

'SHARP, FUNNY AND SATIRICAL...THIS IS ONE TO RELISH'

Guardian



Painting Death

TIM PARKS

VINTAGE

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About the Book

Morris Duckworth has a dark past. Having married and murdered his way into a wealthy Italian family he has long left aside the paperweight and the pillow to become a respected member of Veronese business life. But it's not enough.

Never satisfied with being anything short of the best, he comes up with a plan to put on the most exciting art exhibition of the decade, based on a subject close to his heart: killing. All the great slaughters of scripture and classical times will be on show, from Cain and Abel, to Brutus and Caesar. But as Morris meets stiff resistance from the Neapolitan director of Verona's Castelvecchio museum, everything starts to unravel around him. His children are rebelling, his mistress is asking for more than he wants to give, his wife is increasingly attached to her ageing confessor, and worst of all it's getting harder and harder to ignore the ghosts that swirl around him, and the skeletons rattling in every cupboard. The shame of it is that Morris Arthur Duckworth really did not want to have to kill again.

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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Adultery & Other Diversions

Translating Style

Hell and Back

A Season with Verona

The Fighter

Teach Us to Sit Still

Italian Ways

*For the Veronese,
who put up with this Englishman for thirty years*

Painting Death

Tim Parks



Harvill *Secker*
LONDON

PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

MORRIS WOULD ARRIVE late for the ceremony. That was appropriate for someone of his importance. It was in his honour after all. But not so late as to be disrespectful; if one disrespects those doing the honouring, one diminishes the recognition. He watched in the mirror as steady hands pushed a Tonbridge School tie tight into the still-firm skin of his strong neck. He would look smart, without being obsequious; neither formal, nor casual. These were fine lines to tread and that he could do so with ease was one of the rewards of maturity. Ease: that was the word. Morris would appear at ease with the world, at ease with himself, his scarred face, his thinning hair; at ease with his wealth, his wife, his fine family, fabulous palazzo and now, at long last, this distinction conceded *in extremis*. All's well that ends well. You're a happy man, Morris Duckworth, he told himself out loud, and he smiled a winning smile. No, a *winner's* smile; not a single niggle that nagged, not a prick of the old resentment. Thank you, Mimi, he mouthed to the mirror, admiring the brightness in blue British eyes. Thank you so much!

'*Cinque minuti,*' sang a voice from below. It might have been the dear dead girl herself!

'*Con calma!*' Morris called cheerfully. After all, they lived only a stone's throw from the centre of civic power. If he had one regret, it was that this was only Verona, *la misera provincia*; Piazza Bra, not Piazza di Spagna. But then think how dirty Rome was. How chaotic. And how grey, grim and gauche Milan. This prim little town is your destiny, Morris. Be happy.

As he left the bathroom, the flick of a Ferragamo cuff revealed a Rolex telling him it was indeed time. *Le massime autorità* would be waiting.

The maximum authorities! For Morris!

‘Papà!’ came the voice again. His daughter’s wonderful huskiness, so like dear Mimi of old. She was impatient. All the same, Morris couldn’t resist and stepped into The Art Room for a moment of intimacy with his most recent acquisition.

The heavy old frame rested on a chair. Morris hadn’t quite decided where to hang it yet. He ran a finger down its mouldings. How austere they were! The gilt had gone gloomily dark, from candle smoke, no doubt. It was a pleasure to think of sombre old interiors made somehow darker by their flickering candles. But in the painting itself the two women were walking down a bright street. It was the Holy Land, millennia ago: two bulky figures, seen from behind, in voluminous dresses. Between them, trapped by hand against hip, the woman on the right held a broad basket. It was partially covered, but the white cloth had slipped a little to reveal, to the viewer, unbeknown to the two ladies as they sauntered away, not a loaf of bread, not a heap of washing, not a pile of freshly picked grapes but, grimacing and astonished, a bearded male face: General Holofernes! His Assyrian head severed.

‘Papà, for Christ’s sake!’

Now there came a deeper voice, ‘Morrees! You mustn’t keep the mayor waiting.’

Morris frowned, why did he feel so drawn to this painting? Two women carrying a severed head. But the scene was so calm and their gait so relaxed it might as well have been the morning’s shopping.

‘Dad!’

In her impatience, Massimina switched to English. Morris turned abruptly on a patent-leather heel and strode to the broad staircase. As he skipped down stone steps, running a

freshly washed hand along the polished curve of the marble banister, his two women presented themselves in all their finery: Antonella magnificently matronly in something softly maroon; Massimina willowy in off-white, and both generously bosomed in the best Trevisan tradition. Morris smiled first into one face, then the other, pecking powdered cheeks and catching himself mirrored in the bright windows of four hazel eyes. Only his son had inherited the grey Duckworth blue.

‘Where’s Mauro?’ Morris asked, pulling back from his wife. Her gold crucifixes still galled, but he had learned not to criticise. He was not a control freak.

Antonella was already making for the door where the ancient Maddalena stooped with her mistress’s mink at the ready. Antonella pushed her arms into sumptuous sleeves. ‘The cardinal will be there,’ she was saying, ‘and Don Lorenzo. We’re late.’

‘But where’s Mauro? We can’t go without Mauro.’

Morris couldn’t understand why his wife wasn’t taking the problem more seriously. Or why the decrepit maid wasn’t wearing a starched white apron over her black dress, as specifically instructed. This was an occasion for family pride.

‘I don’t think Mousie came home last night,’ Massimina said.

‘Don’t *think*?’ Morris stopped on the threshold. ‘Home from where? Haven’t you phoned him?’ He was not happy with the thought that a son of his could be nicknamed Mousie.

‘I’m sure he’ll meet us there,’ Antonella said complacently. She was standing in the courtyard now where threads of water splashed across the stony buttocks of a young Mercury apparently leaping into flight from a broad bowl of frothy travertine. All around, vines climbed the ochre stucco between green-shuttered windows while just below the roof a sundial took advantage of the crisp winter weather to alert anyone still capable of reading such things that Morris was

now seriously late for the ceremony that would grant him honorary citizenship and the keys to the city of Verona.

‘He went to the game.’

‘What?’

‘Brescia away. I called him, but his phone is off.’

‘He knows when the ceremony is, *caro*.’ Antonella hurried back and took her husband’s arm. ‘We were chatting about it yesterday.’ Her manner, if only Morris had had the leisure to contemplate it, was a charming mix of anxiety and indulgence. She treated her husband as a troublesome boy, which rather let their obstreperous son off the hook. ‘I’m sure we’ll find him there before us. But we mustn’t keep the mayor waiting. In the end, the only person who really counts today is you, Morrees.’

This was such a pleasant thought that Morris allowed himself to be pulled along, outside the great arched gate and into the designer-dressed bustle of Via Oberdan. All the same, he hadn’t begged his boy two days’ truancy from one of old England’s most expensive schools, and paid a BA flight to boot, to have the lout abscond at this moment of his father’s glory. For some reason the word ‘coronation’ came to mind: Morris was to be crowned King of Verona. He frowned to chase the thought away; one mustn’t lose one’s head.

‘By the way, who won?’ Antonella asked. Morris’s wife had a magnanimous air; it was the mink’s first outing this season.

Massimina took her father’s arm on the other side. ‘Alas, Brescia,’ she sighed. ‘Own goal in injury time.’

Comfortable between them, though it was disconcerting that his daughter was so tall, Morris marvelled that his lady-folk should be aware of such trivial things. What was injury time in the end? He had never really understood. Dad had not wanted company when he set off to Loftus Road and anyway his son would not have been seen dead with a man wearing a green and white bobble cap.

‘But if he didn’t come home,’ he protested, ‘where did he spend the night? And why wasn’t I told?’

There was no time to hear an answer, for on emerging from Via Oberdan into the wide open space of one of Italy’s largest squares, it was to discover that Piazza Bra was not, right now, wide open at all. They had chosen this of all mornings to erect the stalls for the *mercato di Santa Lucia*. Damn. From the majestic Roman arena, right along the broad Liston, past Victor Emmanuel on bronze horseback and as far as the Austrian clock, palely illuminated above the arch of Porta Nuova, the whole cobbled *campo* was chock-a-block with gypsies, *extra-comunitari* and assorted exempla of Veneto pond life scrambling together prefabricated stalls for the overpriced sale of *torroni*, candy floss and other vulgar, sugar-based venoms. It was a dentist’s Promised Land, which fleetingly reminded Morris that this was another area in which his son was proving an expensive investment.

Through clouds of diesel from trucks unloading trifles and baubles of every bastard variety, not to mention the construction of a merry-go-round, Palazzo Barbieri on the far side of the square, solemn seat of the Veronese *comune*, suddenly seemed impossibly distant. Morris almost panicked. What if they called the event off? What if they mistook his belated arrival for a deliberate snub? One could hardly blame the traffic, living only 300 yards away. Morris began to hurry, at first dragging his women with him, then freeing his arms to dive between a wall of *panettoni* and their leering vendor, the kind of squat, swarthy figure one associates with black markets the world over. It was a disgrace! He would say something to the mayor.

‘Da-ad!’ his daughter protested. ‘Why do you always have to be in such a rush?’ Only now did Morris realise the girl had put on four-inch heels, to cross a sea of cobbles. The original Massimina, who had been half her height, would have known better. And he had thought his first love dumb!

Antonella laughed. 'This way, Mr Nonchalant,' she said and pulled her husband to the left, out of the throng and down the small street that ran behind the arena. Here, almost immediately, the way was clear and though the change of route had added a hundred yards or so to their walk, Morris understood at once there would be no problem. Thank God he had married such a practical soul! So much more sensible than her dear departed sisters. Nevertheless, he kept up a brisk pace, past beggars and chestnut vendors, just in case something else should come between him and his overdue due. The complacency of ten minutes before now seemed a fool's paradise and Morris knew from bitter experience that there was nothing to be gained from seeking to retrieve it. It took carefree weeks and important art acquisitions to consolidate a mood as positive as that; or at least an afternoon's revelling with Samira. For a moment, then, passing on one side a café advertising hot chocolate with whipped cream and on the other the arena ticket office promising the world's largest display of Nativity scenes - from the Philippines to the Faroe Islands! - Morris found himself struggling to relate two apparently remote but peremptory thoughts: first the memory of how he had ignominiously scuttled through these same streets thirty years ago, a wretched language teacher hurrying head down from one private lesson to another, always at the tight-fisted beck and call of people richer and stupider than himself (dear Massimina among them, it had to be said); and second, the reflection that his son was hardly likely to have taken his Tonbridge School uniform to a winter evening football game; so that even if the boy did make it to this morning's ceremony after a night slumming with thugs in foggy suburbs, he was not going to be sporting a burgundy and black striped tie that matched his own. Only now, still striding along in the shadow of the Roman amphitheatre with Antonella panting to keep pace in her furs, did Morris realise how much he had been looking forward to that little

touch of father-son complicity; it was the kind of quietly significant detail he liked to think a fashion-conscious Veronese public would register with a twinge of envy: style the Italians might have in abundance, but never the sober solidity of a great British educational institution. In which case, come to think of it, the ungrateful boy might just as well not turn up for the ceremony at all. Perhaps I should pull him out of Tonbridge, Morris wondered, save myself thirty grand a year, and have the boy eke out a living teaching English, as I once had to. There! Realising that the two apparently separate thoughts had after all found a very evident and purposeful link - his spoiled son needed reminding what was what - Morris suddenly felt pleased again: whatever happened this particular morning, or any other morning for that matter, he would always have his wits, his wit. Hadn't he, in the end, Morris Duckworth, got himself to Cambridge University from Shepherd's Bush Comprehensive, the first and very likely the last pupil ever to do so? Let Mauro 'Mother's Boy' Duckworth do the same!

'I asked, have you prepared a speech?' Antonella was saying. 'Morrees! *Eih, pronto?* Aren't you listening?'

They had arrived at the bottom of the grand steps. The columned facade was above them.

'Of course,' Morris said, realising as he spoke that he had left the thing at home: three sheets of A4 on the windowsill beside the loo. He had allowed himself to be distracted by Judith and Holofernes.

His wife reached up to straighten the lapels of his jacket. Very quietly, she said: 'Just be careful not to say anything stupid.'

Morris was taken aback.

'Like the time at the Rotary.'

The English husband felt a dangerous heat flood his loins. 'It will be fine,' he said abruptly.

'Only trying to help,' she explained, brushing something off his shoulder. But he knew she was laughing.

'I was drunk,' he insisted.

'I know,' she smiled.

'The punch was too strong. They should have been gaoled for poisoning.'

'We're late, Morrees,' she said calmly. 'Come on.'

Right. But now where was his daughter? Son or no son, at least the three of them could ascend the town hall steps together. Morris turned but couldn't find her. The ridiculous Verona *trenino* was passing, a fake electric steam locomotive, bright red, with an open carriage behind and piped Christmas music deafening the dumb tourists on board. 'Hark the Herald'. How anybody could have imagined introducing such an atrocious eye-and-ear sore into the centuries-long sobriety of the city's ancient piazzas was beyond Morris. Had anyone ever sung 'Hark the Herald' in Italy? 'Late in time behold Him come!' Indeed. Just as Morris fought off a fleeting memory of his carol-singing mother (he himself had solo-ed 'Once in Royal David's' at St Bartholomew's, Acton) the train lurched forward with the clanging of a bell and Massimina emerged from behind, swaying impressively as she stepped out to cross the road, closely watched, Morris noticed, by three motorcycle louts smoking outside the wine bar at the corner. The girl was too attractive by half, too present and alive for her own good. Those heels would have to come down an inch or three. Confident nevertheless that his daughter was still a virgin, otherwise he would surely have known, Morris held out his hand as if to draw his child toward him. They would cut a fine figure entering the corridors of power side by side. Except that now an ancient gypsy woman reached up from the pavement - *Grazie, grazie* she wheedled - she must have imagined the wealthy man's outstretched arm held an offering of change. Irritated, Morris was about to shoo the crone away when he caught his wife's quick intake of breath. They were in full view of a dozen dignitaries and newspaper photographers standing under the portico at the

top of the steps. Morris reached into his pocket and found the fifty-cent coin one had to keep ready for such occasions, because to open your wallet was always a mistake.

For the next fifteen minutes, it would have been hard to imagine a more gratifying occasion. On the door they were greeted by the faithful Don Lorenzo, for many years the family's spiritual adviser, who took them into the first reception room to meet Cardinal Rusconi, gorgeous in stiff scarlet. Morris kissed a puffy hand and agreed that, for all the commercial exploitation, Christmas never quite lost its magic, while Antonella spoke of the importance of sponsoring Nativity scenes in the poorer suburbs where the camels and shepherds created a much needed sense of festive spirit. Glasses of bubbly in hand, nobody seemed to have noticed how late they had arrived and Morris couldn't decide whether this was wonderful or irritating. He might just as well have been on time, which certainly came more naturally, in which case he could have enjoyed feeling superior to the latecomers. A radio journalist wanted him to explain yet again the circumstances that had led to this honour, but under the prelate's approving if somewhat haughty gaze, and nodding to a fellow Rotarian across the room, Morris demurely told the sycophant that it would hardly be appropriate for him to sing his own praises: the mayor, he said, would no doubt put forward the *motivazione* during his presentation. Massimina, he noticed from the corner of an ever observant eye, was chatting to Beppe Bagutta, son of the man who ran the Verona Trade Fair and quite a few other things beside; decent results at art college were all very well, but a little more would be required if the girl was to make her Duckworth mark on the world. Nearer at hand, there was a pleasant buzz of mutual congratulation with the ascetic Don Lorenzo telling the corpulent cardinal how much he had appreciated his article 'A Eucharist for Our Times' - he and Antonella had studied it together, he said - and the cardinal actually deigning to ask Morris how

he thought Italy might come out of the present financial crisis; a subtle way of fishing for some kind of donation perhaps. Why else would such a powerful man have bothered to turn up for a ceremony of no religious significance? Old acquaintances and business partners, gallery owners and building contractors waved their hellos but Morris decided he would be best served standing beside the ecclesiastical red, so similar, it suddenly crossed his mind now, to the Father Christmas outfit Dad had donned to hand out half-bottles of Teacher's to shop-floor friends on Christmas Eve. Was Samira here, perhaps? That was an exciting thought. He hadn't invited her, but you never knew. The girl was clearly infatuated. Or even inspectors Marangoni and Fendsteig, from the old days? That too would be oddly exciting. But the meddling policemen must have retired long ago, Morris reflected. Just as well, with all this DNA wizardry they'd recently come up with. He smiled at the cardinal who smiled back as though they had been friends for ages, and Morris was just rummaging through the clutter of his mind to see if there was some favour he could ask of the prelate before the prelate asked whatever it was he planned to ask of him, when, at the blast of a trumpet, four extravagantly befeathered Bersaglieri raised four ceremonial flags to form an arch of honour at the door to his right: there were Europe's circle of quarrelling stars, Italy's bureaucratic tricolour, the razzmatazz of the dear old Union Jack and finally, white on red, the ladder of Cangrande della Scala, erstwhile Duke of Verona. Morris bowed his head as he stepped beneath these proud symbols into the great Sala degli Arazzi and that world of honoured tradition he had always, after his rather particular Duckworth fashion, aspired to.

So it was mildly irritating, having reached the inner sanctum, to find that the mayor hadn't bothered with a tie. 'I'm afraid we'll have to get moving,' the younger man said, hurrying between elegant chairs to give Morris his hand and

then immediately withdraw it. He wore a white shirt, open at the neck, black blazer and denim jeans, so that if it weren't for the red and green mayoral sash across his chest it would have been hard to imagine why he was in such solemn surroundings at all. A delegation of Arab businessmen was expected for eleven o'clock, he explained. One couldn't be late for the Arabs. 'Our new masters, alas!'

Morris had always despised the Northern League and chided himself for having expected anything better of Verona's local hero, first separatist mayor of this exquisitely Italian town.

'We were waiting for my son,' Morris said frostily. 'I'm afraid his flight's been delayed.'

They took seats behind a polished table while a crowd of seventy or so settled in rows beneath Paolo Farinati's huge *Victory of the Veronese over Barbarossa* covering half the wall to the left, a great oil-brushed tumble of bodies, blood and heraldry with some fine fabrics and polished armour tossed in for good measure among neighing horses and silken banners. Oh to have a palazzo big enough to house such splendour, Morris thought. A whole war in your front room! But with undue haste the mayor was already jumping to his feet and plucking one of the microphones from its stand.

'*Buon giorno a tutti!*' he began, even before people had had time to take their seats. 'We are here as you know to honour a man who has been among us for many years, indeed who arrived in this town *the very season our beloved Hellas Verona won the Scudetto*. You brought good luck, Meester Dackvert!' the mayor smiled down on his guest. 'We are extremely grateful.'

This shameless crowd-pleaser of an opening, which immediately raised a shout of applause - even Antonella and Massimina clapped enthusiastically - wasn't actually true, since Morris had arrived in Verona in 1983, not '85. But the Northern League people, he remembered, were

invariably Hellas fans, theatrically rough and tough, the town's would-be bad boys. Mauro surely wasn't messing with the league, Morris hoped. Even the Communists dressed better.

'Not, alas, a success we are likely to see repeated in the near future,' the mayor added with pantomime gloom, 'or not if last night's abject performance is anything to go by.'

The public sighed.

'Though the disturbances after Brescia's late goal, if I may say so in parenthesis, and I know because I was there, were certainly *not* initiated by Hellas fans.'

'*Verissimo!*' a voice called from the back.

What on earth, Morris wondered, did all this have to do with honouring Cittadino Duckworth?

'Actually,' the young mayor laughed, 'for a while the terraces looked rather like our old painting here.' He gestured to the raised swords, rearing horses and trampled corpses in Farinati's *Victory*. 'Though I personally was unarmed of course.'

Another laugh. This was infuriating. But Morris had learned over the years to keep calm, if not exactly cool, especially when in full public view. Sitting tight, his body steaming with angry heat, he consoled himself with the reflection that he was very likely the only one in this room who had ever had the courage to raise a weapon in anger and kill a man, or woman for that matter (on the very weekend Verona had won the championship if he was not mistaken), hence the only one here who could really understand the heat, horror and wild elation experienced in Farinati's magnificent painting. What was a scuffle at a vulgar football match compared to real killing? His knowledge went deeper than theirs, Morris told himself, inches of steel deeper, though come to think of it he'd never used a knife. Reaching to pour himself a glass of water, Morris noticed his wife in the front row trying to catch his eye and shaking her head slightly. Was he doing something

wrong? He hadn't opened his mouth yet. And who was the man on her right who looked so oddly familiar?

'Aside from that magnificent achievement,' the mayor paused - he had a thrusting jaw and close-set, merry eyes in pasty skin - 'Verona having been, as I shall never tire of repeating, *the last provincial team ever to be CHAMPIONS OF ITALY*' - again he waited for the obedient applause to die down - 'aside, as I said, from that alas unrepeatable *exploit*' - he pronounced the word *à la française* and turned to grin complacently at his guest - 'Meester Dackvert's first years in Verona were not entirely happy, peripherally involved as he so sadly was in the murderous tragedies that beset two of the town's finest old families, the Trevisans of Quinzano, and the Posenatos of San Felice.'

Again there was applause, but subdued this time, as many present would remember the violent deaths of three prominent citizens, unaware of course that these were precisely the occasions when Morris had been obliged to learn the lethal skills celebrated by Paolo Farinati on the magnificent canvas beside them. Sipping his glass of water, the Englishman began to wonder whether it had really been wise to accept this invitation and, glancing towards Antonella, saw that she had lowered her face, perhaps to shed a tear over her dead sisters, or even, however misguidedly, her first husband, while the man sitting to her right patted her shoulder with surprising familiarity. Suddenly Morris found himself alert. It couldn't be Stan Albertini, could it? Stan had left Verona decades back.

'There was also, as friends of the family will recall, an unfortunate incident with a German shepherd, which, er, rearranged, as they say, our English guest's rosy-cheeked physiognomy, obliging him to rely henceforth on brain rather than beauty!'

How inexcusably clumsy and insensitive these remarks were! But since Morris's old scars had at that very moment begun to sing and burn in cheeks and temples, the English

guest (*guest*, after thirty years!) was grateful for any supposed embarrassment that offered cover. If there was one person who possessed the facts to bury him, if only it ever occurred to the halfwit to string them all together, it was Stan.

‘But the English are a resilient race,’ the mayor continued, ‘as we Italians know to our cost.’ Speaking without notes, he raised and lowered the microphone, swinging his shoulders from side to side with the panache of a stand-up comedian. Clearly his audience loved him, for they never failed to titter. ‘In short there are many reasons for our decision to honour Meester Dackvert today.’ Again he looked indulgently down on his guest as if the fifty-five-year-old multiple murderer had just been born in a stable under a sparkling comet. ‘Having married the beautiful Antonella Trevisan, surely an indication of the best possible taste’ – the tasteless remark raised a storm of cheers; if there was one quality Antonella did not have, Morris thought, and had never remotely claimed to have, it was beauty; unless of course you considered a sort of exemplary piety beautiful – ‘Meester Dackvert single-handedly turned the family’s traditional old wine company into one of the dominant economic forces in our town, offering employment to scores of Veronese and even larger numbers of African and Slav immigrants, who, it has to be said, without the precious resource of paid work, might well have become a danger to our community.’

The mayor paused, apparently unaware of anything offensive in this reflection. This time there was no applause. ‘He very astutely developed the older vineyards to build a fine new luxury housing estate on the hills above Parona – Villaggio Casa Mia – offering a chance to many of our youngsters to buy their first properties. And, together with his splendid and most Veronese wife, he has been over many years a generous sponsor of the university, the arts

and the Church, always ready to help out when some worthy project runs into rough financial waters.'

Again the mayor paused, again there was no response from the crowd. But now the man seemed to relish the silence, as if it was exactly what he intended. He hadn't mentioned, Morris noted, that Fratelli Trevisan SRL also made regular contributions to all political parties that polled more than five per cent in local elections, not to mention a wide range of minor and indeed major officials in the customs and tax offices. Only now, however, did it occur to Morris that what he really should have sponsored was Hellas Verona Football Club.

'But the immediate reason for our decision to extend this honour to Meester Dackvert' - suddenly the mayor's voice slowed to something pondered and solemn, as if all the preamble about championships, murder mysteries and Morris's astonishing entrepreneurial skills were the merest patten to settle the public's mood - 'is his generous and completely unsolicited response to the vicious media attack that has been launched on our town and on this administration in particular.'

There was much muttering and scraping of chairs. Nothing, as Morris well understood, was taken more seriously in Verona than the town's national and international reputation. Far more important than any concrete reality, was the business of what people thought of you.

'As you know the attempt to paint our fair city as a den of backwardness and brutal authoritarianism has been going on since the time of the Second War and the Republic of Salò. Entirely unfounded, it forms part of a squalid game of political conditioning by which our envious rivals - and I need not tell you who they are - seek to cut us off from what very little funding is available for urban development in these hard times.'

The murmurs of assent now began again.

‘But if this propaganda war was bad before, it has become even more aggressive since the Northern League took over the governance of the town and brought some order to the chaos and cronyism that had been going on for far too long. It is clear that even our supposed political allies in Rome, not to mention the hopeless band of ex-Communists who occupied and abused these same public offices not so long ago, have been running a smear campaign that now extends beyond the national to the international press, culminating in the libellous article that appeared in a British newspaper a few months ago. I shall not repeat the gross accusations that were made there. They shall never sully my lips.’

At this point there was such a roar of applause that the mayor, who was checking his watch with embarrassing frequency, had to raise his arms to quieten the crowd and hurry on. ‘What I intend to do instead, as sole and sufficient motivation for our conferring on Morrees Dackvert THE FREEDOM OF OUR CITY’ – and here the mayor picked up from the tabletop, and quickly put down again, a parchment scroll and open, navy blue gift box containing a large silver key – ‘is to read out the letter that our excellent friend wrote in reply to those accusations in the same newspaper. And I shall read it, *amici miei*,’ he raised his solid jaw and grinned, ‘in Eengleesh, yes, to remind our envious neighbours – their names shall never be mentioned – of the level that education has reached in this proud province.’

Morris was startled. The man was going to read his letter to the *Telegraph*. In English! When he couldn’t even pronounce Duckworth properly! Morris wanted to grab the mike from his hand and read the thing himself, if read it had to be, though at this point he began to wonder whether the double-barrelled snob who had carried out his hack’s hatchet job on the ancient town – the offensive article that Morris had responded to – didn’t perhaps have a point after all. For at last it dawned on him that this whole ceremony

had been organised, not to reward Morris Duckworth for being a fine citizen at all, but as the merest PR for the Northern League. The separatists had a British intellectual on their side!

‘Unlaiykk,’ the mayor waved a scrap of newsprint, ‘yor mendaayshuuus correespondent who publeeshed VERONA: CAAPEETAL OF KIIITSCH . . .’

It had all begun some months ago at Samira’s place. She and Morris had made love in the usual lavish fashion on the mattress under the ochre tapestry, then, while she was preparing one of her excellent herb teas – and there was still frankincense smoking in the corner – her brother had come out of his room and started talking about wanting to do a Masters in economics in London. Tarik was a very respectful young man and showed none of the disapproval one might have feared from a jealous brother raised in a backward Moslem community, though that might have been, of course, because Morris was paying the siblings’ not insignificant rent. But what was to be gained from being cynical? There was nothing bunga-bunga-ish about what went on between Morris and Samira, it was genuine affection, and of course now that he had found the girl a six-month work-experience in the local council’s Heritage Department she would be more than worth the price of her two-bedroom flat in San Zeno. If nothing else she had access to the files of all paintings possessed by churches in the province.

Always ready to help, and save a friend a costly mistake, Morris had pulled his MacBook Air from his Armani attaché case and sat down at the glass table with the two young Libyans each side of him. They had browsed a few university sites, compared curriculums and requirements, and considered whether it would be wiser to apply now, before Tarik had finished at Verona, or wait till he had the Italian degree in the bag, at the expense of having to take a

gap year. 'I could find something for you to do,' Morris had smiled, 'if it's a question of filling the time. I can always use a smart young man.' It seemed important to have Tarik understand that Morris's affection for Samira extended, overflowed rather, to her nearest and dearest. Tarik frowned, asking his sister's benefactor to explain again - his Italian was excellent but his English still shaky - the mysterious workings of UCAS, and as Morris clicked back and forth, enjoying his expertise these days with all things bureaucratic, he suddenly became intensely aware of their three pairs of legs side by side under the stylish glass tabletop: Samira's, to his left, wonderfully young and vulnerable as she distractedly opened and closed honey thighs in a black bathrobe; his own solid and steady in sober grey flannel, and, to his right, in tattered jeans, casually crossed at the bare brown ankles, this fine young Arab's. 'I love them both.' Morris suddenly found himself saying these words inside his head. 'I love sister and brother both!' and he felt a surge of energy and excitement such as he had not experienced these twenty years and more.

Then, intending to show Tarik where to read the economic news in the English press, Morris opened the *Telegraph's* home page, and there it was. 'Verona: Capital of Kitsch', by Boris Anderton-Dodds. Who the hell was he? So extraordinary did it seem to open an English national newspaper and find an article on the small Italian town they lived in, that the threesome read it at once. Nicolas Sarkozy was planning to take his pregnant Carla on holiday to the town of Romeo and Juliet. It was typical of the French president's abysmal taste. Over recent years the once elegant Veneto town had seen no better way to solve its self-inflicted economic problems than to become Italy's dumb Disneyland of romantic slush and sleaze. Tourists were met at airport and railway station by pesky guides pressuring them into Love Tours of Romeo's house and Juliet's balcony where cohorts of Korean businessmen had

themselves photographed with hands cupping the bare breast of a bronze nymphet before being hauled off to karaoke evenings where they learned 'O sole mio' and 'Santa Lucia', hardly Veronese tunes. The Renaissance palazzo housing Juliet's tomb - though of course no one knew whether it had really been Juliet's tomb, as no one knew whether it had really been Juliet's balcony - had become an upmarket registrar's office luring sentimental suckers from five continents to empty their wallets for overpriced ceremonies and third-rate costume jewellery. It was the globalisation of vulgarity; everywhere you looked the city was choked with cheesy cliché, the hotels advertising 'consummation' suites (and sheets!) for honeymooning couples and the mayor himself offering his services as registrar at a special price to milk the cash cow to the last drop. This was the same xenophobic Northern League mayor who pursued a racist policy against kebab outlets, denied Moslems a place to build a mosque and introduced fascist regulations that prevented people from sleeping on park benches or eating sandwiches on the steps of public monuments, and all in a town where the church pretended to be charitable but in fact kept hundreds of apartments empty (without paying any property tax) rather than rent them to poor Africans. Every year, towards Valentine's Day, lovers all over the world were invited to write a Letter to Juliet, alias the town council, with a prize for those who managed the best homage to love. A prize judged by whom? Boris Anderton-Dodds demanded. What did the city's administrators know about love? If they had any respect at all for the myth of romantic love they would return the town to its ancient dignity and remember that the quality most alien to romance was greed, the quality most akin, charity. A modern *Romeo and Juliet* would not be about the Montagues and Capulets, let alone the Sarkozys and Brunis; it would be the thwarted love between the son of a

Northern League official and the chadored daughter of a dusky kebab vendor.

What pious nonsense! Morris was aghast that a reputable British newspaper, one, he would never forget, that had turned down at least three job applications from a certain Morris Arthur Duckworth thirty and more years ago, should stoop to such disgraceful misrepresentation. 'But Verona is a fantastic town!' he shouted; the thought that his UKIP father might very easily end up reading this nonsense and enjoy a chuckle at Morris's expense was immensely irritating. Then he noticed that his young friends were smiling.

'What's there to smirk about?' he demanded.

'It's true the city's racist,' Samira said.

'You bet,' Tarik agreed.

'What's that got to do with it? Just because a place is racist you can't say it's the capital of kitsch. Verona must be one of the most beautiful cities on earth. The English haven't got anything to hold a candle to it.'

'I wouldn't know,' Tarik said. 'I just think the racist accusation is the one that matters. Who cares if we call it kitsch or not?'

'I care!' Morris fumed. 'Everywhere's racist. You think Milan isn't racist? And Rome? You think London isn't racist? Why are they rioting? Blacks are always rioting in London. They have their good reasons. Calling a place racist is like calling a spade a spade, or telling me grass is green. But calling it *tasteless* when it's one of the most beautiful places on earth is sheer envy. It's vandalism! Imagine the number of people who'd lose their jobs if the Brits stopped coming to Verona because of a criminal article like this. Think of the museums they'd have to close. The restaurants and hotels giving work to people without papers or permits. Albanians and Pakistanis and Moroccans.'

'Come on Mo, darling,' Samira laughed and leaned a head on his shoulder. 'Don't take it so seriously.' Morris caught the wink she sent to her brother under his nose. Literally.

'How are you two discriminated against?' he demanded. 'Tell me. Is there any problem finding a kebab? No. I'd eat them myself if I wasn't a vegetarian. Do you need a bench to sleep on?'

'There is no mosque to worship in,' Samira said.

'For heaven's sake, you're in a Christian country.'

'We have trouble getting a *permesso di soggiorno*,' Tarik said, 'finding a landlord who will rent to Moslems.'

'But I sorted out your *permessi*! And I found you the apartment!'

Morris remembered in the past certain young immigrants who had been more grateful when he helped them.

'But if they didn't have these immigration laws, we wouldn't need . . . ' Tarik stopped himself and put his face in his hands.

'I'm going to reply to this,' Morris announced importantly. 'Talk about getting away with murder!'

He opened Word and began to type. He was furious with the kids, but also aware that, at least partly, he was writing to impress them, to show them that Morris Duckworth was the kind of man who could see the wood for the trees, and get his name into print in the process. In the end, they were young; like Mauro, they needed to be taught a thing or two.

'Dear Sirs,' he typed, 'Unlike your mendacious correspondent who published "Verona: Capital of Kitsch", I actually—'

'What does mendacious mean?' Samira asked.

'Someone who lies all the time. *Mendace*.'

'Ah.'

Tarik said a few words in Arabic and they both burst out laughing.

'Now what are you sniggering about?' Morris was incensed. He liked them. Liked them both. He loved their fine young features, black eyes, and snake-smooth skin. But not if they were planning to gang up and treat him like an old fogey.