH  
SPAIN'S ANCIENT MONASTERIES



RICHARD STARKS and MIRIAM MURCUTT

*A Room with a Pew*

Let everyone who comes be received as Christ.

—RULE OF ST. BENEDICT



I have desired to go  
Where springs not fail,  
To fields where flies no sharp and sided hail  
And a few lilies blow.

And I have asked to be  
Where no storms come,  
Where the green swell is in the havens dumb,  
And out of the swing of the sea.

—“HEAVEN-HAVEN: A NUN TAKES THE VEIL”

BY GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS (1844–1889)



When a police officer stops a monk for speeding,  
he smells alcohol on the monk's breath and sees an  
empty wine bottle on the floor of the car.

“Have you been drinking, sir?” he says.

“Only water,” says the monk, his fingers crossed.

“Then why do I smell wine?”

The monk looks at the empty bottle and says,  
“Good Lord! He must have done it again!”

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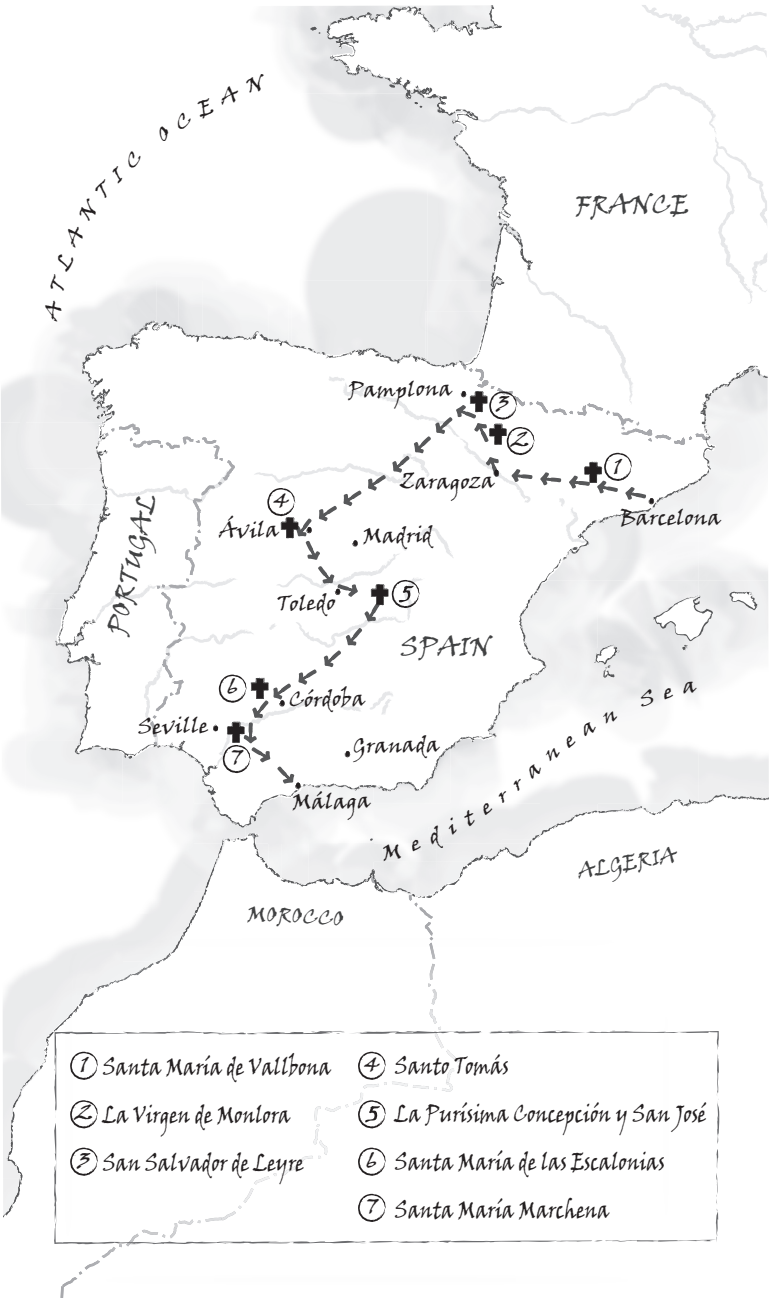
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## *Authors' Note*

This book has two authors but for the most part it is written in the first-person singular. To have used the first-person plural would have been clumsy. It would also have implied that we are somehow joined at the hip—which, of course, we are not.

Richard Starks

Miriam Murcutt



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## *Introduction*

I've never seen a severed finger before. This one, when I examine it closely, is unnaturally long, as if it possesses an extra knuckle. It's also brown, what I would call "formaldehyde brown," the color laboratory specimens turn once they're past their sell-by date. It sticks up in what might be construed as a rude gesture, set like a spent candle in an ornate filigree holder. The blackened nail with its sliver of crescent moon above the cuticle appears to be brittle and badly in need of a trim.

"Her ring finger, was it?" I ask. "From the right hand?"

The man who's showing it to me nods. He doesn't say anything for a moment as we put our heads together and gaze through the glass that contains this holy relic, but perhaps he notices something in my expression. "Don't worry," he adds. "She was dead when they cut it off. So there wouldn't have been any pain."

I'm glad about that, because for the past few weeks I've seen a lot of pain. I've seen men flayed alive, burned at the stake, shot full of arrows, and run through with spears. I've seen heads on platters, entrails on the ground, and tortured souls begging for mercy as hordes of demons pitchfork them into an eternity of Hell. And most nights I've slept in a room with a man nailed to a cross, blood coursing from an open wound in his side, his crowned

head lolling onto one shoulder or thrown back as he gazes skyward in anguished rebuke.

It's been a fun-filled few weeks.

Christianity must surely be one of the world's most violent religions—especially when you see it up close from inside a Spanish monastery. It can also, of course, be an inspiration—and, if you approach it with a modicum of doubt, even an inadvertent source of amusement.

“The fingernail,” I tell the man beside me. “It needs a trim.”

“I know,” he says, then flashes a wide conspirator's grin, the kind you might see on a child. “But I'm not allowed to touch it. I'd be roasted alive if I ever did that.”

I turn to look at him and for the first time I realize that he's not what I thought. He, too, is a skeptic. Maybe even a non-believer.

He may have been put in charge of the finger. But like me, he's never been handed the gift of faith.





El Reial Monestir de  
Santa María de Vallbona



*Cistercian*

## {ONE}

EACH YEAR, NEARLY SIXTY MILLION TOURISTS DESCEND ON SPAIN, most of them headed for one or other of the three Costas—Brava, Blanca, and Sol. These Costas are infamous for their tacky bars and stacked beaches, and in the case of Sol (the most southerly one) for their British-ex-pat, underworld residents.

We're also headed that way, but we're hoping to avoid the crush and the crowds (and the bank robbers and drug dealers, too). Our aim is to start near Barcelona in the northeast, then wend our way south and west past Madrid, Córdoba, and Seville before arriving on the southern Mediterranean coast at Málaga. We'll be following a route that, although inland, we have come to think of as the "Costa del Soul"—a term we've coined to reflect the fact that we plan to stay only in monasteries.

Spain's ancient monasteries will, we are sure, not just provide a novel form of accommodation. They will also give us an intriguing glimpse into another way of life—one that's pursued by

a dwindling breed of monks and nuns cloistered within what are essentially living museums of history, culture, and art.

With this plan in mind, we fly into Gerona, one of three airports to serve Barcelona, and pick up a rental car—a blue Fiat Panda with five forward gears and a lawn-mower engine. We squeeze in, jerk the clutch a few times, then drive south on a toll road that parallels the overcrowded coast. Because Spanish monasteries are new to us, we plan to ease ourselves into their medieval way of life by spending our first night in Sant Marçal—an eleventh-century Benedictine monastery that has been transformed into a commercially run hotel, operated under license by a Spanish chain called Husa. We’ve no idea what it will be like, but since the monastery-hotel bills itself as “a small palace of quietly exquisite taste,” where visitors can enjoy a “staff-to-guest ratio of one-to-one,” I’m confident we’ll be able to take it in stride.

Near the town of Sant Celoni, we leave the highway and head inland toward El Montseny—a large massif that is all but ignored by the tourist hordes on the beaches. Right away we enter what I think of as the “real Spain”—small, isolated villages set in rolling fields uniformly striped with olive trees. As we climb the eastern slope of the massif, the temperature drops and the vegetation begins to change. Cork oak and pinewood give way to groves of beech and fir. A thin mist swirls around us as the road twists and turns, seemingly uncertain of the best way to go.

With night coming on, I’m impatient to arrive, but as the Panda wrestles with another pretzel bend, our cell phone rings

and we hear Señor Balsells, Sant Marçal's manager, calling to say that we no longer have a room.

"But we made a reservation," I tell him.

"Sí. I know. But the hotel is now closed."

"But we only booked it a week ago."

"Yes. But now it is closed."

I try to get him to elaborate, but when he expands on "closed," it's only to say that the hotel is "not open."

"I've found you a room elsewhere," he says, and names a sister hotel that Husa operates a few miles on. "You can stay there, and tomorrow I will come to say sorry."

The next day as promised, Señor Balsells tracks us down and finds us eating a late breakfast. He's a fidgety man, about forty years old, who apologizes again in better-than-passable English. He lives, he says, a few miles north in a town called Vich—or Vic, if you prefer its Catalán name.

"Not in Sant Marçal?" I ask him.

He shakes his head. San Marçal is too isolated, he says. There is nothing there except the monastery, now operating as a hotel. Which is closed, he tells us, because no one wants to stay overnight. Just us. Which means he's been forced to tell the one-to-one staff to stay home.

"It's only for a few days," he says, then adds, "I hope."

The hotel is suffering because in a newly austere Spain, corporations no longer book conferences during the week and Spanish lovers no longer hold trysts on the weekends.

"If things don't improve," he says, "we may have to close for good."

The problem, he explains, is that Sant Marçal, although a hotel, is still a monastery owned by the Church. It's part of a portfolio of real estate investments, and the Church, Señor Balsells says, has negotiated a contract that's aimed at generating a steady cash flow.

"We pay them the same rent if business is up or if business is down. It makes no difference to them. But for us"—he shrugs and spreads his hands wide—"we still have other expenses. So if business is down, we're forced to suffer a loss."

He pauses for a moment.

"I think," he says, "that the Church is smarter than we are. But then," he adds, "it has been around a whole lot longer, too."



I used to think that monasteries were started by saints and other benevolent types who were eager to build something tangible for the glory of God. That sometimes happened, of course, but in this part of Spain many of the monasteries were founded by people driven by far more cynical and self-serving motives. As often as not, the monasteries were founded by kings and nobles who donated the land (and sometimes a sizable chunk of cash to go with it) because in exchange they received from the Church absolution for their many sins as well as an affirmation of their right to rule here on Earth. They knew, too, that if they helped build a monastery they would secure for themselves a place to park unmarried daughters, widowed wives, and bastard children—and a place where they could be interred, surrounded by a pious community

that would pray for their souls. To the kings and nobles, it seemed like a worthwhile investment, but to minimize their costs, the canny royals usually gave land that they didn't want—or didn't even own—which often meant land that was somewhere off in the middle of nowhere.

Armed with this knowledge, we circle around the town of Manresa to pick up the A2 highway, but then deviate from our route to seek out a *supermercado*. If, for our first true monastery, we're about to head into the wilds, we want to be sure we're well stocked with what, to us, are the essentials of life. At a Mercadona—Spain's ubiquitous supermarket chain—we load up the Panda with olives, cheese, crackers, bread, peaches and pears, two tins of tuna, three tins of sardines, four bottles of *tempranillo*, a six-pack of San Miguel beer, and a small bottle of Amontillado sherry. It's enough food and drink to guarantee that we need never be hungry, thirsty, or sober again.

Then we step back in time, leaving the gas stations and truck stops to enter a world of vineyards, orchards, and stubbled fields of harvested corn. At a deserted crossroads, we pause briefly then head into the sun to follow a road that tracks the course of a meandering stream. The whisper of a breeze stirs the grass by the side of the road, but nothing else moves as we putter along, passing the tiny settlements of Nalec, Rocafort, and Sant Martí. Near Maldà, we dip into the Maldanell Valley, then round a bend and suddenly, profiled against a clear blue sky, there it is: El Reial Monestir de Santa María de Vallbona. The Royal Monastery of Santa María de Vallbona.

It's impossible to miss. The monastery looms over the town of Vallbona de les Monges the way Dracula's castle must have towered above the Transylvanian landscape. Which is not surprising—because until the mid-sixteenth century, the Royal Monastery *was* the town of Vallbona.

For four hundred years—following its founding in 1153—the Royal Monastery of Santa María stood in splendid isolation with no other buildings for miles around. At first it housed a mixed group of Benedictine monks and nuns, but in 1175 the monks moved out, leaving only the nuns, who then switched Orders to become Cistercians. The nuns were the lucky recipients of generous gifts and inheritances from local royals and other big-wigs—especially after they started a school for the daughters of Catalonia's most distinguished families. By the fourteenth century, the monastery was an affluent community with more than 150 nuns enclosed within it.

But then came the Council of Trent—a reformist body that was meant to redeem a Catholic Church that, by the sixteenth century, had become thoroughly corrupt, exhibiting the sexual mores of a Casanova and the moral probity of a Goldman Sachs. Among the numerous topics the Council addressed was the vulnerability of isolated nuns who, “without any protection, were often exposed to the rapacity and other crimes of evil men”—usually priests and bishops, but sometimes the occasional passing Pope. Henceforth, the Council decreed, all nuns in isolated communities would be rounded up—forcibly if need be—and relocated to “monasteries within cities or more populous towns.”

Large numbers of “female monasteries” (as they were called) were compelled to close. But El Reial Monestir de Santa María de Vallbona—although occupied entirely by nuns—was able to survive, mainly because of its political clout and the considerable wealth it had acquired by way of its royal connections. The nuns were not made to move to a town. Instead a town was brought to them—the town of Vallbona de les Monges. We can see it now, its tiny houses nestling against the monastery’s walls like goslings surrounding a mother goose.



We drive into the center and park in a small empty square. A faded advertisement on a nearby wall extols the virtues of extra virgin olive oil. Next to that is a cafe, its doors closed, blinds drawn. In the opposite corner, a kiosk offers local information, but it, too, is sealed tight. There is no sound except for the knocking of the Panda’s engine as it cools, and no sign of life other than a pigeon pecking disconsolately at the grit in a gutter.

We trudge up a cobbled lane past shuttered houses—whose sandstone walls throw back what’s left of the sun’s heat—and find a church. Its walls are pitted as if they’ve been raked by machine-gun fire. Statues eroded like melted candles flank the main door, and along one wall a row of sarcophagi rest on short stubby legs. They look abandoned—as if they’ve been dumped down by medieval removal men and then left there for eight hundred years until a committee decides where they should finally go.

The church door is locked, but a blue sign bolted to a wall directs us towards *el monasterio*. We follow its arrow to the doors of the monastery—two huge slabs of oak heavily studded with iron and held in place by rusted hinges the size of broadswords. They are at the top of a short flight of flagstone steps that have been worn into a bow by nearly one thousand years of penitent feet. The doors are open a crack. We climb up and squeeze between them into the gloom of the entranceway.

As our eyes slowly adjust, we spot a small push-button bell on the wall to our right beneath a typed label that says *portería*. I press on the bell, but nothing happens. I'm beginning to think the Black Death might have returned to kill off everyone who lived here, when a disembodied voice comes out of the wall through a speakerphone next to the label. The voice is distorted, as if it's traveled through static from the other side of the moon, and I can't tell if it belongs to a man or a woman. I lean into the speakerphone and announce in my clearest Spanish, "*Tenemos una reservación.*"—We have a reservation. It seems a strange statement to make in this setting, but I haven't yet mastered the art of checking into a Spanish monastery.

We wait again, longer this time, until a small wooden door creaks open and out steps a nun from central casting—sallow-faced, about sixty years old, with thick, round, wire-rimmed glasses. Her long white habit sweeps the floor, and she has a few tufts of frizzy hair peeking out from under the black cloth of her veil. I have several Spanish expressions ready to greet her, but when I try to use one she waggles a finger to indicate I should

be quiet. I think I've violated some monastic law that mandates silence, but a few gestures later I realize the nun is telling me she can't understand a word I'm saying because she doesn't speak Spanish—only Catalán. This may be a victory for regional autonomy, but it wipes out weeks of trying to memorize ice-breaker Spanish phrases that have a religious slant.

The nun beckons us up a short flight of steps—a spiral one that leads to another closed door. Out comes a ring of keys. She selects one the size of a crowbar and uses it to open the door. We follow her in and immediately we're hit in the face by a powerful smell of rising damp, like the stench of an English basement. It's also pitch-black, but before stepping into the void, the nun gropes around on the wall to her left and flicks on a light. The room we are in is huge, with a lofty ceiling and stuccoed walls that are hung with paintings of doleful saints suffering through a grisly series of biblical tortures. Two or three tables have been plunked down apparently at random on the stone floor, and along one wall there's a row of overstuffed, papal-size chairs.

The nun strides towards a staircase on the other side of the room. Halfway there, she suddenly accelerates until she is almost running. As I try to keep pace, I realize the light must be on a timer so we need to reach the stairs before we're again plunged into darkness. We follow her up to the second floor and push through an etched-glass door that swings shut behind us, mercifully sealing off the smell of the damp.

The nun steers us along a windowless corridor with closed doors leading off to the left and right. She stops outside one and

produces another large key—this one on a velvet-trimmed fob. She unlocks the door of the cell that will be our home for the next few days, and as she ushers us in I think, Thank God (if there is one) for the Panda outside—all stocked up and ready to roll, should we feel the need to make an escape.



At one time, there were literally thousands of monasteries in Spain—many of them founded in the eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth centuries, when armies of Christians roamed the land, often along pilgrimage routes linked to the Way of St. James, which runs from the Pyrenees in the northeast to Santiago de Compostela in the northwest. These monasteries were built not just to house the growing numbers of resident monks and nuns, but also to bed and breakfast the overnight crowds of itinerant pilgrims. They were, as a result, large, solid, and intended to last.

These days, the demand for their facilities has all but collapsed. A lot of the monasteries have, too, yet many of them remain—still solid, and still able to cater to large numbers of people. It makes sense, therefore, to fill them with some of the new travelers roaming the land—tourists. Until now, this has seemed like a match made in heaven, and one that we might be able to exploit. But as the nun leads us into our cell, I'm beginning to have serious doubts.

We stumble in behind her, still in the dark. The air in the cell is stagnant and cold, until the nun feels her way across the

room to throw open a pair of floor-to-ceiling shutters and then a couple of tall French windows. And suddenly the room is transformed. Blinding white light floods in, along with a warming gust of fresh country air. Through the open windows, I can look out at the upper floors of the houses opposite and see scarlet geraniums spilling in waterfalls of color from window boxes perched on every sill.

The nun hands us the key and silently departs with just a swish of her habit. Left on our own, we look around. The cell—or room—is not large, but it is certainly spacious enough. There are two cot-like beds, narrow and firm, with wooden headboards fixed to the walls behind them. Each is covered by a pea-green counterpane with a pillow at the head and a short stack of neatly folded towels at the foot. The sheets are freshly laundered, ironed to a crisp, and smell faintly of newly cut lemons.

Two bedside tables match the chairs and plain wooden desk that stand against the opposite wall. A modern crucifix hangs over the desk, bearing a suffering Jesus who's neatly dressed in a long brown tunic. His feet poke out from under the hem and his arms, of course, are spread wide. There's a New Testament on the corner of the desk along with a medieval image of Madonna and Child, which has been pasted onto a small pyramid of wood. I'm sure that it's here at this desk we're expected to sit and think deep thoughts, but in my mind's irreverent eye the desktop has already become a deli counter mounded with cheese, olives, tuna, and bread, as well as a bottle or two of (unconsecrated) wine that we'll need to bring in from the Panda.

There's a standard lamp in a corner. The tiled floor sparkles with polish. A built-in cupboard provides more than enough space for our clothes. And as for the bathroom—and yes, there is one en suite—it is equipped with a shower, washbasin, and dazzling white toilet. There is no wicker basket full of free-gift soaps and sample shampoos, but that frill aside, the room has everything we need. And *only* what we need. It's plain, simple, uncluttered, and clean—a perfect example of what I think is the Cistercian ideal of “enough.”

As an unexpected bonus, a sign on the back of the door gives a room rate of nineteen euros per person per night (twenty-two if we want heat), dropping to fifteen euros (nineteen with heat) if we stay more than one night. By way of comparison, an overnight stay in the monastery-hotel of Sant Marçal (had it been open) would have set us back nearly 120 euros.

## {TWO}

THE NEXT MORNING, WE ARRANGE TO MEET SISTER MARÍA FEDERICA. We do this because we're keen to meet a resident nun—any nun. We're not sure how to proceed since the Cistercians here are cloistered and therefore inaccessible; so we just press the *portería* bell and ask the disembodied voice if we can chat with a nun who speaks Spanish, and Sister María is the one nominated by her abbess to step forward and represent her Order. She agrees to meet us later that day.

At the appointed hour, we again ring the *portería* bell and Sister María invites us into a part of the monastery that's normally off limits to outsiders. She leads us into the cloister, but then doubles back on a circuitous route and takes us into the room that—from the damp and the dark—I recognize as the one we passed through when we first arrived. This, I think, is the *locutorium*—the monastic equivalent of a Victorian parlor, where visitors are taken if a nun wishes to meet with them.

Sister María fiddles with the switch that turns on the light (and hopefully turns off the timer) and we settle into the papal-size

chairs that have now been drawn up to one of the large oak tables. Sister María cannot be more than five feet tall, so dwarfed in her chair she looks like an animated doll. I can't see her feet beneath the table, but I'd be willing to bet that they're swinging a good six inches off the floor.

In the ordinary course of my life, I don't encounter many nuns, and if I do come across one I tend to see only the habit and veil. Sitting opposite Sister María, I make a deliberate effort to look past the uniform and view her as an individual. She is thin as well as short, with high cheekbones and thick glasses that magnify her eyes into murky brown pools. She holds her hands clasped in front of her on the table as if in permanent prayer. Around one wrist she has looped a small knitted purse, and around the other she wears a simple watch with a black leather strap. When she smiles, which on first meeting is not that often, she shows a full set of even white teeth. Her skin is pale and remarkably smooth—at odds with the wiry sprigs of gray hair I can see poking out from under her veil.

I try to guess her age—somewhere between fifty and sixty. But then she tells us she came to the monastery when she was twenty-five years old; and later, when we ask, she tells us she's been here for fifty-four years. I quickly make the calculation. The woman is nearly eighty years old. Living proof of the sustaining qualities of a sheltered life spent out of the sun, and what I assume is an ordered existence that's stripped of choices and the daily anxieties of modern life. I dial back to the year she first came here. It must have been 1955 or 1956. Eisenhower was president of the