

Escape to Eden

The aeroplane is speeding west towards the City of Eden. I sit in an exit row; plenty of legroom, but the footrest won't go up. On my right, two lovebirds: same sweaters, same laptops, same spreadsheets. Across the aisle, two women: one, enormously fat, can hardly fit into her seat. The other has talked for hours without taking a breath: has high blood pressure; takes aspirin and herbs; blood pressure is 140/90, but she does not remember which number should be on top; has a gadget to take blood pressures; the nurse cannot even feel her pulse; thinks the instrument is faulty.

We arrive and are told to deplane a horrible word. The air is balmy; palm trees line the streets. There are trees with inedible oranges and olive trees sprayed so they won't make a mess. The people don't walk but drive from mall to mall, to the movies, to restaurants. No bullfights here, as in Hemingway's posthumous *Garden of Eden*; no fiestas; no ménages à trois, no experiments in androgyny; no attempts to get away from modern civilisation.

I sit by the pool, with 16 strength sun lotion. A good time to read; so I attack *Martin Chuzzlewit*. Cherry is mean, Merry is dizzy, and old Mr Martin has attacks of colic could be porphyria, but there is no red urine and there are no descendants so there can be no DNA tests. The doctor is a colourless figure but the pre-Nightingale nurse is the notorious Sairey Gamp. She never touches alcohol, but always has a bottle nearby to put to her lips if she feels stressed.

Young Chuzzlewit goes to America; is swindled a lot; buys a piece of land to make his fortune. It is supposed to be a prime spot in a thriving city, but turns out to be a malaria infested miserable swamp in the desert. He is lucky to recover because few others have survived. But now the times have changed. The valley is green and built up. There are huge supermarkets and luxury hotels and sprinkled golf courses, Roman fountains, and manicured trees. There are health maintenance organisations and big hospitals and happy pensioners or Medicare recipients. It is a land of dreams, dull, but a land that flows with milk and honey. And the name of the town, now, as then, is the City of Eden.

Olive trees are sprayed so they won't make a mess