

Giuliano Stole My Girl

Marc Edward DiPaolo (April 21, 2008)



Just when things were not going well with Eileen, Giuliano the Italian Paratrooper moved in on her. And I was history.

The next day, Eileen was once again cold to me.



I was stumped.

I thought about it all day.

What to do?

Then it hit me.

Flowers.

This would be the first time I ever bought roses for a girl outside getting my mother a bouquet on Mother's Day, and I was looking forward to stepping into the role of boyfriend. What fun. And so, I ventured out into passeggiata, enjoying the bustle of people.

On a side note, since I was no longer new, or burdened by luggage, I was able to appreciate passeggiata for what it was: a great nightly tradition in which the Sienese would take a stroll after dinner to work off some calories and be social with their family members and friends they happen upon in the street. There were no traditions like this in the American suburbs. Suburban Americans were too scared of their neighbors, whom they assumed to be Charles Manson or Ed Gein. And urban Americans were too rich or too poor to be bothered with such things. They were too afraid of looking undignified, or walking into a neighborhood controlled by the Bloods or the Crips.

Yes, Americans hated and feared one another, and were not as cool as Italians.



Having mentally established this, I decided to enjoy passeggiata more than dwell on American antisocial customs.

Anyway, my spirits were lifted by the plan to buy flowers. I remembered vaguely a flower shop nearby a local “fast food” pasta outlet and found my instincts to be correct.

As I explained my mission to the friendly proprietress, I discovered that I was becoming quite good at conversational Italian by now. The woman was very impressed by my attempt at the language, kindly ignoring my rather large oversight of addressing her in the informal “tu” instead of the formal “Lei.”

The bouquet she presented me with was uncomfortable large, considering I assumed I had only paid the equivalent of twenty dollars worth of lire for it. It was not the kind of thing I could make invisible by tucking under my arm as I walked into the hotel, and I knew that the last thing Eileen would want is for me to broadcast to the rest of the students that I was buying her flowers. It would embarrass her. So I slipped my raincoat off and started to drape it over the bouquet. No. The coat would crush the flowers. The large set of red petals and long green stems wrapped in a clear plastic vase would have to remain visible. I decided all I had to do was walk casually as I approached the hotel and hope that nobody saw me.

As I walked past the Palazzo Pubblico down the sidestreet where the hotel rested, I found himself crossing paths with Drusilla Horowitz and Adnan Elshenaway, who were headed out for a walk. Much to my mortification, Drusilla asked in a teasing, sing-song voice,

“Who are the flowers for, Marc?”

“Nobody,” I smiled as I walked past the two and continued up to the hotel entrance.

“I’m sure Eileen will love them,” Drusilla called back.



[WARNING: A Sudden Perspective Shift is Coming.]

I have decided that too much of the action that follows involves events that I did not witness myself. This leaves me with two options: 1) tell you only what I saw myself, resulting in a narrative that reads much like P.G. Wodehouse's Jeeves and Bertie novels, in which important things happen and the narrator is, amusingly, never there to see it. 2) Jump into the heads of real people, and composite characters, and give you my sense of what they (probably? somewhat probably? not remotely?) were thinking and doing while I was elsewhere.

I have chosen option 2.

After all, this autobiography is only 87% true, leaving me the leeway to make stuff up at this juncture. Enjoy the somewhat accurate account of what followed that overcast January in Siena in 1997.]

* * *

After I disappeared into the hotel, leaving Drusilla and Adnan alone to continue walking towards the Campo, Drusilla turned to Adnan and said, "Why don't you think my boyfriend back home ever buys me flowers?"

[Remember readers: Drusilla looks like Liv Tyler, if you need someone to picture.]

Adnan shrugged. "Bob? He's a loser. That's why he doesn't buy you flowers."

"I've been thinking of giving him the heave-ho lately," Drusilla said. "He's clingy and possessive and



he clearly has decided that I'm some kind of mother replacement for him. He makes me feel like I'm on a leash 24/7, you know? Like I'm his to own and command at a given moment."

"You wouldn't be much of a feminist if you kept dating a guy like that," Adnan observed.

Drusilla nodded decisively. "You said it. From now on, I take crap from no one. Least of all Bobby."

"You're in Italy," Adnan said. "Love is in the air. Be reckless. Cheat on the loser."

"I dunno," Drusilla sighed. "It wouldn't be nice. I should go back home and break up with him first. Then it would all be on the up-and-up if I went off with someone else."

"Yeah, but then you wouldn't be in Italy any more," Adnan said. "And it would be too late for a romance in Italy."

"Yeah."

"What, are you married to the guy, or something? Go have a fling!" Adnan commanded. "You wouldn't be much of a feminist if you didn't cheat on him. Remember *A Doll's House*? *The Awakening*? *Lady Chatterly*? Your favorite books!"

[By the way, Adnan looks a little like Ajay Naidu from the movie *Office Space*.]



"I like Anna Karenina better than all of those."

Adnan spread his arms wide. "Well..."

"Yeah," Drusilla shrugged. "You're right." She paused. "But I don't want to dump him. I'm not ready to dump him. I may keep him yet. I just want to set some new ground rules when I get back. Like giving me some space."

"Fair enough. But before you go back to him ... while you're here ... do me a favor and have some sex with a hot Italian guy."

"No sex. But I'll make out with one for a good five hours. Maybe third base. Or a long lead off third..."

"Okay," Adnan said. "Good enough."

They fell silent for a full minute as they walked.

"I'd make out with you if you weren't gay," Drusilla concluded.

"And I'd make out with you if you were a guy," Adnan said diplomatically.



* * *

Whenever a problem preyed on Eileen Harris' mind, she began to feel the tension build in her stomach. The greater the problem became, the tighter the knot in her stomach was pulled. By now, the nausea had risen to a crescendo, sapping her of all her strength, keeping her too dizzy to stand. For the past sixty-seven minutes she lay on her back diagonally across the double bed that she and Drusilla shared, pressing a damp white cloth to her forehead.

Marc, Marc, Marc. It was so wonderful when she was with him. He was so sweet and funny. He made a wonderful friend. So why did he have to go and ruin it by kissing her? Now everything was so complicated.

It wasn't that Marc was a bad kisser. It wasn't that she wasn't attracted to him. He was fairly good-looking.

That wasn't the problem. So what was the problem?

It wasn't that he was a little overweight.

It wasn't that he had a few too many pimples.

It wasn't that his glasses were too large and lacked style.

It wasn't that he kept ordering the same five Italian meals over and over again since he got to Italy, showing a distinct lack of adventurous spirit and a rigidity of taste.



It wasn't that he talked too much about Doctor Who and was a little self-absorbed.

It wasn't that he had some symptoms of arrested development and liked comic books too much.

It wasn't that he was poor with money and spent it too quickly and would probably not be a good provider.

It wasn't any of that.

But she couldn't stop thinking, even when he held her in his arms last night, first outside the D'Uomo and then back here in the hotel room. She enjoyed making out with him tremendously, but she couldn't stop her mind from racing through every possible ending to their relationship.

When they weren't in school together during the semester, she lived near Buffalo and he lived six hours away in Staten Island. Six hours. After they graduated, would he have to drive six hours each weekend just to see her? And, for God's sake, the boy was allergic to cats. How could she date anyone who couldn't set foot in her house without breaking out in hives? Would he drive six hours to see her just to spend the entire visit talking to her on the front steps of her house? And where would he sleep? In a sleeping bag on the lawn under her apple tree? In a hotel? The hotel bills for the first month of their relationship alone would be enormous.

How could she allow herself to fall in love with him when the dynamics of their relationship would be so complicated? Besides, it was destined to end badly, of that she was certain. She had always vowed never to get married, never to have children, and that was what Marc wanted from her more than anything. If not now, then if their relationship really went somewhere...

Ridiculous. Patently absurd. The deck was stacked against them and Eileen was not much of a



gambler to begin with. She liked to be in control. She liked to be prepared for every possible contingency, and there were too many variables. Her logical mind was on the verge of a short circuit.

She would have to talk to him about it. But what could she possibly say to him? He seemed so excited about this so-called relationship. Colin was just saying this morning that Marc was giddier than he had ever been during his entire college career. Would Marc even understand what she was talking about? For an intelligent person, he could behave very illogically, very melodramatically.

Well, hopefully Marc's romantic streak will take a rest, she thought. I'm sure he noticed I gave him the cold shoulder on the bus ride home. That was a clear enough message that he's pushing me too hard. He'd have to be an idiot not to realize that I need some space. If he keeps his distance from me for a few days, I'm sure our feelings for each other will die down and we'll be able to go back to being just friends. That's much easier. Much safer. It's the only logical decision.

There was a timid knock on her bedroom door.

"Yes?" she groaned.

Marc poked his head in. "Can I come in?"

Eileen sighed and sat up. "Yes."

"I noticed you weren't yourself today, so I got you something to help make you feel better." At that, Marc jumped dramatically into the room and, striking a heroic pose, presented her with a giant bouquet of roses. "Ta-da!"

Oh, shit.



Beaming, Marc handed her the bouquet. "Here you go."

Eileen turned the bouquet over in her hands, staring at the vibrant red flowers. They were lovely. They also looked expensive.

I'm definitely going to throw up. Any second now. Puke all over the place.

"What do you think?" asked Marc, who was starting to look nervous.

"Very...nice. Pretty." Eileen tried to smile, but it came out more like a frown. I think I'm gonna die. Dear God, I'm gonna die.

Marc shuffled from one foot to the other. "So, I was worried about you. I don't like to see you looking so glum, you know. You're very cool and you should be happy."

"Thanks," Eileen murmured. Go away, please. Go away, go away, go away, go away, go away, go away. I can't take it anymore.

Marc looked like he didn't know what to do with his hands. First he put them behind his back, then he put them in his pockets, then he dropped them at his side. "I hope I haven't offended you by



getting you these flowers.”

Eileen didn't respond right away to that one, and the tension level in the room jumped four hundred percent. Marc, fully aware that he was losing ground with each passing second, tried to find the right words and failed.

“I know you don't like it when I open doors for you and pull chairs out for you. I'm not really sure what the etiquette is these days for...you know...hanging out with...women who think old-fashioned stuff like flowers is repressive and all that jazz.”

“No, no,” Eileen said, too quickly to sound natural. “They're fine.”

“So I got you flowers, because I figured it was what I was supposed to do, and I wanted to do it because I like you, but I hope that you're not someone who reacts badly to flowers, you know? So if the gift is bad, then I'm sorry.”

“They'll need water.” Eileen stood up and walked over to a large thermos of water on her bureau. She pulled the roses out of the clear plastic vase they were in and slipped them into the thermos.

“Do you need water?” Marc blurted out. “I mean, if you're not well, I can ask Marcello to make you some tea. I can get you some cookies, or something. Or aspirin. Or earplugs”

Eileen smiled weakly at him and sat down again on the bed. I'm torturing him. I'm tearing him to pieces and all he did was buy me a present. Why am I doing this? Does he deserve this crap I'm giving him? Why can't I smile at him? Why can't I give him a real “thank you” for these lovely flowers? What the heck is wrong with me, anyway?



"No, no aspirin," she said. Damn, she thought. That was a mistake too. I should have given him a mission. Something to make him feel useful. Something to help him save face and give him a graceful escape from this horrible, stifling room.

Now sweat was gathering on Marc's brow. "Well, I can see you still look a little sick, so I'll let you get some rest."

"No." Eileen jumped to her feet and grabbed Marc by the wrist. "Wait."

Marc was afraid to look her in the face. "Yes?"

There was a lump in Eileen's throat that made it hard for her to speak. "I want to thank you. Really. Thank you for the flowers. I do like them. I really do. You look like you don't believe that, and I don't blame you, but I really like them."

Marc looked at her, searching her eyes to see if she was telling the truth.

Then the thought, unbidden, jumped into Eileen's mind. Kiss me again, Marc.

He saw the invitation in her eyes and brought his lips up to hers.



Marc and Eileen were rolling around on top of the bed covers, kissing each other amorously. With the pleasure came relief, for Marc knew he'd been granted an eleventh hour stay of execution and he was enjoying every moment of it. Terrified of doing anything to end this bliss, Marc fought the urge to try to take her clothes off, contenting himself with exploring the curves of her body through her clothes. The night before they had made out for minutes at a time, pausing a few times to rest, holding one another and stroking each other's hair, before beginning again. He knew she had enjoyed it last night just as he had, and he expected that they would spend at least as much time together tonight.

He knew he was wrong when he felt her start to fight him. He couldn't believe it. She was still fighting him. Why? If she didn't want him to kiss her, then why didn't she pull away the moment he tried to make a move? Why stop now? What was the problem?

He remembered what had happened last time they stopped kissing. She gave him the cold shoulder for nearly a day. What would happen if he stopped kissing her now? Would she ever let him kiss her again? He decided he would try to ignore her wriggling for as long as possible. Maybe if he could make his kisses and caresses all the more pleasing to her, focus all his energy on electrifying her senses, she wouldn't break away from him. It was what he had been trying to do all along, but he redoubled his efforts, knowing that he only had a few moments to prove himself before her protests grew too great.

"We have to stop," she whispered between kisses.

Jesus Christ.

Marc stopped, burying his face in the covers.

"Can you - ?"



"Yes, yes," Marc grumbled, rolling off of Eileen and sitting up on the bed. Eileen sat up and traced her fingers through her hair, combing the wild strands back into place. She had that long-suffering look back on her face. The one that made him feel like he was as pleasant to be around as an eighty-year-old vicar with roving hands and a massive erection. Well, he wasn't about to let her tear his heart out for the third time in one day.

Marc stood up abruptly and shot Eileen an angry look. "Look, if I make you feel that uncomfortable, then I'll stay out of your way."

His fists balled at his side, he stalked across the room and stopped in front of the door. He looked at her again, waiting for her to stop him from leaving. She was staring glumly down at her own hands, folded on her lap.

"I'm tired of pushing you. I'm tired of being the bad guy."

Eileen didn't say a word.

"It's your move now. If you want me, I'll be upstairs." Furious and humiliated, Marc tore open the bedroom door and strode outside, almost crashing into Joachim's barrel chest.

"Marc, I wanted to –"

Marc continued past Joachim and head up the stairs to his room. "Not now, Joachim. Please."



Does he want me to follow him? Eileen wondered. Or am I the last person he wants to see right now? No. He wants me to follow him.

Eileen started to stand up, but her nervous stomach replied with a nauseous lurch that dragged her back to her seat. No. She was in no condition to go chasing after him. He'd made her too upset. He'd done this to her, made her sick with worry. The bastard. If only she could lay down a little while, until the nausea passed, but her room seemed smaller now than it had been even a few minutes ago and now she was beginning to understand where the cliché "the walls felt like they were closing in" came from.

Decisively, she fought the sickness in her stomach and stood up, tossing on her long emerald coat and darting out of her room. She raced past a taciturn Joachim, who was loitering like a lost soul in the second-floor parlor, and proceeded down the spiral staircase to the main floor restaurant. Thankfully, there was no sign of Marc or her archenemy Colin. She couldn't take any sniping at this particular moment. She had to get some air. She had to get to the D'Uomo. Maybe if she stood outside the church, a place she had found so inspiring in so many ways, the place where she and Marc had first kissed, she might know better what to do.

She crossed the Campo, navigating past several picnicking couples and groups of friends standing in ill-defined circles talking with one another in various and sundry languages. From what she understood of Italian, she overheard one bald man insisting that Savonarola was a great man and didn't deserve being executed on the spot in the past, just missing the substance of his friend's rebuttal.

Marc's right. I'm being unreasonable. Why won't I give him a chance to prove himself? What am I so afraid of? What if Marc and I can work something out? What if he's willing to make the commute to see me each week? Maybe, for once, I can have a boyfriend who possesses some small degree of intelligence instead of having to settle for some of the terrible boys I went to grammar school with. Or is this what I'm afraid of? Have I been alone so long that I'm afraid to take the risk of being with someone?



Eileen was so consumed with self-doubt and self-reflection, psychological and romantic analysis of Marc's motivation, and strategic planning of how their next meeting would go that she barely realized her feet had carried her to the D'Uomo until she came to a stop in front of the black-and-white striped giant. Once the sight of the mammoth structure sank in, Eileen felt the tears start to fill her eyes. She realized that she couldn't think her way around this problem. She had to clear her thoughts and see what her heart told her. She had to pray. Before she could begin her invocation, she was distracted by the approach of a handsome Italian soldier.

"I hate to see someone so beautiful look so depressed," said the young man.

Eileen rubbed the tears away from her eyes with the back of her hand. "I'm not depressed," she protested, ridiculously.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" he asked, his noble brown eyes searching out hers.

Eileen laughed humorlessly. "I wish there were."

"Is it your boyfriend?" the soldier asked without irony.

"He's not my...", Eileen began hastily, and then realized she might be lying. "Well he's...it's my...it's...well, I suppose he's something of...unless he just broke it off, or unless I did. I don't know what he is. I don't know what we are."

"And that's the problem?" said the man, as if he now understood the situation completely. "You do not know how you feel about him yet, and he's run out of patience."



"Yes, that's it exactly," Eileen confessed miserably.

"It's too bad he's felt the need to put so much pressure on you," the man said sadly, pressing a hand on her shoulder. His touch was cool, but reassuring.

Eileen turned to look at the tall man. "It's just all happening so fast. I didn't expect anything like this to happen. The last time I came here with students they were all so insipid. I never expected to meet another student who affected me the way Marc does. It all came as a total surprise to me."

"But that is a good thing," the man smiled.

"Is it?"

"But of course. Surprise is the greatest gift life can give us. It keeps things exciting. It keeps us off balance. If we were able to predict everything that would happen to us before it happened, wouldn't life be the most colossal bore?"

Eileen shifted her eyes sideways, avoiding the soldier's searching gaze. "I don't know."

"Well, I love surprises. Take now, for instance. I'm on leave from my assignment for the next two days. I was just going out for a little while to enjoy the night. The last thing I expected to see was a woman as lovely and enchanting as you standing outside the D'Uomo looking for a friendly person to talk to. I didn't expect any of this, but it's a surprise, and it's a wonderful one."

Eileen felt herself starting to cry again and didn't know why. "It's a wonderful surprise?"



She didn't expect the Italian paratrooper to place his hand gently under her chin and lift her face slowly up to his. His deep-set eyes were filled with affection and concern. Eileen felt herself start to blush.

"A wonderful surprise," he repeated, smiled a perfect white smile.

Eileen smiled back. "Thank you."

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