

A Town Called Old Mouth

My most profound mistake was to luxuriate in the heady feeling of being cultured, merely because my flight was nearing Rome's Leonardo da Vinci International airport. We'd pick up a rental car there and then head northeast to Florence.

I put away my stack of guidebooks on Florence, Venice, and Siena in favor of one on Rome and its environs. As my parents had planned it, we would be "doing" Rome at the tail end of our two-week stay in Italy, but my sister, Maggie, and I had a few hours to kill before the remainder of our family flew in from Paris. I scoured the guidebook for a nearby destination. Proximity to the airport was my only criteria.

"Hey, check it out!" I nudged Maggie, who had been sleeping most of the journey from Kennedy Airport.

"Ostia Antica. Fifteen miles away from the airport. And they've got a beach!"

I looked up the Italian word for beach (*spiaggia*) and armed myself with a few other Italian words from my guidebook: *Il taxi. Quanto costo?* I was already equipped with a few essentials: *Buon Giorno. Per favore. Grazie. Prego.* These words the ones a non-native speaker might grow up hearing in regular conversations, and then eventually adopt, and then occasionally drop into his or her own speech patterns. Though my signature farewell was *Ciao!* long before this trip to Italy and I would like to admit that my goal was to have a cross-cultural understanding of salutation practice, the reality was I most likely suffered from an extraordinary case of the cools. Perhaps *Ciao!* would take on a greater meaning in its native land.

Customs was a non-event. After all of those stories I'd heard about how people who looked like me—unsuspecting and female—were taken aside with their luggage and searched over by officials in painstaking detail, their lingerie flying and diaries scanned for conspiratorial language, I was anticipating such drama. But alas,

Maggie and I were essentially ignored; we posed no threat to national security, me with my purple book bag and she in a lime green ski jacket. I had to ask to have our passports stamped. And even that was a non-event, as the Italian man smiled and said, "Sure."

That would be the first English-speaking break we would get in what would be a slew of them. But we weren't the only ones: the Spanish, the Germans, and the French got them, too. How gracious of the Italians to translate "No Cameras" in ten different languages on signs three feet long that marked the front of museums and other public buildings!

Most people, I believe, embrace such hospitality. My family, for instance. Later, in Florence, I would buy a pocket-sized Berlitz phrase book and dictionary and be admonished by my family, and especially my sisters. Why waste lira on such an unnecessary item? Didn't I want to save the lira for something special made out of coveted Italian leather? But more than once, as I predicted, they shamelessly hailed me as their on-site translator. In particular I remember such shamelessness at the one restaurant without an English translation menu and during the negotiation of a statue's price at the local market. But there are just too many to mention.

I consider the befuddlement surrounding the language barrier a source of richness. And as Maggie and I headed out into the cool, sunny morning, I wished for that sort of strain—the kind that builds character and makes for great stories.

We were sans luggage and sans guidebook and out on the curb in about fifteen minutes from the time of deplaning. Many taxis purred on the platform. I bungled my lines to a driver, but he seemed used to it. The three of us smiled and got into the taxi. He seemed to approve of our destination. Of course he knew about Ostia Antica. He took tourists there all the time from the airport; tourists who'd read in their trusty guide books about the first colony and ancient seaport of Imperial

Rome, rumored to have been founded by good ol' Ancus Martius, the fourth king, in 335 B.C. to guard the mouth of the Tiber River. We all smiled some more.

Through the open windows of the taxi, I could sense the Tyrrhenian Sea from the quality of the air—a briny breeze, dense with moisture. Here we were on a real Italian adventure. I breathed deeply and pinched Maggie excitedly on the arm.

As our taxi driver turned off the autostrada and into Ostia Antica, he said, "No Pompeii?"

Confused, I looked over at Maggie who, for lack of anything else to say, said, "No, no," and then shrugged.

"Ah," he said and smiled in the rear view mirror. He assumed we were those well-read tourists who knew that when Rome began to fall in the 5th century, so did Ostia Antica; tourists who knew about malaria epidemic and the pirate attacks of the Middle Ages; tourists who knew that excavations of Ostia Antica began in the early 19th century and had so far revealed about one-half of the town (166 acres); tourists who knew that these ruins were unsurpassed in showing the daily Roman life of 2,000 years ago; tourists who could envision a fortress wall where the signs pointing back to the airport now stood. He'd been told by other American passengers that the guide books said, "If you can't make it to Pompeii, get a cab from the Fiumicino Airport to Ostia Antica and spend the day exploring the ruins of this ancient city." He assumed that we'd read the same passage. He assumed wrong.

He probably felt he need not draw our attention to the land out the taxi's right window; the land that was once ruled by the ancient course of the Tiber River before a flood in 1575 altered it for good.

He could have enlightened us in a million different ways because we were only thinking: Breakfast and a beach.

He slowed the cab, his hands up in the air, wanting to know where to let us out. I didn't know where we wanted to be dropped off; I didn't even know what we

came here to see. Leaving the taxi meant, among other things, that our driver would need to be paid and I was egregiously bad with calculating currency. My father, the banker, had described some easy way to translate lire into dollars, just so I could have a little perspective on the seemingly large bills I was handing over. It was something about multiplying the lire total by 6.5.

In front of a dusty, wooden store front called *Il Mio Fornaio* seemed as good a place as any to be let out. I paid the taxi driver most likely far too much for the brief ride and we stepped into the town that at its height boasted 100,000 residents, though some sources argue 500,000. A bustle of proud folk stood on the sidewalk dressed in dark, burlappy garments; proud that the name of their town was aptly translated into Old Mouth and was instrumental in Rome's prosperity.

Had we not been so ravenous for breakfast, we might have had the wherewithal to ask the burlapped sages: What used to stand here so many years ago? A bath, a temple, a theater? One of the women, the squarest one with the burgundy handkerchief, would emerge from the pack. She would reach out her rough, brown hand to us, shake her head and empathize, "America so young." I might correct her and say, "Americans so naive."

It was 1998 on a Saturday morning around 9 am and at *Il Mio Fornaio* the local people of Ostia Antica were buying their bread for the day. This was serious business. Maggie and I were surely on to something authentic as we squeezed into the sweet-smelling square shop. The flour in the air made breathing and seeing difficult, but that's what made it so real. We joined what I thought was a line, like the ones I knew from America, but we kept getting pushed back by some of the more girthy, boorish women. Most of them wereshorter than I—5 feet—but I can admit to some fear. They were territorial, like dogs. In their expressions I saw

inaudible snarls. I secretly wished for a few men to show up, thought they might break up the estrogen levels that were as thick as the flour in the air.

"I feel like an animal," Maggie said, grabbing my arm for balance.

"We gotta stay. This is the real thing," I whispered.

Maggie frowned and grabbed a piece of the counter to stay afloat in the swarm. "Why are you whispering?"

My answer was respect. I didn't want to offend these folk, have them think we considered them occupants of some petrie dish.

"So what if they can't understand me. It's still shows respect," I said. "What do you want?"

"How should I know? I can't understand the signs."

I punched her softly. "Let's buy according to shape."

"I'm so hungry I could eat that woman's hairy forearm," Maggie said. "I'm going to buy according to size."

"Fine," I said.

I swear it was because Maggie said the thing about eating the woman's hairy forearm that the mass of bodies shifted a little and we were propelled out the back of the crowd by the screen door we'd come through. It was chaos. And chaos in a foreign land is always more chaotic. Italian words and laughter, shuffling feet, the scrape of breads plunging into paper bags, the cash register dinging and ringing, and Maggie rolling her eyes.

"This is new to me," Maggie said. "Five steps forward, five steps back? Very productive. It's just like New York."

I smiled, without showing my teeth, to a stern woman taking up more than her share of space. She carried a basket so big it was rude. I let her wade ahead of me.

Upon seeing that Maggie said, "Let me take the muscling position. You choose the sustenance."

"Right."

I'd never seen so many breads, like the variety of nails at a hardware store. All in one place. No discrimination. All shapes, sizes, and strains in bins on the wooden counter and cubbyholes on the wall. A crudely written name tag and price hanging like an afterthought, askew and faded underneath its tack, accompanied each species of flour and water. Behind the counter's glass sumptuous sugary pastries beckoned, but I said, "No."

"What?" Maggie asked, breathing heavily.

"Nothing. Keep an eye on the women."

I scanned for the biggest loaf to make her happy. *Bigne* is big and round and white, like her boyfriend. And I decided on the *Pane Integrale* for myself. Pretty, brown, and small—like a button.

The three women behind the counter danced the "we-work-in-a-very-small-space-but-we-can-handle-it-because-we-are-so-happy" dance, barely missing each another as one would turn around and nearly impale the other with an oblong loaf. They were made of patience and grace, and they smiled so big I began thinking there might be some drug in the air.

Maggie was doing her job, keeping me from being tripped or taken down. I think it was her lime green jacket that kept them away. It had its own noiseless noise.

"Just jump in!" She pushed me against the counter. She was beginning to lose faith and strength. Her relative politeness would not hold out much longer. I could see the hunger in her eyes and it was not pretty.

"You've no idea the cultural barriers I am facing," I said in defense.

"Hah," she said and kept muscling.

I turned my attention back to my bread dancers. Whenever I got a little eye contact, my heart would end up on the back of my tongue, dislodging the words: "Uno Bigne, uno Pane Integrale!"

I failed to get any attention about three times. In the interim, below the counter, I counted out what I thought was the correct lire. As I was doing this a woman, who looked like a potato, rested her chin in my shoulder. I slipped out from under her chin hold and pressed myself against the glass.

But then it happened—my big moment, as if the ghostly trio of Ostia Antica's past, Nero and Claudius and Constantine concurred. "Let her buy bread!"

The woman I hoped I'd get—tall, slender, and swarthy like an olive—spun into my view and her eyes landed on me. I opened my mouth and she smiled at my accent or my pronunciation, or both, and it was a nurturing smile. Perhaps she suspected I could use a little charity. It was nice, I must admit, to have felt like we communicated.

The breads I ordered flew into bags and drifted into my waiting hands. We'd been welcomed to Ostia Antica by three famous Roman emperors and now we would eat. I was even confident of the amount of lire I was handing over. Admittedly it helped that my bread dancer nodded every time I placed a bill in her hand. Maggie was smiling, her hard work now done—a success within itself. We both chimed in with "Grazie!" because it was a word we knew how to use. Even better, it was something the locals said.

Though getting out of the store, against the current, was laborious—each patron was an immovable obstacle much like a wall—we forged on, despite the intimidation. I smiled at the potato woman and even found it in myself to admire the hook of her chin.

Next on the agenda: caffè. And then the spiaggia on the shores of the Tyrrhenian Sea. And then: Pane and caffè on the spiaggia in Italia. Very simple. A drop in the bucket for a town with so much else to offer.

Maggie and I took the sidewalk to avoid the "skillfully aggressive" drivers that sped by on the cobbled streets just wide enough to accommodate cars—tiny cars. We passed the center green where there were benches and trees and old men smoking in overcoats and hats. If we'd only asked they could have informed us that we were walking down the famous Decumanus Maximus, the main street that bisected the town. Perhaps if we'd shared our *pane* they might have assured us that the series of mosaics at the Baths of Neptune depicting Neptune and Amphitrite were not to be missed; that for some Ostia Antican visitors, Neptune's image was a main attraction.

And Maggie would have said, "That means Neptune's a stud."

"Thanks for the translation," I would say. "I do understand subtlety."

"Since you're from America," one man might say, "you must see what is called the 'early Wall Street.' It is the Piazzalle delle Corporazioni. Its black-and-white mosaics are of all the trades that were housed there at one time. The caulkers, the rope makers, the furriers, and ship owners. Our "Wall Street" is earlier than yours by . . . ," he'd try to do the math, pulling his old, spotty hands out of his overcoat, "too many years to count."

But we didn't stop to talk to the old men. We needed caffè in a bad way.

Intuitively we walked toward a coffee bar. I should tell you right here and now what kind of coffee drinkers Maggie and I are: We go to Dunkin' Donuts and order the Super Regulars to go. That means negotiating a ridiculously large Styrofoam cup filled with cream and sugar and coffee for the next two hours.

Again a line, but less barbaric and seemingly less cutthroat. I wondered for a moment why the Ostia Anticans didn't sleep in on the weekends. I would have been sleeping if I weren't in some strange, small town in Italy.

Innocently and respectfully we stood in the back of the coffee bar for about a minute waiting to gain some ground in the queue.

We had our lines down. "Duo Caffè, per favore," is what we would say. How hard could it be? Caffè means coffee in any language, right?

The whir of machines sounded so productive and orderly. The acrid, yet chocolatey smell of coffee settled like silt in my skin and hair.

"The line isn't moving," Maggie whispered to me.

"You're just bummed that it's not necessary to use force."

"Not so. I think I pulled a muscle," she said, massaging her arm.

"You're whispering. Why are you whispering?" I asked.

She glared at me.

I looked around and realized that these people were standing still, facing the bar, ritualistically drinking their morning beverages. Several espresso cups and saucers dwarfed by several pairs of hands.

"It's not a line," I whispered back and said, "Scusi!" a few times—a word Americans have adopted to be cute. I learned later that the proper thing to say would have been, "Permesso!"

Now we were at the front of the bar and the man behind the counter asked me a question with his friendly, handsome face. From the context of the situation I assumed he wanted to know what we wanted to drink.

"Duo caffè, per favore."

Before I could say anything more, and not like I could have articulated a plea, there were two tiny white saucers in front of me, on top of which sat two tiny white matching cups the size of shot glasses. Coming up with the lire was a bit of a

struggle this time because I was reeling from the shock of realizing I didn't know how to order what we wanted. It was already clear that this joint wouldn't have anything resembling a Super Regular. Perhaps only people with a junkies' relationship to caffeine can understand the gravity of this situation.

The friendly man actually took the lire I was trying to organize from my hands and counted it out slowly and carefully, placing one bill on top of the other until it matched the amount on the register. I gave him a grateful "Grazie!" and handed Maggie her saucer and shot glass of veritable mud. She frowned. It was such a big frown that it amused the whole interior of the coffee bar. Benevolent laughter is nicer than the opposite, but when it is foreign, it stings just the same.

Though it was unorthodox, we stepped outside to sip and endure our caffè.

"I've never thought coffee was funny," Maggie said.

"I guess it is—starting today."

There were tears of laughter in my eyes before she even took a sip because I knew she would spit it out. She took a sip and spit it out.

"Who wants to start their morning this way?" she asked. "I'd rather drink motor oil."

She would actually spend the remainder of the two weeks in Italy trying to articulate her coffee needs. One waiter in Florence would tell her in broken English that she was difficult and would have trouble finding a husband. Finally, at a pensionne in Siena, she would get her wish—a big, stainless steel tank with separate spouts for milk, water, and coffee. Beautiful, black coffee that filled a large mug.

From previous experience we knew to head straight to the counter, past the statuesque patrons with caffeine in hand. The same friendly man laughed *benevolently*, as did a few from the crowd, when I ordered.

"Duo caffè latte, per favore."

I laughed with him and it didn't matter to me. I needed the caffeine. He would have been laughing even harder, or perhaps even crying if he knew what we didn't know. Perhaps he thought he was launching us on our sightseeing tour with the proper dose of caffeine to enjoy his ancient hometown.

I handed Maggie her caffè latte in a glass a few inches tall. She consumed it begrudgingly. All eyes were on us. Heads were cocked, waiting for our note of approval. I raised my glass and passionate Italian cheers struck the little coffee bar. It was communication of a sort. If they knew that our objective here in Ostia Antica was to buy some grub and kill some time, they might not have found our display so charming. If for an instant we had thought about more than our stomachs, we might have asked this captive audience: "Which way to the spiaggia?" In between small sips, the man in the little felt cap might have replied, "You must go to Lido di Ostia, the resort up the road, but be careful, the pollution is bad. Why don't you tour the marbled House of Cupid and Psyche instead?"

And to think we could have learned of the many hardships Psyche had to endure at the hand of Venus because Venus was jealous of her beauty. Finally reunited and immortalized by Jupiter, Psyche and Cupid had a house of their own. A tale certainly more satisfying than that of any Hollywood movie stars.

I think back on the whole experience now and as a form of apology I would like to relay to them all that I credited that particular latte with getting me hooked on something other than Super Regulars—in spite of the fact that I wasn't able to get it to go.

We walked out into the sun and the cobblestone. Desiring some caffeinated beverage she was familiar with, Maggie insisted that we find a Diet Coke somewhere. Fortunately, Coca Cola Light sufficed.

"To the spiaggia!" I said, my cute as a button *Pane Integrale* under my arm.

Maggie rolled her eyes. "Is that the only word you know?"

We found the road that we came in on and crossed over the autostrada hoping that it would lead us to the water. Eventually it would have, but *eventually* was not a time frame we cared to fathom. Several cars driven by young men slowed down or stopped. They motioned us over.

"God," I said, "You'd think one of us was blond. I hear they really harass the blondies."

"Maybe they can see that you're blond on the inside," said Maggie, hugging her big *bigne*.

I told her at that point that I got her the big, white, round loaf of bread because it reminded me of her boyfriend, Brad.

We aborted the spiaggia mission. Our lack of ambition was shameful. We decided to go hang out in a patch of sun with the old men in the park.

There were no patches of sun and the venue was lousy. We felt outnumbered and wrong, having invaded the male space.

"What do you think these guys do?" I asked, watching them smoke and pace.

"This," Maggie said.

But any one of those fellows might have remembered Mussolini's orders from 1938 to 1942 to continue digging Ostia Antica out of obscurity.

We crossed the famous Decumanus Maximus, and climbed to the top of some concrete steps to absorb what we could of the *sole*. We gnawed on our *pane* and commented on the people.

"Let's get a manicure!" I exclaimed, as if there were nothing else to do in a town that has been around since 335 B.C. whose temples were shrines to the Persian sun god, Mithras.

"Of course!" Maggie said and leapt up, remembering a store front resembling a beauty salon at the end of the row of shops.

The blinds were drawn, but the door was open. The woman who greeted us after some time was surly and smoking, as were all of the other women.

"Now what are we going to do?" Maggie asked, referring to the ensuing face-off.

We pointed to our fingers and wiggled them in the air. We picked up nail polish from a table. The woman waived us down, as if to shut us up or sit us down, or both, and said to one of her smoking cohorts, who had her hands in a lady's hair, "Duo Mani."

We waited, breathing smoke dating back to the 4th century B.C., and cast our eyes over enthusiastic Italiano magazines starring many Americano celebrities. I was exhausted from traveling and not sleeping, but the pitch and cadence of the Italian accents was hard to doze to. To an American unfamiliar with the Italian language, anyone speaking it sounds passionate; passionately mad, passionately happy, passionately crazy. I fantasized that a husband was getting roasted and that a younger man, perhaps a foreigner or a laborer, was being lusted. All of the women seemed to want to maintain that middle-aged sexiness that plays itself out in sequined midriffs, spiky heels, fake moles and big, badly teased and tortured hair.

"Do you think we'll walk out of here looking like them?" I whispered.

"Might keep the guys away," Maggie said, without even looking up.

I couldn't tell if it was actually dark or if it was the surfeit of smoke blinding me. It was hard to imagine any beauty being achieved out of the place. I knew Maggie was thinking the same thing, but we were too polite, intimidated, and lazy to abort this mission as well.

I got up to use the bathroom, a room I hope never to see the likeness of again, and when I returned Maggie was getting her "Mani" from the less surly of the two beauticians. Maggie had one red stripe down the middle of three of the nails on her right hand.

I gave her a confused look and she gave me one back. With her free hand she mimed filling in the sides of the nail and then shrugged her shoulders.

The beautician laughed and said, "Italiano Mani!" She flashed her nails, each one painted with a line down the middle and said, "Looks longer."

Maggie smiled and nodded.

"I couldn't drink their caffè, I guess I'll have to make one concession."

A few minutes later, I was in the hot seat. I got up the courage to ask the same woman how to get a taxi to return to the airport.

"Il taxi?" I asked.

In between drags on her cigarette and swipes at my nail, I gathered from her that it wasn't possible. The gist of what I came to understand, through moronic sign language between the two of us, was that all taxis came from Roma; there were none from Ostia Antica. Though the news was discouraging I was impressed to have understood that much from her pointing a cigarette in the northerly direction, shaking her head, and saying, "No, no."

"Il bus?" I asked.

Again, just a few hand gestures and I had the low down. Any public transportation, limited on Saturdays anyway, went straight to Roma, not to the airport.

And so it was plain. We were stranded.

I interrupted Maggie who was blowing her ten red stripes dry. Momentarily forgetting we spoke the same language, I nearly employed a series of gesticulations to get my point across, but I caught myself.

"Remember those polizia by the autostrada? Throw yourself at their feet. We are stranded and we gotta be back to the airport in half an hour to meet Mom and Dad."

"I didn't see no polizia by the autostrada," Maggie said.

"Work with me here, would you?"

Ten minutes later when I stood up to leave, it occurred to me I'd been sharing my beautician's cigarette and I looked like a mischievous kid who'd gotten into her mother's nail polish. The beautician took the lire from my hands and did the same thing as the friendly caffè man: she piled the bills on top of one another in front of me. I trusted her with her currency, my money, for some reason, even though I would have a good laugh about my nails later on. At the moment I was willing to believe that I had an authentic Italian manicure, maybe even one particular to Ostia Antica. I could travel the whole country and people would know I'd been to Ostia Antica because of my rare and beautiful "Mani."

Out in front I scanned Ostia Antica for Maggie, my fellow American, and when I did not spot her for 10 minutes I began to worry.

If my attention hadn't been so mired in our logistical nightmare I might have seen, from my perch, the uncovered pillars of the Ostia Forum. Or the Capitoleum, a 2nd-Century B.C. temple honoring a trio of Gods: Juno, Minerva, and Jupiter.

Then I saw Maggie running down the street. "We've got a ride! We've got a ride!"

When she couldn't find the polizia at the autostrada, she went back to *Il Mio Fornaio* and began yelling, "Does anyone here speak English?"

I promised from that point on to love her for her audacity as we walked back toward *Il Mio Fornaio*.

"So, then this English woman said she and her husband spoke English. She asked, 'What is your emergency?' I felt so queer saying, 'My sister and I need to get back to the airport.' But she laughed."

"Today, that is the norm," I said.

"No kidding."

We all piled into their Volkswagen bug. I couldn't tell if our gracious hosts, Laura and Rocco, were actually heading toward the airport or if they were just

feeling charitable toward our situation. Regardless, they were lovely—a young, handsome couple in bohemian garb, with pictures of their children, two and four, on the dash.

After telling us more about our about respective cities, San Francisco and Boston, than we knew ourselves, Laura said:

"How did you like the ruins? The Mithraic shrines are my favorite."

"Ruins?" I asked. Maggie and I exchanged looks.

"Oh, you Americans can be so droll." She reached back and tagged my arm.

Laura thought we were kidding. "I often wonder what my perspective would be if I had grown up in such a young country like yours," she said thoughtfully.

I laughed. "Warped."

We all laughed. I saw signs for the airport.

"How did you two spend the morning in Ostia?" I asked.

She raised a loaf of *pane* to her face from her lap of four. "*Il Mio Fornaio*—best bakery for miles around. We go every Saturday."

I spanked my backpack, doughy and sweet with two loaves and Maggie looked relieved.

"Yeah, we discovered that little gem right away!"

I nearly flashed her my Ostia Antican "Mani" and was close to telling her about the best caffè latte lira could buy, but I thought better of revealing our little secret nuggets of Ostia Antican life.