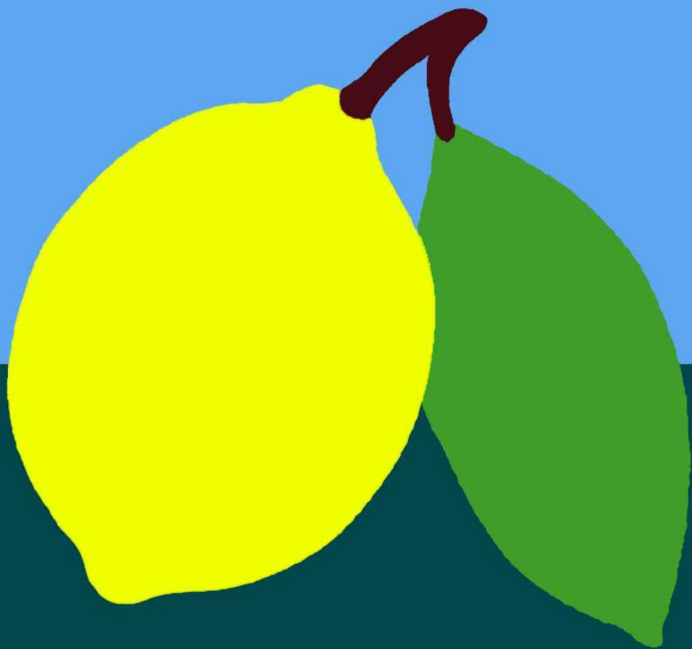


# SEE THE AMALFI COAST



FRANCES M THOMPSON

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“To plant a garden is to believe in  
tomorrow.”

Audrey Hepburn

# SEE THE AMALFI COAST

## 1.

Our plane leaves in five hours and he hasn't packed yet. Instead, he sits in his shed and tinkers with his toys.

*"They're not toys. They're models. Works of bloody art!"*

We booked the tickets a few months ago. Cheap flights from one website, a last minute hotel deal from another. Martin clicked the mouse taking us from one page to the next. I read out our credit card details. It all happened so quickly.

*"It's only bloody money. You can't spend money when you're dead."*

The last time we went abroad was fifteen years ago. Ten days in Disney World, one final family holiday. Steven was spotty and grumpy, bored by us all. Stacie made up for it by insisting that I run a brush through her hair one hundred times every night. Martin was relentless in reminding me that this was his "very idea of hell" every time we stood in the queue for a ride. And yet there was a moment of magic. On our last hot evening in Florida, as we four hugged Mickey Mouse, a photographer captured a happy moment that didn't exist. I always smile when I move that photo frame to the side to dust the mantelpiece.

This time it will be just the two of us; the children don't even know.

*"You mustn't tell them. It's our bloody holiday not theirs,"* I was instructed. *"Promise?"*

I nodded. I didn't say yes and I didn't say no.

"What time is our flight?" He walks through the patio doors, heading on a familiar path to the kitchen sink. There's sawdust on his cheek and he smells of glue. It's a smell I both love and hate. I place a hot cup of tea into his hand and tell him we need to leave in just under two hours.

"Bloody hell! I haven't packed yet!" I nod and follow him upstairs.

## 2.

The taxi is stuck in traffic. Martin fidgets beside me, his bulk of a belly knocking into me, his knees poking into the back of the driver's seat, who seems oblivious. He's a tall Indian man with bright white teeth and a scarlet red turban that almost touches the roof of the car. Aside from the rolling consonants, which give away his heritage, he has a thick Yorkshire accent, thicker than Martin's.

"It's not usually this busy at this time of day," he directs an apologetic smile back at us in the rear view mirror.

"Can't you put your traffic alerts on? Find out how long this is going to take?" Martin asks. He wanted to drive but I put my small foot down. Our holiday would begin as soon as the front door was locked.

I check everything again: our passports, new and unused; e-tickets for the plane, printed on the paper I bought especially; a copy of an email from the hotel with my foreign looking email address sitting at the top of the page; a small bundle of crisp Euros ready to go on their own journey. Everything is safely tucked into the white envelope that arrived on our doormat carrying a letter from Martin's consultant. I filed the letter away after it had been read but the envelope was still useful. It even reseals quite well.

"The traffic alerts are on, my friend," the taxi driver is explaining. "They come on automatically when there's a traffic report. Even when the radio's switched off. Very

clever. I know what other taxi drivers are like. Always got the radio on, playing all that loud, terrible music. But no one wants to listen to that rubbish. I mean, I'll put the radio on, if I'm asked, if it's what the customer wants. But to tell you the truth, it's not often that I'm asked. I think people prefer silence these days. Me, I prefer the silence too. We don't get much of it in this busy world, do we?" He is smiling again, his eyebrows raised. "So I keep the radio off but my alerts stay on. They come through every fifteen minutes or so. I think we must have just missed the latest traffic report. What time is it now...?"

"Well, for someone who likes the silence, he doesn't bloody shut up!" Martin whispers into my ear, nudging me again, this time with a push of affection.

I look at my husband of 31 years and despite the traffic and his having it in for this pleasant taxi driver, I can tell that he's enjoying himself. I smile back. It feels like the beginning of a holiday.

### 3.

We stand in the queue for security in front of a young family. Their youngest daughter reminds me of Zara, our three-year-old granddaughter. I watch her talk to herself while tucking her blonde curls behind her ear using the full palm of her hand.

I smile at the little girl while preparing myself for the worst. I fear that the flight will be two hours and forty-five minutes of moans and groans. We've not been on a plane for fifteen years and I've heard that the seats have got smaller. I know for certain that we've grown bigger. Martin especially. How I wish I'd done something about that. I should have stopped making dessert, started buying semi-skimmed milk, cut sugar out of his tea. I should have made him come with me when I walked next-door's dogs after Mavis had her fall. But they tell me that it may still have happened, that maybe it was always going to happen.

"Did you put my mp3 player in here?" Martin is shuffling around the contents of his rucksack looking for the small device Stacie and Keith gave him last Christmas. It took him a month to start using it. By March he didn't hate it and now in late July he can't bear to be separated from it.

*"Podcasts. Bloody brilliant things. You can find a podcast on anything. Anything you want. Music, history, news. And they're all free. Well, most of them. Bloody good things, podcasts."*



I nod confirmation that it's in there and as he digs deep to find it, I grab another look at the little girl behind me. She smiles back. She is just like Zara.

#### 4.

“Bloody, bloody, bloody hell!”

The seats are smaller than I feared.

Martin has squeezed himself into one by the aisle, into which he extends his left leg. He tuts every time he has to tuck it back in as the staff push trolleys past, the drawers of miniature-sized drinks making brisk tinkling sounds.

“So if we land at six o’clock local time, and the hotel transfer takes twenty-five minutes, we’ll arrive just in time for dinner.” Martin winds his watch forward. “I think I fancy pizza. What do you reckon? Think we’ll be able to find a nice pizza place in town somewhere?”

I glance at him and see a grin. He’s making a joke.

“You’re right, love. There’s a good bloody chance we’ll find pizza in Naples!” His big, taut belly rises in a small laugh.

Naples, Martin’s Naples. He’s read the guidebook more times than I can count, highlighting new sections and folding over corners. He buys travel magazines just because Naples is mentioned in passing. He watches DVDs about the Romans, Gothic architecture and the Second World War’s destruction of the city. He’s studied this part of the world for decades after he learnt that a longhaired Argentinean called Maradona played for the city’s football club. While

the Argentinean and his hand of God soon fell out of Martin's favour, the city stuck. Pompeii, Vesuvius, Capri, the Camorra mafia, pizza and the Amalfi Coast all followed and filled space in Martin's head; the more he found out the more he was drawn to this corner of the world. This is his dream holiday in the most literal sense. He dreams of it at night – his eyelids twitching at the escape and excitement it brings. And on his computer he feeds the daydreams too, trawling the Internet for things he mustn't miss and knowledge he can impart on me at dinnertime. The other week as I was collecting mugs from his shed, I found an "Italian for Beginners" CD he'd borrowed from the library next to an Italian recipe book opened on a page with the title "Campania Cuisine".

I try to recall what he's eaten today. I wonder if his appetite will hold out for that pizza.

With his headphones in, he falls asleep. I lean down to open my handbag, which is wedged under the seat in front. I check the white envelope is there with everything still inside.

## 5.

The heat smacks us in the face as we descend from the plane on rickety, plastic steps. In front of me Martin raises his face to the sun as though he's never seen it before, or perhaps, as though he'll never see it again. I poke him in the back to keep him moving.

A man stands at the bottom, his chin lifted up and away from us. I sense that he thinks he's taller than he really is. He's wearing tailored black trousers and a short-sleeved white shirt over which a fluorescent yellow vest flaps open in a warm breeze. The gold rims of his oversized aviator sunglasses sparkle in the sun. Every now and again he raises his left arm and slowly points to the terminal building with a slim, tanned index finger. I have never seen somebody so stylish doing such an unglamorous job.

"Bloody poser," Martin sniffs.

## 6.

A woman with big brown eyes greets us with a fake smile and a perfect manicure. She is utterly beautiful. In Leeds she would be a film star. Martin melts in her presence, over-pronouncing his words and grinning at every opportunity. I indulge him, knowing it will perk him up for the rest of the day.

“Have you ever been to England? I wouldn’t bother, if I were you. Bloody cold most of the time, even in summer. Though this feels pretty bloody hot to me. Is it always like this?” The back of his hand wipes his brow.

Seeing the sun reflect off his balding head, I wonder if we packed enough sunscreen. It’s another silly thought.

As we leave the terminal, I hold back so Martin can walk side by side with the film star. I pretend not to notice when he struggles to lift our suitcases into the boot of the mini bus.

## 7.

Naples' roads are terrifying. There is no order on the motorways other than a common tendency by cars to drive with the white lines of the road directly underneath them. Once on older, narrower streets our pace slows to a crowded crawl. It's impossible to determine how many lanes of traffic the road is supposed to have or how many people would like it to have. I hear more horns than I see vehicles and though it is deafening, it is also a little exciting. I know it's not the case, but it feels as though the noise is announcing our arrival, as though Naples is welcoming us.

As we sit in traffic, once grand buildings shade us from the sun. I look up and see walls crumbling, shutters missing panels and small balconies weighed down with flowerpots, chairs, bikes and even washing machines. Mopeds creep up on either side of us, one after the other. They are like ants, coming out of nowhere and unquestioningly following the one in front of them, trusting that they can and must go where he before him goes.

Down alleyways I see rows of washing stretching across, high in the air. I always thought it looked romantic and neighbourly in films, but in reality, it's a little sad to see peoples' clothes drying in exhaust fumes on a shared washing line. Yet that doesn't make it any less of a treat to see.

On the ground there is dirt. Rubbish bags are stacked on street corners and beside shop doors. I remember Martin

telling me about the rubbish problem Naples had a few years ago. He showed me some frightening photos of huge mounds of rubbish lining the pavements and roads, so I know what I'm seeing is an improvement on this.

People sit outside their homes on chairs; some perch alone and stare sternly ahead, others lean into small groups and talk intently. Most are men and all seem old, with the lines of life stories carved into their faces. All appear undisturbed by the noise, the traffic and the bags of rubbish that lie close by.

I look up and spot an elderly woman with unruly white hair staring out of a window, her face peering over a pot of purple orchids. Three young men wearing suits and too much hair gel walk by my window. They talk over each other, with their hands and shoulders as much as their mouths. As the mini bus finally begins to move forward we pass a policeman sitting on a motorbike on the pavement. He smokes a cigarette and watches the chaos unfold around him.

I count seven stray dogs on our journey so far, one with only three legs.

Martin suddenly covers my hand with his, squeezing my knuckles together. "It's bloody brilliant, isn't it?"

## 8.

Our hotel is basic but comfortable. I should have known it wouldn't be perfect, but for the money we spent I would have liked something more; an extra pillow, a quieter air conditioning unit, drinking glasses instead of plastic cups.

We have a balcony that overlooks the vast and industrious port of Naples. It's impressive, even to me. In the far corner is a collection of grey military ships, which appear very serious compared with the gigantic white cruise liner that stretches out along the other end. A little way out to sea there are a number of tankers sending clouds of smoke into the sky. It doesn't take Martin long to move a chair outside so he can sit and watch over the city.

"Make us a cup of tea, love."

The unfamiliar taste of the UHT tea milk spoils the first sip for me but Martin doesn't seem to notice. I sit beside him as he slurps his tea and blinks at Naples.

He is finally here.



## 9.

“Best pizza I ever bloody tasted!” Martin wipes his mouth with a paper napkin and surveys his empty plate. I am shocked but happy.

I have three slices left and pass two to him. He grins at me childishly. I tell him he looks like Steven when he smiles like that.

“Well, where do you think he got his good looks from? You? Ha!”

We laugh together. The restaurant is full; a mix of pale, polite tourists and dark-haired, lively Italians.

“But Stacie is like you, of course. Those blue eyes. Zara’s got them too. Bloody hell, she’s going to be a handful when she grows up. Just like Stacie was.”

It’s always thoughts of the future that pull at me hardest. I hope that Martin doesn’t notice. He would be disappointed if I cried onto the last slice of my pizza. I quickly pick it up, let it crease down the middle and nibble at the point of the triangle. Martin insisted that we eat with our fingers because that’s what Italians do. I think about what he said as we sat in front of his computer looking at flights.

*“I’m sorry, but I just don’t want them knowing. We’ll tell them we’re off to Dorset for the week again. We’ll pop the car in*

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