

**"[SHIFTY LOU ANDERSON IS] A WINNER....THERE'S NO BETTER WRITER  
THAN MURRAY WORKING TODAY." —THE NEW YORK DAILY NEWS**

# A FINE ITALIAN HAND



**WILLIAM MURRAY**

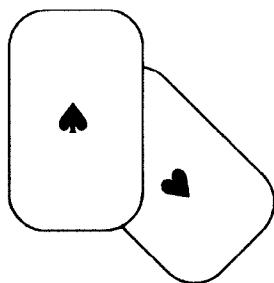
A FINE  

---

ITALIAN  

---

HAND



OTHER SHIFTY LOU ANDERSON MYSTERIES BY WILLIAM MURRAY:

*Tip on a Dead Crab*  
*The Hard Knocker's Luck*  
*When the Fat Man Sings*  
*The King of the Nightcap*  
*The Getaway Blues*  
*I'm Getting Killed Right Here*  
*We're Off to See the Killer*  
*Now You See Her, Now You Don't*

OTHER BOOKS BY WILLIAM MURRAY:

*The Americano*  
*Best Seller*  
*The Dream Girls*  
*The Fugitive Romans*  
*Horse Fever*  
*Italy: The Fatal Gift*  
*The Killing Touch*  
*The Last Italian*  
*Malibu*  
*The Mouth of the Wolf*  
*Previews of Coming Attractions*  
*The Self-Starting Wheel*  
*The Sweet Ride*  
*The Wrong Horse*

A FINE  

---

ITALIAN  

---

HAND

A SHIFTY LOU ANDERSON MYSTERY

WILLIAM MURRAY

M. EVANS AND COMPANY, INC.  
*New York*

Copyright © 1996 by William Murray

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced  
or transmitted in any form or by any means without the  
written permission of the publisher.

M. Evans and Company, Inc.  
216 East 49th Street  
New York, New York 10017

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Murray, William, 1926—

A fine Italian hand / William Murray.

p. cm.

ISBN 0-87131-797-4

1. Anderson, Shifty Lou (Fictitious character)—Fiction.

2. Americans—Travel—Italy—Milan—Fiction. 3. Magicians—Italy—  
Milan—Fiction. 4. Milan (Italy)—Fiction. I. Title.

PS3563.U8F56 1996

813'.54—dc20

95-49582

CIP

TEXT DESIGN BY BERNARD SCHLEIFER  
Typeset by Alabama Book Composition

Manufactured in the United States of America  
9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

FOR ALICE, AGAIN



We desire nothing so much as what we ought not to have.

—PUBLILIUS SYRUS

Many killings are attempted, but few are accomplished.

—PITTSBURG PHIL





# FRESHENING

"You're going to Italy tomorrow? What for?"

"Some lectures and demonstrations," I said. "For the I.B.M."

"You're going to lecture for I.B.M.?"

"International Brotherhood of Magicians," I explained.

"Oh, not the computer guys."

"No. I'm not going to make any money, but it'll just about cover my expenses. And I've never been to Italy."

"You going to go racing over there?"

"I doubt it. Anyway, I need to get away for a while, Jay. I've been losing my ass here."

Jay nodded glumly. "Yeah, it's been a dismal meet so far, after Santa Anita." He snapped one of his big black notebooks shut and set it down on the empty seat between us, on top of a pile of other big black notebooks containing all the past-performance statistics for Southern California's three major racetracks for the past three years. Jay Fox was nothing if not thorough; very little was left to mere chance. I raised my binoculars to check out the field on its way to the starting gate. It was a clammy, overcast day, and across Hollywood Park's smog-enshrouded infield the horses, cheap three-year-old maidens running in a meaningless sprint, looked like moving shadows, the bright silks of their jockeys shining like small beacons of light above them. I stood up.

"Where are you going?" Jay asked. "There's nothing to bet on here. Sit down."

"A place bet on the favorite. Some long shot could easily run second and I might get even money."

"A desperate move," Jay said. "You're ready to ship out. Go to Italy, but don't bet this dog. Where's the value?"

"Jay, I need to cash a ticket," I explained. "This is the only horse in the field who can run even a little bit. And he's being ignored in the place pool."

"He's trained by a magician," Jay said, "one of those guys who can make any horse disappear by the eighth pole."

I hesitated, then sat down as the horses began filing into the starting gate. Arnie Wolfenden, carrying a large container of pink lemonade and a hot dog, eased himself into the seat behind me. "Anybody risk any money here?" he asked.

"I was going to," I admitted, "but Jay talked me out of it."

"Cal-bred maiden claimers," Arnie said. "Shifty, you're living dangerously these days."

"It's time for him to go to Italy," Jay said. "He needs freshening."

"Italy," Arnie said, with a sigh. "I was in Italy right after the war, with the occupation troops. What's it like now?"

"I'll tell you when I get back."

"Nothing worked then," Arnie said. "No electricity, bombed-out villages, very little public transport. But you know what? We sure ate well. I'll never forget the food."

"The horses have reached the starting gate," the announcer called out.

We all raised our binoculars to watch the race. The favorite broke on top, opened up two lengths, held the lead to the sixteenth pole, was passed by the second choice, and barely lasted for second over a fifty-to-one shot lumbering down the lane on the outside. "I'd have cashed," I said.

Jay turned to look at me. "Shifty, what's the matter with you?" he said. "Look at the board. He's going to pay two eighty to place. Is that the kind of bet you're making now? I'll go through life passing horses

like that and save enough money every year to pay off my credit cards."

He was right, of course, and I knew it. But I had failed to cash a ticket in three days, eleven consecutive losing wagers on horses that hadn't even raised a gallop. I didn't want to carry the burden of that losing streak off with me to Italy; I'd have been nervous about getting on the plane. This particular day, with one of the weakest cards of contestants competing I'd ever seen at a major racetrack, I had yet to make a bet, and now we were coming up to the seventh. I had spent nearly three hours handicapping the night before and I had nothing to show for it, not a single horse at any price that looked like a solid wager. I stood up again. "Maybe I will go home," I said. "I haven't even packed."

"A salubrious decision," Arnie Wolfenden observed, popping the last of his hot dog into his mouth.

Jay shook my hand. "When are you coming back?"

"I have an open ticket," I said. "Maybe in three, four weeks."

"Well, enjoy yourself," he said. "When you get back, the two-year-olds will be running. We always do well with the two-year-olds. They haven't had a chance to screw them up yet."

"You're turning into a cynic, Jay. It's not like you."

"Yeah, well, the Hollywood spring meet so far has been a grind," he said. "All the good three-year-olds are back East for the Triple Crown races, and most of the good jockeys, too. I may take a little vacation myself, go off on a cruise or something."

"My idea of living death," Arnie said. "I'd rather be flogged naked in a public square than go on a cruise. Jay, surely you jest, my friend."

"I've also thought about maybe going on safari to Africa," Jay said. "Two weeks in the game parks."

"Gazing at animals you can't bet on," Arnie said, "the ultimate frustration."

"I can't bet on these either, Arnie."

"True, but there's always tomorrow, Jay. Every day a new adventure. What's in Africa? Flies, and a lot of other insects. Where are the horses?"

"They have racing in Nairobi," I said.

"What kind of animals? Horses that would make this last bunch look like Secretariats," Arnie said. "Come on, Jay, cool it. This is your habitat, my friend—the racetrack, the biggest game park in the world. Soft prey, big cats, little cats, hippos, crocs, hyenas, jackals, vultures, all right here for our enjoyment. Who needs Africa?"

"I'll see you guys."

"Take it easy, Shifty," Jay said, with a last wave of his hand.

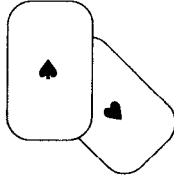
"Hey, look at the board," I heard Arnie say, as I walked out of the box, "look at the action on the eight horse. Check him out, Jay. Maybe we overlooked something."

I walked out of Hollywood Park through the clubhouse that last afternoon in early May, leaving my racetrack cronies to their calculations. I wasn't sorry to go, I was happy to be leaving for Italy, but still I felt a twinge of melancholy. I love magic and I love the horses, and walking early out of any racetrack is like leaving a bit of myself behind. As I skirted the clubhouse bar, I spotted Angles Beltrami, the other permanent member of our grandstand box. He was pressed up against a soft-looking plump blonde in a tiny black miniskirt, black pumps, and a sleeveless pink jersey that barely covered a formidable bosom. I waved to him, but either he didn't see me or he chose to ignore me. "The eight horse in here, babe," I heard him say as I passed. "Can't lose. So what about tonight? Can't you tell your husband you got a PTA meeting or something?"

I went downstairs, but before heading to the parking lot I checked the tote board. The eight horse had been backed down to nine to two from a morning line of twenty to one. I turned around, walked to a betting window, and bought a ten-dollar win ticket on the eight, then I lingered by a television monitor long enough to watch the race.

The eight horse ran five wide around both turns of the tight turf course and lost by a neck to a forty-to-one shot. I tore up my ticket and left the premises. Jay was right. I needed freshening, I needed Italy.

# FANDANGO



She had the face of a fallen angel. When I first saw her she was sitting by herself in a corner of the room, holding a glass of champagne with both hands as if it were a chalice. She seemed also to be poised for flight, like a young bird on a branch, unsure of herself, a little afraid. It was that quality of vulnerability that attracted me to her. And then, too, she was sexy in an earthy way, with fleshy lips and something wounded in her eyes. I knew immediately she was American, one of three or four at the party, but she wasn't like any of the other women there; nothing sleek or lacquered about her, a country girl in city clothing. I'd been in Milan for only four days and this was my third party, and so far they'd been much the same, flesh markets, people selling themselves and one another, people buying. She didn't look like someone in the path of easy commerce.

I asked Carlo Ravelli about her, and of course, he knew something. "Ah, that one," he said. "She has only been here a few months."

"American, right?"

"Extremely," Ravelli said. "Embarrassingly so."

"Embarrassingly? In what way?"

Ravelli smiled and casually flicked cigarette ashes onto a very expensive Oriental rug. "Speak to her," he said. "You will see what I mean." He glanced at her and gave a little shrug of the shoulders.

Something about her bothered him or annoyed him, I wasn't sure which, but then I didn't know Ravelli that well. "Adriano is mad for her," he said, "but you know Adriano. He only wishes to fuck her."

"I don't know Adriano."

"Adriano Barone, your host."

"And why hasn't he?"

"She doesn't like him. She's afraid of him."

"She a model?"

"She is trying."

"What's her name?"

Ravelli smiled. "That is part of the problem," he said. "Bobby Jo. Amusing, no? That could only be American. There is the sound of banjos in the air. You wish to meet her? No problem. Speak to her. They are all here to be spoken to. Excuse me, *caro*." And he left me to go talk to someone across the room. Ravelli wasn't much of a magician, but he was a whiz at social gatherings; he seemed to know everyone. I didn't respect him at all as an artist, but he was the right man to be representing the International Brotherhood of Magicians in Italy; he had a talent for opening doors.

I decided to get another glass of wine before introducing myself to her. I was still fighting jet lag and I wasn't sure why I had agreed to come to this party. It was exactly like the other ones I'd been to since my arrival, and I found them boring, especially since I couldn't speak much Italian. Everyone seemed to be playing a part, posing for an invisible photographer. I went to the bar at the far end of the huge room and poured some *pinot grigio* into my glass.

Outside, the rain fell softly against the panes of the tall French doors leading to a terrace that overlooked a garden. The palazzo, like all the other ones I'd seen in this old part of the city, presented a shabby exterior to the street, but inside the rooms screamed of old money. This main living room, with its high paneled ceiling showing medieval religious scenes, was typical, I gathered, full of antiques and objets d'art and apparently handed down from one generation of Barones to another and now to Adriano, the heir to all this ancient history. Elsewhere in the palazzo, Ravelli had told me, lived Adriano's relatives—aunts, uncles, cousins, in flats of their own, but at a

distance so far removed from Adriano that not even blood could bridge the gap. "Adriano despises them all," Ravelli had told me. "His life has become a fandango of bodies."

I hadn't even met him. Ravelli had pointed him out to me when we'd arrived, but had not bothered to introduce me. He was a tall, broad-shouldered man in his early thirties with long black hair that tumbled nearly to his shoulders, a quick, nervous smile, and dark, flashing eyes that probed the room as if searching for prey. He was dressed informally, in gray slacks and a navy blue pullover, and looked like an athlete going to seed, with a little too much weight in his once lean face and body. I'd forgotten all about him five minutes after I'd arrived and begun to mingle a bit, with Ravelli introducing me here and there as "*il famoso mago americano*" and "*il più grande prestidigitatore del mondo*," which I was not. But let him talk; nobody seemed to care anyway.

As I left the bar, I caught another glimpse of her and decided to go over and talk to her. Of all the young, very beautiful women in this room, moving like gazelles through these carnivores, only this girl looked somehow in danger. She was now leaning against the wall, still holding the glass in both hands in front of her, and looking down at a fat, bald, hairy little man who was talking at her rather than to her, thrusting himself toward her as he spoke, his head bobbing in time to his words, as if they were drumbeats. She looked dismayed; she couldn't believe what she was hearing. When he'd finished and moved away, she stared after him in amazement.

"You all right?" I asked, as I came up to her. "You look a little strange."

"I don't believe it," she said. "Do you know what he just asked me?"

"I can guess."

"He wanted to know if I'd go to bed with him tonight," she said. "He told me he could help me. And then, when I said no, he offered me money."

"Who is he?"

"I only met him once, at another party," she said. "His name's



Gianpaolo Caruso. He's a jeweler. He's got a shop on the Via Manzoni, near the Grand Hotel. Can you believe this guy?"

"I guess some girls will go for it in this town," I said. "His looks and charm won't carry him very far."

"That's the truth." She held out her hand. "Hi. I'm Bobby Jo Dawson. Who are you?"

"Lou Anderson," I said. "My friends call me Shifty. That's because I deal cards pretty well."

"You a gambler or something?"

"No, I'm a magician. Close-up. You know, cards, coins, cups, this and that."

"Wow," she said, "really? What are you doing here?"

"It's an I.B.M. deal."

She looked puzzled. "I.B.M.? Computers and stuff?"

I smiled and shook my head. "International Brotherhood of Magicians," I explained. "I came over to give a series of lectures on prestidigitation."

"Presti-what?"

"Sleight of hand. You know, like this." I reached into my pocket, produced a couple of hundred-lire coins, and flashed them at her. "See? Two coins, right?" I clapped my hands together, then held out my closed fists toward her. "Which hand?"

She smiled shyly, then reached out and touched my right one. I opened my hand to reveal it was empty. "See?"

"Wow. That's good."

"Wait. Want to see where they are?"

"Oh, sure."

I opened my left hand. It was empty. Then I reached up behind her ears. "Here they are," I said. I held the two coins out to her. "See? They were caught in your hair."

"Hey, you *are* good. What else do you do?"

"Oh, I've got a lot of moves, more than you have time for tonight."

"No, I mean, you make a living doing this stuff?"

"I squeak by. I also like to bet on horses."