Yari Selvetella

Le REGOLE degli AMANTI

ROMANZO
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YARI SELVETELLA
THE LOVERS' RULES

translated from the Italian
by Julia MacGibbon

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IOLE

It was just a shot of coffee. And I relive that afternoon of real cold, the kind that rips through Rome for a couple days at most each year, and the warmth of the bar we walk into, and the coffee cup on the counter with its air of messy normality, and my heart in my mouth, and me trying to quieten it by telling myself simply that: it's just a coffee, just a coffee in a bar in Piazza Fiume. Gusts of wind rush through the funnel formed by the Via Salaria and the windows vibrate. Inside, an enviable warmth draws women and men together like animals sharing a cave. Sharing a den. My fingers are cold, even inside the black leather gloves. His big hands open the café's glazed door. A curious silver and white-opal ring clatters against its glass. He smiles. His teeth are opals too, his lips soft and feminine, his cheekbones hard and male. A discreet salt-and-pepper beard, his shoulders straight and broad.

He's so very beautiful that it's impossible not to desire him: just those almond eyes would do it, eyes always softened by some form of languor, by a sort of melancholy. And, behind that veil, flashes of enthusiasm or determination, which – I will discover only later – occasionally borders on obtuse stubbornness. He's so tall I could

vanish into him, but he doesn't seem gawky the way tall men always are, and this is something that's already occurred to me several times since I first saw him; or rather, I've thought he was gawky in a way that was quite obvious and almost hypnotic. At the very instant in which he's about to lose control of his body, he's quite capable of effecting an abrupt manoeuvre which completely justifies each of his previous movements. When his horse unexpectedly takes fright or balks and seems to be getting the upper hand, taking advantage of his distractedness, of his chatting with another rider, of the fact that the crop is about to slip from his palm, he gives the lightest of pulls on the reins and everything rights itself. His whip strikes and the animal responds.

His name is Sandro. No one calls him by his real name, Alessandro. I met him at a riding centre on the Appian Way: he owns a horse, while I simply own a pair of boots, a riding hat and thigh muscles which recall the rhythmic gymnastics I did as a teen. I am young, yes. In my prime. And I too possess a certain radiance, I know that. Now, many years later, I can say that without any false modesty and with an edge of nostalgia: these are the years in which men notice me and spin round to look at me if I'm wearing a tight skirt. And I often do. My girlfriends are happy to be seen with me, I'm a graduate in Employment Sociology and I still contribute to research projects at the university. I already have a three-year-old daughter and on Sunday mornings I take myself off to learn how to ride because I'm always gripped with enthusiasm for something or other – for photography, for art history, for politics, for kayaking and, right now, for horse riding. I go to the riding centre alone because my husband doesn't like horses. While I take my riding lessons on Sunday mornings, he stays with Giulia.

Although, in reality, Nicola limits himself to popping her in the car and driving her to my mother-in-law's, where I normally join them for lunch. But before that, I wash her, brush her hair, get her dressed, help her to cut out the playdough biscuits we pretend to cook in her toy oven, and then I'm finally ready to dedicate a couple of hours to myself. Right up until I get to the riding school I continue to feel guilty about going off on my own. But then, the beauty of certain places lies in the fact that they succeed in making us feel we're somewhere else, far from the city, which suddenly recedes into the distance along with our lives.

I experience a truce: I don't mull things over, I don't make plans, the present moment is all I need. On weekdays the sensation is unknown to me, but every Sunday – for two months now – it seems almost surprisingly inevitable. I know exactly when it is that I begin to feel this way. It happens every time I see Sandro.

He gallops and I am learning to trot. He disappears into the valleys along the Via Ardeatina or off in the direction of the vineyards at Fioranello; I go round and round the arena, in diligent circles. I note the moment he arrives and I know when he leaves. Being on horseback is inescapably associated with thoughts of him: as long as he's there it distracts and unnerves me, if he leaves it saddens me.

Blessed is the fraction of a second in which our eyes meet for the first time – so fleeting that the encounter seems not to have really happened, so intense that it is like a seed falling into the earth. The second time round lasts for an instant or two, and then I hate the irony which fills that gaze, almost as though mocking, from the lofty heights of his existential gawkiness, my lack of equestrian skills. And this is how Sandro begins his existence, in a state of grace and conflict: he

is an idea, entirely my own, of a person. I invent him, but he exists. He rises behind the blinds alongside the sun, he startles the darkness of my sleep, he moves me and comforts me because I imagine him. Simply that. When he actually appears, I am reminded of my own reality and then I am almost frightened by my desire to approach him, to recognize in him this thing that I myself have created. I long for Sundays and to see him slip out of the stables off towards the open fields, while I apply myself to my circle work, remaining almost stationary.

On each occasion I take possession of odd details, or at least those I manage to snatch from a distance, or I invent them, approximating, back at home while I tidy up the kitchen or play with Giulia. There he is: all mine, beautiful, present and untroubling; I can laugh at myself and the racing heart this crush of mine brings on, quite harmlessly. Then on Sundays I crave his powerful, gravelly voice, and I strain to learn more of the angles of that face and the texture of that forehead; I peer as far as the reins from which those knuckles emerge, and a ray of sunlight settles right on the tip of his nose. For a few seconds, as he makes his appearance – and this is the game –, I take possession of piece of him. When our eyes meet. For a fraction of an instant.

SANDRO

Some great authors maintain that true writers really are born to write a single book. I'm convinced that's even truer for authentic failures like me. We need an obsession, or an experience which justifies and in some way redeems an otherwise insignificant life. On the pages of my life, in the book that I simultaneously write, read and am, that work of art is my relationship with Iole. Thirty years on, I still call her by the same name, the same agent noun with which we once defined ourselves back in a different century: lover, my lover. And I hers. A single word, ungendered, like the angels. We ourselves are the project and the completed work, we the victory and the defeat, the attempt, the consequence, the limit. Us, our lives, the experiment, the method. The rules.

This story can be written as though it is not my own, and yet it is more mine than anything I possess, even if I reduce myself to a character, to a name, to a point of view, and choose this as a way to narrate the different people we were in that far-off 1989. Here, then, are some of the episodes of our life, the life of Sandro and Iole, laid out on these pages as though it were true. Anything but a failure.

Our love – their love – begins in the early months of the year. Both of them are already married. Sandro, at thirty-six, has a marriage that he remembers having been stormy ever since his son, Fabio, was born in 1981, almost a year to the day after they got back from their honeymoon in Egypt. Letizia, his wife, is a high school Chemistry teacher used to excelling in everything: colleagues and students are enchanted by her competence and passion, her girlfriends by her unflinching loyalty, the other regular swimmers at the pool by her eternally shapely buttocks and her ringlets which, even in the changing rooms, are perfectly teased and fabulously fashionable, à la Kelly LeBrock or Joey Tempest. She considers her husband an unrealistic dreamer, perhaps even a bit of a prat, but she loves him. She's capable of loving even someone like him. They live near Piazza Mazzini in a flat that Sandro's family have owned for three generations, like the house in Rocca di Mezzo and the villa in Santa Marinella. Their family car is an Audi 100 and Letizia's is a Peugeot 205 Cabriolet. These things stoke Letizia's ambitions for social advancement – a process already set in train by her father, who had been born a country lad in the province of Frosinone and, thanks to sponsors with political connections among Giulio Andreotti's Christian Democrats, ended up a paper pusher at the Ministry for Public Works, with a flat in the Batteria Nomentana district in the north of Rome advantageously rented from a pension fund from which, many years later, the family would purchase the freehold under a right-to-buy scheme.

For little Fabio, Letizia is already dreaming of a foreign-language high school, perhaps the French Lycee, but she hasn't yet discounted the idea of sending him to a prestigious Catholic private school, the De Merode College – a possibility that Sandro has, for the time being, put

the kibosh on, at the cost of violent rows and despite the fact that the school also boasts a basketball team of some renown, and the sport is one that the boy, who is taller than his peers, seems particularly well-suited for. Letizia is a beautiful woman, ambitious and practical; she would be capable of making sacrifices for the sake of the family, and for him personally if only they had identified a common objective: saving up for a new house or moving to a different city to strengthen her husband's career prospects. Sandro, however, cannot wholly admire her. He is irritated by her dogged conscientiousness which is so very petty bourgeois, and the condescension she reserves from herself and her own family and which inevitably mutates into formidably rigorous expectations of others. Above all, he dislikes her imperviousness to doubt: once she has chosen a particular path she is quite capable of following it right into Hell.

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An unexpected and fundamentally longed-for thing has occurred. He has met a woman capable of modifying the way he sees the world. He has met Iole. He has fallen in love.

It happens in stages, first at the riding centre where, without much natural talent but with a certain grace, the young woman is learning to mount: that sweet smile, simultaneously modest and loquacious, and formed of softly curved cheekbones, white teeth and lips both long and full; that way she has of observing him without embarrassment, as though everything in life can be treated as a game. From a distance, he asks himself what it is that illuminates her face that way, and is certain

he remembers blue eyes shining under the shadow of that riding hat. Passing close by her, however, he realizes that they are a glittering black, and that even black can glitter.

What draws him to Iole is not animal magnetism but a genuine connection. It seems both natural and right that he should seek her out and that this should bring him happiness, and yes, he dares use precisely that word and envisages it not as weighty and complicated, like a coffer full of treasure, but light as a hot air balloon. When he is at her side everything seems to float. The enthusiasm the woman feels for the things of this world is evident. She is young but already gives the impression of wanting to recoup something from life; time is short, there's no time to lose. The time for living is now.

He had already sensed this in her at the riding school; he had understood it during their first rendezvous in a bar in Piazza Fiume – a winter afternoon that reached its conclusion at the house in Via Savoia, on a day that was, quite by chance, Iole's birthday –; and he had known it for certain when, the following day, he had found himself missing her.

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They are inside the tent. Sleep is eluding them. They chat by the light of the battery-powered torch until it begins to weaken and Sandro prefers to switch it off. They are surprised by the flickering moonlight. It reaches right through the canvas. Or perhaps that is simply one of the floodlights along the campsite driveway: it makes no difference. They are burning up, they spent too long in the sun.

There's a smell of vanilla-perfumed cream, of dirty socks and of salt. While playing in the waves and lying on the beach at various point in the day, they had used the double airbed from the tent. Now it's damp and stained with big white splotches and the glue has started to give way. It has begun to deflate and if they move around too much they touch the ground. It's a careful balancing act, managing to stay afloat just half an inch above the earth, but that's all that's needed to keep them aloft. They manage.

'Let's stay like this for ages,' insists Iole. Sandro nods, or thinks he does, and finally they fall asleep.

In that early June, in that land hoarding ancient stories, those two lovers feel they are within reach of a knowledge that most people are denied.

There must be an alternative, they tell themselves, a regulatory system, a contract, a social model, a protocol for employing the act of love in such a way that it is consummated without ever consuming itself, like the Vestal flame, a way of cheating the seasons, like the crop rotation farmers practise to guarantee their fields remain forever bountiful.

It is the dose that makes the poison, but it can also make the philtre: they must never tire of one another.

If it comes to an end – and all things do come to an end –, it must happen once all has been truly explored and experienced. Only then will they say farewell.

If it lasts a long time, their relationship must be a vehicle for reciprocal growth and not a sacrificial prize. This will be their only blessing.

They talk like a pair of secret agents setting off on a risky mission, calmly contemplating death and trapped in the unavoidable net of

rhetoric, which is the cheap poetry of all unfathomable intentions, of great and inexpressible emotions. The position each resolves to adopt in the eyes of the other has yet to be defined. There is no name for it, if not the most tender and equivocal, which might as well be kept in use: lovers, lovers forever.

What a strange game it is, this game they are hazarding without any fear of the ridiculous, alone as they are, sporadically exchanging chatter as they walk along the road, leaning against the plastic panels of the Citroën Mehari as they wait for its engine to cool, and then, once they get to Cagliari, wandering through the war-bombed sections of the old town amid the roofless towers and bastions of the White City, out onto the belvederes whose views are so sweeping that they seem to be sitting right at the centre of the horizon, and then off towards the cliffs along the western coast.

This is the phase dedicated to the framing of their constitution.

Sandro proposes a legislative device, a declaration of intent, a contract – albeit one devoid of sanctions, if not the failure of their relationship itself – to the terms of which they must adhere. Iole deems this approach authoritarian: what they need is not prescriptive, but an ideal intent to which they will be morally bound, like conspiring deities, like believers, with a handful of adamantine principles by which every deed in their life will be governed, leaving space for interpretation and analogy.

They get to the Sulcis peninsula and from there as far as Cape Pecora. They have fun: they suck on *fregola*, the granular local pasta, and seafood; they bite into morsels of roast goat; they stretch out in the sun on the island's westerly beaches amid abandoned mine shafts, powdery sand, stones as big as skulls and families of wild deer.

Some points the lovers dispute until they almost come to blows; on others they come to a sudden agreement, which surprises and almost unnerves them.

They continue to sleep and make out in the tent as though they were teenagers; she offers herself with an abandon she has never before experienced, she says. He dares to request unorthodox pleasures without feeling shy or ridiculous.

The two positions harmonise at the very last minute – when the conference on employment law has already concluded, successfully predicting the legislative chaos and intergenerational betrayal which will materialise within the space of a few years. The conference produces proceedings which are published a few months later; the constitutional assembly of the lovers produces the document via which Sandro and Iole will submit some of the most delicate aspects of their lives to an experiment which will in part make of them mere guinea pigs, and in part persuades them they are setting sail towards an epic liberty, towards a nonconformity which is both a political act and a personal conquest. They promise solemnly to abide by it, with greater cognisance – and heavens knows what confidence – than they had brought to the vows uttered at their respective weddings.

'Should I trust you?' Iole provokes him, and instantly regrets having asked.

'Of course not,' he mocks, 'no one trusts lawyers, especially ones like me.'

Iole says nothing further, so Sandro feels obliged to clarify.

'But this is the first time I've written the law myself. Or we have. That makes a difference, I think. So, what can I say? Trust me as

though I were someone else, maybe. As though I were you. Can you be trusted?'

'Usually. When I'm not on the run in Sardinia with my lover, yes. Here, I'm not sure. Have you ever trusted someone who deliberately gets themselves into trouble?'

'Yes. Frequently. In fact you could say I only trust people who make a mess of things.'

'Well that's alright then. Let's trust each other.'

From a notebook, facing the cliffs of Nebida, with a sunset that inflames the great purple rocks like a gargantuan ensign, Sandro reads out *The Lovers' Rules* for the very first time. Iole listens and suggests they add a subtitle which she thinks should be ideological in flavour, but Sandro insists on something more literary. In the end they opt for *A Manifesto for Lighthearted Love*.

They believe they will be happier and they are unafraid of being ludicrous. They are undaunted by the tenacity required or by the contents of their treaty which, although agreed upon quite lucidly, will make life hard. They have understood what it is that makes their love special: it is a game. Which is why they take it so seriously.

The pact will be valid for thirty years, but subject to the possibility of termination, informally and without motivation, at any time. Once it has run its term, if they actually get that far, they will accept the consequences of the choice they have made – one both frivolous and militaristic.

Together they become the guardians of a pledge and the authors of a story which one day may perhaps deter, convince or delude others just like them. They are writers, jurists and sociologists. In the pauses that they dedicate to silent reflection, between one treaty article and

the next, she whistles an old song. The sun falls whole into the vastness of the western Mediterranean, the night is slow to take possession of the hills but the sea is already black. In what survives of the light, they feel united, close to one another in a way that no one has ever been before them.

Yari Selvetella
The Rules of Lovers

LE REGOLE DEGLI AMANTI

Yari Selvetella depicts two authentic, thoughtless and selfish characters, the scant Italian bourgeoisie of the 21st century and the flame of a man and a woman glowing with their love for words, their need for authenticity and for a great contemporary romance.

To fall in love in adulthood is always difficult: that unreasonable feeling exposes us and makes us take important decisions. That is what happens to the main characters of this novel: since the moment they meet, Iole's and Sandro's lives start turning around one question, how to protect their happiness from the passing of time. They think they have an answer, or at least a starting point: they know what they do not want. They want to escape their age's boredom, but without questioning their dull marriages in name of deeply loved children. So they decide to make their secret couple a light love, where a neverending research is continuously started but never ended: they even set a 30-year pact and a decalogue to guide them, in order to experiment the charms of undercover love and to fully live their marriages and children.

YARI SELVETELLA (Rome, 1976) published the novels *La banda Tevere* (2015) and *Le stanze dell'addio* (Bompiani, 2018), longlisted for the Strega Prize, and the poetry collection *La maschera dei gladiatori* (2014). He works as a TV author for Rai Uno.

LONGLISTED FOR 2018 STREGA PRIZE WITH *LE STANZE DELL'ADDIO*

"The novel tells both the power of love and its exceptionality and even its seriousness when it finishes. It tries obsessively, and therefore desperately, to free clandestine love from imperfections."
Francesco Piccolo,
"La Lettura – Corriere della Sera"

"*The Rules of Lovers* stands as a fresco of the Italian bourgeoisie "with few qualities" on the glimpse of the new millennium and, at the same time, as a literary investigation on the possibility of great love, today."
Il Libraio

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