

The Meaning of Friday



A Naxos mystery *with Martin Day*

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Vanessa Gordon lives in Surrey and has spent many years working as a concert manager, musicians' agent and live music supplier. She has visited Greece as often as possible.

The Martin Day mystery series is set on Naxos, the largest island in the Cyclades, Greece. It is an island of contrasts. The modern port of Chora is crowned by a Venetian kastro surrounded by an interesting old town. You can find uninhabited central hills, the highest mountain in the Cyclades, attractive fishing villages, popular beaches, and archaeological sites. There are historic towers and welcoming tavernas, collectable art and ceramics. Naxos has produced some of the finest marble in Greece since ancient times. Now, Martin Day has moved in.

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

The Meaning of Friday
The Search for Artemis
Black Acorns

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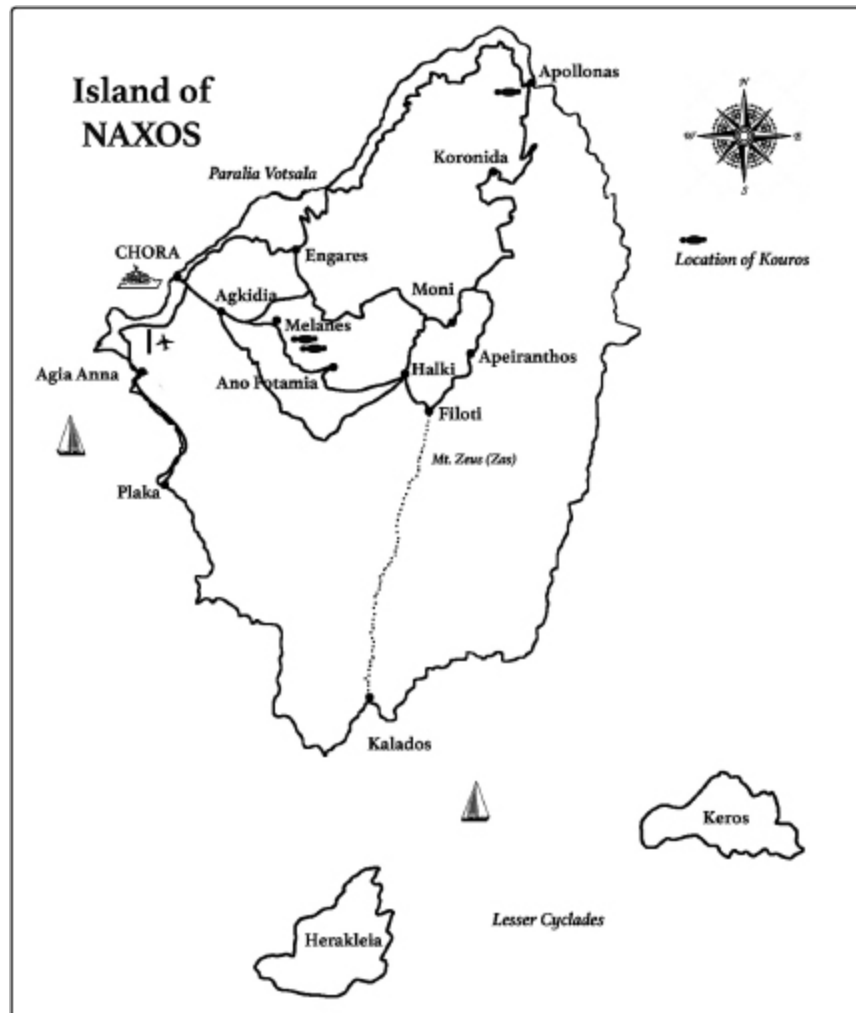
To our friends on Naxos and my family

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A NOTE ABOUT GREEK WORDS

Readers without a knowledge of Greek might like to know about one or two things that they will find in the book.

‘Mou’ means ‘my’, often used with a name as a term of affection.

‘Agapi mou’ means ‘my dear’.

Greek names sometimes have changed endings in the vocative, which is when the person is directly addressed. This is why you will see Nikos become Niko, Vasilios become Vasili, and other examples, when the characters are being spoken to directly.

Pater is the correct form of address to the papas or priest.

‘Panagia mou!’ is an exclamation which literally calls on the help of the Virgin Mary.

‘Kali orexi’ means ‘Bon appétit!’

‘Kalos irthatay!’ means ‘Welcome!’

‘Kyrie’ and ‘Kyria’ are forms of address like monsieur and madame.

Place names can be found in different spellings; spellings most likely to help with pronunciation are used in this book.

The main town of Naxos is called Chora or Naxos. You pronounce the ch in Chora as in the Scottish 'loch'.

'Kalispera sas' means 'Good evening'

1

The view hadn't changed since the age of Homer, but the killer paid it no attention. The uncultivated centre of the Cycladic island of Naxos was a playground only for goats and hikers. It was a beautiful but lonely landscape, shaped by the weather. The summer sun scorched the weather-enduring grass, and the tough scrub bent beneath the winter winds. The higher peaks were grey with rockfalls, while on the lower slopes the insects were now collecting the last nectar before the summer drought. The spring air smelled of wild herbs, but in a few weeks that rare softness would be overtaken by the dry scent of dead leaves. Things like this had been constant for millennia.

Villages thrived in pockets of fertile land linked by serpentine country roads. In the countryside near one of these, the hill village of Melanes, where ancient peoples once quarried marble, a twentieth-century farmer had built a stone hut to shelter him when he followed his flock across the open land. No more than a square box, the hut was made from rough rocks like those used for dry stone walls, and was just big enough for a man to lie down in. It was far enough from the road to go unnoticed, and even from the footpath nearby it looked uninviting. Its flat concrete roof was littered with chunks of stone as if to hold it down, but it wasn't going anywhere. By the entrance, a bit of rusty steel mesh lay discarded, grown through by weeds.

The stone hut had no windows, the entrance had no door, and for many years it had served no purpose. Its state of decrepitude was a guarantee of loneliness and eventual collapse. The little shelter had an air of having given up hope.

It was the perfect place to hide a body. The killer never expected anyone to venture inside.

2

Martin Day, archaeologist and television presenter, came laughing out of the office of the Curator of the Naxos Archaeological Museum, and took the steps two at a time to the ground floor. An English-speaking tour group filled the reception area of the museum, and Day waited for them to disperse before trying to leave. He was quite keen, anyway, to hear what their tour guide was telling them. He had just recognised him as an old friend from England.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, welcome to the outstanding Archaeological Museum of Naxos. Inside you’ll find a truly impressive collection of items, including the famous Roman mosaic floor. Naxos was an important centre of Cycladic culture through a range of periods, so the museum covers a great many fascinating eras. I know you’re particularly excited to see the beautiful Cycladic figurines, like the ones which we saw in Athens when we visited the Museum of Cycladic Art. The figurines have a captivating beauty that appeals to us today and have inspired many of our great modern artists - think of the paintings of Picasso and Modigliani, and the sculptures of Barbara Hepworth and Henry Moore.”

Day permitted himself a small smile. The tour guide paused for breath and glanced in Day’s direction. Having been a Classics undergraduate at Cambridge alongside Day, Paul was a fellow escapee from a life of academia. Paul now led

'cultural tours' of Greek sites, while Day was freelance, writing successful books on Greek archaeology and presenting television history programmes on subjects that took his fancy. Neither of them found conventional careers appealing.

Paul grinned and nodded to Day, before continuing with his lecture without missing a beat.

"Cycladic figurines are often female in form, with arms crossed and marks on the belly that suggest pregnancy. Their original purpose is unknown, but they may have been fertility symbols or funerary items. Many are broken across the middle, and could even have been broken deliberately as part of some ceremonial event. Many of these lovely statuettes were found buried in one single, remote pit. Mysterious as well as beautiful objects."

Day squeezed round the group and out into the fresh air as the lecture continued. The spring morning was already very warm. He loitered outside and didn't have long to wait before Paul joined him. He laid a big hand on Day's arm.

"I've got ten minutes while they buy their tickets and guide books," he said. "So, how are you, Professor?"

Day had made a TV series recently in which the American director had insisted on giving him the title of Professor, which he had certainly not earned in any university. He grinned.

"And what are you doing here? I thought you were in Athens."

"I've just bought myself a place here on Naxos," Day replied. "Finally got round to it. I'll be spending the summers here."

“Lucky bastard!”

“Working, of course. Never any rest from the job. You know me. How about you?”

“I’m good, thanks. I bought a boat this year and went independent as a tour operator. Now I have the boat I can arrange my own itineraries and be my own master. Tourists never change, but the down-time I get now is much better. And I take them to places that I want to go to, rather than having somebody else write the script. Look, how about a drink one evening?”

“Sure. Whenever you like. I’ll be living here till something else comes up.”

“Great, I’ll text you. I’ll be showing this group around here for a few days, and I get free time whenever they do. It’ll be good to catch up, it’s been months.”

“Years more like.”

“Really? OK, got to go, they’re looking for their leader! Good to see you, Martin.”

Paul hurried back to his group and Day’s thoughts turned, as they often did, to coffee. He fancied a quiet table with a view of the sea. He walked towards the sea and found a café on the road near the port. It was a favourite of his, because it had seating right on the edge of the water. He ordered a frappé and sat back feeling great. He was back on Naxos, with the whole summer ahead of him, and now he owned his own place. Day intended that summers in his new house, for which he had only received the deeds of ownership at the beginning of the year, would be a simple regime of research and writing in the glorious peace of the island’s hilly centre. He had just informed his old friend Aristos

Iraklidis, otherwise known as The Curator, that he planned to pick the Greek's knowledgeable brain over a bottle or two of local wine from time to time, and now he realised he might occasionally see other friends and colleagues as they passed through the islands, as Paul was doing.

To add icing to the cake, his old friend Helen Aitchison was about to arrive for a long visit. Helen was the kind of person Day liked best: independent, undemanding, intelligent and, like himself, a lover of peace and quiet. She wrote novels now, quite successfully, and was planning on spending most of the summer in Day's new home up in Filoti village. His relationship with Helen was blissfully platonic, their friendship rooted securely in a shared past where they worked together, and they had proved that they could successfully spend long periods under the same roof without driving each other mad. She would be on Tuesday's ferry from Rafina.

Day's mood, as he drank his frappé, checked Facebook on his phone and gazed from time to time at the shining Aegean, was entirely in harmony with the serene May morning.

3

Rania Iraklidis, Aristos's wife, had laid the table for Sunday lunch under the vine-covered pergola behind the Iraklidis's house in the rural suburb of Agkidia. The busy port of Chora, the main town and harbour of Naxos, was only a few kilometres away, but could have been on the other side of the island. The Iraklidis's house was quiet and idyllic.

Day had the same thought that always struck him when he saw Rania, that having a historian for a husband clearly suited her. Their life seemed peaceful, their conversation was of history, food and the Aegean. The food was homemade and the wine local. They had no children of their own, but many friends, and in their early sixties they seemed to have arranged their lives exactly how they wanted them. This was Day's idea of married bliss. As a confirmed bachelor of nearly forty, he felt he was an expert judge of these things.

He was really looking forward to Sunday lunch with his old friends. He politely declined an ouzo and allowed Aristos Iraklidis to press him to try a rather good white wine. The Curator, as he was commonly called on the island, was in the best of moods.

"We should begin with a toast to our good friend, Martin," he announced, his eyes twinkling above his straight, Greek nose. "To 'Professor' Day, TV celebrity and most private

man. And now owner of a Naxian house, which makes him also a discerning man. To your good health, Martin!”

“And to yours! It’s wonderful to be with you both again, in this haven of peace in your garden. Lunch smells delicious, too.”

“We’re looking forward to seeing a lot of you over the summer, Martin. Aristos has ordered more wine from his favourite vineyard especially.”

Day soon felt decidedly light-headed. The wine was delicious, cool and scented as with an aroma of mountain herbs, and Aristos was generous with it. He and Aristos shared a love of wine, just as they shared a love of Greece, of archaeology, of beauty, and of peacefulness.

They ate Rania’s delicately seasoned stew of lamb and potatoes with satisfaction. The lamb fell off the bone, the sauce was subtly flavoured with local oregano, and the chunks of local potatoes were rich with the flavour of the meat. Day thought Rania’s cooking exemplified the best of Greek cuisine and never turned down an invitation to eat her food. There were the usual extras too: an olive-rich Greek salad boasting large chunks of tasty tomato and juicy onion, and extra homemade fried potatoes especially for Day, who had a rather soft spot for chips.

There was fresh fruit to follow. Day politely declined the fruit, as usual. Dessert wasn’t his thing, he would say. Oddly, this applied to fruit, which he didn’t object to but rarely ate. He helped himself to seconds of chips when he thought nobody would notice.

“Unbelievable!” he said, finally finishing. “That meal was truly something else. You two must visit me soon in my new house in Filoti and let me cook for you. As soon as I get

more settled. Of course, I couldn't match this standard, Rania!"

"We'd love to, Martin, and I'm sure you cook beautifully. Tell us all about your house."

"It's just outside Filoti, walking distance from a particularly good taverna where I shall eat whenever I can't be bothered to cook. The house is a recent conversion, quite well done and very spacious. It doesn't need any more doing to it, and it has a spectacular view over the valley. It's so quiet there ... I can work either on the balcony or indoors, and there's decent internet connection. Lots of bookcases, a cooker, a fridge, and a currently empty wine rack the size of half a wall. I'm expecting you to help me with that, Aristo."

"Sounds like it might have been quite expensive?" grinned Aristos.

"It wasn't cheap, but as you know I sold my father's house in London last year. He would have approved of what I've done with my inheritance, I think."

"He certainly would. It sounds ideal for you. And when does your friend arrive? Her name is Helen, isn't it?"

"Yes, Helen. Tuesday, on the boat from Rafina. She can stay for weeks and weeks, it'll be brilliant. The house is easy to divide between us. As I said, it's quite big. She'll have her own room and balcony. We'll get lots of work done, and meet for coffee, lunch and dinner. And aperitifs, naturally. She'll be doing a project of her own. I think she's about to start a new novel. She sketches and paints too. She's never looked back since she took early retirement from the College. Thank God she earns enough to afford trips to Greece to see me. Her novels bring in good money now."

“You must bring her to visit us soon - mustn’t he, Aristomou?” said Rania, and Aristos shrugged as if to say it went without saying.

“With pleasure, of course I will. I love to introduce my best friends to each other.”

“I’ve heard of her novels,” said Rania, rather to Day’s surprise. “Maybe you’ll be in one of them soon, Martin! Or perhaps you live too quiet a life.”

4

The ferry 'Blue Star Naxos' from Rafina brought Helen Aitchison to the island on time. The ship did a cumbersome pirouette in the bay and reversed into port, where it lowered its huge steel ramp to release lorries, cars and pedestrians onto the crowded jetty. Helen concentrated on negotiating the ramp without being pulled down by her heavy suitcases or staggering in front of a car. She felt sweaty and dishevelled, but knew Martin would never notice. She saw him waiting for her just beyond the crowd. He was easy to pick out, taller by a head than most people and fair haired. He saw her and waved. He was one of the few people not holding a sign bearing someone's surname, and, typically of him, was standing on his own.

Helen joined the people and vehicles which jostled down the road towards the car park and the town, moving as one intolerant jumble. There were trucks laden with everything from bottled water to iron girders. There were taxis, minibuses, and the cars of hoteliers parked in the way with boot lids raised to receive their guests' luggage. Somehow everyone began to disperse. The fumes from the ferry were black as the boat turned up the power to leave the dock, having relieved itself of every passenger requiring Naxos and taken more on board.

Day's hug was stiff but his smile was sincere. He lifted Helen's cases into the boot of his second-hand Fiat 500 and

said triumphantly, "Welcome to Naxos, Madame! Welcome to our Cycladic summer!"

Day had remarkably few airs and graces for a relatively successful TV figure, she thought. He ring-fenced his private life, refusing to be at the beck and call of publishers and programme-makers. Luckily these people wanted what he produced, acknowledged his need for 'research time,' and so far had indulged his idiosyncrasies. These included long periods in Greece. He was therefore a particularly contented man as people of forty go. If a dark mood overtook him, it was short-lived. He had a great many friends, and she had always understood why.

It took them twenty minutes to escape the congested port. Once on the road out of town the traffic dwindled and Helen began to relax. She knew Naxos and liked its combination of Cycladic culture and modernity. It had a busy summer season, but away from the beaches and towns its people still led fairly traditional lives. Goats, cheese and olives co-existed with car rental, pizzerias and souvenirs. There were beaches and mountains, fast food and outstanding cuisine. Naxos also had a reputation for seriously good art, including ceramics, marble work, textiles and photography. There were two good museums, several ancient archaeological sites, and in the centre of the island and round its rocky coasts there were villages which retained the feel of traditional Greece.

Day began to tell her about his new Greek house in the village of Filoti. She already knew Filoti, with its central road climbing languidly beneath overhanging plane trees, its tavernas and cafés with tables outside, its small market space and its ancient tower. Helen had not even seen a photograph of Day's house, however, the place where she was to stay for the next few months.

They reached Filoti and Day pulled up by an old house with an unimposing frontage in keeping with the other properties on the outskirts of Filoti. Day unlocked the main door and led the way inside. The cool of the main room enveloped her, her eyes struggling with its dimness until he opened the shutters. He opened more and more of them as they explored the house. The improvements made by the recent conversion became clear. The back of the house had not one but three balconies, all facing away from the road and overlooking the valley at the back. The main room was large, consisting of a living area dominated by a large wooden table, a sofa, and a galley kitchen tucked at the far end. Off this room was the largest balcony, where Helen thought she would spend most of her time, enjoying the light and the view of the valley.

Day showed her round proudly. Her room had its own small balcony with a table and chair where she could also work. Day's room, desperately untidy but filled with light, was on a lower level cleverly cut into the hillside, and had a balcony which overlooked a garden of vegetables and fruit trees belonging to the people next door. Day's room, in the modern part of the house, had the complete seclusion he cherished, while Helen's room had the better view. It was an arrangement that would suit them both.

"Isn't it perfect, Helen? Our summer will be superb. We shall meet on the main balcony for lunch, and again after siesta for aperitifs. We shall then wander into the village for a delicious meal at the excellent Taverna O Thanasis, I can't wait to take you there, it has the most wonderful food. Thus we shall eke out our days throughout the summer in a civilised manner. And some excellent work will be done!"

"I love it, Martin," she said. "It even smells wonderful."

She was right, he thought, having not noticed it before. The fresh mountain breeze wafted through the open balcony doors carrying with it a green smell of cut grass and perhaps even a scent of the distant sea. The smell of wood old and new, lavender polish and fresh varnish, books and coffee, floated round the house.

Day showed her round the main room pointing out his prize possession, his library, and important items such as the fridge and the cafetière. The floorboards in this older part of the house squeaked in a very pleasant, somehow Greek way. Helen nodded in approval.

“How much of this furniture did you have to bring out from the mainland, Martin? I presume transport to the islands is very expensive.”

“I hired a guy with a van to bring my things over from Athens, including my books. The house came furnished, which is usual in the islands. The mattresses are new, I assure you - IKEA. All the bedding is brand new from a wonderful shop in Kolonaki. I bought things like the cafetière and the microwave on the island. I had some help from a friend of mine, Aristos, who’s the museum curator, and his wife. We’re invited to dinner with them, by the way, they want to meet you, and we’ll have to entertain them too. You can cook!”

She threw him a look, but he was clearly trying to be funny.

“I could fix a cleaner to come in once a month. If you think so?” he continued.

“No need. It won’t take you long.”

“Right. So all we have to do now is go to the supermarket in Chora and buy vital supplies. Do you want to unpack first?”

“If I just get my cases in ...”

“No problem,” he said, and strode off towards the car.

Helen walked to the main balcony and stared out across the valley. It was going to be the best, quietest, most productive summer she had had for years, and it sounded like there would be some social occasions too. Here, surely, she would get the inspiration for her next book.

They bought what Day called their vital supplies in a reasonably large supermarket on the outskirts of Chora. Day, who was masterminding the expedition, filled the trolley with wine, gin, tonic, lemons, and toilet paper. Helen added some peaches, grapes and fruit juice. They began to get inspired and added tomatoes, rocket, two jars of Greek capers, Italian ham, feta cheese, oregano, good olive oil, and cheap grinders of salt and black pepper. Day found some nice-looking local flatbread which could be quickly grilled and drizzled with olive oil. Two six-packs of water in plastic litre bottles were essential. Nibbles for aperitifs. That sorted out lunches for a while, and they decided that dinner, at least to begin with, would be provided by the much-admired Thanasis; it was almost as cheap.

Back at the house, they put the shopping away and retired to their separate rooms for the afternoon. Helen tested her mattress and found it pleasantly firm. The pillows looked all right, but only a night on them would reassure her. Everything, thankfully, looked new. She unpacked and took her book to the balcony.

After a couple of hours, Day emerged from his room in fresh clothes to find Helen with her feet on the railings,

contemplating the view.

“Gin and tonic?”

“Yes, please. Let’s start as we mean to go on.”

Day brought the drinks to the balcony and they watched as the sun began to sink and the coolness of evening creep over the valley.

“So, what do you plan to work on while you’re here?” Day asked.

“I have an idea for the next book, but it’s not coming together. I’ve brought some paints with me, and there are a couple of art supplies shops on the island if I need more. I’m just going to settle in gently, be a visitor for a while. There’s plenty of time, the summer is long.”

“Here’s to that!”

“And you?”

“I’m going to take a look at the work of a Naxian archaeologist called Nikos Elias,” he said enthusiastically. “He lived on Naxos most of his life and died a few years ago, and he was a mysterious and secretive figure. His house has been turned into a small museum, but I can’t find anything written about him yet. Even here on Naxos he isn’t well known, so it occurred to me I might do a short biography. Maurice, my agent in London, thinks he might have a publisher interested in it. Elias’s former partner looks after the small museum and I’ve been in touch with him. I thought you and I could drive over there one day. I’d like to get going on the work as soon as I can. Rumour has it that Elias made one or two discoveries which he didn’t publish, maybe something exciting, who knows? We’ll see.”

5

Day's favourite restaurant, Taverna O Thanasis, was on the main road at the end of Filoti nearest Day's new house. As he and Helen walked past the outdoor tables to the door of the taverna, Thanasis greeted them hospitably. The tables inside were laid with blue cloths topped with white cotton squares, neatly fastened with elastic beneath the table rim. Traditional wooden chairs with woven seats, and sepia photos on the walls, completed the traditional feel of the taverna. There was a delicious smell from the kitchen. They chose a table, accepted menus, and Thanasis brought a bottle of cold water and two glasses.

"Thanasi, may I introduce my friend, Helen?"

"I'm delighted to meet you, Kyria. Martin has been looking forward to your arrival, and so have we. Did you have a good journey?"

"Very good, thank you. Martin tells me the food here is the best on Naxos!"

"Then I shall bring you some excellent small plates to start. And for main course this evening we have some goat cooked slowly in a red sauce, some cockerel with pasta, or, if you prefer fish, I have some fresh sardines."

Day asked for some local red wine while they chose their food, and watched as Thanasis walked purposefully towards