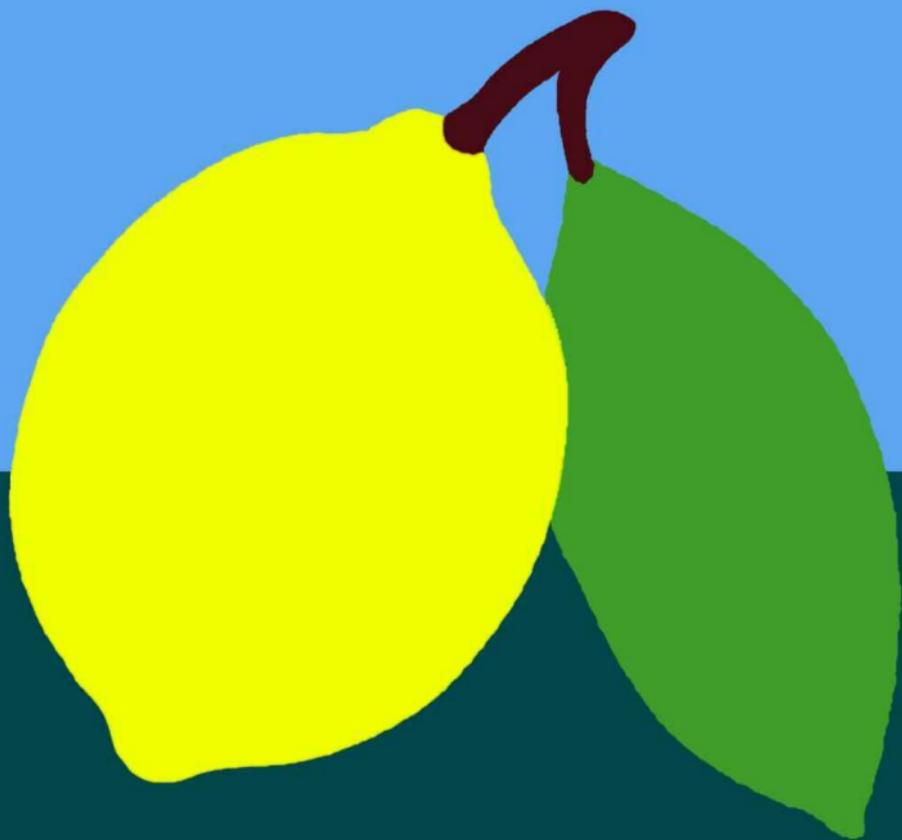


SEE THE AMALFI COAST



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

the garage and they won't even notice we've gone. If we say we're going abroad, to Italy, to Naples, they'd wonder why. They know it's not like us and then there'd be all the questions. I'm sorry, love, but it's for the best. They may be like chalk and cheese in some ways, but they're both as bloody nose as each other."

Martin reaches for my hand over the table, something he hasn't done in years.

"Maybe we should have gone away more, you and me. Seen more of the world," he says.

Maybe we should have, but we were never the type to go abroad, not once the kids were grown. After Martin's redundancy there was a constant worry for money. And where would we go? Of course, it should have been obvious. Naples was what Martin always talked about but he never actually suggested going there. I thought him happy enough to keep it as a hobby, a pipe dream. Why did I never think to make my husband's dreams come true?

And now I've started to think about my own dreams. I've always wanted to see the Niagara Falls, the Grand Canyon and the Eiffel Tower all lit up at night. I remember saying once how lovely it would be to see New York at Christmas, but Martin wasn't keen. Big expensive holidays were things we did with the kids. Now it was just the two of us, squeezing into a caravan in Dorset or spending a night or two up on the Dales kept us happy.

I stare at our linked hands and think about New York. I can always go with Stacie. Maybe Zara too, when she's old enough.

10.

I line Martin's medication on his bedside table and place a plastic glass of water behind them. The toilet flushes and Martin coughs. His cough will never get better. I know that now but it doesn't stop it shaking my soul every time he wretches.

It used to take him five sips to swallow all the pills. Now he can do them all in two gulps.

"Bloody hell," he sits down on the bed. In the dim light of his bedside lamp I see him rub his stomach, the source of all our ills.

It is at night that I notice how sick he really is. He struggles to stay awake after 9 o'clock. The more he needs to sleep, the harder it is for me to enjoy the comfort of slumber. But he can have my sleep. If it had been in his kidneys, he could have had one of mine too. I would give him anything.

"Six months. Six bloody months."

Those words. They were the beginning of Naples, but they were also the beginning of the end.

11.

The sun burns and blisters above us. Here in the middle of Pompeii, we are fully exposed to its strength. I have applied Factor 50 onto Martin's freckled skin and he is downplaying how hot he is. He doesn't want anything to ruin today, not even his own discomfort. But I can see the circles of sweat swell across his shirt and I watch his chest rise and fall more than it should when we stand still. Last night he vomited three times.

"I'll be fine. Stop fussing. We've come all this bloody way. I'm not going to waste the day staying in a bloody hotel room. I want to see Pompeii!"

It feels as though Martin has already been here. He moves around the ruins as though he knows exactly what lies ahead. He turns with confidence in his chosen direction. I follow him, climbing down into a crater that he explains was once an amphitheatre and we walk along the foundations of a Roman temple where leftover stubs of pillars line its entrance. With every step I develop a better understanding of both the size of the city that used to exist and the magnitude of the volcano that destroyed it.

"This way, love," he says.

Martin leads me on to a collection of partially built buildings gathered around the remnants of a courtyard. It doesn't take long to envisage what this place was like; a cluster of houses, perhaps shared by friends and family. It's

not dissimilar from our own neighbourhood.

“Look at this, love.”

Inside the broken walls of a house, Martin points to an area fenced off with transparent plastic panels. Behind them lie raised, grey shapes of various sizes. It takes a couple of seconds but I eventually make out the ashen mould of a mother and child crouching on the floor, the mother holding her child under her in pointless protection. It happened thousands of years ago and yet I can see them both and their fear vividly. I turn away and walk to the other side of the room, grateful that I've mastered the art of crying silently.

When I look back I watch Martin absorbing the stories of the ash people who lie at his feet. His lips are pouted into a sombre stare. His nose twitches and a few droplets of sweat trickle down the side of his face, losing their way somewhere near his ear. I wonder how he feels to be so close to death.

I still remember the Martin I married. The fit, young man with the slightly upturned nose, peach freckles and wild thick hair neither of us could control. I thought he would look young forever. But now he looks old, all belly and sloping shoulders.

The drugs will help reduce the swelling, the pain and the symptoms. They may even buy him more time, if he responds well, but the bottom line doesn't change. It's inoperable and it's not disappearing. There's no role for

radiotherapy or chemotherapy to play. It spread from his stomach to his liver before we'd had the chance to even discuss them. A Gastrointestinal Sarcoma Tumour, a rare cancerous mass the size of an orange, is fixed to the lining of Martin's stomach feeding off him, maturing, spreading, killing.

"I don't even like bloody oranges."

Of course, I asked him, begged him, to tell the children.

"What's the bloody point? I don't want all the fussing and the worrying. You'll be enough bloody trouble as it is."

We thought we could beat it alone, just the two of us. We've seen off other threats before, beaten away the things that tried to shake our smallholding of this world, like when Stacie got hit by a car two days after her fifth birthday and broke her femur in four places. She walks with a slight limp that reminds me how lucky I am that she is alive. And when Martin got made redundant seven years ago, I thought we'd have to sell the house, spend our savings on surviving until we could claim a state pension. But after a week of moping about the house, me nagging at him and worrying myself sick, he took himself off to evening classes to learn how to build a website. Somehow he turned that website into a business, selling model planes and helicopters to other men like him who spend too much time in sheds. In the beginning, I doubted him and in the end, I shouldn't have. His business meant I could retire on the day I always planned to.

“Ye of little faith. I told you I knew what I was doing. I always bloody do.”

That’s why I agreed not to tell the children. They didn’t need to know if everything was going to be okay.

I gather my tears and my thoughts and I walk up to Martin’s side. I make sure the length of my arm touches the side of his. I shudder seeing the mother and child made of ash again.

“At least they were together, eh?” he says, his knuckles brushing against mine.

12.

The following day we hire a car to see the Amalfi Coast. The Film Star organises it, smiling flirtatiously at Martin when she questions the date of birth on his driving license. I've noticed that she no longer looks at me when she talks to us and when I tell Martin this he smiles smugly. I try to persuade Martin against driving – there are bus tours we could do, a train we can catch - I worry about the traffic and the chaos on the roads. But I know that this is the very reason he wants to drive. He wants to be part of it.

"If you can't bloody beat 'em, join 'em!"

Our hire car is smaller and lighter than Martin is used to. We jolt along in the disorderly queues and speed away when traffic allows. Martin grins with every gear change. "Flipping heck, love! Did you feel that? It's got bite this one!"

Once away from Naples, the traffic dilutes and begins to flow. On our right hand side we are being hugged by the Mediterranean, which looks up at us as we roll along the tops of sheer brown and grey cliffs. There is something in that never-ending blue of the sea, interrupted only by the mysterious Isle of Capri that seems to swim closer to us as we move forward. I've never seen a blue like it. Up ahead, along the side of the zigzagging land, there are spots of colour that are villages, towns and lone grand houses.

"Bloody hell! Look at that!" His head twists as he tries to

take in as much of the view as he can. I tap his knee and his movements sober up a little. The road along the cliff's edge is as terrifying as it is beautiful.

We drive in silence for many minutes, the way we have done on many journeys over the years, but we both enjoy how different this one is. Eventually Martin turns off the road and I notice that he is following signs to Sorrento, a town we agreed to stop in at some point in the day.

Before he gets out of the parked car, I spray his exposed skin with the thick white sunscreen that never quite rubs in completely. With a guidebook gripped in his hand, I let Martin lead us down a long line of flat, grey steps squashed between the tall walls of townhouses, already knowing he's going to take us down to the water that looked so blue from up above. As the street opens up into a small courtyard of trees, Martin stops. He is looking for something and I don't know what it is. We find it in the form of a lemon tree standing in the middle of the square.

"There you go, love. One of the Amalfi Coast's oldest and most famous exports." Martin takes out the camera we've hardly used until this week and he attempts a few shots, chewing the inside of his lip and holding his breath. I stand a short distance behind him absorbing the warmth of the sun before it becomes too much. I remind myself to review the photos later and comment on the ones I like.

Our path eventually takes us down to busier streets and finally a waterfront promenade. We see the sea lapping up

under an elegant marina that is lined with gleaming speedboats and luxury yachts.

“Yachts. Waste of bloody money, if you ask me. Think of all the things you could buy with the same amount of money. You could have a year off work for a start.” Martin shakes his head and rests his hands on his hips, forcing his domed belly out. I try to remember if he took his pills this morning.

We walk away from the yachts and come to a scene at the furthest, oldest side of the marina that puts us at ease. Fishermen of all ages are offloading the catch of the day from their modest fishing boats, which boast little more than flaking paint and frayed ropes. I expect to be overwhelmed by the smell of fish, but the air smells clean, fresh and sun kissed; nothing like the fish counter I avoid in the supermarket. I watch the men work together and I suspect many of them are related; fathers, sons, uncles and cousins. I think about my own family. I wonder if Steven’s working too much, if Stacie has finished painting her front room and how Zara is getting on at playgroup.

Martin begins to retrace our steps to the car, itching to get back behind the steering wheel. Affected by the fresh air and thoughts of my family, I don't feel ready to move on yet, so I persuade him to stop and have a coffee first. Martin’s been told not to drink too much caffeine and only a quick lift of his eyebrow refers to this as I order two espressos. To my surprise, Martin doesn’t grab the opportunity to indulge in this contraband and he sips it half-heartedly. I stare at the biscotti that lies neglected on his saucer; it reminds me of

the cold scrambled eggs he kept shifting around his plate at breakfast. Although it brings him no pain his loss of appetite has been one of the hardest symptoms to watch him suffer.

Climbing back up the hill is a struggle. Martin huffs and puffs himself up one slow, difficult step at a time and I move ahead of him too easily. To bridge the gap I stop to wait beside a low-walled garden that I can gaze into. It's a neatly kept collection of vegetable plots with tomatoes ripening in one corner and clumps of herbs prospering in another. The wall of the house that backs on to the space is covered in a climbing plant that is dotted with bright pink flowers. I've never seen a plant like this before, but I suddenly and desperately want one in our garden, climbing up and covering the garden fence. I think of the unexpected colour it would bring to summer. Nobody has trees like that on our road.

Martin approaches and I take the camera from him as he leans forward, panting. I fumble my way through turning it on and I take a photo of the pink flowers. I will ask Gus at the garden centre what it is and whether it would survive a Yorkshire winter.

We continue to walk steadily on, a metre or so apart until we reach another town square that we must cross to get to our car. As we approach the far corner we see three men sitting on a bench wearing polished shoes and short-sleeved shirts, each one a different shade of blue. They sit in front of a small corner store that sells vegetables and postcards. Something tells me the men have been there for

many years and I wonder where their wives are and what they're doing.

I tell Martin I'm going in the shop to buy postcards.

"Who the bloody hell are you going to buy postcards for?"

Of course. I have no one to send postcards to. In the harsh and hot light of the midday sun our secret holiday is no longer exciting. It's frustrating, it's sad and it's silly. I am angry that I can't send a single postcard home. In short clipped words I explain to my husband that I will buy the postcards for myself. They will be souvenirs for me to keep, for me to remember.

"Until someone bloody finds them and starts asking questions," Martin mutters. "How the bloody hell are you going to explain it then, eh?"

Before I realise my mouth is moving I shout horrible, spiteful words at my husband that I instantly wish I could erase from the air. But at the same time I want him to answer me.

Because, how *is* he going to explain to his children that he's dying?

13.

Forty minutes later and the air conditioner has cooled our overheated bodies and hot heads. I don't know where we are going or what Martin's plan is but he seems to have one. We've not spoken since I bought the postcards. They are now tucked inside the white envelope, which is starting to lose its seal.

We are back up on those impossible roads, winding our way around more dramatic scenery. Capri now sits in the corner of our rear window.

"I'm hungry," Martin says.

I nod in agreement.

"Listen, love. We've talked about this and this is how it's going to be. There's nothing to be gained from them knowing," Martin taps the steering wheel with the palm of his hand. His head turns to me but his eyes do not, they stay fixed on the road ahead. "So, we're not going to tell them. I'm just going to go,"

14.

We are lost. We expect another town or village to cross our path but it doesn't so we turn off following signs for a hotel whose name we can't pronounce, assuming they must have a restaurant. There are two other cars parked on the gravel outside a grand three-storey mansion house painted in the purest white. We walk through its double door entrance.

Inside, the hotel looks like it has gone into hibernation. There are dustsheets covering sofas, tables, chairs and a small reception desk. I look up and around. Fat childlike cherubs sitting on clouds are painted on the tall ceiling.

"Hello?" Martin's voice booms against the empty walls. "Anyone home?"

There follows the banging of doors, the shifting of things and the echoes of hushed words. I panic that we've broken in, or worse, interrupted a break-in.

The face of a young man appears from a door at the back of the room and upon seeing us he smiles and enters. He's wearing ruby red jeans and a purple polo shirt. I imagine this outfit walking down our local high street and the looks it would get. He begins talking in Italian, but quickly stops when he realises we aren't responding, merely standing and watching, uninformed.

"Can I help you? Are you lost?" His accent creates vowel

sounds where there are none.

“No. Worse. We’re hungry!” Martin jokes with him. “But it looks like you’re closed?”

“Yes. The hotel is closed. My father, he died recently. We cannot open the hotel this year. My mother is very sick, with sadness. A broken heart.” His hands rest on his chest as he walks towards us.

Martin speaks softly. “I’m very sorry to hear that. We’re sorry for your loss. We’ll leave you in peace.”

“No!” The man blinks many times, ridding his eyes of the sadness that was there just a moment ago. He invites us to “sit, stay and eat something”. He throws off the dustsheets from a nearby table and insists his mother will prepare us lunch. “She loves to cook. She will enjoy it. It will be something simple, but I promise it will be delicious.”

And it is. It’s the most delicious food I’ve tasted in the longest time; a big bowl of spaghetti cloaked in tomato sauce with a sprig of basil perched on top. It’s the kind of unfussy food we serve to children, but it would never, could never taste like this. There is the warmth of the sun in the sauce, hidden in tomatoes that I imagine grew watching over the Amalfi Coast. How strange that the sun can give humans cancer, but it gifts tomatoes such sweetness. I accept a second serving hungrily.

Paolo, our host, serves us red wine from a glass carafe and

it flows down our throats quickly, even Martin's. We learn that the hotel was a family business that he and his brother didn't want to join. He'd got himself a job in the city, working for a shipping merchant, and had no desire to work fifteen-hour days for half the money. When his father died five weeks ago he asked his boss for three months off so they could tidy up the hotel to try and sell it before the end of the high season.

"But you know, I am starting to like this place. Maybe I will not sell," Paolo says with a soft glint in his eye as he looks up at a cherub.

"You can't argue with your surroundings. It's the best office I've seen in a while. Bloody beautiful!" Martin says. He wipes his mouth with both hands. I want to photograph his empty plate.

I'm not sure Paolo understands my husband's idioms, so I tell him in simpler terms that we think the Amalfi Coast would be a wonderful place to work.

"You're right. You know they have a saying in Italy," Paolo continues, standing close and holding on to the back of Martin's chair. "Come, see the Amalfi Coast and then die."

He looks at us solemnly. We are both silent. I stare at the tomato sauce drying on my plate.

"It's because it is so beautiful, there's nothing else to live for." Paolo is moved to explain with a small shrug.

He says it so plainly, as if it's the truest saying in the world.

15.

The traffic begins to build up on the motorway as we head back. I fear it's a sign that Naples will be just as hot and chaotic as when we left. Martin embraces this and uses the car horn freely when others around us do the same.

"If you can't beat 'em," he snorts. "Out the bloody way, you foreign lot!"

Fed up with the noise and a little parched by the wine, I impatiently unfold a map of the city. I quickly devise a new route. If we turn off the motorway a few junctions earlier we can cross the city through the suburbs and industrial parks to the east before turning south to the harbour. It takes me seven minutes, two car lengths of traffic and eleven car horns to convince Martin that it's a good idea.

And it is a good idea as we pass through newer, emptier city streets. It only stops being a good idea when we find ourselves heading towards a dead end, lost in an unfamiliar suburb that is eerily barren of life.

The street is lined with concrete blocks of housing painted in fading shades of pastel blue. They are similar to the council estates in Leeds, the ones built in the Sixties, the ones that quickly lost any charm they may have had. Martin stops the car before we reach the row of garages that are our dead end. With a grunt, Martin snatches the map out of my hands.

“Where have you sent us?” He grumbles. “Bloody hell! We turned the wrong way a mile back!”

I stare at his finger on the map wondering how it happened, eager for him to be wrong, keen to prove that I am right. How that eagerness hasn't faded after all these years of marriage and terminal cancer, I'll never know. We begin to argue.

“I knew it was wrong to trust you. You never were one to read maps right. I shouldn't have listened to you. I mean, it's not like we're in a foreign bloody city or anything, is it?”

A tap on my window interrupts my retort. I turn and stare into a pair of dark eyes. They belong to a teenage boy wearing a grey hooded sweatshirt pulled tight around his face, the strings tied in a bow just above his mouth. For a second, I consider how funny he looks, like he's wearing an Easter bonnet. He taps again and I see what is happening now. He is knocking the glass with the point of a small, sharp knife.

“Bloody. Hellfire.” Martin clunks the car's gear stick into reverse and I wait to feel the car accelerate backwards but the boy is quicker. My unlocked door is opened by the hooded youth and he leans in. Loud Italian words are barked at me, fragments of spit leaping out of his mouth. The knife lingers just inches from my face. It's very clean and I can see the slope of its sharpness. I start to feel very nauseous.

“He wants our money,” Martin says and in the madness I think about the “Italian for Beginners” CD from the library. “Give it to him.”

My door stays open and I shrink into my seat, frozen. I have never been this scared. Not when I called the ambulance because Martin was vomiting blood, in so much pain he couldn't move. Not at the hospital alone waiting to find out what was going on, abiding his orders not to call anyone. Not when the consultant's letter we already knew the contents of arrived on our doormat. Never.

The teenage boy stands up once more and looks around quickly, checking. He keeps one hand firmly on the roof of our car and shifts his weight from foot to foot, swaying side to side in the space that the open door creates. The knife is now at his waist, tucked into the corner of my vision. My whole body feels as heavy as lead. I cannot move.

Reassured he's not being watched, his bonneted head lowers again and there is more shouting of angry words, this time with his arm across me, touching me, the knife extended in front of Martin's face.

“Bloody give him the bloody money!” Martin raises his voice over the youth's.

Suddenly I can move again. I pull my purse out of the handbag that lies at my feet and I open it up, ready to pull out notes and empty the change into his hand. I think about the white envelope still sitting in my bag. He's not getting

that.

“Just give him the whole bloody thing. He has a knife for God’s sake!”

I throw my old, tattered purse at the teenager, which he is not expecting. It bounces off his chest and falls to the ground beside his left foot. I hear the sound of coins spilling on to the ground. I think about my driving licence, my credit cards, the cropped photos of Zara. As he bends down to claim it all, I see the band of his boxer shorts rise above his jeans. These kids, they’re all the same, in Naples and in Leeds, they’re all the same. My heart breaks for this boy’s desperation but at the same time I want to thump him with all my might.

“Shut your bloody door!” Martin shouts, but the car is already moving. We are reversing at speed. It sounds as though the car is going to take off or break in two. I reach out to pull the car door and it’s only when I hear it slam shut that I finally exhale and start to sob. The boy’s face is stuck to the inside of my eyelids.

“It’s alright, love,” Martin pushes down on the central locking. “It’s over now. I’ll get you back safe. It will all be okay,”

Later, much later, when my heart has stopped racing and my hands have stopped shaking, I think again and again and again, *Oh Martin, what will I do when you’re not here to say that?*

16.

It's the best thing that has happened to Martin in years.

He is a different man. He bounces around the hotel reliving the story. First, he tells our tale to the receptionist who isn't as shocked as I would have liked. Then he tells two of the best looking policemen I have ever seen as they sit opposite us in a small room, the walls of which have yellowed so much I doubt they were ever white. The Film Star has accompanied us to the police station as a translator, a role I start to think she has played before when she greets a man at the entrance to with two firm kisses on each cheek. We are then ushered past a queue of people waiting inside.

"He came out of nowhere with this knife. He must have known we were tourists. Right off, he knew it was a hire car. Aye, he was young but old enough to know what he was doing! Maybe fourteen, fifteen? What do you think, love? Yes, fifteen. Didn't see the colour of his eyes. Oh dark were they, love? Well, brown then, maybe. Bloody rascal. That's right, grey hooded sweatshirt all tied up around his face. And black jeans, white trainers, I think. A skinny lad. About my height, maybe a bit shorter. You know it's only because my genius of a wife threw her purse on the floor that we got away. As he bent down to get it, I floored it. Nearly took his head off in the process, ha! I've never gone that fast in reverse before, thought the bloody gearbox was going to drop out!"

I clamp my hands over one another in my lap to stop them

shaking. I am not convinced the Film Star offers a verbatim translation. I add the police report I'm given to the paperwork already in the white envelope. As we leave, I turn back to see the Film Star pressed up closely to the detective who interviewed us. I don't mention it to Martin.

17.

Martin is still talking about it on our flight home four days later. Thankfully, the woman he sits next to is fascinated. She tells us how relieved she is that she didn't leave Capri once during her holiday. I ask her politely what Capri was like but we don't get much further than "Oh, lovely," before Martin is sharing his theory on the boy being a member of the Neapolitan mafia.

Our taxi is waiting for us at the airport and I'm pleased to see it's the same smiling man who drove us there only a week ago. Martin grumbles about it to begin with but shortly after our seat belts are clicked into place he is telling the driver his story.

"Yes, a knife. In my wife's face! One of those folding blades. A serious knife. I mean you wouldn't call it a machete, but I was bloody terrified!"

"And you were in Italy you say? I'd have thought things like that don't happen there. Oh, but do you think it could have been the mafia? I've read about the Italian mafia."

I fade in and out of their conversation, watching cars glide past us in a way that seems so orderly now. I think about seeing Zara again and smelling her hair. I wonder if I should bother filing an insurance claim or if I should just let it go, like Martin said. I see the boy's dark eyes and I hear his angry voice. I think about Stacie and Steven and if they'll think us too tanned. I shudder at all the lies already told and

I try to count how many more there will be. I think about the purse made from Italian leather that Martin bought me two days ago. I hope it never loses its smell. I hear the tap of sharp metal on glass and I see the boy's dark eyes. I think about losing him and how I will cope. I remember the climbing plant with bright pink flowers.

"Well, it sounds like a complete nightmare! And what a shame for it to have ruined your holiday." Martin's new friend offers a gentle smile in the rear view mirror, just as he did a week ago.

Martin stares out of the window as the early morning mist rises off the grey and green land we were born on. "Ruined? No, not at all. Fantastic holiday. Time of my bloody life."

THANK YOU FOR READING!

I hope you enjoyed Martin and his wife's story. If you'd like to [write a review on Amazon](#), I'd be very grateful.

See the Amalfi Coast is one of twelve short stories published in [Shy Feet](#), my debut collection of short stories. You can [buy the full collection](#) for just \$4.49 or £2.80 from [my blog](#). Alternatively get Shy Feet: Short Stories Inspired by Travel on [Amazon](#), [Kobo](#) or [Smashwords](#).

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If you felt moved by Martin's story then please consider making a donation to [Sarcoma UK](#) or to the [Joanna Bryant Benefit Trust](#), a charity set up in memory of a brave young woman who lost her battle to Sarcoma in January 2013. The trust supports other young adults affected by cancer and all royalties from the sale of this book are donated to this cause.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Since October 2011, Frances has been location independent, travelling and working around the world with her Australian partner and too many vintage clothes. She blogs about her travels on [As the Bird flies](#). Now living in Amsterdam, Frances is working on her first novel and second short story collection.

To find out about Frances' next release and to enjoy exclusive, free preview books, [subscribe to her newsletter](#).

Frances loves to hear from readers and you can reach out to her by email (frances@fmthompson.com) or on Twitter ([@bushbirdie](#)).

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