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Dancing to the End of Love

Written by Adrian White

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DANCING TO THE END OF LOVE

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For all the lost sons and daughters.

PRELUDE

I live in Pisa with Maria. She's the reason that I'm here. Maria Gabriela Carbone – an Italian Scot, or a Scottish Italian, depending on her moods, which are many and extreme. Carrier of a gene that will kill her sooner rather than later, so I forgive the mood swings. I forgive her because she is what she is – everything to me and everything that I'm not. No doubt she'd tell me that she's not mine to forgive and I'd agree; but I'd forgive her anyway.

So I'm back in Pisa, staring again at the Leaning Tower. It leans. It's not wasted on me that I've returned here, but I gave up long ago being amazed at where my life might take me. It doesn't really matter to me where I live and I try not to draw any conclusions or comparisons or circles. I'm here because Maria is here, and she won't be here forever and neither will I.

Of all the Italian cities Maria might have chosen in which to study, Pisa wouldn't have been the first on *my* list. Bologna, I think, I like the feel of above all others. Before I lived in Pisa, Bologna was my idea of an Italian university town, perhaps because the tourism isn't so blindingly in your face. Bologna's appeal reveals itself to you gradually and it gets to feel more personal. You can believe you're part of a select few who appreciate its beauty. Pisa, on the other hand, is a city of instant gratification when it comes to tourism – it does exactly

what it says on the postcard – but it also has one of the best hospitals in the world and so, for now, this is where I live.

Don't get me wrong; I like a lot of things about Pisa and the longer I live here the better it gets. It's the opposite of Bologna: Pisa reveals its mundane reality over a period of time. People live here and work here, study here and die here. The white marble of its public buildings is a temporary distraction, conveniently packaged together in the Campo dei Miracoli so Pisa can point and say, '*si*, all that is over there, that's where you want to be'. And, if truth be told, it's where I go just about every day. I love the grass around the Duomo; I particularly like the contrast of the grass and the marble. And the blue sky, of course, I'm forgetting about the cornflower blue of the sky. The green, the white and the blue – what a combination. I can be at peace here, sitting alone in the shadow of the Baptistry, and it never fails to blow me away.

If I'm not in her room when Maria finishes her lectures for the day, she knows to come and find me here. It's quite a walk from where we live and more often than not she'll get on with her studies first – we share a desk and she has essays and a thesis to write. Early evening, or late afternoon, is Maria's desk time. She also has a job in a local bar and this means she has to grab what opportunity she can to get her coursework completed. It's a little intense for my liking and occasionally a little tense too, but this is Maria; she's never going to change and I wouldn't want her any other way.

We do okay. I thought at first we'd be too much on top of each other but it hasn't been like that at all. I do most of my writing early in the day while Maria's at college and I can go over my work again in the evening. Also, she has the use of the university library and this leaves me free to work or to not

work; whatever I feel like doing. She worried about me for the first week – would I manage on my own in a strange city, or would I get lonely? I think she forgets sometimes who I am, or else she blanks out how I lived my life for most of the past three or four years before we met; whether she does so subconsciously or deliberately, I don't know. Perhaps she just has a natural concern, or a determination to be normal in abnormal circumstances? I let it go and smile; it's nice to have someone care for you, even if the cause for their worry doesn't actually exist. Lonely – how can I be lonely? Look at all these people, thousands of them, every day, holding up their arms to support the Leaning Tower for their photographs. Families, lovers, strangers, tourists. Some argue over nothing, made irritable through tiredness and the heat, while others flop down on the grass beside me and just enjoy. I love it here and I'm happy.

I used to leave Maria a note in the room – *gone for a walk, gone to buy groceries* – but the notes soon became redundant. We live along the river and my walks usually take a circular route along Via Santa Maria to the Campo and then back through the side streets to the Piazza del Cavalieri, stopping off at the market to shop for tonight's dinner. My rests at the Campo have become longer and longer, partly in recognition of Maria's need for space – work space and personal space – but also through sheer contentment. After everything – this. I know how to count my blessings and I count them every day.

Maria came looking for me one day, early into my routine, and neither of us was surprised when she found me on the grass between the Duomo and the Baptistry.

'You're such an English tourist,' she said.

And I am. I don't ever want to lose my wonder at this place, this beautiful island of green, white and blue.

So sometimes now when Maria comes to join me in the Campo, she walks in the opposite direction, through the market, glancing in the shops she knows I like to frequent. I am that predictable, but I also like to wait to see her arrive in the Campo, among the crowds of people, and watch for the moment when she switches from her thoughts of whatever to her thoughts of finding me. It's good to see her from a distance, but only because I get to see her up close too. That girl there – she's looking for me, and when she sees me, her walk changes from an unconscious swing of happiness to a very deliberate come-on. She knows what she can do to me, and even though I know she knows it, I fall for it every time. I play my part; I sit back, resting on my outstretched arms, and I stare. I'm lucky and I know it. She's smart and she's sexy, and she's with me – or rather, I'm with her.

'Am I in heaven?' I ask.

She deliberately stands where I can see up her dress, so I shake my head and smile.

'What?' she asks, all innocence.

'You're shameless.'

'You're the one doing the looking.'

'I'd be crazy not to.'

'I'm starving. I'm at college all day and I have to come looking for you if I want something to eat?'

'You could always try shopping and cooking for yourself.'

'Yeah, right – that's not the deal.'

'We have a deal?'

'You know we do – you feed me, you get to have sex with me.'

'Which would you like to do first?'

'Very funny,' she says. 'You know the rules – you don't do one, you don't get to do the other.'

I miss Maria on the days she doesn't come to the Campo, but once it gets to a certain time and she still hasn't arrived, I know she must have some college work to finish before heading out later to her job at El Greco's. I also know she's avoiding me. She's been avoiding me for days, which is no easy thing when you share a single study bedroom. She has a secret she's keeping from me – which isn't that much of a secret, all things considered – and the consequences of it are worrying her. I understand why she's nervous about telling me but I hope she's not scared; fear like that can sit in your belly like a cannonball.

Tonight, perhaps, I'll talk to her about the baby.

The sun dips behind the Duomo and I stand to brush the grass from my clothes. Maria might joke about the cooking and the eating but she has to cram that food inside her, so I head off to shop for tonight's dinner.

LAURA

2004

As soon as I see her, I know what I want to do to her. And I know it's not a very nice thing to do.

I have my Brad Pitt look about me. I'm not saying I look like Brad Pitt – I'm a long way from that – but there's a look: a scruffy but clean look, a *happy and content with who I am* look, a *seen a lot of the sun but taking care of my skin* look.

Thelma and Louise without the cowboy hat . . . *A River Runs Through It* . . . any of the outdoor, sunshine movies. Happy to be alone, but open to conversation. Enviably self-possessed – you get the picture?

I'm travelling alone. I always travel alone these days. I live alone; I am alone. It's so much easier when you're on your own. There are no worries about finding a seat with the kids. I often wait until last before boarding a plane and enjoy the lack of hassle and responsibility. This flight today is only half-full – or half-empty, you choose – and still the parents are panicking and pushing, watching out for any sneaky queue-jumping, resenting the older passengers who block the way and take an age to hobble down the stairs and across to the plane. When I walk out from the departure lounge, all the passengers are lined up at the first set of steps, baking in the hot afternoon

sun, babies bawling in the heat, toddlers trying their parents' patience. I walk to the rear steps; I'm comfortable and settled into my aisle seat before she's even entered the cabin.

I'm not looking for her – I hadn't noticed her in the terminal – but something happens as she looks down the cabin, searching for the best seats for her family. There's a second as she sees me – a moment of indignation at my having jumped the queue – before she looks up and notices the other passengers who have followed me to take the rear steps of the plane. There's a smile at not being sharp enough to have thought to do the same, a shake of the head at the futility of all the pushing and shoving when the flight is so empty, and she catches my eye and smiles. I sympathise – or, rather, I convey my sympathy by returning her smile, acknowledging the joys of parenting with a slight shake of my head – but I know right away that this isn't how she sees me. I am the antithesis of parenthood. I'm freedom; I am lack of responsibility – all this in one look and in the space of a second.

Still, now, she could disappear beneath my radar. In that one shared moment, I've seen something in her – something nice and good, something I know I would like – but it doesn't have to come to anything. It could be one of a thousand thoughts I have today – well, maybe not a thousand, but you know what I mean – of the different women, of the many different lives we all could have, if only we choose to pursue them. What she chooses to do, though, is to walk on down the cabin and take the seats opposite me.

I wonder why. I mean, it's obvious who and what she is: a mother with her family – these five words define her. She can't allow the likes of me into her world. From now on, she refuses to acknowledge my existence and my role is to similarly deny

that anything so much as a smile has passed between us. These are the games we play. I'm not stupid: I know that brief acknowledgement we shared is just that and nothing more, but I like that she's allowed herself this little lapse of sitting close by. I like that I might be the briefest of glimpses into another life for her, one that she's chosen not to take and is happy not to have taken, and I smile because it makes me feel good.

Englishness is all around me. You have to be away for a while before you can feel this, how quaintly odd and typically English they are when they're together like this. Or is it just that when you see them abroad, they're so much more obviously English, and stand out from their different surroundings? And I don't mean the football shirts – the shirts are more for the English airports, before the holiday flights to foreign countries. Have shirt, will travel – always the England shirt and not the club team you happen to support. You might not know much about where you're going, but you want the friendly recognition from another shirt-wearing Englishman once you get there . . . and not the rivalry of a City or a United. The shirt gives you the confidence to fly off to the strange places, to the darker faces that, funnily enough, might not think so much of you for what you're wearing.

I'm on a Ryanair plane in Italy – in Pisa – and yet the whole tone of the cabin is one of Englishness and the English. There must be a few Italians on the plane, and I suspect there are a few Irish people planning to fly on from Stansted once we arrive, but the English dominate the cabin and make it their own. With their over-politeness that makes them sound a little slow and stupid, with their worried faces as they check for seats and their loud, southern English accents that will always

be alien to me – I'm happy not to count myself amongst their number.

It's funny, the reasoning that allows me to think of the English as though I'm not English myself. It's as if, because I've not lived there for so long, I'm somehow different to all these passengers. Or have I always thought of myself as different, first by choosing to live in Ireland and then by travelling for so long that I've effectively made myself stateless? Yet it's still a British passport I carry in my pocket; I'm not that much of a vagrant. I know it's my Britishness I would cling to if I ever found myself in a tight spot, if ever I had to find my way home in a hurry.

This is the difference: these English passengers are going home. I have nowhere to call home and haven't had for almost three years.

My 'friend' across the aisle is travelling with her husband and young children, two little girls.

'If you sit in there with Jenny,' she says to her husband, 'we can maybe keep the seats for Bob and Laura.'

Her husband sits in the row in front with the elder of the two girls. I deliberately don't look across, and close my eyes to concentrate on my breathing. Nobody asks to sit in the seats next to me. It wouldn't bother me, but there's no need for anybody to ask, as there are plenty of free seats. Hearing all these English voices suddenly makes me conscious of the fact that I'm on my way back into the world. I've spent the best part of three years hearing many different languages spoken, most of which I don't understand well enough to follow, and one – Greek – that I've given up on even trying. I know enough to be polite and to get what I need, whether it's accommodation, food or directions, but it's a long time since I've been in an

environment where I understand every word I hear spoken. I guess this is why I'm picking up on all these holidaymakers' petty concerns: because I can understand them.

Bob and Laura arrive; already I call them by their names in my head. This makes six of them travelling together and I can see why it makes sense to save the seats – two rows of three to keep them all together. Her husband moves back to sit with her; she has the window seat and he the aisle, with their baby daughter safely between them. I'm surprised the baby's old enough to require a seat of her own as she doesn't look much more than one, or maybe a very young two-year-old. I used to be pretty good at guessing ages, but perhaps I'm not as good as I once was. The elder daughter, Jenny, sits on her own between Laura and Bob – three, is she, or maybe four?

I used to have a daughter of my own – Ciara – but I lost her. She'll be almost four now, a little older perhaps. It's almost time for her to start school. This September, I guess – just a few short weeks away.

I can see that Laura is the sister and that Bob is Laura's boyfriend. That was a pretty good idea for them all to go away together – more variety for the kids and the chance of a break for the parents. One night out together, alone, while Bob and Laura mind the kids. It makes sense.

All this and they haven't even closed the cabin doors yet. I deliberately look away before they pick up on my listening in.

It's easy to figure out the family dynamic though, even without watching closely. Her husband reads his *Daily Mail* while she settles their younger daughter with a picture book. The elder daughter refers back constantly to her mother – never her father – for sweets and a drink for the flight, or to show a page from the book she's reading. Bob sits in front of

the husband and reads the in-flight magazine, turning around occasionally to point out the interesting bits from an article on Amsterdam. Her husband says he'll read it later and returns to his *Mail*. Laura seems very close to her sister and I can see she enjoys her role as the children's aunty. She's young – in her early twenties, I think – but you can see she wants a family like this for herself. The talk between the four females is easy and natural; the men are content, if quiet. No one here has fallen out over the past week or so, and the holiday has been a success.

But I don't think either man appreciates just what he has. Bob must be secure, almost smug, in the knowledge that he's Laura's boyfriend. He has reason to be – if anything, she's the more obviously attractive of the two sisters. Bob's the one with the least responsibility here: all he has to do is get along with the kids and doing so puts him in a stronger position with Laura. She has the feeling he'd make a good dad; all he has to do is bide his time and he's there. But I don't think he knows just how easily she could be taken from him.

Pay her more attention, I want to tell him.

And the husband: does he think it's enough that he just turned up on this holiday? Sure, he works hard all year and yes, he deserves a holiday, but this is supposed to be quality time with the family, and he seems oblivious to the three of them. There's a lot to lose here: two daughters and a wife. It's not enough just to read your paper. She prompts any conversation they have and any help he gives her is asked for rather than offered. I gave more for my one daughter than he gives for two and still I lost her.

Horses for courses, I think. Different strokes for different folks. They all seem happy enough. The kids don't suffer with

their ears as the plane takes off. She chats away to her sister in between listening to her daughters. What more do you need from your partner than to carry the bags and to be there for a cuddle in bed at night?

As I said, I pick up on all this without even trying. I catch her eye every now and again when she leans forward to speak to Laura but there's nothing there for me. She changes at one point from her contact lenses to her glasses and it adds a few years. She looks even more like the mammy, even more content with her lot in life, but I recognise something when I see it and I see a quality in her that she can't hide, no matter how hard she might try.

The flight is uneventful. This is the first time in a long time that I've been up in the air. I've been travelling by trains, buses and ferries, with the occasional hitched ride in a car. I've been clinging to the surface of the earth. When we land, they announce we can leave the plane by either the front or the rear steps, but I resist the temptation to catch her eye. I notice the husband carries the younger daughter as she sleeps, that's all.

The weather gives me an immediate reality check and the difference in temperature has me wishing I had a jacket or a coat. I run across to the bus carrying us to the terminal, no longer harbouring any fancy notions about Brad Pitt.

It might be this lack of a coat or it might be something else that alerts the attention of immigration control. They take me to one side, away from the passport queue.

'Can I ask you where you're travelling from, sir?'

'Pisa.'

'And your destination in the UK?'

'I'm travelling on to Ireland, to Dublin,' I say.

'Do you mind if I just check through your bag?'

I pull the small rucksack off my shoulder and hand it to him. He scans it first with some sort of long stick and then opens the buckles. What are you going to do? These people: their authority derives from your fear that if you kick up a fuss they can probe your anus with a camera. So I wait for him to go through my things. It takes only a few seconds.

‘You live in Ireland, do you?’

‘Yes,’ I say for simplicity.

‘Do you mind if I make a note of your address there?’

Well, yes, I do mind but there’s nothing I can do about it, so I give him Siobhan’s address – our home, as was.

‘And you’ve been on holiday in Italy, yes?’

Jesus – what is this?

‘I’ve been travelling around Europe for a year or so,’ I say.

‘Very nice – and what do you do that allows you that kind of luxury?’

I shrug and reach for my bag but he doesn’t let me take it.

‘Seriously, sir, what do you do for a living? I just need you to tell me that and then I can let you go.’

Should I tell him? That I live off the money given to me when I agreed never to see Siobhan and Ciara again?

‘I’m a writer,’ I say, dreading the conversation, but he releases the grip on my bag.

‘That’s fine, sir, thank you. Have a safe onward journey to Ireland.’

It’s routine, I know, but it throws me and I have to remind myself of the reason for coming back when there’s nothing here for me to come back for.

I was based for a while in North Africa – Morocco, mainly, and then Tunisia for last winter – before returning in the spring to the Greek Islands. As the temperatures rose, I had

the idea of travelling up from the bottom of Italy, inching further north each time it became too hot or the mosquitoes moved in. And that's what I did, catching the ferry first to Brindisi and then hitching, or walking when rides were hard to come by. Having shipped my things to Pisa, I was happy in the knowledge that if necessary I could always just jump on a train. I diverted for a week or so to Rome to meet up with Danny – or Brother Daniel as he is now called. He's studying at the Irish College, preparing for the priesthood. We argued, about money mostly – his money and my money, how he'd given his away and how he suggested I do the same. I stayed with Danny for a couple of days in the accommodation the college provides for tourists on a pilgrimage to Rome, but I couldn't suffer the piety for long and had to put some distance between us again. I swapped the noise of the city for the open countryside along the spine of Italy. Some part of trekking across those barren mountains must have stirred a desire for the colour and the rain of Ireland, and I decided to fly home for the month of August. When I arrived in Pisa, I collected my few belongings from the station and booked a flight for the following week to Dublin.

But I hadn't reckoned on the cold, and I still haven't really thought where I will go once I get to Dublin. I thought I had my shit sufficiently together but now I'm not so sure. I'm already having my doubts and this is only England. What will I do once I get to Dublin? It's one thing to wander through a foreign country in the sunshine, quite another to wander through Ireland in weather that's changeable at best. Being pulled aside by Immigration is enough to shake me out of the smug contentment I've been used to – just as those English voices had on the flight – and it brings the real world sharply

back into focus. This is a world where you worry about the stamps from foreign countries on your passport, especially if those foreign countries are in North Africa.

This is England.

At baggage reclaim the monitor says belt number one, but when I walk across, our flight number isn't there; this is obviously going to take a while. I recognise a few faces from the flight. Some passengers decide to stay by the belt, while others return to the monitor. I notice a teenage girl looking at me and how she quickly turns away. She looks good – tanned and well dressed, waiting for a jacket from her baggage, just like me. Her sister joins her and she's just as good-looking – a little older but still in her teens. They chat and both look my way. Now it's my turn to look away but it feels good. They're joined by their father and the three of them consult with each other. The girls walk by me on their way back to check the monitor – how come I didn't notice them on the plane?

I stroll over to their father and catch his eye. He smiles – typical, his face says to me. I walk the circular length of the baggage carousel and he's still alone when I return.

'No sign of the bags, so?' I ask.

'No, nothing yet,' he says. 'My girls are over by the monitor; they'll let us know if there's any change.'

He's very affable, very easy-going. I could be his friend, in another world.

'Have you far to go, if they ever decide to give us our bags back?' I ask.

'Not too far. Cambridge.'

'That's a nice part of the country.'

'You know it well, do you?'

‘I’m often there through my work,’ I say, lying. ‘Are you in one of the colleges?’

He laughs.

‘Is it that obvious? Yes, just been away for a few days with the girls – try to instil some culture in them.’ The belt starts up. ‘Ah, maybe now,’ he says.

‘Best of luck,’ I say, and move over to a space by the belt. His daughters are making their way back over and I don’t want to be too obvious – caught talking to their father.

Yes, we could be friends. I could meet him one day in Cambridge, in town or in his college – invent some business or other. Fancy a pint some time? Is he alone – separated? Sees the girls occasionally; I could be there by chance one time and get to know them. Not move too soon, build up the trust. Our parents don’t understand us, they’d tell me. I’m a little younger than their dad so it might make all the difference. See both sides – he loves you, you know, don’t give him a hard time. Find a shared interest with the girls – the movies, perhaps? Ask his permission. Pleased to have them taken off his hands – safer off with me than out with some of those young bucks. Where’s the mother – some frosty academic bitch? Too busy doing research to take time off for the family holiday? Might be something there for me too? I could fuck up his life big time. If I can’t have his happiness, at least I can take his happiness away.

This is the ease with which my world might change. Who knows what may happen? I take one last look at the girls – yes, I’m right, there’s something there for me – but then turn my back on them and watch out for my bag.

The family of six from the plane approach the belt now that our luggage is about to appear. They have two trolleys

– Bob wheels one, Laura the other. Her husband carries their sleeping baby while she holds the hand of the elder child, Jenny. No culture trip to Tuscany for these guys, I think – they’ve been in Viareggio for the week, maybe caught a glimpse of the Leaning Tower but almost certainly didn’t make it as far as Florence.

They stand close by. It’s one of those days when what I hope might happen does happen. If I’d been coming on too strong, I’m sure she might have avoided standing close by. I get the feeling she’s happy to be seen with her family – look at what I have here, she’s telling me. Bob stands beside me with the trolley behind him; he’s the luggage man. I consider using the same conversation I had with the Cambridge professor – try to discover where they’re heading – but again, I don’t want to be too much, too obvious. It’s enough that I can listen in on their happy family group.

The bags go by on the belt. I see my own as it appears down at the far end and I decide not to take it on the first run past.

Bob muscles in to pick up a huge suitcase. There’s an identical one immediately behind and I can picture how it is – Bob and Laura have one case, while her family of four share the other.

‘Is this one yours too?’ I ask Bob. I can see him struggling with the weight of the first, trying to lodge it on to Laura’s trolley.

‘Cheers mate,’ he says, twisting around to look at the bag.

I drag it off and on to Bob’s trolley. I catch a glimpse of the label – Springfield, I think it says, and Brighton, although that’s a long way from Stansted. I know she’s watched me lift the bag and I walk away, further along the belt.

Cheers mate – fucking English, commonly used by blokes

who wish to get along. Or occasionally used in an aggressive way, but not here, not by Bob. Brighton – Jesus, that’s a long way. Surely there are flights out to Italy from Gatwick? Yet I can picture them all, piling into the husband’s SUV – yes, makes sense in a way. Last-minute booking, cheap flight – come on, let’s fuck off to Italy for a week. Cheers mate!

I see the Cambridge professor walking away with his daughters and the younger one throws me one last look. Yes, I could do that. Be the first, spoil her for everybody else. Make it so that only I will do and then move on to her sister. Sibling rivalry – could I manage them both? Be worth trying at least – be fun trying.

My bag comes around again – a small sports holdall that’s seen me through the past three years – and I grab it off the belt. I don’t need a trolley. It’s easy to travel light when there’s only one of you. Once I’d sold the laptop and given up on the whole writing thing, there wasn’t much luggage left to carry. I have a few T-shirts – faded by the sun and soon to be replaced – a change of trousers and some underwear. I wear my walking boots when I’m travelling because they’re easier to carry on my feet than in a bag.

It’s a pain having to check in for Dublin all over again but there’s only a small queue so I tag on to the end. I’m on autopilot here, taking out my passport and reservation number and, once I’ve checked my bag, I revert to that independent-traveller state of mind. I’m hungry and I decide to eat on this side of passport control. There are almost two hours before my flight. I walk the entire way back along the concourse to the Irish pub at the far end. The pint tastes good and when my food arrives I order a second. It’s good, everything is good, and I relax into the ambience of the bar.