

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Mimi's Ghost

Tim Parks

Contents

About the Book

About the Author

Also by Tim Parks

Title Page

Epigraph

Part One

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Part Two

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Part Three

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

Chapter 28

Part Four

Chapter 29

Chapter 30

Chapter 31

Chapter 32

Chapter 33

Chapter 34

Copyright

About the Book

Morris can't get over Mimi. But then he should have thought of that before he murdered her and married her sister. Now Mimi's back, as a ghost, and she seems to be suggesting the way to redemption for Morris. He must help the poor immigrants of Verona; but if anybody should get in his charitable way then so much the worse for them . . .

About the Author

Born in Manchester, Tim Parks grew up in London and studied at Cambridge and Harvard. In 1981 he moved to Italy where he has lived ever since. He is the author of novels, non-fiction and essays, including *Europa*, *Cleaver*, *A Season with Verona* and *Teach Us to Sit Still*. He has won the Somerset Maugham, Betty Trask and Llewellyn Rhys awards, and been shortlisted for the Booker Prize. He lectures on literary translation in Milan, writes for publications such as the *New Yorker* and the *New York Review of Books*, and his many translations from the Italian include works by Moravia, Calvino, Calasso, Tabucchi and Machiavelli.

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Italian Ways

Mimi's Ghost

Tim Parks

Minerva

'The realms of thought, philosophy and the spirit break up and shatter against the unnameable, myself.'

*Max Stirner, The Unique and his
Property*

Part One

MORRIS RAN SOFT fingertips along the silk finish of coffee-coloured tiles designed by Valentino. It was almost the only room in the flat he felt unreservedly happy about. The polished walnut fittings were particularly attractive, he thought, holding here a fleshy beige soap dish, there the thick white towels that made such a change from the skin-scraping variety he had grown up with. What's more, the babble of radios, televisions and raised voices from the other households in the condominium rarely penetrated this sanctum - some trick of modern construction methods, some unplanned relief. So that here one could shave in peace, admire the clean line of one's jaw, the perfect complexion of two cheeks exactly poised between youth and maturity, the neat cut of still-thick hair above clear blue eyes . . . and dream of a life in which one had made different decisions.

For Paola had been a mistake of course.

Having straightened his tie beneath the freshly pink chin, this successful property owner walked around his sunken bath to a window tastefully double-glazed in a frame of orange pine. Enjoying the simple movements, the feel of the brushed steel handle, the still-new smell of resinous wood and paint, he pulled open the window, and unlatched the shutter. But there was rust on the black varnished metalwork here; that was something he would have to talk to the builder about. Morris scratched with manicured nails at a series of blisterings. Sometimes it seemed you had hardly settled down to enjoy some luxury detail of the place before you were finding a fault, a blemish, some niggling little thing that made you feel you couldn't settle down and

relax. Morris examined. Clearly the builder had been accepting junk from cheap suppliers and banking on the fact that the purchaser couldn't possibly notice everything in the couple of quick inspections he'd be granted before being told that if he didn't pay up (in cash!) then someone else was more than willing to. No, he had been taken for a ride there. Taken for a ride by a provincial, tax-evading shark. And the thing about being taken for a ride of course was to face up to it, admit it, take it square on the chin. Never, never tell yourself things were all right when they weren't.

Things were definitely not all right with Paola.

Pushing back the shutter revealed an oppressively grey winter dawn, hatching out the uninspired silhouette of the next 'luxury' condo the same builder was now throwing up on an area of land that only six months ago he had promised would be forever part of their beautiful cross-country view. Morris shivered in the cold air but forced himself to look, to savour this little defeat, so eloquent of his failure to really grasp the Italian character. For it was not enough to have got hold of a fortune, one would have to learn how to defend it. It occurred to him how smug that man must feel every time their cars crossed along the avenue, how confident of Morris's humiliation!

Still, it was fitting weather for the Day of the Dead: icy, a touch of fog. Good. There would be the dressing up, which he always enjoyed, the family gathering, the procession of cars to the cemetery, the flowers, the poignancy of seeing Massimina's photograph by the family tomb. Morris liked these traditions. He liked the way they framed your experience and gave it rhythm. Certainly Father had never visited the rose tree where Mother's ashes were deposited. Next time he went home he must make a point of getting out there to show the man what civilisation and respect were all about.

Having closed the window, Morris again stopped and gazed in the mirror: the Armani cardigan, the Versace tie,

the shirt by Gianfranco Ferre – there could be no denying the elegance of all this. Just that now one had it, one realised it wasn't enough. One wanted more. One wanted art and culture and dignity and one wanted to live with people who appreciated such values and cultivated them. Which was why his marriage had been such a tragic, such a stupid mistake. If there was time this afternoon he would visit Forbes . . .

'Paola!' Morris stepped out into the corridor. 'Paola, it's past eight-thirty!' There was no reply. He looked into the bedroom. His wife was luxuriously sprawled under the goosedown quilt. Expensively permed chestnut hair bubbled over pink pillows. But there wasn't that girlishness, the radiant innocence and ingenuousness her sister Massimina had had. What's more, Massimina, in the brief halcyon month of their elopement, had always been up and about at a decent hour.

He sat down at the bedside and stared at the creature he had so hastily joined his life to. At some point or other he was going to have to impose himself. Otherwise one would find oneself just another weak husband providing the wherewithal for a simpering woman to waste her time exactly as she wished. Eventually, without opening her eyes, Paola enquired: 'How come you're not off to work this morning, Mo?'

He disliked being called Mo.

'*Sono i morti,*' he said. 'The Dead.'

'*Giusto.* Why did you get up then? We don't have to be at the cem till elevenish. Come back to bed and play.'

Morris said stiffly: 'There are the flowers to collect for Massimina. Anyway I thought you had your big exam tomorrow.'

'Oh, what a bore! Come to bed, Mo, come on, do what you did last night. I can't wait.' She groaned and made a rude gesture.

Trying to put kindness and encouragement into his voice, he said: 'Every hour counts the day before an exam, you'll regret it tomorrow.'

The young woman sat up sharply in a night-dress of such creamily thin silk her nipples beneath seemed Cadbury's chocolate buttons. Mother had tucked in his Christmas stocking twenty years before. She had smaller breasts than Massimina, but more pert and, he was aware, fashionable. Pouting, she reached across the bed, found a pack of Rothmans and lit up with a lighter, apparently of brushed silver. Along with the discothèques, the punkishly showy clothes in the poorest taste and the moronic if locally well-placed circle of friends, this smoking of hers was another habit which Morris now realised was out of line with the vision of a better life that had always been his inspiration.

Anyway, his father had smoked Rothmans.

'Well?'

'Oh, I don't think I'm going to do it.'

He opened his mouth to object. Was she going to throw away the possibility of a career, he protested, just for fear of the very last exam?

'Well, you know, Mo, I was thinking, what do I really want with a degree in architecture in the end? Do you see what I mean?' She cocked her head to one side. 'The fact is we've already got money. Another couple of months and Mamma will be joining Mimi under the old angel anyway. You get to run the company and it's plain sailing.'

The angel was a reference to the somewhat pompous monument that topped the family tomb.

Wincing at the crudity of this, Morris observed that quite apart from the money, which was always a plus, a career in architecture would offer her a path to self-realisation.

'Oh, Morris, you're such a bore!' She laughed out loud, her husky, patronising laugh, and as she did so he reflected that it wasn't so much the fact that she smoked that bothered him, but the way she did it: with the brash confidence, he

thought, the particularly unpleasant arrogance of stylish young women in films. Was this why his father had been so appreciative during their visit to England? He hoped he himself would never be guilty of radiating intimidation in this way.

'I told you before,' she continued, 'the only reason I went to university in the first place was to get out of that stuffy house and as far away as possible from Mamma and that reek of mothballs and polished furniture. And the only reason I did architecture was because they don't have it at Verona, so I had to go to Padua four days a week and there was the chance of having some fun. Now come on, take those silly clothes off and get back in the sack.'

Again Morris suffered from the crudity of all this, though he had heard a lot worse of late. When they made love, for example, which he still rather enjoyed, and surprised himself by being so good at (though there was always that feeling of repulsion afterwards that would send him hurrying to the shower) – yes, when they made love she would come out with the most amazing stream of obscenities, things he had never imagined anybody could want to say to anybody. He protested: 'But, Paola, my love' – he enjoyed hearing himself say 'my love' – 'you always seemed so happy at home; I mean, when I visited that first time and you and Antonella were complaining about how badly Massimina was doing at school.'

Paola positively pealed with laughter. 'What an act!' she giggled. 'What an act it always was! Poor Mimi was so hopeless. I knew she'd end up badly.'

But this was too painful. He said abruptly in the intimate gloom of their bedroom: 'So you're giving up your career?'

She puffed. 'I never had one, darling. Just passed all my exams copying everybody else. You know how it is here. I could never understand why Mimi didn't do the same.'

Then Morris startled himself by saying with genuine tenderness: 'OK, but then let's have a child. I've always

wanted a little boy.'

But again she positively shook with laughter. '*Nemmeno per sogno*, Morris! That can wait at least five or six years.'

'So what are you going to do in the meanwhile? I mean, we've never really talked about this.'

'Have a good time.' She blew out a smoke ring and cocked her head to one side in a sly smile. Certainly she was not the picture of demure bereavement that had first drawn him to her and put the whole idea into his head the day of Mimi's funeral. And she added: 'I feel I'm only just starting to live.'

'While I slave at the company?'

'I thought that was what you wanted. You nearly jumped for joy when Mamma had her stroke.'

He stared at her.

'And now, if you are not going to do the honours, I think I'll take a shower.'

She stood up and, coming round the bed, tweaked his nose. 'Silly old Mo,' she laughed, again speaking pidgin English, and walked out with some deliberately exaggerated arse wiggling in tiny tight white pants.

Morris shut his eyes.

A few minutes later he was outside the smart and decidedly expensive condominium. The air was biting. Under the grey fog, frost rimed every surface. A stately row of cypresses loomed rigid and white. The laurel hedge by the gate was draped with icy cobwebs. Morris was the kind of person who noticed and appreciated such things.

Wearing a tastefully grey wool coat and lilac cashmere scarf, he drove into town in a small white Mercedes. If he had had his way of course, he would have bought a place right in the ancient centre and not bothered with a car at all. But Paola had wanted to be quite sure she wouldn't have to put up with unexpected visits from her mother, who was endlessly bothering sister Antonella and brother-in-law

Bobo; she had thus felt that one of these chic new condominiums out in the country the other side of town from Mamma would be more to her liking. Morris, still in a state of foolish euphoria at being accepted, at least legally, into the family, had been at his most accommodating.

Given Mamma's sudden deterioration these last couple of months, this decision had probably been a mistake, Morris now realised. Especially since no one knew quite how the company was to be divided up on her departure. Had he and Paola been living that bit nearer they would have been in a better position to show respect for her, their compassion and maturity. Certainly Antonella and Bobo were being most assiduous. Morris felt he should have foreseen all this and not been so ready to let Paola have her way. But he was new to marriage, had embarked on it with the best intentions, and anyway it was easy to be wise after the event. One thing Morris was learning these days was not to be too hard on himself.

Driving fast, he picked up the car phone and called Forbes. The man's cultured, gravelly voice enquired: '*Pronto?*' in an accent that was more or less a declaration of British superiority. Morris, so proud of his own achievements in sounding Italian, becoming Italian, truly being Italian, was nevertheless fascinated by this older man's refusal to adapt in any way, by the ostentatious manner in which he appreciated Italy and Italian art as a foreign connoisseur, an outsider. He didn't seem to share or even understand Morris's need for camouflage at all.

Morris announced himself and apologised if perhaps he had wakened the older man.

'Ah, Morris, I would forgive you more than that.' There was immediately a fruity generosity in his pensioner's voice.

'It's just I was thinking of going down to Florence at the weekend. Do you want to come? There's a picture I'd like to look at. In the Uffizi.'

'Splendid idea.'

'What I was thinking was, if I took you with me you could explain everything. I hope you don't consider that presumptuous of me. I'm a bit weak on some of that early Renaissance stuff.'

'Only too glad to help, no problem.'

'And on the way maybe we could talk about that little piece of business you suggested.'

'If you think there's any hope of raising the capital,' Forbes said humbly. 'I'm afraid that with my limited means . . .'

'Something might be arranged,' hinted a Morris who had married into a wealthy family and didn't need to hide the fact. Or at least not from Forbes. On the contrary, it was nice to think he had this asset that encouraged a man like Forbes to give him some of his time. The only danger was he might have exaggerated.

'I'll be over to pick you up Saturday morning, around nine,' he said.

'Er, do you mind making it nine-thirty, Morris? I'm not an early bird.'

'Not at all.'

They both rang off. But then it was so much fun, talking on a designer phone in a fast car, so much the perfect symbol of his well-deserved success, that, as quite often these days, this handsome blond Englishman continued to chat away, even after the line had gone dead.

'*Pronto?*' he enquired coolly. 'Massimina, can you hear me? Bit of a bad connection, I'm afraid. Can you hear me? It is the Day of the Dead, you know.'

He imagined he heard her saying yes in her intimate, breathless, girlish voice. Or rather *sì*. '*Sì, Morri, sì.*'

The fog suddenly thickened on the road into town and was swirling all round the car now.

'You know I've seen a painting of you? Yes. No, I knew you wouldn't believe me.' He spoke very casually into the elegant white receiver, cruising in overdrive into zero

visibility. Somehow it seemed important to take these risks, as if every time one escaped one had bought some good fortune for oneself. 'I was reading one of my art-history books and there you were. Yes, it was Fra Lippi's *La Vergine incoronata*. I mean, it must be you. It's so exactly the same. And it made me think, you know, Mimi, seeing as he'd painted you five hundred years before you were born, that perhaps you were still alive now, that perhaps in a way you *were* the Virgin, reincarnated again and again, for one *incoronazione* after another . . .'

Heavens, this was oddball stuff, Morris thought. He hadn't known he was going to come out with this sort of sick drivel at all. On the other hand, one of the things that most gratified him, that most convinced him he must be something of an artist deep down, was the way he never ceased to surprise himself. He wasn't getting old and stale at all. On the contrary, his train of thought was ever richer.

The fog pressed down on the car, seemed to clutch and catch at it as it flew past.

' . . . So that I couldn't really have killed you at all, could I, Mimi?'

Suddenly finding a pink blur of tail lights only feet ahead, Morris braked hard and geared down violently. But it wasn't enough. To avoid a collision, he swung left to overtake into absolute grey blindness. Immediately headlights appeared. The local bus skidded towards him. Morris squeezed round a 126 to a chorus of klaxons.

He picked up the receiver from the passenger seat where it had fallen. ' . . . And I just thought, Mimi, I thought, if you could give me some sign, or something, you know, that you're alive and well, it would mean so much to me. Any sign. So long as I really know it's you. And that you've forgiven me.'

Morris frowned. For, of course, the worst part of recognising her in that Madonna by the Renaissance painter had been remembering how the post-mortem had shown

she was pregnant. Mimi was pregnant and he had killed his own child, their love-child, a saviour perhaps. This horrible fact could still occasionally rise to the surface of Morris's consciousness, bringing with it a sense of nausea and profound unease. Though again, this was actually rather gratifying in a way, since otherwise one might have been concerned that one had no sensibility at all. Experience suggested it was a common enough failing.

'Will you do that for me, Mimi? Give me a sign? I don't care what form it takes, just that it be clear.'

Again he imagined her saying: '*Sì, Morri, sì,*' in that most accommodating voice she had had. Certainly Massimina could never have been accused of having addressed him as Mo or having invited him to jump into the sack and give her a poke. Sex had been something special with her, something holy. Mimi, had he had the good fortune to marry her, would never have been so selfish as not to want to have children. Then all at once an idea had him laughing. What a funny old bloke I am, he thought. Get Paola pregnant despite herself is what I should do. Give her a purpose in life. Before she becomes a mere fashionable parasite. She'll thank me for it in the end. Wasn't that the purpose of marriage, as declared in the wedding service?

Amidst these and other thoughts, some of them only half-conscious perhaps, Morris suddenly changed his mind. Acting on one of those intuitions he had learnt to trust over the years, he chose not to go straight to the florist's to pick up the huge wreath he had ordered, but turned right, up the Valpantena, on the fast road into the hills where the family had its winery.

He came out of the fog shortly above Quinto and drove very fast on this holiday morning as far as Grezzana. In grey winter light the valley was rather ugly, with its ribbon development of light industry and second-rate housing projects, many of which had a disturbingly English flavour to them. Certainly it wasn't the Italy his spirit had yearned for

when he had decided to marry into one of their rich families. He had talked this over at length with Forbes: the race was obviously degenerating. They still produced and loved beautiful things, and this was very important for Morris, who could imagine few other reasons for being alive; but they didn't seem to care if they made their country ugly in the doing of it, and they appeared to think of beauty more as a consumer product than something of spiritual value, a question of owning a particular shirt and tie, a particular style in furnishing. Many of them had no idea at all of their own historical art and heritage. It was a shame, Morris thought, a real shame, and he turned off the road along a gravel track that after a couple of turns brought him to the three long, low, breeze-block constructions that made up the vinification, bottling and storage facilities of Trevisan Wines.

He fiddled in his glove compartment for the right remote control and a long, low gate began to rattle and whine. The new dog barked wildly, as it always would at Morris, as dogs always had with him since as early as he could remember. He must talk to Bobo about it, try to get through to him that it was completely pointless keeping such a beast, since if somebody did want to break in they would surely have no difficulty shooting the thing. No one was around to hear a gunshot in these low-key industrial areas outside working hours. You had to think of such things.

Unless Bobo had been meaning to prevent precisely visits of this variety, Morris wondered. His own. But that was paranoia. He was a member of the family now. And once you were family, you were family.

He pulled up and turned off the engine. The big Dobermann or whatever it was (for Morris had not the slightest interest in animals) snarled and leapt around the car. Uncannily, it seemed to be aware of the door he would have to get out of. Oh, for Christ's sake! This was a problem

he hadn't considered at all. But far too silly to make him change his mind, surely.

He started up again and drove through shale and puddles to the door of the office located in a kind of annexe at the end of the long building that housed the bottling plant. He managed to negotiate the car into a position only six inches or so from the door, and while the dog was squeezing, panting and yelping to get into the narrow space, Morris buzzed down the window, slipped his key into the lock and turned it twice. He then drove away, heading around the building at little more than walking pace, thus luring the stupid animal into a following trot through parked trucks and stacks of bottles. Then, turning the last corner, he accelerated hard to arrive back at the door with just the few seconds' grace he needed to be out of the car and into the building. He slammed the door behind him. The dog was furious. Likewise Morris. And he decided on the spot he would poison the thing.

THERE ARE THREE major wine-producing areas around Verona: the Valpolicella to the north and west; Soave twenty kilometres to the east; and, between them, the Valpantena, stretching north from the eastern suburbs of the city. The first two need no advertising anywhere in the world. Indeed Morris even remembered his father picking up the occasional 'Suave' to impress one of his tarts after Mother's death, while Morris himself had drunk many a glass of 'Valpolicelly' at artsy-fartsy Cambridge parties without having the slightest idea where the place really was. Had the Trevisans, then, had their vineyards in either of these two areas, there would have been no obstacles to the grandiose plans of expansion Morris liked to conjure (the principle being, surely, that if one deigned to do something, and above all something commercial, then one should do it in grand style).

But the Valpantena . . . the Valpantena was decidedly second rate. It was difficult to get DOC certification. The soil was too clayey. The alcohol rating was low. The wine had no body and less flavour. Worse still, it simply had a name for being plonk. With the result that sales were falling sharply as the population moved up-market in the wake of snobbery and brand-name advertising, while the dour hard-drinking peasantry succumbed to cirrhosis and the miserliness (since Thatcher) of those European subsidies aimed at keeping them on the land and inside the thousands of smoky rural dives where Valpantena was drunk over interminable games of *briscola*.

What, Morris often dreamed, if it had been one of the Bolla family's girls had run off with him, and not Massimina

Trevisan? He could then have become the respected export manager of a major company with a vast international distribution network. He could have been responsible for sponsoring small cultural ventures, workshop theatres, local exhibitions of Etruscan art, sober books of artistic photography. Or again, what if he had taught English in more exclusive circles in Milan (as why the hell shouldn't he with his educational background)? Then only the sky would have been the limit: the Berlusconis, the Agnellis, the Rizzolis, quite unimaginable wealth and *signorilità* Given that he had pulled it off with the suspicious and decidedly refractory Trevisans, was it so unfeasible that he could have done the same with the more generous industrial nobility? Could still do it perhaps, if only he put his mind to it.

But there lay Morris's snag. Morris didn't, except in emergencies, put his mind to practical things. And sometimes not even then. He allowed himself to be drawn into aesthetic considerations, existential dialogues. His brain was incredibly fertile territory, but it seemed that what had been planted there was exotic and ornamental, rather than practical. He prided himself on flying off at tangents, on making acute observations, but he could never plan anything more than a day or two ahead. (Would he ever have started the Massimina business had he had the faintest inkling of how it must end? Surely not. That had been an appalling discovery of the very last hour.) He was like a novelist who could never remember what his plot was supposed to be, or more appropriately, a miserable opportunist, picking up crumbs wherever they fell.

Hadn't it been the same with his marriage? The situation had presented itself; it was Paola had made the offer, just as two years ago it had been Massimina approached him, rather than he her. And Morris had been unable to hold off and play for higher stakes, unable to see that he was made for better things.

Of course, there had been certain alleviating circumstances on the second occasion: the euphoria arising from his having survived a major police investigation had doubtless played its part. In the happy-go-lucky mood he'd been in, the surprise invitation to accompany sister Paola to England had had a smack of destiny about it. Riding high, he had accepted, plus of course there had been that prurience, that perverse poignancy of remaining, socially and emotionally, so close to the scene of the crime. Ostensibly Paola had been going on an extended holiday to help her get over the family bereavement, and this again was the kind of pathos that attracted Morris, rich as it appeared to be with noble emotion and dignity. In the event, however, it all too soon emerged that the real reason for her English trip was her need to avoid her friends until such time as she could get over the snub of having been dropped by her long-time dentist fiancé.

Be that as it may, when they had arrived at the airport and were sitting in a taxi (the very first taxi of Morris's life as it happened), her cosy suggestion that he stay in the expensive Notting Hill flat which family friends had provided for her had been nothing if not explicit. Still excited, understandably, by his newly acquired wealth (certificates for 800 million lire's worth of Eurobonds in his suitcase), lulled by the excellent Barolo they had drunk with their snack on the plane, and by no means averse to pursuing the sexual experiments which had so pleasantly if poignantly brightened up his abduction of Mimi, Morris did not even look for reasons for not agreeing. He was riding the crest of a wave. He could do nothing wrong. And it had been particularly good fun, one London afternoon to invite his dumb, proletarian, carping father over to the Pembroke Villas address and flaunt an ambience of Persian rugs and Mary Quant curtains that even the pigheaded Mr Duckworth must have recognised (in money terms if nothing else) was a definite step up.

Shrewd herself, Paola had quickly developed a fatal attraction for Morris's own particular brand of shrewdness, his curiously polite stiffness and reservation, which she found a 'terrific turn-on' (and imagined was exquisitely English and fashionable, not realising, as Morris himself was all too painfully aware, that on the whole Anglo-Saxons were an uncouth and violent lot). For three, four, five months they had thus lodged together, enjoying a sex life as ambitious as it was exquisitely free from sentimental complications. Paola had learned not a word of English and spent a great deal of money. Unlike dear Mimi, it turned out that she shared, more than shared, Morris's interest in expensive food and drink, with the result that Morris had made the mistake, for the first and hopefully the last time in his life, of succumbing to an almost constant state of inebriation, something that had doubtless blurred his awareness of other, less attractive sides to her personality.

Returning to Italy together in the spring of the following year, it had been to find that as a result of an unplanned pregnancy elder sister Antonella was being hurried into marrying the ugly heir to a battery chicken empire, Bobo Posenato, or Pollo (chicken) Bobo, as Paola disparagingly called him (one of the few things Morris genuinely liked about Paola was her ability to be wittily disparaging). All kinds of extravagant arrangements were under way. Mamma Trevisan was over the moon with the expediency of this marriage, which obviously far outweighed the tawdry circumstances that had precipitated it. Very large sums of money were being spent. A beautiful apartment had been bought, designer wedding clothes were even now being made. The Due Torri, Verona's most expensive hotel, had been booked for the reception.

With all this extravagance and festivity, sharp Paola had not unnaturally felt herself being upstaged by her blander, rather goosy elder sister. For his part, Morris, having vaguely wondered in London if he mightn't set himself up as the

man of the family, had felt his previous antagonism for Bobo reinforced if not doubled or trebled. Hadn't this arrogant boy with his nosiness and enquiries been responsible after all for the rejection of Morris's initial attempt to court Massimina in a traditional fashion, and thus, in the long run, for forcing Morris to become a criminal? And surely it wasn't right that a taciturn, acned young man with no imagination and less manners should be so extraordinarily well set up in terms of wealth and power? It was the kind of naked injustice that fed Morris's insatiable appetite for resentment. Of course, he did have some wealth himself now, enough to buy - what? - two or even three apartments perhaps (why hadn't he asked for more when he'd had the knife by the handle?), but absolutely nothing like the *miliardi* available to Polio Bobo and his ilk; and to make matters worse, Morris, at that time, still had to be painstakingly careful that nobody noticed him spending this money, whose existence he would never be able to explain. Like a fool, he must continue to play the pauper, the poor mouse of the family, even when he wasn't. It was infuriating. Because you weren't rich until you had your hands on the means of producing wealth - Marx had been right about that. With just a few hundred million (lire!) in Eurobonds you were barely hedging against inflation. So that when one evening Paola had very coolly remarked how upset the others would be if she and Morris got in on the act by making it a double marriage, he had immediately said yes, wouldn't they? Plus, if they didn't watch out, Paola had further observed, there was every danger that Pollo Bobo, still kept out of his own family business by Father and elder brother, would worm his way into Trevisan Wines and even further into Mamma's good graces, no doubt with the intention of annexing the company to his own family empire. Whereas if they married immediately, Mamma would have to give Morris a position of some, and hopefully equal, importance.

Of course in retrospect Morris saw now what a sad, sordid poverty-stricken kind of opportunism it had been which had made him agree to this: surrendering his privacy to a creature he barely knew out of the sack or in various states of intoxication (because she was keen on marijuana too), committing his very considerable brain power to the promotion of a few plonky vineyards, and above all entering (for there seemed no alternative if he was to make a go of the Trevisan clan) into a partnership with a gawky, spoilt, chinless young man who was as unworthy of Morris's opposition as he was of his collaboration.

But one was who one was in the end. Wasn't this what Morris had been trying to tell his father in spool after spool of dictaphone tape these past five years and more? One was who one was. Character was destiny. This was the kind of thing that Morris Duckworth did (still afraid of ending up on the street despite that 800 million). And if he had recently stopped trying to explain himself to Dad after a cupboard full of cassettes stretching over six or seven years, wasn't it precisely because he had at last realised that by that very same token - character, destiny - his father could and would never understand anything Morris tried to tell him? The uncouth old goat was an uncouth old goat. How could you expect him to be otherwise? Morris was Morris, and thus he would remain, locked into his own skull, his own inadequacy, to the bitter end: an underachieving, desperate, somehow pantomime Morris. Wisdom meant accepting this.

Though sometimes he felt quite different about life. Sometimes he felt there was nothing could stop him. Or at least that he might as well enjoy himself.

Events had moved with soap-opera rapidity. The apartment had been bought (with his money, in his name - leaving less than 400 million - but he would never be held to ransom by his wife). Morris had attended a catechism course for adults and turned Catholic (interestingly enough it was here that he first came up against those Third World

sufferers whose fate so often occupied his mind these days). A summer date had been set for the wedding. All had appeared to be going well. But then, despite this considerable effort on Morris's part to conform with local mores, Paola, with typical instability, had at the very last moment changed her mind and decided she wanted to be married in the register office so romantically, albeit ominously, located on the supposed site of Juliet's tomb. This was, and was intended as, a deliberate snub to her mother, a punishment for her being so syrupily ingratiating with the Posenato clan and so offhand if not actually cold with Morris.

In the event it turned out to be a brilliant idea. Not only was Mamma furious (for the Posenato family would be upset by the idea of down-market, register-office in-laws), but Morris was actually able to gain ground with the old lady, and even with the fiercely pious (despite her pregnancy) Antonella, by presenting himself as the wise and reserved Englishman ostensibly struggling to have capricious young Italian Paola see reason. Indeed, the ruse worked so marvellously that, come the great day, Mamma's frustration at being crossed like this had been too much for her and she was struck down by a thrombosis precisely as Morris turned from signing the papers to smile at the small gathering of Paola's friends (including, rather disturbingly, the dentist).

Mamma collapsed and was rushed off to *rianimazione*. Hearing the news during a last-minute dress-pinning session for her own ceremony later in the afternoon, Antonella had tripped on her train while hurrying down the stairs and, after much panic, ambulance-calling and toing and froing at the hospital, was found to have lost her child. When Morris had tried (and he had cancelled his honeymoon flight to the Azores, for God's sake) to express his quite sincere condolences to Bobo, the unpleasant young Veronese had scowled at him as if it must somehow be his fault. But there was no limit, Morris sometimes thought, to people's desire

to find a scapegoat. Nobly he decided not to bear a grudge against the boy. Perhaps in time and against all the odds they would learn to like each other.

After three months' intensive treatment, Mamma had still not regained the use of the left side of her body. Without having any specific instructions, Bobo simply stepped in and took over Trevisan Wines, inviting Morris, after a couple of violent arguments with Paola, to open a small commercial office for the company in town. And of course what Morris should have said was no. He was not cut out for trade and commerce. Fundamentally, he had a delicate, aesthete's personality, and no desire at all to engage in the hurly-burly of commercial life. He should have been a photographer, a fashion designer, a theatre critic. Yet the opportunist in him wouldn't pass it up. Perhaps because in another department of his mind he had always wanted to be who he wasn't, always wanted to please macho Dad as much as darling Mum. And then because he wanted to be Italian of course, a real member of a real Italian family, and because he felt strangely drawn to the surly Bobo. Either he would make the boy like him, or make him pay for not doing so. In any event, he was given an office two metres by two in the centre of town and invited to find new buyers for a company he knew nothing about. That was six months ago.

Morris slammed the door on the barking dog outside. He was in a small grey office which nothing could redeem - certainly not the cheap gun-metal desks, nor the fifties filing cabinets, nor the squat computer, the smeared windows with their sad view of two large trucks tucked between dirty trees, the shelves with their manuals on vinification and piles of brochures on Trevisan Wines (published in 1973 and far from being exhausted). One of the first things Morris had done on joining the company had been to flick through the English translation of this brochure, which told the unsuspecting buyer that: 'Born of moronic soils and famous

stock of vineyard plants, this nectar of the pre-Alps cannot not satisfy the updated gusto for palette harmony and a fragrance that entices.' His suggestion that the piece be rewritten had been met with scepticism. The company had only a handful of foreign clients and none of them was English. It wasn't worth the printing costs. So that there the brochures still sat in dusty piles, unused and unusable. Indeed, the only new thing around was a down-market pornographic calendar, free gift of the Fratelli Ruffoli bottle-producing company, where the said company's product was presented in intimate proximity to what most men presumably thought of as the great focuses of pleasure. A small plastic crucifix hung opposite the calendar over the door that led through to the bottling plant proper. Morris found both decorations equally distasteful.

Reckoning he had about half an hour, he switched on the computer on the production manager's desk and one after the other slipped in the disks he found in the top drawer. Unfortunately he had no experience of computers, nor any desire to gain any; thus when finally he found the file, *Salari e stipendi, 1990*, he was unable to access it. It was too infuriating, especially since this was precisely the kind of information that should have been freely available to a member of the family. Another file on another disk promised to tell him about *Fornitori - uva/vini*, but again he couldn't get at it. Still, there was something odd there just in that title, 'Suppliers - grapes/wines'. Morris stared at the unpleasantly glowing green letters, the irritating wink of the cursor that seemed to mesmerise thought rather than encourage it. Suppliers?

'Ciao,' said a voice.

Morris swung round on the rotating chair. The pale young man stood in the doorway.

'Ciao,' Morris said warmly. '*Benvenuto*. How are you?'

'It's a holiday,' Polio Bobo said. 'And this is not your office.'