

DEATH  
AND THE  
OLIVE GROVE

*Also by Marco Vichi*

Death in August

*About the author*

Marco Vichi was born in Florence in 1957. The author of eleven novels and two collections of short stories, he has also edited crime anthologies, written screenplays, music lyrics and for radio, written for Italian newspapers and magazines, and collaborated on and directed various projects for humanitarian causes.

There are four novels and two short stories featuring Inspector Bordelli. The latest novel, *Death in Florence (Morte a Firenze)*, won the Scerbanenco, Rieti, Camaiore and Azzecagarbugli prizes in Italy. Marco Vichi lives in the Chianti region of Tuscany.

You can find out more at [www.marcovichi.it](http://www.marcovichi.it).

*About the translator*

Stephen Sartarelli is an award-winning translator. He is also the author of three books of poetry. He lives in France.

MARCO VICHI

DEATH  
AND THE  
OLIVE GROVE

AN  
INSPECTOR BORDELLI  
NOVEL

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*for Franco, my father*



*Our every act of knowledge begins with a feeling*

Leonardo

*To the vain, time turns all remedies into water*

Anonymous, 21st century



## Florence, April 1964

At nine o'clock in the evening a tiny little man no taller than a child came through the front door of the police station, out of breath. He pressed up against the windowpane of the guard's booth, yelling politely that he wanted to speak with the inspector. Mugnai, inside, told him to calm down and asked him which inspector he was referring to. The dwarf squashed a dirty hand against the glass and yelled:

'Inspector Bordelli!' as if Bordelli were the only inspector in the place.

'What if he's not here?' asked Mugnai.

'I saw his Beetle outside,' said the little man. In the end he was let in. Mugnai gestured to his colleague Taddei, a burly sort with bovine eyes who was new on the job. Taddei got up with effort from his chair and, with the dwarf following behind, started climbing the stairs. At the end of a long corridor on the first floor, he stopped in front of Inspector Bordelli's door.

'Wait here,' he said, glancing at the tiny stranger's shabby shoes, which were still smeared with mud after a cursory cleaning. Then he knocked, disappeared behind the door, and came back out a few seconds later.

'Go on in,' he said.

The little man hurriedly slipped inside and Taddei heard Bordelli say:

'Casimiro, what on earth are you doing here?' Then the door suddenly closed. Unsure, Taddei scratched his head and knocked again. He stuck his head respectfully inside.

'Need anything, Inspector?'

'No, thanks. You can go now.'

*Marco Vichi*

Casimiro, repeatedly swallowing, waited silently for the ox to shut the door. He declined a cigarette from the inspector and remained standing in front of the desk.

‘What’s wrong, Casimiro? You seem agitated.’

‘I’ve just seen something, Inspector, up Fiesole way . . . I was walking through a field and—’

‘If you don’t want to smoke, have a beer at least,’ said Bordelli, pointing towards the bottom drawer of a filing cabinet on the other side of the office. ‘I’ll have one too, please,’ he added.

Casimiro dashed over and got the bottles, setting them down nervously on the desk. He was anxious to speak. Bordelli calmly opened the beers, flipping off the bottle-caps with his house keys, and passed one to Casimiro. The little man drank half of it in a single draught, grew a bit calmer, and finally sat down. The inspector avidly took two swigs, splashing his shirt, then set the bottle down on some of the papers strewn all across his desk. Hanging on the wall behind him was a dusty photo of the President of the Republic, with a horseshoe appended from the same nail. The air in the office always smelled of rotten cardboard and mushrooms, Bordelli thought.

Casimiro was squirming in his chair. He was wearing a child’s jacket that was actually too big for him. Bordelli studied the dwarf’s face, which was small and narrow, as if it had been crushed in a closing door. He’d known him since the end of the war, and the little man had always had the same tragic, nervous look about him. One rarely saw him laugh. At most he might make a bad joke about his physical condition and then snigger. Bordelli in his way was fond of him and had even, on occasion, invented phoney jobs for him as an informer, so he could give him a little money without making him feel too embarrassed.

‘I was passing that way by chance, Inspector . . . If I hadn’t seen it with my own eyes—’

‘Sorry to interrupt, Casimiro, but the second of the month was my birthday.’

‘Happy birthday . . .’

‘Is that all?’

*Death and the Olive Grove*

‘What do you want me to say, Inspector?’

Bordelli felt like chatting that evening, perhaps because he was very tired . . . He could only imagine what sort of rubbish Casimiro had to tell him.

‘Aren’t you going to ask me how old I am?’ he said.

‘How old are you?’

‘Fifty-four, Casimiro, and I have no desire to grow old. Fifty-four, and still, when I go home, I have no one to kiss me on the lips.’

‘Why don’t you get a dog, Inspector?’ the dwarf said in all seriousness. Bordelli smiled and slowly crushed his cigarette butt in the already full ashtray. Picking up his beer, he leaned back in his chair. The bottle had left a damp ring on a report.

‘Just think, Casimiro, maybe, at this very moment, in some part of the world, the woman I have always been looking for has just been born. But if she was born today, by the time she’s twenty I’ll be a dotty old bed-wetter. And even if she was born forty years ago, it was probably in Algeria, Poland or Australia . . . Fat chance I’ll ever run into her . . . Do you ever think about such things?’

‘Inspector, can I tell you what I saw?’

‘Of course, forgive me,’ said Bordelli, resigned.

Casimiro set his beer down on the desk and stood up, growing agitated again.

‘I was walking through a field and almost tripped over a dead body,’ he said in a single breath, for fear the inspector might interrupt him again.

‘Are you sure?’ asked Bordelli.

‘Of course I’m sure. He was dead, Inspector. Blood was dripping from his mouth.’

‘Where was this?’

‘Just past Fiesole,’ Casimiro said darkly.

Bordelli stood up and, with one hand, grabbed his cigarettes and matches and, with the other, took his jacket from the back of his chair.

‘What were you doing up there at this hour, Casimiro?’

*Marco Vichi*

‘I was just passing through,’ the dwarf said with lying eyes.

‘Let’s go and have a look at this corpse,’ said Bordelli, walking out of the office.

‘But what about my bicycle?’ Casimiro asked, trotting beside him.

‘We’ll load it into my car.’

Reaching the end of the Viale Volga, they turned on to the road that led up to Fiesole. Past San Domenico they began to see the city below, a great dark blot dotted with points of light. A pile of cow shit with little candles on top, thought Bordelli.

Casimiro’s short legs were stretched over the seat, his worn-out shoes barely reaching the edge. He was quiet and fiddling with a good-luck charm, a little plastic skeleton barely an inch long, with two tiny pieces of red glass in the eye sockets. He’d been carrying it with him for years, and Bordelli had stopped ribbing him about it some time ago.

Past the piazza at Fiesole, the little man said to turn down the Via del Bargellino, and a few hundred yards on, he began to look around nervously.

‘Stop here, Inspector,’ he said suddenly, jumping to his feet on the car seat. Bordelli parked the Beetle in an unpaved clearing and got out. Casimiro hopped down, more agitated than ever.

‘I’ll lead the way, Inspector.’ He climbed up the small, dilapidated retaining wall beside the road and began to penetrate the low, dense vegetation. Bordelli followed behind him, looking around with care. High in the sky, a big bright moon cast a lugubrious glow on the countryside, but in compensation made it easy to see. To the right was a large, untilled field with a few now withered vines and several ivy-smothered trees. It seemed a shame to see a field reduced to such a state.

‘You said you were passing this way by chance?’ Bordelli asked, laughing.

‘Sort of,’ said Casimiro, continuing hurriedly through the brush.

‘Meaning?’