Mary Morris

Mary Morris is a self-described “wanderer of the planet.” Most of the characters in her fiction are defined by a journey, although the trip may be emotional rather than actual. “As a writer my life has always been connected with journeys, I have been a kind of compulsive traveler since I can remember. My stories evolve out of those experiences,” she said. Morris’s first book, Vanishing Animals and Other Stories, was published in 1979. Critics took note and labeled her a writer to watch. Four years later she published a novel, Crossroads. Morris returned to short fiction in her next book, The Bus of Dreams and Other Stories—tales pervaded by transience. Her next novel, The Waiting Room, a story of three generations of women, was published in 1989, and in 1993 she edited an anthology of writing by women travelers, Maiden Voyages. In fiction or non-fiction, Morris is never far from the central metaphor of travel. “For me writing is a kind of journey,” she said, “whether it evolves from the world outside or the world within.”

Morris’s essay “On Italian Time” first appeared in Travel and Leisure. In it, her initial frustration with the Italian inattention to timetables, schedules, and regimen gives way to understanding.

On Italian Time

Recently my family and I traveled by train from Zurich to Milan. Having just spent the night on a plane, we collapsed into the train compartment intending to sleep during the six-hour ride.

Shortly after we left Zurich a Swiss conductor told us the train separated at the border. We would have to move into one of the front cars, but the half-hour stop in Chiesa would give us ample time to make the shift.

Somewhere, as we dozed through Switzerland, our conductor left the train. Another one who was younger, Italian, and seemingly wiser, woke us, shouting that we’d be in Lugano in ten minutes. The train would separate there, but it was a short stop. “You’d better hurry.”

At Lugano my husband and I dragged our luggage, sleeping daughter, and assorted paraphernalia onto the platform and dashed toward the front. As we approached another trainman I said to him in Italian, “Excuse us, sir, but which cars go to Italy?” He looked at me with slight disdain as he uttered a resonant baritone, “Signora, tutto il treno va in Italia.” He said it three times to make sure I understood. The whole train goes to Italy.

It was a difficult moment. We had given up our secluded little compartment for what looked like a long section of second-class smoking cars. Too tired to return, we climbed on. A high school soccer team was celebrating, but our daughter had fallen back asleep, and we didn’t have the heart to move her again. In Chiesa, when I got off to change money, I watched the part of the train we had originally been sitting in divide off and head for Austria.

I am not a cynic and I love Italy. But I have discovered that time and space are relative notions there. I have followed signs to the Palazzo Grassi that led directly into a wall, and floated the wrong way down a one-way canal, the gondolier shouting all the way. I’ve read timetables that had no relation to actual departure times, and followed a sign to Verona that in fifteen minutes brought me back full circle to the place on Lake Garda where I had begun.

No one maliciously puts you on the wrong part of the train or sends you in the wrong direction. It’s just that arrivals and departures matter much less than wines and sauces, the state of your frescoes, and lovemaking. Italy, like Mexico, is fundamen-
tally a pagan land that has embraced Christianity out of necessity, guilt, and belief. Scratch the surface and you'll find heathens, and heathens don't really care what day it is, let alone what time. What matters is seeing, smelling, tasting. Who cares if you turn left, when right is just as beautiful and the wine is just as good.

In Verona we rented a small green Fiat from a disgruntled Eurocar representative named Gemania who had dyed red hair. When I stopped by to extend our rental, she asked for the contract. “I'm sorry,” I said, “I can't seem to locate it.”

“But you must find it,” she insisted. “If you do not have the contract, we cannot give you the weekly rate.” The message was clear: without the rental agreement we were essentially buying the car. That night my husband and I went through every bag and every shred of paper, but we found no contract. I decided to call Gemania. I would plead, bribe, do anything. But when I explained the situation she said, “Oh, don’t worry. No problem. It’s fine.”

What had happened to Gemania since the previous day? Had she eaten a wonderful meal, had a troublesome tooth pulled, received a letter from a long-lost love? Sheer whimsy seems to be a national trait. Terra firma becomes quicksand. For some reason I find this charming.

Later, on the train to Venice, the conductor kindly suggested we would save time if we got off in Vicenza and waited for the direct train to Venice on Binario 3 (Track 3). He held up three fingers. “Numero tre,” he said emphatically. We sat contentedly with our luggage at Binario 3, thinking how lucky we were to be the only people going to Venice that day. Look at the poor people stuffing themselves into that overcrowded train on Binario 2.

As we watched the train for Venice depart from Binario 2, I was left once again to ponder the Italian character. Our conductor could not have been more self-assured. After all, we are helpless tourists and he has this one job: to collect our money and tell us where to go. Perhaps we tourists are victims of intentional misinformation—a plot whose purpose is to drive us away.

However, the natives suffer similar fates. When we visited Manuela, a friend who lives in Vicenza, she served us lunch on her patio. Afterward she came with us to spend an afternoon touring Vicenza. We returned to her house to find her sons and husband missing and messages on her answering machine from people concerned about her well-being.

It turned out that a local doctor, a family friend, had noticed that a woman with a name similar to Manuela’s had been admitted to the hospital. She had been bitten by a tiger mosquito, an aggressive insect, and had swollen up like a balloon. Coincidentally, she resembled Manuela, if Manuela were blown up like a balloon.

The doctor phoned his wife who phoned her sister who phoned Manuela’s sister who phoned the sons and so on. Several families rushed to the hospital to stand at the swollen woman’s bedside, debating whether or not this was Manuela (who, at the time, was having gelato with us in the piazza).

Manuela insisted we drive with her to her friend Marina’s house. That was where everyone had assembled to await word on whether the woman in the hospital was Manuela. The sun was setting as we arrived at a beautiful villa in the countryside surrounded by cypresses and Roman pines. There under the trees sat all the friends and family. “Manuela vive!” they cheered as Manuela got out of the car. Champagne corks popped and a celebration began.

I was thinking we should get going, but my husband was drinking wine from unmarked bottles that had been brought out of the cellar. I decided to stroll through the vineyards. When I returned, Marina had set a long table outside with a red-checked cloth. She had a salami; someone else had olives. Pepino, Marina’s husband, went to pick tomatoes. One of Manuela’s sons fetched some mozzarella from my car. Marina asked me to light the candles and I replied, in my best Italian, “Dov’è il semaforo?” Everyone laughed because I’d asked for the traffic lights.

The table was spread with cheese and tomatoes and Tuscan bread and salami. Though we had reservations elsewhere and other places to be, we all sat and drank wine under the stars until it was time for bed.