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A MODERN FAMILY

Written by **Helga Flatland**

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A Modern Family

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Translated from the Norwegian by Rosie Hedger



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The Alpine peaks resemble sharks' teeth, jutting upwards through the dense layer of cloud that enshrouds Central Europe as if the creature's jaws are eternally prepared to clamp down. The mountaintops force the wind in various directions, pulling at the plane from all angles, and we're so small here, all in a row, the backs of the heads in front of me shuddering in unison.

More than half the population on the ground below us believes it's OK to raise a hand to their children, I think to myself, and for a moment my eyes seek out my own children; but they're hidden from view, seated four rows in front of me. Beside them, Olaf rests his head against the cabin wall. In front of him I spy Ellen's blonde hair, and between the seats I can see that Mum is sleeping, her head resting on Ellen's shoulder. Dad wanders along the aisle between the rows of seats, wearing his new Bose headphones around his neck. Did he wear them to the toilet? I feel a warm flicker of affection and smile at him, but I fail to catch his eye. He sits down beside Håkon, and I catch only glimpses of Dad's face, his high cheekbones and the tip of his nose, which has a faint blue hue about it from the glow of the laptop in front of him.

They could be anyone. We could be anyone.



It's raining in Rome. Everyone is prepared for it; we've been checking the forecast every day for the past three weeks, and we've discussed it on the phone and via text message and in our family Facebook group, reassuring ourselves that it doesn't matter, that it's April, and April brings unpredictable weather, plus it's bound to be warmer than it is in Norway, and we're not going for the weather, anyway. Even so,

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the mood at Gardermoen Airport, which was bathed in spring sunshine and close to a balmy 20°C, was noticeably better than it is at Fiumicino Airport, where it is 13°C and raining. The mood may also have something to do with a sense of anticlimax, an acknowledgement that the tension and goodwill with which we greeted one another at Gardermoen has dwindled over the course of the flight; the first leg now over and done with, everybody's shoulders have relaxed ever so slightly.

Having the others here, even at the airport, makes me feel intruded upon. I try to catch Olaf's eye, to seek some confirmation that he feels the same; Rome and all that surrounds it, everything that belongs to it, is ours. Walking through the arrivals hall feels different this time; I don't exhale in the same way I do when Olaf and I are here by ourselves, I don't feel that same frisson of excitement. But Olaf is busy buying train tickets for everyone, and I lament my own ingratitude, my self-absorption. I make up for it by picking up Hedda, kissing her nose and asking if the plane's shaking scared her. She squirms free, no doubt hyper after munching her way through the biscuits and chocolate that Olaf wasn't supposed to deploy in anything other than an absolute emergency.

We're due to spend two days in Rome before leaving for Olaf's brother's house, which is located in a small town on the coast. Two days is both far too brief and far too long a stay, I think to myself for the first time, and I see both my own little family – the one I've created with Olaf – and the one that I've come from, with new eyes.



Dad turns seventy in four days' time. Last year, during his birthday meal, he called for silence and announced that the following year's birthday gift to himself and the whole family would be a holiday – his treat. We could go anywhere, he declared, turning to Hedda, who was four years old at the time: 'We could even go all the way to *Africa*!'

The idea itself, the manner of its announcement and his almost

frenzied disposition in the months leading up to that night were so out of character that Ellen sent me lists of brain-tumour symptoms on a daily basis for quite some time afterwards. It's probably just a reaction to the fact that he'll soon be turning seventy, Olaf said. But Ellen and I were having none of it: he's not the kind to make a fuss about his age. He's always poked fun at people who create a crisis when their birthday comes around – the kind who compensate with over-the-top reactions. They're using their age as an excuse, he's always said. They're really making a fuss about something else. But Dad didn't seem ill, and he didn't seem to be in the midst of any kind of crisis. And our concerns about him weren't so overwhelming that they outweighed our pleasure at being treated to a holiday, so Ellen and I let it go.

We haven't been on holiday together for what must be twenty years now, not since the days when the concept of 'family' extended no further than Ellen, Håkon, Mum, Dad and myself. Occasionally we've ensured that our stays in the family cabin have overlapped, with Mum and Dad and Håkon, and maybe even Ellen, staying on for an extra few days before Olaf, the children and I are given the run of the place, but this kind of trip – an organised *pack-your-bags-and-off-we-go* kind of trip – we haven't embarked on since I was in my early twenties, and Ellen and Håkon and I found ourselves piled in the back of a rental car in Provence.

I don't recall us being quite so distant back then, not like we are now. Moving away from Oslo and out of the house in Tåsen, leaving behind the familiar framework, with its fixed patterns, conversations, gatherings, places at the table, it's done something to the family dynamic; nobody knows quite how to act, how to adapt, which role is theirs to take. Maybe it also has something to do with the fact that we're three adults on holiday with our parents; we're half grown, yet still their children.

The Africa idea was quickly vetoed – by everyone but Hedda, that is – and it was actually Olaf who suggested Italy, saying that we could stay in his brother's house there. Olaf is careful never to find himself in anybody's debt, and the thought of Dad paying for a holiday for him

and his children very quickly became too much to bear. You can't offer him money, I said when Olaf suggested we pay our own way, it'd be condescending. Liv and I really want to show you the Italy that we've come to know, Olaf told Mum and Dad. Perhaps we could combine that with your seventieth birthday celebrations?



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We're far too big for Italy. Big and white and blond, we barely fit around the table at the restaurant that evening. The furniture and interiors have been designed with trim little Italians in mind, not for Dad and Håkon, both almost six feet, four inches tall, not for such long arms and legs; not for us. We cram ourselves into our chairs, all elbows and knees, too many joints jostling for room. Ellen and Håkon squabble over the available space, suddenly teenagers all over again. I recall the way we identified the seams between the seat cushions in the back of the car, treating them as border lines – even the slightest hint of coat flap crossing a seam was forbidden. The air around us was subject to the same restrictions. Håkon was only three at the time, but he grew up with sisters and with clearly defined lines in the car, in the tent and at the dining table – and in life in general, really – lines that laid down the ground rules.

Sitting beside us is an Italian family. There are more of them than there are of us, but, as Håkon points out, they're seated around a smaller table, all making their way through one dish after another, just like Olaf and I did on our first trip to Rome. We'd told the waiter that we wanted to order the same as the family at the table next to us. I spent the following week gazing at large Italian families sitting down to eat together for several hours every evening – children and grandparents, loud and prone to gesticulation, just like in the films, and I missed my own family, though I knew even then that it wouldn't be the same if they were there. Here. But now they *are* here; now *we're* here, all of us seated around the same table: Mum, Dad, Ellen, Ellen's boyfriend Simen, Agnar and Hedda, Olaf and me – and Håkon.

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I glance over at Dad sitting at the head of the table, and it strikes me that we're sitting exactly where we sit when we're at our parents' house. Dad always sits at the head of the table, with Mum to his right and me beside her, and Håkon across from Mum with Ellen by his side. Other later additions to the family – partners, Agnar, Hedda – have had to organise themselves around us; I don't think we've even given it a single thought. The only person ever to initiate any kind of silent protest is Simen; on the few occasions he's joined us for family gatherings, he's practically launched himself at the seat beside Ellen – Håkon's place at the table – draping an arm across the back of her chair and firmly clinging to his spot until everyone else has taken a seat.

Dad has thick grey hair, and even though pictures from when I was little show him with the dark hair he once had, I can only just recall it – in my memories, he always has the same grey hair he has now. He locks eyes with me and smiles, and I wonder what he's thinking about, if he's happy, if things are how he imagined they would be. Perhaps he hasn't imagined them at all. He tends not to predict whether things will be one way or the other, but he's always commented on my own tendency to do so: You have to try to accept things as they are, Liv, he would tell me when I was young and shedding anguished tears over holidays, handball matches or school assignments that hadn't gone as I'd expected, finding it impossible to explain to Dad just how critical it was that they should unfold exactly as I'd anticipated; any action or accomplishment, great or small, had to follow a predictable course to prevent things from becoming chaotic and intangible. But you can't plan life in that kind of detail, Dad said, you need to accept that you can't always control things.

Now he's leaning over to Mum. The hearing in his right ear – the ear that's always on Mum's side at the dinner table – isn't what it once was, and she lifts a hand to create a buffer between her words and the clamour of the restaurant. Or perhaps it's the other way around. Dad doesn't look at her; he smiles and nods slightly.

'So, have you made up your minds?' he asks loudly, looking out across the table before Mum has lowered her hand. He brandishes the menu.

Scarcely two minutes have gone by since the menus were handed out to us, and he hasn't yet opened his own.

'We should probably start by ordering some wine,' Mum says.

Dad doesn't respond to this. He studies his menu carefully. She leans over to his hard-of-hearing side and repeats herself, and he nods yet again without saying a word, just looking down. Mum smiles, but not at him, not at any of us. She opens the wine list.



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