

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Uniform Justice

Donna Leon

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About the Author

Donna Leon has lived in Venice for many years and previously lived in Switzerland, Saudi Arabia, Iran and China, where she worked as a teacher. Her previous novels featuring Commissario Brunetti have all been highly acclaimed; including *Friends in High Places*, which won the CWA Macallan Silver Dagger for Fiction, *Through a Glass, Darkly*, *Suffer the Little Children*, and most recently, *The Girl of His Dreams*.

Death at La Fenice
Death in a Strange Country
The Anonymous Venetian
A Venetian Reckoning
Acqua Alta
The Death of Faith
A Noble Radiance
Fatal Remedies
Friends in High Places
A Sea of Troubles
Wilful Behaviour
Doctored Evidence
Blood from a Stone
Through a Glass, Darkly
Suffer the Little Children
The Girl of His Dreams
About Face

DONNA
LEON

UNIFORM
JUSTICE



arrow books

for Hedi and Agustí Janés

In uomini, in soldati sperare fedeltà?

You expect fidelity in men, in soldiers?

Così fan tutte

– Mozart

THIRST WOKE HIM. It was not the healthy thirst that follows three sets of tennis or a day spent skiing; it was the grinding, relentless thirst that comes of the body's desperate attempt to replenish liquids that have been displaced by alcohol. He lay in his bed, suddenly awake, covered with a thin film of sweat, his underwear damp and clinging.

At first he thought he could outwit it, ignore it and fall back into the sodden sleep from which his thirst had prodded him. He turned on his side, mouth open on the pillow, and pulled the covers up over his shoulder. But much as his body craved more rest, he could not force it to ignore his thirst nor the faint nervousness of his stomach. He lay there, inert and utterly deprived of will, and told himself to go back to sleep.

For some minutes he succeeded, but then a church bell somewhere towards the city poked him back to consciousness. The idea of liquid seeped into his mind: a glass of sparkling mineral water, its sides running with condensation; the drinking fountain in the corridor of his elementary school; a paper cup filled with Coca-Cola. He needed liquid more than anything life had ever presented to him, as desirable or good.

Again, he tried to force himself to sleep, but he knew he had lost and now had no choice but to get out of bed. He started to think about which side of bed to get out of and whether the floor of the corridor would be cold, but then he pushed all of these considerations aside as violently as he did his blankets and got to his feet. His head throbbed and his stomach registered resentment of its new position relative to the floor, but his thirst ignored them both.

He opened the door to his room and started down the corridor, its length illuminated by the light that filtered in from outside. As he had feared, the linoleum tiles were harsh on his naked feet, but the thought of the water that lay ahead gave him the will to ignore the cold.

He entered the bathroom and, driven by absolute need, headed to the first of the white sinks that lined the wall. He turned on the cold tap and let it run for a minute: even in his fuddled state he remembered the rusty warm taste of the first water that emerged from those pipes. When the water that ran over his hand was cold, he cupped both hands and bent down towards them. Noisy as a dog, he slurped the water and felt it moving inside him, cooling and saving him as it went. Experience had taught him to stop after the first few mouthfuls, stop and wait to see how his troubled stomach would respond to the surprise of liquid without alcohol. At first, it didn't like it, but youth and good health made up for that, and then his stomach accepted the water quietly, even asked for more.

Happy to comply, he leaned down again and took eight or nine large mouthfuls, each one bringing more relief to his tortured body. The sudden flood of water triggered something in his stomach, and that in turn triggered something in his brain, and he grew dizzy and had to lean forward, hands propped on the front of the sink, until the world grew quiet again.

He put his hands under the still-flowing stream and drank again. At a certain point, experience and common sense told him any more would be risky, so he stood up straight, eyes closed, and dragged his w

palms across his face and down the front of his T-shirt. He lifted the hem and wiped at his lips; the refreshed and feeling as if he might again begin to contemplate life, he turned to go back to his room.

And saw the bat, or what his muddled senses first perceived as a bat, just there, off in the distance. It couldn't be a bat, for it was easily two metres long and as wide as a man. But it had the shape of a bat. It appeared to suspend itself against the wall, its head perched above black wings that hung limp at its sides, clawed feet projecting from beneath.

He ran his hands roughly over his face, as if to wipe away the sight, but when he opened his eyes again the dark shape was still there. He backed away from it and, driven by the fear of what might happen to him if he took his eyes from the bat, he moved slowly in the direction of the door of the bathroom, towards where he knew he would find the switch for the long bars of neon lighting. Befuddled by a mixture of terror and incredulity, he kept his hands behind him, one palm flat and sliding ahead of him on the tile wall, certain that contact with the wall was his only contact with reality.

Like a blind man, he followed his seeing hand along the wall until he found the switch and the long double row of neon lights passed illumination along one by one until a daylike brightness filled the room.

Fear drove him to close his eyes while the lights came flickering on, fear of what horrid motion the bat-like shape would be driven to make when disturbed from the safety of the near darkness. When the lights grew silent, the young man opened his eyes and forced himself to look.

Although the stark lighting transformed and revealed the shape, it did not entirely remove its resemblance to a bat, nor did it minimize the menace of those trailing wings. The wings, however, were revealed as the engulfing folds of the dark cloak that served as the central element of their winter uniform, and the head of the bat, now illuminated, was the head of Ernesto Moro, a Venetian and, like the boy now bent over the nearest sink, racked by violent vomiting, a student at San Martino Military Academy.

IT TOOK A long time for the authorities to respond to the death of Cadet Moro, though little of the delay had to do with the behaviour of his classmate, Pietro Pellegrini. When the waves of sickness abated, the boy returned to his room and, using the *telefonino* which seemed almost a natural appendage, often did he use and consult it, he called his father, on a business trip in Milano, to explain what had happened, or what he had just seen. His father, a lawyer, at first said he would call the authorities, but then better sense intervened and he told his son to do so himself and to do it instantly.

Not for a moment did it occur to Pellegrini's father that his son was in any way involved in the death of the other boy, but he was a criminal lawyer and familiar with the workings of the official mind. He knew that suspicion was bound to fall upon the person who hesitated in bringing a crime to the attention of the police, and he also knew how eager they were to seize upon the obvious solution. So he told the boy – indeed, he could be said to have commanded him – to call the authorities instantly. The boy, trained in obedience by his father and by two years at San Martino, assumed that the authorities were those in charge of the school and thus went downstairs to report to his commandant the presence of a dead boy in the third-floor bathroom.

The police officer at the Questura who took the call when it came from the school asked the name of the caller, wrote it down, then asked him how he came to know about this dead person and wrote down that answer, as well. After hanging up, the policeman asked the colleague who was working the switchboard with him if they should perhaps pass the report on to the *Carabinieri*, for the Academy, a military institution, might be under the jurisdiction of the *Carabinieri* rather than the city police. They debated this for a time, the second one calling down to the officers' room to see if anyone there could solve the procedural problem. The officer who answered their call maintained that the Academy was a private institution with no official ties to the Army – he knew, because his dentist's son was a student there – and so they were the ones who should respond to the call. The men on the switchboard discussed this for some time, finally agreeing with their colleague. The one who had taken the call noticed that it was after eight and dialled the interior number of his superior, Commissario Guido Brunetti, sure that he would already be in his office.

Brunetti agreed that the case was theirs to investigate and then asked, 'When did the call come in?' 'Seven twenty-six, sir,' came Alvisè's efficient, crisp reply.

A glance at his watch told Brunetti that it was now more than a half-hour after that, but as Alvisè was not the brightest star in the firmament of his daily routine, he chose to make no comment and instead, said merely, 'Order a boat. I'll be down.'

When Alvisè hung up, Brunetti took a look at the week's duty roster and, seeing that Ispettore Lorenzo Vianello's name was not listed for that day nor for the next, he called Vianello at home and briefly explained what had happened. Before Brunetti could ask him, Vianello said, 'I'll meet you there.'

Alvisè had proven capable of informing the pilot of Commissario Brunetti's request, no doubt.

part because the pilot sat at the desk opposite him, and so, when Brunetti emerged from the Questura a few minutes later, he found both Alvisè and the pilot on deck, the boat's motor idling. Brunetti paused before stepping on to the launch and told Alvisè, 'Go back upstairs and send Pucetti down.'

'But don't you want me to come with you, sir?' Alvisè asked, sounding as disappointed as a bride left waiting on the steps of the church.

'No, it's not that,' Brunetti said carefully, 'but if this person calls back again, I want you to be there so that there's continuity in the way he's dealt with. We'll learn more that way.'

Though this made no sense at all, Alvisè appeared to accept it; Brunetti reflected, not for the first time, that it was perhaps the absence of sense that made it so easy for Alvisè to accept. He went docilely back inside the Questura. A few minutes later Pucetti emerged and stepped on to the launch. The pilot pulled them away from the *Riva* and towards the *Bacino*. The night's rain had washed the pollution from the air, and the city was presented with a gloriously limpid morning, though the sharpness of late autumn was in the air.

Brunetti had had no reason to go to the Academy for more than a decade, not since the graduation of the son of a second cousin. After being inducted into the Army as a lieutenant, a courtesy usually extended to graduates of San Martino, most of them the sons of soldiers, the boy had progressed through the ranks, a source of great pride to his father and equal confusion to the rest of the family. There was no military tradition among the Brunettis nor among his mother's family, which is not to say that the family had never had anything to do with the military. To their cost, they had, for it was the generation of Brunetti's parents that had not only fought the last war but had had large parts of it fought around them, on their own soil.

Hence it was that Brunetti, from the time he was a child, had heard the military and all its words and pomps spoken of with the dismissive contempt his parents and their friends usually reserved for the government and the Church. The low esteem with which he regarded the military had been intensified over the years of his marriage to Paola Falier, a woman of leftish, if chaotic, politics. It was Paola's position that the greatest glory of the Italian Army was its history of cowardice and retreat, and its greatest failure the fact that, during both world wars, its leaders, military and political, had flown in the face of this truth and caused the senseless deaths of hundreds of thousands of young men by relentlessly pursuing both their own delusory ideas of glory and the political goals of other nations.

Little that Brunetti had observed during his own undistinguished term of military service or in the decades since then had persuaded him that Paola was wrong. Brunetti realized that not much he had seen could persuade him that the military, either Italian or foreign, was much different from the Mafia: dominated by men and unfriendly to women; incapable of honour or even simple honesty beyond its own ranks; dedicated to the acquisition of power; contemptuous of civil society; violent and cowardly at the same time. No, there was little to distinguish one organization from the other save that some wore easily recognized uniforms while the other leaned towards Armani and Brioni.

The popular beliefs about the history of the Academy were known to Brunetti. Established on the Giudecca in 1852 by Alessandro Loredan, one of Garibaldi's earliest supporters in the Veneto and, by the time of Independence, one of his generals, the school was originally located in a large building on the island. Dying childless and without male heirs, Loredan had left the building as well as his family *palazzo* and fortune in trust, on the condition that the income be used to support the military Academy to which he had given the name of his father's patron saint.

Though the oligarchs of Venice might not have been wholehearted supporters of the Risorgimento, they had nothing but enthusiasm for an institution which so effectively assured that the Loredan

fortune remained in the city. Within hours of his death, the exact value of his legacy was known, and within days the trustees named in the will had selected a retired officer, who happened to be the brother-in-law of one of them, to administer the Academy. And so it had continued to this day: a school run on strictly military lines, where the sons of officers and gentlemen of wealth could acquire the training and bearing which might prepare them to become officers in their turn.

Brunetti's reflections were cut off as the boat pulled into a canal just after the church of Santa Eufemia and then drew up at a landing spot. Pucetti took the mooring rope, jumped on to the land, and slipped the rope through an iron circle in the pavement. He extended a hand to Brunetti and steadied him as he stepped from the boat.

'It's up here, isn't it?' Brunetti asked, pointing towards the back of the island and the lagoon, just visible in the distance.

'I don't know, sir,' Pucetti confessed. 'I have to admit I come over here only for the Redentore. I don't think I even know where the place is.' Ordinarily, no confession of the provincialism of his fellow Venetians could surprise Brunetti, but Pucetti seemed so very bright and open-minded.

As if sensing his commander's disappointment, Pucetti added, 'It's always seemed like a foreign country to me, sir. Must be my mother: she always talks about it like it's not part of Venice. If she gave her the key to a house on the Giudecca, I'm sure she'd give it back.'

Thinking it wiser not to mention that his own mother had often expressed the same sentiment and that he agreed with it completely, Brunetti said only, 'It's back along this canal, near the end,' and set off in that direction.

Even at this distance, he could see that the large *portone* that led into the courtyard of the Academy stood open: anyone could walk in or out. He turned back to Pucetti. 'Find out when the doors were opened this morning and if there's any record of people entering or leaving the building.' Before Pucetti could speak, Brunetti added, 'Yes, and last night, too, even before we know how long he's been dead. And who has keys to the door and when they're closed at night.' Pucetti didn't have to be told what questions to ask, a welcome relief on a force where the ability of the average officer resembled that of Alvisè.

Vianello was already standing just outside the *portone*. He acknowledged his superior's arrival with a slight raising of his chin and nodded to Pucetti. Deciding to use whatever advantage was to be gained by appearing unannounced and in civilian clothes, Brunetti told Pucetti to go back down to the boat and wait ten minutes before joining them.

Inside, it was evident that word of the death had already spread, though Brunetti could not have explained how he knew this. It might have been the sight of small groups of boys and young men standing in the courtyard, talking in lowered voices, or it might have been the fact that one of them wore white socks with his uniform shoes, sure sign that he had dressed so quickly he didn't know what he was doing. Then he realized that not one of them was carrying books. Military or not, this was a school, and students carried books, unless, that is, something of greater urgency had intervened between them and their studies.

One of the boys near the *portone* broke away from the group he was talking to and approached Brunetti and Vianello. 'What can I do for you?' he asked, though, from the tone, he might as well have been demanding what they were doing there. Strong-featured and darkly handsome, he was almost as tall as Vianello, though he couldn't have been out of his teens. The others followed him with their eyes.

Provoked by the boy's tone, Brunetti said, 'I want to speak to the person in charge.'

'And who are you?' the boy demanded.

Brunetti didn't respond but gave the boy a long, steady glance. The young man's eyes didn't waver, nor did he move back when Brunetti took a small step towards him. He was dressed in the regulation uniform – dark blue trousers and jacket, white shirt, tie – and had two gold stripes on the cuffs of his jacket. In the face of Brunetti's silence, the boy shifted his weight then put his hands on his hips. He stared at Brunetti, refusing to repeat his question.

'What's he called, the man in charge here?' Brunetti asked, as if the other had not spoken. He added, 'I don't mean his name, I mean his title.'

'Comandante,' the boy was surprised into saying.

'Ah, how grand,' Brunetti said. He wasn't sure whether the boy's behaviour offended his general belief that youth should display deference to age or whether he felt particular irritation at the boy's preening belligerence. Turning to Vianello, he said, 'Inspector, get this boy's name,' and moved towards the staircase that led to the *palazzo*.

He climbed the five steps and pushed open the door. The foyer had a floor patterned with enormous diamonds made from boards of different woods. Booted feet had worn a path to a door on the far wall. Brunetti crossed the room, which was unexpectedly empty, and opened the door. A hallway led towards the back of the building, its walls covered with what he assumed to be regimental flags. Some of them bore the lion of San Marco; others carried different animals, all equally aggressive: teeth bared, claws unsheathed, hackles raised.

The first door on the right had only a number above it, as did the second and third. As he walked by the last of them, a young boy, certainly not more than fifteen, came out into the hall. He was surprised to see Brunetti, who nodded calmly and asked, 'Where's the office of the Comandante?'

His tone or his manner sparked a Pavlovian response in the boy, who jumped to attention and snapped out a salute. 'Up one flight, sir. Third door on the left.'

Brunetti resisted the temptation to say, 'At ease.' With a neutral, 'Thank you', he went back towards the staircase.

At the top, he followed the boy's instructions and stopped at the third door on the left. *COMANDANTE GIULIO BEMBO*, read a sign next to the door.

Brunetti knocked, paused and waited for an answer, and knocked again. He thought he'd taken advantage of the absence of the Comandante to have a look at his office, and so he turned the handle and entered. It is difficult to say who was more startled, Brunetti or the man who stood in front of one of the windows, a sheaf of papers in his hand.

'Oh, I beg your pardon,' Brunetti said. 'One of the students told me to come up and wait for you in your office. I had no idea you were here.' He turned towards the door and then back again, as confused as to whether he should remain or leave.

The man in front of the window was facing Brunetti, and the light that shone in from behind him made it almost impossible for Brunetti to distinguish anything about him. He could see, however, that he wore a uniform different from that of the boys, lighter and with no stripe down the side of the trousers. The rows of medals on his chest were more than a hand span wide.

The man set the papers on his desk, making no attempt to approach Brunetti. 'And you are?' he asked, managing to sound bored with the question.

'Commissario Guido Brunetti, sir,' he said. 'I've been sent to investigate the report of a death here.' This was not strictly true, for Brunetti had sent himself to investigate, but he saw no reason why the Comandante should be told this. He stepped forward and extended his hand quite naturally, although he were too dull to have registered the coolness emanating from the other man.

After a pause long enough to indicate who was in charge, Bembo stepped forward and extended his

hand. His grip was firm and gave every indication that the Comandante was restraining himself from exerting his full force out of consideration for what it would do to Brunetti's hand.

'Ah, yes,' Bembo said, 'a commissario.' He allowed a pause to extend the statement and then went on, 'I'm surprised my friend Vice-Questore Patta didn't think to call me to tell me you were coming.'

Brunetti wondered if the reference to his superior, who was unlikely to appear in his office for at least another hour, was meant to make him tug humbly at his forelock while telling Bembo he would do everything in his power to see that he was not disturbed by the investigation. 'I'm sure he will be here as soon as I give him my preliminary report, Comandante,' Brunetti said.

'Of course,' Bembo said and moved around his desk to take his chair. He waved what was no doubt a gracious hand to Brunetti, who seated himself. Brunetti wanted to see how eager Bembo was to have the investigation begin. From the way the Comandante moved small objects around on the top of his desk, pulled together a stack of papers and tapped them into line, it seemed that he felt no unseemly haste. Brunetti remained silent.

'It's all very unfortunate, this,' Bembo finally said.

Brunetti thought it best to nod.

'It's the first time we've had a suicide at the Academy,' Bembo went on.

'Yes, it must be shocking. How old was the boy?' Brunetti asked. He pulled a notebook from the pocket of his jacket and bent the covers back when he found an empty page. He patted his pocket, then, with an embarrassed smile, leaned forward and reached for a pencil that lay on the Comandante's desk. 'If I may, sir,' he said.

Bembo didn't bother to acknowledge the request. 'Seventeen, I believe,' he said.

'And his name, sir?' Brunetti asked.

'Ernesto Moro,' Bembo replied.

Brunetti's start of surprise at the mention of one of the city's most famous names was entirely involuntary.

'Yes,' Bembo said, 'Fernando's son.'

Before his retirement from political life, Dottor Fernando Moro had for some years served as a Member of Parliament, one of the few men universally acknowledged to have filled that position honestly and honourably. The wags of Venice insisted that Moro had been moved from various committees because his honesty proved inconvenient to his colleagues: the instant it became evident that he was immune to the temptations of money and power, his incredulous fellow parliamentarians found reason to reassign him. His career was often cited as evidence of the survival of hope in the face of experience, for each chairman who found Moro appointed to his committee was certain that, this time, he could be induced to back those policies most certain to line the pockets of the few at the expense of the many.

But none of them, in three years, had apparently succeeded in corrupting Moro. Then, only two years ago, he had suddenly, and without explanation, renounced his parliamentary seat and returned full time to private medical practice.

'Has he been informed?' Brunetti asked.

'Who?' Bembo asked, clearly puzzled by Brunetti's question.

'His father.'

Bembo shook his head. 'I don't know. Isn't that the job of the police?'

Brunetti, exercising great restraint, glanced at his watch and asked, 'How long ago was the body discovered?' Though he strove for neutrality, he failed to keep reproach out of his voice.

Bembo bristled. 'This morning some time.'

‘What time?’

‘I don’t know. Shortly before the police were called.’

‘How shortly before?’

‘I have no idea. I was called at home.’

‘At what time?’ Brunetti asked, pencil poised over the page.

Bembo’s lips tightened in badly disguised irritation. ‘I’m not sure. About seven, I’d say.’

‘Were you already awake?’

‘Of course.’

‘And was it you who called the police?’

‘No, that had already been done by someone here.’

Brunetti uncrossed his legs and leaned forward. ‘Comandante, the call is registered as having come at seven twenty-six. That’s about half an hour after you were called and told the boy was dead.’ He paused to allow the man time to explain, but when Bembo made no attempt to do so, Brunetti continued, ‘Could you suggest an explanation for that?’

‘For what?’

‘For the delay of half an hour in informing the authorities of a suspicious death at the institution you direct.’

‘Suspicious?’ Bembo demanded.

‘Until the medical examiner has determined the cause of death, any death is suspicious.’

‘The boy committed suicide. Anyone can see that.’

‘Have you seen him?’

The Comandante did not answer immediately. He sat back in his chair and considered the man in front of him. Finally he answered, ‘Yes. I have. I came here when they called me and went to see him. He’d hanged himself.’

‘And the delay?’ Brunetti asked.

Bembo waved the question away. ‘I have no idea. They must have thought I would call the police and I was sure they had.’

Letting this pass, Brunetti asked, ‘Do you have any idea who called?’

‘I just told you I don’t know,’ Bembo said. ‘Surely they must have given their name.’

‘Surely,’ Brunetti repeated and returned to the subject. ‘But no one has contacted Dottor Moro?’

Bembo shook his head.

Brunetti got to his feet. ‘I’ll go and see that someone does.’

Bembo didn’t bother to stand. Brunetti paused for a moment, curious to see if the Comandante would enforce his sense of the loftiness of his position by glancing down at something on his desk while he waited for Brunetti to leave. Not so. Bembo sat, empty hands resting on the top of his desk, eyes on Brunetti, waiting.

Brunetti slipped his notebook into the pocket of his jacket, placed the pencil carefully on the desk in front of Bembo, and left the Comandante’s office.

OUTSIDE BEMBO'S OFFICE, Brunetti moved a few metres away from the door and pulled out his *telefonino*. He punched in 12 and was asking for Moro's number when his attention was caught by loud male voices coming up the stairway.

'Where's my son?' a loud voice demanded. A softer voice replied, but the other voice insisted. 'Where is he?' Saying nothing, Brunetti broke the connection and slipped the phone back into his pocket.

As he approached the stairs, the voices grew even louder. 'I want to know where he is,' the original voice shouted, refusing to be placated by whatever it was that was said to him.

When Brunetti started down the flight of stairs, he saw at the bottom a man of about his own age and size and recognized him instantly, having both seen his photo in the papers and been presented to him at official functions. Moro's face was blade-thin, his cheekbones high and tilted at a Slavic angle. His eyes and complexion were dark and in sharp contrast to his hair, which was white and thick. He stood face to face with a younger man dressed in the same dark-blue uniform worn by the boys in the courtyard.

'Dottor Moro,' Brunetti said, continuing down the steps in their direction.

The doctor turned and looked up at Brunetti but gave no sign of recognition. His mouth was open and he appeared to breathe only with difficulty. Brunetti recognized the effect of shock and mounting anger at the opposition the young man was giving him.

'I'm Brunetti, sir. Police,' he said. When Moro made no response, Brunetti turned to the other man and said, 'Where's the boy?'

At this reinforcement of the demand, the young man gave in. 'In the bathroom. Upstairs,' he said, but grudgingly, as if neither man had the right to ask anything of him.

'Where?' Brunetti asked.

Vianello called from the staircase above them, waving back towards where he had come from. 'He's up here, sir.'

Brunetti glanced at Moro, whose attention was now directed at Vianello. He stood rooted to the spot, his mouth still roundly open and his breathing still audible to Brunetti.

He stepped forward and took the doctor's arm in his. Saying nothing, Brunetti led him up the stairs after the retreating back of the slowly moving Vianello. At the third floor, Vianello paused to check that they were following, then moved down a corridor lined with many doors. At the end he turned right and continued down an identical one. Vianello opened a door with a round glass porthole. He caught Brunetti's glance and gave a small nod, at the sight of which Moro's arm tightened under Brunetti's hand, though his steps did not falter.

The doctor passed in front of Vianello as though the Inspector were invisible. From the doorway Brunetti saw only his back as he walked towards the far end of the bathroom, where something lay on the floor.

‘I cut him down, sir,’ Vianello said, putting a hand on his superior’s arm. ‘I know we’re not supposed to touch anything, but I couldn’t stand the idea that anyone who came to identify him would see him like that.’

Brunetti clasped Vianello’s arm and had time to say only ‘Good’, when a low animal noise came from the back of the room. Moro half lay, half knelt beside the body, cradling it in his arms. The noise came from him, beyond speech and beyond meaning. As they watched, Moro pulled the dead boy closer to him, gently moving the lolling head until it rested in the hollow between his own neck and shoulder. The noise turned to words, but neither Vianello nor Brunetti could understand what the man said.

They approached him together. Brunetti saw a man not far from himself in age and appearance, cradling in his arms the body of his only son, a boy about the same age as Brunetti’s own. Terror closed his eyes, and when he opened them he saw Vianello, kneeling behind the doctor, his arm across his shoulders, close to but not touching the dead boy. ‘Let him be, Dottore,’ Vianello said softly, increasing his pressure on the doctor’s back. ‘Let him be,’ he repeated and moved slowly to support the boy’s weight from the other side. Moro seemed not to understand, but then the combination of command and sympathy in Vianello’s voice penetrated his numbness, and, aided by Vianello, he lowered the upper half of his son’s body to the floor and knelt beside him, staring down at his distended face.

Vianello leaned over the body, lifted the edge of the military cape, and pulled it over the face. It wasn’t until then that Brunetti bent down and put a supporting hand under Moro’s arm and helped him rise unsteadily to his feet.

Vianello moved to the other side of the man, and together they left the bathroom and headed down the long corridor and then down the stairs and out into the courtyard. When they emerged, groups of uniformed boys still stood about. All of them glanced in the direction of the three men who emerged from the building and then as quickly glanced away.

Moro dragged his feet like a man in chains, capable of only the shortest steps. Once he stopped he shook his head as if in answer to a question neither of the others could hear, and then allowed himself to be led forward again.

Seeing Pucetti emerge from a corridor on the other side of the courtyard, Brunetti raised his free hand and signalled him over. When the uniformed officer reached them, Brunetti stepped aside and Pucetti slipped his arm under Moro’s, who seemed not to register the change. ‘Take him back to the launch,’ Brunetti said to both of them, and then to Vianello, ‘Go home with him.’

Pucetti gave Brunetti an inquiring glance.

‘Help Vianello take the doctor to the boat and then come back here,’ Brunetti said, deciding that Pucetti’s intelligence and native curiosity, to make no mention of his nearness in age to the cadet, would help in questioning them. The two officers set off, Moro moving jerkily, as though unaware of their presence.

Brunetti watched them leave the courtyard. The boys shot occasional glances in his direction, but they had only to catch his eye to look away instantly or to adjust their gaze as though they were busy studying the far wall and really didn’t notice him standing there.

When Pucetti came back a few minutes later, Brunetti told him to find out if anything unusual had happened the night before and to get a sense of what sort of boy young Moro had been as well as how he was regarded by his classmates. Brunetti knew that these questions had to be asked now before their memories of the previous night’s events began to influence one another and before the boy’s death had time to register and thus transform everything the cadets had to say about him into the

sort of saccharine nonsense that accompanies the retelling of the stories of the saints and martyrs.

Hearing the two-tone wail of an approaching siren, Brunetti went out on to the *Riva* to wait for the scene of crime team. The white police launch drew up to the side of the canal; four uniformed officers stepped off then reached back on board for the boxes and bags filled with their equipment.

Two more men then stepped off. Brunetti waved to them, and they picked up their equipment and started in his direction. When they reached him, Brunetti asked Santini, the chief technician, 'Who's coming?'

All of the men on the scene of crime team shared Brunetti's preference for Dottor Rizzardi, so it was with a special tone of voice that Santini answered, 'Venturi', consciously omitting the man's title.

'Ah,' answered Brunetti before he turned and led the men into the courtyard of the Academy. Just inside, he told them the body was upstairs, then led them to the third floor and along the corridor to the open door of the bathroom.

Brunetti chose not to go back inside with them, though not out of a professional concern with the purity of the scene of the death. Leaving them to it, he returned to the courtyard.

There was no sign of Pucetti, and all of the cadets had disappeared. Either they had been summoned to classes or had retreated to their rooms: in either case, they had removed themselves from the vicinity of the police.

He went back up to Bembo's office and knocked at the door. Hearing no response, he knocked again, then tried the handle. The door was locked. He knocked again but no one answered.

Brunetti walked back to the central staircase, stopping to open each of the doors in the corridor. Behind them stood classrooms: one with charts and maps on the walls, another with algebraic formulae covering two blackboards, and a third with an enormous blackboard covered by a complicated diagram filled with arrows and bars, the sort of design usually found in history books to illustrate troop movements during battles.

In ordinary circumstances, Brunetti would have paused to study this, as, over the decades, he had read accounts of scores, perhaps hundreds, of battles, but today the diagram and its meaning held no interest for him, and he closed the door. He climbed to the third floor where, decades ago, the servants would have lived, and there he found what he wanted: the dormitories. At least that was what he thought they had to be: doors set not too close to one another, a printed card bearing two family names slipped into a neat plastic holder to the left of each.

He knocked at the first. No response. The same with the second. At the third, he thought he heard a faint noise from inside and so, without bothering to read the names on the card, he pushed the door open. A young man sat at a desk in front of the single window, his back to Brunetti, moving about in his chair as though trying to escape from it or perhaps in the grip of some sort of seizure. Brunetti stepped into the room, reluctant to approach and startle the boy into some worse reaction but alarmed by his violent motions.

Suddenly, the boy bent his head towards the desk, thrust out his arm, and slapped his palm on the surface three times, singing out, 'Yaah, yaah, yaah,' drawing out the final noise until, as Brunetti could hear even across the room, the drummer played a final extended riff, which the boy accompanied, beating out the rhythm with his fingers on the edge of his desk.

Into the pause between tracks, Brunetti barked, his voice intentionally loud, 'Cadet.'

The word cut through the low hiss of the headphones and the boy jumped to his feet. He turned towards the voice, his right hand leaping towards his forehead in salute, but he caught it in the wire of the headphones and the Discman crashed to the floor, dragging the headphones after it.

The impact seemed not to have dislodged the disc, for Brunetti could still hear the bass, loud even

halfway across the room. 'Hasn't anyone ever told you how much that will damage your hearing?' Brunetti asked conversationally. Usually, when he put this same question to his own children, he pitched his voice barely above a whisper, the first few times successfully tricking them into asking him to repeat himself. Wise to him now, they ignored him.

The boy slowly lowered his hand from his forehead, looking very confused. 'What did you say?' he asked, then added, by force of habit, 'sir.' He was tall and very thin, with a narrow jaw, one side of which looked as if it had been shaved with a dull razor, the other covered with signs of persistent acne. His eyes were almond-shaped, as beautiful as a girl's.

Brunetti took the two steps that brought him to the other side of the room, and noticed that the boy's body tightened in response. But all Brunetti did was bend down to pick up the Discman and headphones. He set them carefully on the boy's desk, marvelling as he did at the spartan simplicity of the room: it looked like the room of a robot, not a young man, indeed, of two young men, if he was to believe the evidence provided by bunk beds.

'I said loud music can damage your hearing. It's what I tell my children, but they don't listen to me.'

This confused the boy even more, as if it had been a long time since an adult had said anything to him that was both normal and understandable. 'Yes, my aunt tells me that, too.'

'But you don't listen?' Brunetti asked. 'Or is it that you don't believe her?' He was honest and curious.

'Oh, I believe her all right,' the boy said, loosening up sufficiently to reach down and press the on button.

'But?' Brunetti insisted.

'It doesn't matter,' the boy said with a shrug.

'No, tell me,' Brunetti said. 'I'd really like to know.'

'It doesn't matter what happens to my hearing,' the boy explained.

'Doesn't matter?' Brunetti asked, utterly at a loss to grasp his meaning. 'That you go deaf?'

'No, not that,' he answered, paying real attention to Brunetti and apparently now interested in making him understand. 'It takes a lot of years for something like that to happen. That's why it doesn't matter. Like all that Global Warming stuff. Nothing matters if it takes a long time.'

It was obvious to Brunetti that the boy was in earnest. He said, 'But you're in school, studying for a future career – I presume in the military. That's not going to happen for a number of years, either. Doesn't that matter?'

The boy answered after a few moments' reflection. 'That's different.'

'Different how?' asked a relentless Brunetti.

The boy had relaxed now with the ease of their conversation and the seriousness with which Brunetti treated his answers. He leaned back against the top of his desk, picked up a packet of cigarettes and held it out to Brunetti. At his refusal the boy took one and patted around on the top of his desk until he found a plastic lighter hidden under a notebook.

He lit the cigarette and tossed the lighter back on to the desk. He took a long drag at the cigarette. Brunetti was struck by how very hard he tried to appear older and more sophisticated than he was. Then the boy looked at Brunetti and said, 'Because I can choose about the music but I can't about the school.'

Sure that this made some sort of profound difference to the boy but unwilling to spend more time pursuing it, Brunetti asked, 'What's your name?' using the familiar *tu*, as he would with one of his children's friends.

‘Giuliano Ruffo,’ the boy answered.

~~Brunetti introduced himself, using his name and not his title, and stepped forward to offer his hand.~~ Ruffo slid from the desk and took Brunetti’s hand.

‘Did you know him, the boy who died?’

Ruffo’s face froze, all ease fled his body, and he shook his head in automatic denial. As Brunetti was wondering how it was that he didn’t know a fellow student in a school this small, the boy said, ‘That is, I didn’t know him well. We just had one class together.’ Ease had disappeared from his voice, as well: he spoke quickly, as if eager to move away from the meaning of his words.

‘What one?’

‘Physics.’

‘What other subjects do you take?’ Brunetti asked. ‘What is it for you, the second year?’

‘Yes, sir. So we have to take Latin and Greek and Mathematics, English, History, and then we go to choose two optional subjects.’

‘So Physics is one of yours?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘And the other?’

The answer was a long time in coming. Brunetti thought the boy must be trying to work out what this man’s hidden motive was in asking all of these questions. If Brunetti had a motive, it was hidden even from himself: all he could do at this point was try to get a sense of things at the school, to catch the mood of the place; all of the information he gained had more or less the same amorphous value and its meaning would not become clear until later, when each piece could be seen as part of some larger pattern.

The boy stabbed out his cigarette, eyed the packet, but did not light another. Brunetti repeated, ‘What is it, the second one?’

Reluctantly, as if confessing to something he perhaps construed as weakness, the boy finally answered, ‘Music.’

‘Good for you,’ came Brunetti’s instant response.

‘Why do you say that, sir?’ the boy asked, his eagerness patent. Or perhaps it was merely relief at this removal to a neutral subject.

Brunetti’s response had been visceral, so he had to consider what to say. ‘I read a lot of history,’ he began, ‘and a lot of history is military history.’ The boy nodded, prodding him along with his curiosity. ‘And historians often say that soldiers know only one thing.’ The boy nodded again. ‘And no matter how well they might know that one thing, war, it’s not enough. They’ve got to know about other things.’ He smiled at the boy, who smiled in return. ‘It’s the great weakness, knowing only that one thing.’

‘I wish you’d tell my grandfather that, sir,’ he said.

‘He doesn’t believe it?’

‘Oh, no, he doesn’t even want to hear the word “music”, at least not from me.’

‘What would he rather hear – that you’d been in a duel?’ Brunetti asked, not at all uncomfortable at undermining the concept of grand-parental authority.

‘Oh, he’d love that, especially if it were with sabres.’

‘And you went home with a scar across your cheek?’ Brunetti suggested.

They laughed at the absurdity, and it was like this, easy and comfortably united in gentle mockery of military tradition, that Comandante Bembo found them.

‘RUFFO!’ A VOICE barked from behind Brunetti.

The boy’s smile vanished and he straightened up to stand as stiff as one of the pilings in the *laguna*, his heels clacking together at the same instant as his stiff fingers snapped to his forehead in salute.

‘What are you doing here?’ Bembo demanded.

‘I don’t have a class this hour, Comandante,’ Ruffo answered, staring straight ahead.

‘And what were you doing?’

‘I was talking to this gentleman, sir,’ he said, eyes still on the far wall.

‘Who gave you permission to talk to him?’

Ruffo’s face was a mask. He made no attempt to answer the question.

‘Well?’ demanded Bembo in an even tighter voice.

Brunetti turned to face the Comandante and acknowledged his arrival with a gentle nod. Keeping his voice mild, he asked, ‘Does he need permission to speak to the police, sir?’

‘He’s a minor,’ Bembo said.

‘I’m not sure I follow you, sir,’ Brunetti said, careful to smile to show his confusion. He could have understood if Bembo had said something about military rank or the need to respond only to orders from a direct superior, but to cite the boy’s youth as a reason why he should not talk to the police displayed what seemed to Brunetti an inordinate attention to legal detail. ‘I’m not sure I see how Cadet Ruffo’s age is important.’

‘It means his parents should be with him when you talk to him.’

‘Why is that, sir?’ Brunetti asked, curious to hear Bembo’s reason.

It took a moment for Bembo to find it. Finally he said, ‘To see that he understands the question you ask.’

His doubts as to the boy’s ability to understand simple questions hardly spoke well of the quality of instruction on offer at the school. Brunetti turned back to the cadet, who stood rigid, arms rod-like at his side, his chin a stranger to his collar. ‘You understood what I asked you, didn’t you, Cadet?’

‘I don’t know, sir,’ the boy answered, keeping his eyes on the wall.

‘We were talking about his classes, sir,’ Brunetti said, ‘and Cadet Ruffo was telling me how much he enjoyed Physics.’

‘Is this true, Ruffo?’ the Comandante demanded, not the least concerned that he was openly doubting Brunetti’s veracity.

‘Yes, sir,’ the boy answered. ‘I was telling the gentleman that I had two elective subjects and how much I liked them.’

‘Don’t you like the required subjects?’ Bembo demanded. Then, to Brunetti: ‘Was he complaining about them?’

‘No,’ Brunetti answered calmly. ‘We didn’t discuss them.’ He wondered, as he spoke, why Bembo

should be so concerned at the mere possibility that a student had said something negative about his classes. What else would a student be expected to say about his classes?

Abruptly Bembo said, 'You can go, Ruffo.' The boy saluted and, ignoring Brunetti's presence, walked out of the room, leaving the door open after him.

'I'll thank you to let me know before you question any of my cadets again,' Bembo said in an unfriendly voice.

Brunetti hardly thought it worth contesting the point, so agreed that he would. The Comandan turned towards the door, hesitated for a moment as though he wanted to turn back and say something to Brunetti, but then thought better of it and left.

Brunetti found himself alone in Ruffo's room, feeling in some way invited there as a guest and thus bound by the rules of hospitality, one of which was never to betray the host's trust by invading the privacy of his home. The first thing Brunetti did was to open the front drawer of the desk and remove the papers he found there. Most of them were notes, what appeared to be rough drafts for essays the boy was writing; some were letters.

'*Dear Giuliano,*' Brunetti read, entirely without shame or scruple. '*Your aunt came to see me last week and told me you were doing well in school.*' The calligraphy had the neat roundness of the generation previous to his own, though the lines wandered up and down, following an invisible path known only to the writer. It was signed 'Nonna'. Brunetti glanced through the other papers, found nothing of interest, and put them all back into the drawer.

He opened the doors of the closet next to Ruffo's desk and checked the pockets of the jackets hanging there; he found nothing but small change and cancelled vaporetto tickets. There was a laptop computer on the desk, but he didn't even waste his time turning it on, knowing he would have no idea what to do with it. Under the bed, pushed back against the wall, he saw what looked like a violin case. The books were what he would have expected: textbooks, a driver's manual, a history of AC Milan and other books about soccer. The bottom shelf held musical scores: Mozart's violin sonatas and the first violin part of one of the Beethoven string quartets. Brunetti shook his head in bemusement at the contrast between the music in the Discman and the music on the shelf. He opened the door to the closet that must belong to Ruffo's roommate and cast his eye across the surface of the second desk, but he saw nothing of interest.

Struck again by the neatness of the room, the almost surgical precision with which the bed was made, Brunetti toyed for a moment with the idea of drugging his son Raffi and having him brought down here to be enrolled. But then he remembered what it was that had brought him to this room, and levity slipped away on silent feet.

The other rooms were empty or, at least, no one responded to his knocking, so he went back towards the bathroom where the boy had been found. The scene of crime team was at work, and the body still lay there, now entirely covered with the dark woollen cloak.

'Who cut him down?' Santini asked when he saw Brunetti.

'Vianello.'

'He shouldn't have done that,' another of the technicians called from across the room.

'That's exactly what he told me,' Brunetti answered.

Santini shrugged. 'I would have done it, too.' There were affirmative grunts from two of the men.

Brunetti was about to ask what the crew thought had happened, when he heard footsteps. He glanced aside and saw Dottor Venturi, one of Rizzardi's assistants. Both men nodded, as much in acknowledgement of the other's presence as either was willing to give.

Insensitive to most human feelings that were not directed towards him, Venturi stepped up close to

the body and set his medical bag by the head. He went down on one knee and drew the edge of the cloak from the boy's face.

Brunetti looked away, back into the showers, where Pedone, Santini's assistant, was holding a plastic spray bottle up towards the top of the right-hand wall. As Brunetti watched, he squirted clouds of tiny cloud of dark grey powder on to the walls, moving carefully from left to right and then back to his starting point to repeat the process about twenty centimetres below.

By the time all the walls were coated, Venturi was back on his feet. Brunetti saw that he had left the boy's face uncovered.

'Who cut him down?' was the first thing the doctor asked.

'One of my men. I told him to,' Brunetti answered and bent down to draw the edge of the cap back across the boy's face. He rose up again and looked at Venturi, saying nothing.

'Why did you do that?'

Appalled at the question, Brunetti ignored it, irritated that he had to speak to a man capable of asking it. He asked, 'Does it look like suicide?'

Venturi's long pause made it obvious that he wanted to exchange discourtesies with Brunetti, but when Santini turned to him and said, 'Well?', the doctor answered, 'I won't have any idea until I can take a look at his insides.' Then, directly to Santini, 'Was there a chair, something he could stand on?'

One of the other technicians called over, 'A chair. It was in the shower.'

'You didn't move it, did you?' Venturi demanded of him.

'I photographed it,' the man answered, speaking with glacial clearness. 'Eight times, I think. And then Pedone dusted it for prints. And then I moved it so it wouldn't get in his way when he dusted the shower stall.' Pointing with his chin to a wooden chair that stood in front of one of the sinks, he added, 'That's it, over there.'

The doctor ignored the chair. 'I'll have my report sent to you when I'm finished,' he said. Brunetti, then picked up his bag and left.

When Venturi's footsteps had died away, Brunetti asked Santini, 'What does it look like to you?'

'He *could* have done it himself,' the technician answered. He pointed to some marks that stood out from the darker grey of the coating on the walls of the shower. 'There are two long swipes across the wall here, at about shoulder height. He could have done that.'

'Would that have happened?'

'Probably. It's instinct: no matter how much they want to die, the body doesn't.'

Pedone, who had been openly listening to this, added, 'It's clean, sir. No one had a fight in there, that's what you're wondering about.'

When it seemed that his partner wasn't going to add anything, Santini continued: 'It's what they do, sir, when they hang themselves. Believe me. If there's a wall near them, they try to grab it; can't help themselves.'

'It's the way boys do it, isn't it, hanging?' Brunetti asked, not looking down at Moro.

'More than girls, yes,' Santini agreed. His voice took on an edge of anger and he asked, 'What was he – seventeen? eighteen? How could he do something like that?'

'God knows,' Brunetti said.

'God didn't have anything to do with this,' Santini said angrily, though it was unclear whether his remark called into question the deity's charity or his very existence. Santini went out into the hallway where two white-coated attendants from the hospital waited, a rolled-up stretcher leaning against the wall between them. 'You can take him now,' he said. He remained outside while they went in, put the boy on the stretcher, and carried him from the room. When they were abreast of Santini, he put up

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