RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

A Season With Verona

Tim Parks

Contents

About the Book

Is Italy a united country, or a loose affiliation of warring states? Is Italian football a sport, or an ill-disguised protraction of ancient enmities?

After twenty years in the bel paese, Tim Parks goes on the road to follow the fortunes of Hellas Verona football club, to pay a different kind of visit to some of the world's most beautiful cities. From Udine to Catania, from the San Siro to the Olimpico, this is a highly personal account of one man's relationship with a country, its people and its national sport. A book that combines the tension of cliff-hanging narrative with the pleasures of travel writing, and the stimulation of a profound analysis of one country's mad, mad way of keeping itself entertained.

About the Author

Born in Manchester in 1954, Tim Parks moved permanently to Italy in 1980. Author of novels, non-fiction and essays, he has won the Somerset Maugham, Betty Trask and John Llewellyn Rhys awards, and been shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize. His works include *Destiny*, *Europa*, *Dreams of Rivers and Seas*, Italian Neighbours and *An Italian Education*.

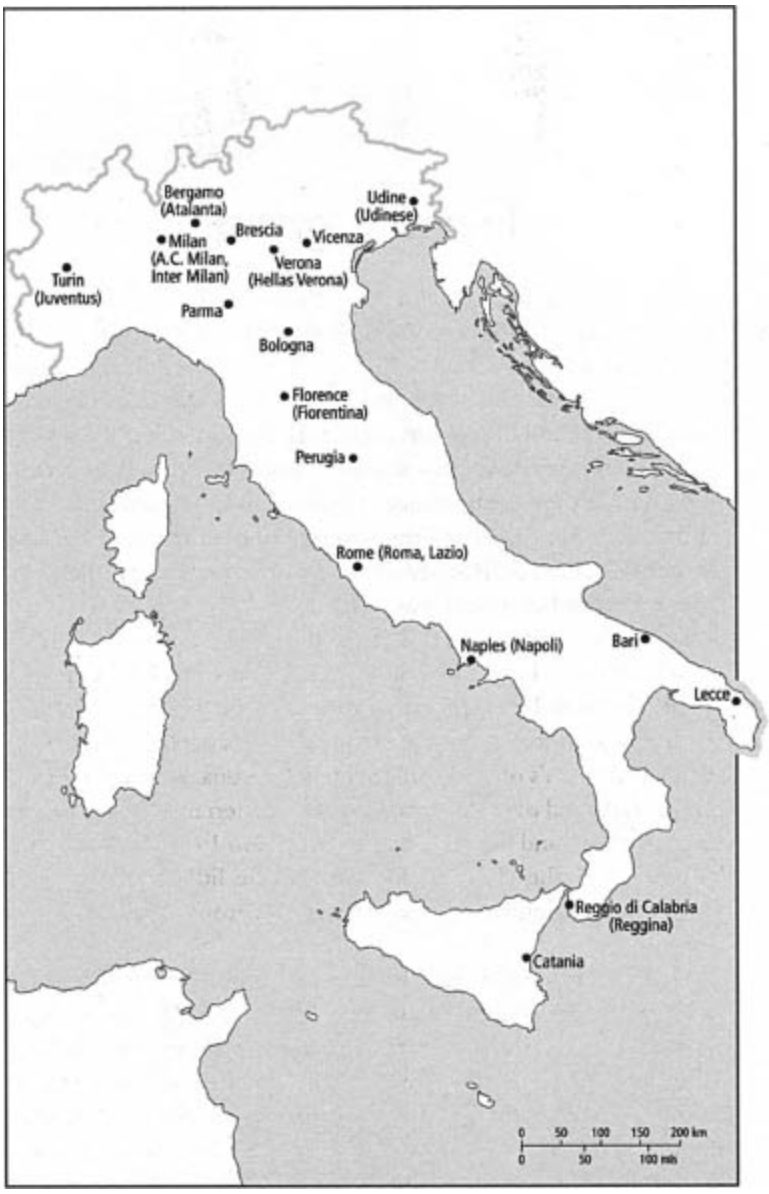
ALSO BY TIM PARKS

Fiction

Tongues of Flame
Loving Roger
Home Thoughts
Family Planning
Goodness
Cara Massimina
Shear
Mimi's Ghost
Europa
Destiny
Judge Savage
Rapids
Talking About It
Cleaver
Dreams of Rivers and Seas

Non-Fiction

Italian Neighbours
An Italian Education
Adultery & Other Diversions
Translating Style
Hell and Back
Medici Money: Banking, Metaphysics and Art in Fifteenth Century Florence
The Fighter


Bergamo
(Atalanta)
Udine
(Udinese)
Brescia
Vicenza
Milan
(A.C. Milan,
Inter Milan)
Verona
(Hellas Verona)
Turin
(Juventus)
Parma
Bologna
Florence
(Fiorentina)
Perugia
Rome (Roma, Lazio)
Naples (Napoli)
Bari
Lecce
Reggio di Calabria
(Reggina)
Catania
0 50 100 150 200 km
0 50 100 mls

This book is dedicated to the boys who travel on the Zanzibar bus

Infame, i nomi non si scrivono!
1°FEBBRAIO/=\87

(Worm, you mustn’t write their names!)

In line with this sensible precept, all names of fans have been altered.

TIM PARKS

A Season with Verona

Travels Around Italy in Search of Illusion, National Character and *Goals*

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

Facci Sognare

Proud to be among the worst …
McDan, Verona, Veneto

FACCI SOGNARE, SAYS the banner. Make us dream! Please!

We're in the Bentegodi stadium, Verona. My son and I are sitting on the edge of the famous Curva Sud. The South End. Ten minutes ago, hurrying with the throng up the stairs, our path was suddenly blocked. Somebody thrust a plastic stick across the steps. Tightly wrapped around it was a blue and yellow flag. I agreed to a 'donation' of a thousand lire. So now the whole *curva* is a rising tide of flags, of shiny blue and yellow plastic, mass-produced, fiercely waved, and from beneath that flutter comes the slow loud swell of ten thousand voices chanting: 'Haaaayllas. Haaaayllas. Haaaayllas!' Because the team's official name is Hellas Verona. At the bottom of the curve, draped over the parapet where the terraces look down on the goal, a huge and beautiful banner proclaims 19/=\03, indicating the date when the club was formed and the little ladder, symbol of the Scaligeri family, ancient masters of Verona. The fans know their history.

Hellas – Homeland. Fan, from fanatic, from the Latin *fanaticus*, which means a worshipper at a temple. 'CIAO CAMPO!' somebody has written in spray-paint on the concrete of the tunnel that leads us out into the stadium – Hello Pitch! – and then beside this, in English, since everything is more solemn when written in a foreign

language: I LOVE YOU. As if it were the place rather than the team or the game that was important, this temple, the Bentegodi stadium. Certainly when you push out of that tunnel after a choking switchback of dusty stairs and corridors, when you emerge into the sunshine or the floodlights, the head lifts and the heart expands quite marvellously. The sense of occasion, with the crowd now ranged in slanted tiers and the pitch hugely green beneath you, is enormous.

The football stadium is one of the few really large constructions that turns its wrong side out. The oval bowl excludes the world, reserves its mysteries for initiates. The TV cannot violate it, cannot even begin to catch it. It's a place of collective obsession, of exaltation. Even a grumpy misanthrope like myself can feel the lift of communal delirium. Even I am chanting, Haaaayllas, Haaaayllas, Haaaayllas, waving my plastic flag. It's the first home game of the season. Verona face the daunting Udinese, already well advanced in the UEFA cup. Please don't lose. A chant starts up. '*Verona, Verona segna per noi*!' Verona, score for us. It spreads round the *curva*. '*Verona Verona, vinci per noi*!' Win for us. It's a liturgy. *Hellas Verona, facci sognare*! Make us dream.

But not all dreams are happy, and even fewer untroubled. My own season actually began two weeks ago. For years I have been a regular at the Bentegodi, but this season, for the first time, I have decided to go to all the away games too. And to write about them. Partly, the writing is an excuse. How can I explain to my wife that I am going to be away every other Sunday for nine months if I'm not writing about it? If I'm not making money. It's such a mad indulgence: to watch Verona play in Rome, in Naples, in Lecce and Reggio Calabria. 'It'll be a travel book,' I insist. 'At last I'll write a real travel book.' I can't wait to see those games. I can't believe I'm going to do this.

But at the same time, I want to get my mind around it too. I want to think and think long about the way people, the way Italians, Veronese, relate to football, the way they, we, dream this dream, at once so intense and so utterly, it seems, unimportant. And the way the dream intersects with ordinary life, private and public. For years now I've had the suspicion that there is something emblematically modern about the football crowd. They are truly fanatical, in the Curva Sud, but simultaneously ironic, even comic. A sticky film of self-parody clings to every gesture of fandom. We cannot take ourselves entirely seriously. Or perhaps this *is* the serious thing, this mixture of delirium and irony, this indulgence in strong emotions without being burned up by them. When the Haaaayllas chant ends everybody claps in self-congratulation and lots of them burst out laughing. *Forza Hellas*! We know we're ridiculous.

But to go back a step; the first game being away from home, the season began, for me, one evening towards the end of September, when I stopped the car outside Bar Zanzibar, rendezvous of the notorious Brigate Gialloblù, the Yellow-Blue Brigades, the hardcore. In the cluttered window a handwritten announcement said that the coach trip to Bari would cost a hundred thousand lire return. Thirty pounds. Bari is about five hundred and fifty miles away and since the game is at three in the afternoon, fans are invited to meet for departure outside the Zanzibar at midnight the evening before. It's a baptism of fire.

I push through the doors, produce my hundred thousand, ask for a ticket. The pair behind the bar are middle-aged, man and wife, straightforward and gruff, bent over the sink. They are clearly surprised not to know a face. Everybody here knows everybody else by name, by nickname, big boys and old men vigorously slapping down cards on chequered tablecloths and shouting at each other. You'll never understand whether they're arguing or not. They're arguing without being angry. Or they're angry

without arguing. In any event the bar booms with noise. The TV has been turned up to deal with it. I have to repeat myself: I want to go to Bari!

And now the couple are surprised again that they can't place my accent. Why would I support Verona if I wasn't Veronese? Verona are not Juventus.

I'm handed no more than a torn-off scrap of grubby paper with the biro scribble *BARI, PAGATO,* on it. Paid. Nothing is rung up on the till. But now a full sheet of A4 is produced and smoothed out on a copy of a magazine that shows celebrities bare-breasted on their yachts. At the top, somewhat laboriously, her hands damp from a sink full of glasses, the woman writes: BARI. BUS. And she asks my name. 'Tim.' At once I know I should have said Tino. 'Like the phone company,' I explain. 'TIM – Telefonia Italia Mobile.' She shakes her grey hair and writes. *1. Tim. Pagato*. Five days before departure I am actually the first fan to sign up.

And as it happens, I'm the first to sign up for what is, in absolute terms, the very first game of the Italian season. Most league games in Italy are played Sunday afternoon, but for the sake of pay TV each week one game is moved forward to Saturday at three, another to Saturday evening, and one is shifted back to Sunday evening. The evening games, at peak viewing hours, involve the big teams: Juventus, AC Milan, Inter Milan, Lazio, Rome. One of those five will win the championship. Nobody doubts it. The Saturday afternoon games are strictly for the '*provinciali*', the also-rans, us.

So I am the first person to sign up for what is perceived to be the least-important fixture of the weekend. What can Bari and Verona ever do but try to keep their miserable heads above the dark waters of the relegation zone? Serie A and the company of the elite will always be a luxury for the likes of us. Serie B is always there with open arms ready to draw us into the abyss of provincial anonymity.

And immediately, even before the innumerable refereeing aberrations that will doubtless mar the season at our expense, this decision to move the match forward to Saturday afternoon becomes the occasion for that most common of Italian emotions, small-town resentment. My son, Michele, is furious. He wants to come with me to the game – what an adventure to travel through the night to Bari! – but he can't, because Saturday is a regular school-day: eight until one, six days a week. 'This would never have happened if we were Juventus.' He shakes his head bitterly. '*Bastardi*!' Every small town footballing dream is dreamed despite the *bastardi*, against the *bastardi*; every victory is achieved in the teeth of the *bastardi*. Apart from the referees, we have no idea who they are.

In any event, it's late September now and everybody is desperate to see a game again. Everybody is yearning for that stupid excitement of waiting for a goal, for or against, trembling on the edge of our seats, on the edge of euphoria or disappointment. The season has been delayed a month so as not to clash with the Olympic Games, with that intolerable mix of noble sentiments and growth hormones. Needless to say, this is a television-driven decision. Nobody who goes to the stadium would ever dream of missing a game for a long jump competition, or the prurient pantomime of synchronised swimming. What tedium! I swear to God I have not watched a single event of the Olympic Games on TV, not one, and would not travel a single mile to watch them live. How could any of that grim athleticism and loathsome armchair nationalism compare with what is at stake when Verona play Inter, when the familiar players stream out on to the pitch and come to salute the *curva* and your heart is in your mouth at the thought that the five reserves they have on the bench are worth more than our whole twenty-five-strong squad put together.

‘*Cazzo di Olimpiadi*,’ someone has written on The Wall, the club’s internet ‘guestbook’. Fucking Olympics. I couldn’t agree more. ‘And then the *bastardi* go and put the first game on Saturday,’ Michele says. Saturday! He has two hours of Latin, he complains, and I at least twenty-two, there and back, on the coach. Or do I? When I drive by the Zanzibar at ten to midnight Friday evening, the place is closed and the street empty.

There is a general belief that away from the busy downtown, the suburbs of our modern cities Europe-wide are all the same. It’s not true. So fine at creating a generous and thriving muddle around the noble monuments of their ancient centres, or again a charming languor in the skewed piazzas of their knotty hillside villages, the Italians ran out of imagination when it came to modern suburbs. In the modern suburbs they have achieved the last word in desolation and dull conservatism.

So the *periferie* of Verona have neither the blowy luxuriance of the English garden suburb, nor the gritty romanticism of the spectacularly depressed area. Here block after six-storey block of featureless flats string amorphously either side of wide, straight, featureless roads. In inevitable reaction, the late-night drivers hurtle at junctions which are often just large empty asphalt spaces with not much indication as to how you’re supposed to behave when you get to them. And if the original plan was at least sensible, maintenance is desultory. The coarse grass on the verges is cut only when it reaches knee height. There are no pavements on the side-streets, only expensive cars.

Perhaps, it occurs to me, locking up the old Citroën, perhaps since it was built round the stadium, the whole purpose of this suburb was to design a place of such spiritual emptiness as to more or less oblige everybody to go to the game on Sundays. In which case they could hardly have done it better. To show the full extent of their

imagination, or as a clue to their undeclared brief, they called the suburb Stadio. Why not? Giving up on the Zanzibar I walk, disconcerted, back to the main square outside the Bentegodi, and find that there is just one bar open.

Or half-open. It already has its iron grille pulled down a little, to threaten closing time. I slip under and ask for a beer. The only two customers are kissing, not passionately perhaps, but certainly determinedly. In any event they are not thinking about Bari – Verona. And at this point – you don't need a glass, do you? the barman asks – I suddenly see myself travelling down to the southern seaport on my own. Yes, I will be the only passenger on an empty coach. I will stand alone on the hostile terraces, the only supporter of *la squadra gialloblù*. The cameras putting together the evening's highlights will focus on me for one split second. I'm shrieking with anger as the referee refuses to grant us a penalty.

But it's impossible to support a football team on your own. Can we imagine a fan on his own? It would be like being the only worshipper of a god, the only speaker of a language. You'd be incomprehensible to everyone. Fandom, like family, is a destiny you do together. At ten past midnight a slim figure ducks under the grille and orders a beer. He's thirtyish, shy, sad, broken-nosed, and he has a blue-and-yellow scarf round his neck. 'Bari?' I ask. 'Bari,' he confirms. It's begun.

The troops gather on the corner of the square. It's twelve forty-five. The bar has closed, but everybody has supplies of beer or spirits. They're carrying them in those little pinky, yellowy backpacks Italian children use to take their books to school. The night is cloudy. The summer is suddenly over. After two months without rain, it has started to drizzle. Football weather. We stand under a concrete portico, waiting for the coach. There are about twenty youngish boys, three or four girls and a dozen men. One

boy seems to suffer from a mild case of phocomelia. With his short arms he arranges his yellow-blue cap crosswise on his head, glad to be part of the group.

‘*Dio boia*!’ the boy next to me suddenly shouts. ‘Executioner God’, it means, a strictly local blasphemy. For some reason Italians find the expression particularly foul, perhaps because of the way the *boia* is pronounced. You begin with an explosive ‘b’, popping your lips as if you were a big fish, then you swallow the ‘oi’ in a long, slow adenoidal sound, lingering on a sort of ‘y’ deep in the tonsils, before snapping the word shut with an axe-blow, ‘a!!’ ‘*Dio bboiyyya*!’ he repeats, apropos of nothing. Then he starts shaking his head. ‘*Abbiamo fatto una figura di merda. Dio boia*!’ He tips up his beer can. The beer dribbles down his chin. ‘Covered ourselves in shit,’ he protests. ‘We covered ourselves in shit.’

Nobody is talking about football. Nobody is interested in discussing the team, at least half of whom are new this year, some of them the merest kids. Nobody is reflecting on the fact that we have lost Cesare Prandelli, the brilliant coach who got us back into Serie A and then took us up to ninth place last season, the coach who brought us victories against Juventus and Lazio. Nobody mentions that the hated owner of Hellas F.C., Giambattista Pastorello, has put the club up for sale, a disastrous move because it now turns out that nobody wants to buy it. Nobody mentions the fact that the official sponsor, Marsilli Salumi, suddenly withdrew its support two weeks ago, announcing that it was pointless attaching the image of its excellent sausages to a team that sold all its best players as soon as anybody waved any money at them, a team that was thus sure to be back in Serie B by the end of this season.

For me all these developments are fascinating. I’ve spent half my summer reading about them. Every day the *Arena*, the local paper, has at least a half-page dedicated to the city’s football team. Every single day, summer and

winter alike. Often it's a whole page. After a game it's three pages. I have read oceans of accusations, denials, rumours. That space has to be filled. I have sworn to myself that I will understand the mechanics of football finance before the year is out. I want to know if the dream element distorts the figures, if investments are made in football that no one would dream of making in any other business. Or if it's as merciless as Marsilli's meat-packing. Are we really destined for Serie B even before the season starts? Has Pastorello given up on us? Is he a genius or a fool, well-meaning or a shark? And is it or is it not ominous, given the recent disastrous performance of Nasdaq, that we are the first Serie A football team to be sponsored by an internet company, the hitherto unheard-of Net Business? Suddenly I want to know what is *really* happening. I want to know who really possesses the team: the supporters, the players or the businessmen? I want to know if we're going to get thrashed down in Bari, or whether we can give the bastards some kind of a game. Who is the new striker we've just bought?

But this is not what the fans are discussing. Or not these fans. 'It was a fucking disgrace! *Dio boia*!' the man leaning on the wall beside me suddenly says, speaking very loudly. He is tall and thin, one eye wild and the other immobile, glass perhaps, and he has a can of beer in every pocket of his big jacket, inside and out. 'We covered ourselves in shit. *Dio boia*. In shit! The boss says: "OK *ragazzi*, explain yourselves! Go on explain." We were all there. And nobody answered. Nobody answered, *Dio boia*! Everybody with his eyes on the floor. On the floor, *Dio can*! I was the only one who said anything, *Dio boia, Dio can*. The only one, what's wrong with us!'

Dio can! Dog God. For best effect the expression is inserted before or after *Dio boia. Dio bon*, a milder blasphemy, can be used as a soft option when winding up or winding down. And *Dio porco* is another possibility, though

it tends to stand on its own. *Dio porco* is the only one of the three that can be safely reversed: *Porco Dio*. The divine can be substantive or attribute. But already, as you can see, the variations are numerous. No need to run through them now: they will be heard often enough in the course of the night ahead.

I have ended up with the real *brigate*, that's the truth of the matter. It's Gianni who finally explains the situation. Gianni is the shy, broken-nosed figure who arrived in the bar almost half an hour before anyone else. 'If you buy your ticket at the Zanzibar, you're in with the real *brigate*.'

I tell him that I've bought various tickets in the past from the Zanzibar, to go to Bergamo, or Brescia, or Venice, and the crowd were a fairly mixed lot. But he points out that when the venue is only an hour or two away, there will be at least ten coaches and the hardcore are diluted by all kinds of 'normal people'.

That's obvious. In the same way, in the Bentegodi on Sundays, the hardcore are there at the heart of it all, they provide all the energy for the chants, all the humour and the violence, there would be no real excitement without them. But they're held back and watered down by the vast crowd at the fringes. It's a big, complex, self-correcting community, the Curva Sud, looked at as a whole.

But tonight we have only the nuts. Gianni uses the word *pazzi*, the mad, as if he suspects that I need warning. 'Only one coach is going from the Zanzibar,' he says. 'Who but a *pazzo* would travel five hundred and fifty miles to watch Verona away? They almost always lose away.' Then he gives me a searching look from soft eyes. Am I a *pazzo*?

'I planned to bring a couple of friends from England,' I lie, 'and my son. But the friends chickened out, *bastardi*, and my son has school on Saturday.'

'*Bastardi*,' Gianni says, 'putting our game first.'

'*Bastardi*,' I agree.

'*BUTEI*!' a voice roars.

A tall and very handsome young man has appeared, waving a sheet of paper. It's the paper that begins 'BARI, BUS. 1. Tim.'

'*BUTEI*!'

This is the local strictly Veronese word for *bambini*, small *bambini*. The supporters always call themselves *butei*. Little kids. *I butei gialloblù*. When one fan calls the others, he shouts: '*Butei*!' When someone joins the discussion on The Wall, he writes '*Butei*!' It's understood, then, that they're infantile, or that they're playing at being infantile. The word is affectionate and ironic. And they always speak to each other in the fiercest local dialect. Which excludes everybody who wasn't born within a thirty-mile radius of the town. However much you can learn Italian, you can never learn the dialect. You may understand it, but you'll never speak it. Now the handsome man is going to take the roll and my foreignness will be exposed. Quite honestly, I hadn't thought about this as a problem before now.

'Get your cash out, *Dio boia*,' the handsome fellow is saying. 'Why did nobody pay in advance, *Dio can? Che figura di merda*!'

'I paid,' I announce.

We're in the streetlight under the portico.

'Tim,' I tell him.

'Teem,' he says.

He stares at me. 'Yes, you've paid.' He doesn't know what to say. Who the hell am I? But then our voices are drowned by a huge shout.

'*CHI NOI SIAMO?*' Who are we?

Everybody picks it up. It's deafening. *Chi noi siamo?* The *Chi* and the *noi* are sharp and staccato. The *siamo* falls away rapidly.

'*GLIELO DICIAMO?*' Shall we tell them?

Again the solo voice is picked up by the group. *Chi noi siamo* is repeated. Then a huge chorus.

‘*BRIGATE, BRIGATE GIALLOBLÙ*!’

The words are shouted with fists in the air, the ‘ga’ of *brigate* is given all the stress in a fierce yell. And from the chant they move straight into a song: ‘*Siamo l’armata del Verona*!’ We’re Verona’s army. And all at once they’re a group, a single entity. Every time they get together for an away game, this is the first chant. This is the moment when they stop being separate people hanging around in twos and threes, and become the Brigades. ‘Every place we go,’ someone suddenly shouts, ‘people always ask us *CHI NOI SIAMO*?’ Who are we? Shall we tell them? It’s a declaration of identity, a rallying to Hellas, to the homeland. And I’m a bit out of it. They would never understand how I come to be here. I don’t really understand myself. But at least I’ve paid, *Dio bon*.

There follows an hour, under the portico, with the drizzle sifting down, of trying to get people to pay and trying to establish who is coming and who isn’t. Sadly, the girls aren’t coming. And then trying to establish who is going to beg to come without paying. Notably the wildest, the best supplied with beer. The leader with the sheet of paper insistently repeats the expression *figura di merda*, and even *brigate di merda*, though this doesn’t seem to have anything to do with the *figura di merda* that Glass-eye is going on and on about quite obsessively. ‘The boss says, OK explain yourselves, and did anyone have the courage to speak up, *Dio boia*? I was the only one, *Dio can*.’

Apparently there has been some encounter between the representatives of authority and the *brigate* over some unpleasant incident or other. Or at least that appears to be the gist. Perhaps I’ve misunderstood. ‘We can say we made a mistake without covering ourselves in shit, can’t we, *Dio boia*?’ Glass-eye insists. ‘*Porco Dio*, can we or can we not? We’re not the only ones to fuck up,’ he starts to scream. He doesn’t seem to need anybody in particular to speak to. ‘Some self-respect, *Dio boia*,’ he shrieks. Since I’m really

not used to these things, it takes me a good half an hour to appreciate that he is coked out of his mind.

The leader is now on his *telefonino*. 'Get out your phones, *butei*,' he orders. It seems there are people whose names are on the list but who haven't turned up. It's a disgrace! A *figura di merda*. It's happening too often. People have no sense of responsibility. They book and they don't come. The word *merda* is pronounced frequently and rhythmically, taking all the stress from the words around it. The 'r' rolls hard into the 'd'. The *Dio boias* abound. There's an incantatory outrage to almost everything that is said. You can feel it in your blood. We're warming up.

Everybody pulls out a *telefonino*. I am the only one who hasn't brought a *telefonino*. They are phoning people at one-thirty in the morning. '*Cretino*! Get your butt along here. No, now, *Dio boia*, or you're a dead man.'

'*Assenza giustificata*,' someone shouts. 'The Fish' it seems is on the night shift. Funnily enough '*assenza giustificata*' is exactly the formula Head of Faculty uses at the university where I teach when somebody doesn't turn up for one of our tedious committee meetings: 'absence justified'. 'The Fish' is working night shift but wants to be kept informed about the group's antics through the small hours. He has his *telefonino* beside his machine. Am I going to get any sleep?

Then a squadron of about a dozen Vespas comes racing round the broad road that circles the stadium. They're in formation occupying the entire street. Ignoring the danger of the big junction they go flying past us. At once someone is livid.

'It's Fosso, *Dio bon*. It's Fosso!'

'*Fosso*' means ditch. They all have nicknames. *Bastardo*. Fosso! 'Your name's on this list, *Dio boia*!' Somebody runs after the Vespas waving his hands. '*Merda*!' The Vespas disappear. Everybody is disgusted. '*Una figura del cazzo*.' A fucking disgrace.

One or two more people appear, though whether because phoned or because experience tells them that the coach will be spectacularly late, I've no idea. After all, they won't be coming from very far. Almost everybody hails from the apartment blocks that circle the city.

'The coach!' someone screams. 'The coach, *butei*!'

A blue bus has appeared.

'They've given us white headrests, *Dio bon*,' our leader shouts. 'White headrests, *Dio boia*. For the *brigate*. We're kings, *Dio can*!'

My heart sinks. This is no luxury vehicle. It's one of the old blue buses they use to bring kids to school and workers to town from outlying villages. We must be renting from the local government. Who else would rent a vehicle to the Brigate Gialloblù? I've travelled on these buses. I know them of old. Stiff upright seats, no radio, no TV, no toilet, no suspension, no speed. And in fact the vehicle idles up to the corner at an incredibly slow pace. But then, we do still have thirteen hours before kick-off. The two drivers climb out: a wiry, waxy-faced kid who looks no more than eighteen and a man about my own age, moustached, wry, taciturn, ready for the worst. With reason. Even as we bundle on, the insults begin.

'*Autista di merda*!' (Shithead driver.)

'*Autista del cazzo*!' (Fucking driver.)

'*Autista cornuto*!' (Your wife's having if off with someone else.)

'*Autista frocio*!' (Queer.)

Then a steady chant: '*Allerta, autista, la figlia è stata aperta*' (watch out driver, your daughter's been fucked).

As we settle in our seats there are about five minutes of this, five minutes of the most violent abuse. Clearly it's something that has to be got through. The drivers don't appear to notice. The drivers are the authorities in our midst, impotent, abused, spat-on. They will never answer

back, but they will never take instructions from us as far as the driving is concerned. Thank God for that.

Our leader climbs on to the bus to make an announcement, though now it appears that he himself is going to go down to Bari by car. '*Butei*, you can do anything you want, OK? Coke, grass, booze. Anything. Have a good time, *butei*. Do what you like. But you're going to leave this fucking coach as you fucking well find it. OK? Anyone who damages this coach answers to me, in person. To me! And the headrests stay white OK. White headrests, *butei*!'

'*Gialloblù. Gialloblù. Gialloblùùùùù!!*!' The boys are singing and clapping. It's the triumphal march from *Aida*. The bus is rocking. The youngest kids have chosen the seats at the back. 'Lights off, *autista di merda*! *Dio boia*.' 'Turn the lights back on, *autista del cazzo*.' 'Turn the red light on, *cornuto autista*.' 'The nightlight, not the main light.' 'What the fuck have you turned the nightlight on for, *autista di merda*?'

The coach finally pulls away. 'Drive straight, driver. *Dio boia*.' 'What d'you turn for driver?' 'Your daughter fucks niggers, driver, she takes it up the ass from niggers.' 'From gypsies, *Dio can*!' The drivers are completely unperturbed. They have done this before of course. Perhaps it's a joke. Meantime, nobody, I reflect, trying to make myself comfortable, absolutely nobody has mentioned Verona's last-minute purchase of the eighteen-year-old striker Alberto Gilardino, already in the national under-twenty-one team. Nobody has mentioned the game, Bari–Verona, the first game of a season starting almost a month late, the first game of, as the papers always say, *il campionato più bello del mondo*, the best championship in the world. Try to sleep, Tim, I decide. Try to sleep.

Forget sleep. I'm sitting in the middle of the coach on the left. The seats are *rigidissimi*. The big dark window is hard and icy. Originally, I had planned to bring such luxuries as a change of clothes, some washing kit, etc., but

at the last minute I saw the folly of this and left them in the car. All I have is my sweatshirt, with hood fortunately, a couple of hundred thousand line in my pocket, and a two litre bottle of … water. I'm fully aware that if I took such an obscene thing along with a group of Manchester United supporters, I would probably by lynched. But Italy is a different place. About an hour into the trip, the bloke in front of me who is taking swigs from a bottle of Amaro Montenegro, a sour after-dinner spirit, politely asks if he can drink from my water bottle. 'Go ahead.' Then the guys behind me, who are smoking dope, also ask if they can drink from my water bottle. 'Go ahead.' Water is respectable in Italy.

But what is mostly being drunk is beer, the majority stewing slowly and in the end quite modestly, one can a little while after another among innumerable cigarettes. Just a couple of guys have bottles of fancy liqueurs, the kind of things advertised on the TV with glamorous women in evening undress.

After insulting the driver and then singing, mainly in praise of deviant behaviour ('we go everywhere, we fight everywhere, barricades, charges, urban warfare, we're not afraid of the police') – after perhaps an hour of this, most people are ready to settle down and sleep. But three or four are high on coke, and these guys are not going to calm down. There's something demonic about them. Quite deliberately, they are not going to let anyone sleep.

The kid two rows up from me on the right is a good-looking twenty-year-old in dark glasses, with a neatly trimmed, even dapper beard, an expensive haircut, a dapper jacket. He's a million miles from the image of the soccer hooligan. But his head is swaying, he has a wild grin on strangely red, very full lips. '*Bomba*!' he suddenly shouts. 'Stop driver, *Dio boia*, there's a bomb on the coach.'

For reasons I can't understand everybody finds this hilarious. The kids at the back are laughing uncontrollably.

Gianni is smiling. Then the boy begins to repeat rhythmically. '*C'è una bomba! C'è una bomba*!' There's a bomb. There's a bomb. Every time he says *bomba*, he puts all the stress on the *om* until the phrase has become madly rhythmical. And he begins a thousand variations. '*Sul pullman c'è una bomba. Nelle mutande c'è una bomba*.' There's a bomb on the bus. There's a bomb in my pants. He goes on and on. Others join in. Needless to say the chant is punctuated with endless *Dio boia*s. The kid jumps up and begins to run wildly up and down the aisle between the seats, hands flailing, chanting rhythmically: '*C'è una bomba, Dio boia*.'

'Who's got some dope?' he demands. I wonder how much he can see in the dark coach with his sunglasses on. He asks me for dope, then drinks from my water bottle. 'Dope, I want dope.' In the other hand he has a bottle of the treacly almond liqueur Amaretto di Saronno. He runs up and down, pulling faces, jumping like a dog in a cage. '*Sulla strada c'è una bomba*! Drive straight, *autista di merda*. Your daughter's a *bomba*. Your wife fucks like a *bomba*. With a black who's a *bomba*.' It goes on for hours.

He's called Fondo. A *fondo* is the bottom of something and *senza fondo* means bottomless. Could it be some reference to his drinking? But you never know how someone got their nickname. Nicknames are not like the crass things you hear about English supporters, Paraffin Pete, Jimmy-fivebellies. They go way back, even to infancy, and they are cryptic and secretive. Someone is called Peru, somebody Rete, goal, or net. There's Penna, feather, and II morto, the dead man. And when these people do at last die, the little poster that appears to announce that death on the walls of the neighbourhood will give the baptismal name, and then in brackets beneath, '*detto Locomotiva*', otherwise known as The Train.

Fondo hangs upside-down from the luggage rack, he takes his sweater off, then his T-shirt, then puts his jacket

back on together with his Verona cap and his expensive sunglasses. Swaying from side to side, he pours beer all over himself. His face gleams. ‘In the can there’s a *bomba*. Drive straight driver, *Dio boia! autista di merda*!’

The others started by applauding, but now they’re getting bored. The four or five older men want to sleep. I in particular really want to sleep. On the other hand, this is a group who have invested all their collective identity in the idea that they are incorrigible. So how can they correct each other?

Again, Fondo hangs upside-down on the racks, feet on one side of the aisle, hands on the other. This time he arranges himself so that his face, upside-down, is almost touching mine. ‘Who the fuck are you?’ he demands. ‘I’ve never seen you.’ I pull off his *gialloblù* cap and throw it to the boy sitting opposite me, a sensible kid who is pulling one thick sandwich after another from his backpack. He throws it to somebody further up the aisle. Fondo runs off waving his arms cartoon fashion. ‘My cap, *Dio boia*! In my cap there’s a *bomba*.’ It’s three in the morning.

Then somebody else, somebody older, is standing in the aisle, looking down towards the back; in a loud voice he shouts: ‘So what about the Jew. What about him, *butei*. What do you make of the Jew? *Bastardo*!’

This man is small and squat, with thick glasses, and he’s wearing a T-shirt that says: ‘I’m proud to be one of the five thousand guilty ones.’ A date beneath the writing allows me to work out that this must be a reference to a notorious away game with Cesena some years ago. Verona would be staying up in Serie A if they won, going down if they drew or lost. Five thousand went down to support them. Verona lost. There was havoc.

But now he’s talking about something that interests me. What about Marsiglia, *butei*? What do we think about the Jew? I can see I shall have to open a long parenthesis.

In the Italian national consciousness, so far as such a thing exists, the north-east of Italy, and Verona in particular, is stigmatised as irretrievably racist. It is also considered bigoted, workaholic, uncultured, crude and gross. So while British or German tourists explore the *piazze* and *palazzi* of the Veneto, in a daze of admiration, imagining themselves, at last, in one of the few places in the world that has managed to preserve the centuries-old elegance of an impeccable Renaissance humanism, the rest of the country has written off this part of the peninsula as a national disgrace, a pocket of the most loathsome and backward right-wing dogmatism.

The historical reasons for this assessment are many, from the area's long relationship with the Austro-Hungarian empire, to its vigorous support for the die-hard Fascist government in Salò and, more recently, the formation of the separatist and xenophobic Lega Nord. But it's also true that the criticism has much to do with the traditional Italian rivalry between cities and regions. If you can find a stick to beat a neighbour with, use it. And what bigger stick can there be to beat someone with in these pious times than the accusation of bigotry and racist intolerance? Wield it with glee.

In any event, one never senses, travelling the rest of Italy, any desire that Verona should be anything but bigoted, nor anywhere but in the dock, and the easy target for complacent criticism. 'When Rome asks us for something special on the region,' an executive of national public radio in Venice once told me, 'they only want news that reinforces that stereotype. For example, they sent us out on *ferragosto* (August bank-holiday) and we were supposed to interview Veronese who were working through the holiday or, even better, making their immigrant labourers work. We couldn't find anybody. Or we're supposed to run a survey on racism; we have to interview a

Moroccan who's been beaten up. And we just can't find one.'

Well, thank God for that. But the fact is that recently someone has been making a great deal of fuss about being beaten up in Verona, yes, right in the centre of ancient and beautiful Verona. And this is what the bespectacled man standing in the aisle of the bus at three in the morning, as the Brigate Gialloblù head south towards the Adriatic, wants the drunken boys to talk about: the case of the Jewish South American religious-instruction teacher Luìs Ignacio Marsiglia.

The bus is travelling on the night of Friday 29 September. Some eleven days before, on the evening of the 18th, Luìs Marsiglia, forty-three years old, balding and thickly bearded, walked into Casualty at the city's main hospital and declared that he had been attacked by three young men wearing motorcycle helmets who banged his head against the wall shouting, 'Dirty Jew get out of here', and 'Long live Haider.' They beat him about the legs with sticks, performed a sort of ritual laceration of his forearms, with some ugly sharp instrument, then would doubtless have gone on to kill him, if they hadn't feared they were about to be discovered and run off.

The case hit the national headlines. Rightly so. Everybody was deeply shocked, most of all the Veronese. Neighbours ran to Marsiglia's apartment with consolatory gifts of olive oil and Parma ham and bottles of Valpolicella. The declarations of solidarity were endless and genuine. Verona is actually a very ordinary place.

But then a typically Italian dynamic sets in. The national press sent its reporters north and began to present Verona as hopelessly Fascist and racist. The minister for internal affairs made an announcement in parliament stating that the attack was clearly the work of dangerous neo-Nazi elements, many of them close to the infamous Brigate Gialloblù. '*I ragazzi gialloblù, Dio boia*,' shouts the