

Excerpt from
The Female Animal
by
Emanuela Canepa

L'animale femmina, published by Einaudi, 2018.
Inquiries regarding rights may be addressed to
Vicki Satlow Literary Agency
info@vickisatlow.com
www.vickisatlow.com

English translation © 2018 by Anne Milano Appel

“Do you know why I’m not yet retired?” Lepore asks.

I shake my head.

“Because I’m really enjoying myself. Females are such interesting animals.”

Females. The term disturbs me like a fingernail scratching on a blackboard.

“And this office is a privileged observation point from which to formulate behavioral statistics. I am fascinated by the way most of them mistake as character a set of automatic reactions that are activated in response to a stimulus. They believe it is temperament, but instead it’s a conditioned reflex: given a certain input, and taking into account the variables, the behavior is always predictable.”

Maybe he’s insane.

I certainly can't take any more of it. I want to get out of there.

I try to end the discussion, hoping not to sound too forward. Even if he's obsessed, I need this job, and I can't afford to do anything rash.

"Why are you telling me this?"

He gets up and moves closer. I can't hold his gaze and sit staring at my feet. The rasping voice comes down from above as he stands over me.

"Because you think you're different. And that is the variable that I find most stimulating of all."

"I merely observe, and thereby obtain confirmation or negation. Though I'm almost never proven wrong, actually."

I just hope he doesn't start in again.

For a while he doesn't move. He seems absorbed. Then he points his pipe in my direction, as if to underscore something that has just occurred to him.

"But I haven't withdrawn from the world yet. If nothing else that shows that I want to be surprised, right?"

He goes away. I watch him. His body looks slightly shrunken. His shoulders sag, curved over in a way that I had never noticed before. He walks unhurriedly, as if he knows that I am staring at him and wants to disprove the weakness I perceive in his gait through sheer act of will.

"I need some coffee," he tells me before going into his office. "If possible, strong enough to be able to alleviate the effects of what's been a terrible day."

"I'll do my best," I reply, practically euphoric because this time I seem to have gotten by without much of a rant.

"That's the declaration of intent of all mediocre people," he retorts. "For once, outdo yourself, Rosita, and surprise me. You women are always all so predictable."

"You have a talent for evasion that disturbs me," he says.

I'm baffled. I thought he wanted to talk about the clients who just left.

"Me?" I ask.

He nods. "A kind of vocation to happiness that borders on obtuseness. It's not the first time I've noticed it. I call your attention to an objective fact, generally unpleasant, and you try to give me a milder version of it, no matter what. Perhaps you think that's all it takes to clear the air."

If I'd meant to gain his satisfaction, I had not succeeded.

"I didn't mean to evade anything, but I don't know anything about Mrs. Trevisan, and I don't know what to say."

"This is not a courtroom, and I did not ask for an expert opinion. I am content with an impression. What does your intuition tell you, Rosita?"

I think back to the woman who strode through the office in her ankle-length suede coat, still unbuttoned. She had a handbag on her arm, and was holding a cellphone in one hand and an appointment book in the other, its cover a

red, shiny leather that matched her nail polish. She drew your attention, and when she left she did not say goodbye to me. I don't know if she even realized I was there.

"I would say she's beautiful."

Lepore makes a disgusted face. I'm not hitting the mark.

"That's obvious and useless. What else?"

"Ostentatious. Arrogant, maybe. It's hard to tell where she really is. How deep within she's concealing herself, I mean."

He thinks about it. Maybe he's just restraining his irritation. In fact, in the end he shakes his head.

"A losing battle. You're unable to venture a personal opinion even when protected by the most absolute anonymity."

I leave the office tired and frustrated. I push open the door of the building so forcefully that it escapes my hold and I have to catch it as it swings wide, to keep it from slamming into the wall. As soon as I stick my nose outside, a woman appears in front of me.

"Excuse me," I say slipping around her so as not to bump into her. She steps aside with me. I think it must be one of those stupid unintentional mistakes and I smile faintly. I say "Excuse me" again and step to the other side. Once more she follows me.

At that point I look up. She's blonde, she's wearing sunglasses. "Rosita Mulè?" she asks.

People who don't introduce themselves annoy me. The office is just upstairs, she's probably one of the lawyer's clients whom I don't recognize. Odd though that she would know my name.

"You're looking for Attorney Lepore, I imagine.

"No, I'm looking for you."

At this moment the little square is deserted, except for a figure across the street, partially hidden in the shadows of the portico. I can't see his face, yet I recognize him immediately. It's Maurizio.

The woman follows the direction of my gaze, and nods with a sardonic expression.

"So now you can guess who I am, right?"

I don't say anything. I look at the woman more closely. She's tall, sturdy, she's shaking, and doesn't seem frightened.

"I'm sorry, I don't know you," I tell her, and I set off, trying to stay calm.

She moves alongside me, takes a few steps with me, then suddenly darts past and gives me a slight shove. Nothing particularly aggressive, but it forces me to stop and stare at her. Out of the corner of my eye I catch sight of Maurizio. He moved with us when we started walking, but shows no signs of getting involved.

The woman removes her sunglasses. She's distraught, her hair a mess, she's without a handbag. She's holding a bunch of keys in her hand. She's panting.

“Who do you think you are?” she hisses at me, an inch from my face. “You think you can just dismiss me like that?”

“I don’t think anything,” I tell her. “And I don’t know what you want from me.”

“I want you to leave my husband alone. Find your own man, and stop seducing someone else’s!”

Seduce? I think about the contained, sporadic relationship between me and Maurizio. If the situation weren’t so dicey, I think I would laugh in her face.

“I’m not seducing anyone,” I say quietly.

“I bet you think you’re special. Maybe he told you that we’re having problems. He promised you that it’s over between us, am I right?”

He never said anything like that. Then she raises her voice:

“There were a hundred more before you,” she says scornfully. “There are a hundred even now, at the same time as you. He’s a pathetic serial womanizer!” She points to Maurizio. “He’s only good at finding dumbasses who fall for it. You’ll never get anything from him, understand? Not a thing!” And she jerks me by the shoulders.

I’ve never had anything from him, for that matter. Aside from some occasional company. Maybe even some nice moments. But not enough to give me any illusions.

I wonder if Maurizio is able to hear what we’re saying. I feel an infinite sadness over this cheap petty scene, because it draws a line between us from which there can be no return. Him, leaving me to his wife’s mercy, as if what happened between us were only my fault. Trading my head on the chopping block for his only hope of salvation. The death of our affair tonight pains me, but what pains me even more is the two of them who may still have a future.

The idea that possession is something to be asserted by force, as orangutans do, is indeed a pitiful spectacle. That he can then stand there and watch without intervening, after having admitted to everything, tells me that this little act is probably a set script in their marriage, performed countless times. Maybe with some success, because they are nonetheless together; in the end the ritual works for them, it manages to keep them bound together. Discontented and bitter, but together. A reverse catharsis. One that buries rather than releases.

A moment later the tone changes again. It’s clear that the emotional register must go full circle. The woman’s eyes fill with tears. She grabs my right arm and bows her head in a kind of supplication.

“Please, you have to swear to me that you won’t see him again. Please.”

Now she’s speaking to me politely again. She covers her face with her hands and begins sobbing softly, an inconsolable little girl, her shoulders shaking under her jacket.

Maurizio has come out of the shadows; he keeps a reasonable distance, but I can see him more clearly. His face too is distraught, he seems to be praying. *Lord, let me get out of here alive.* Is he referring to me or to her? He’s so different from the man I know, a man who was beyond reproach, elusive and indefinable. They are both begging me, each in his own way, to help them keep things going, as if their marriage depended on me.

“I’m sure he won’t call me again after tonight. In any case, if he does, I won’t answer.”

She lowers her hands and uncovers her face; the tears stop. Maybe she isn’t used to this kind of unconditional surrender. For a moment it seems that she’s experiencing a flicker of gratitude. Then she gives me a shove with both hands and makes me fall.

She looms over me and shouts: “You’d better not, bitch! If you do, I swear I’ll kill you!” Then she dashes under the portico. Maurizio gives me one last look, seems as if he’s about to say something, thinks better of it, and starts running after her.

I’m left sitting on the ground, so stunned that I’m unable to move. I barely notice the sound of footsteps behind me. A hand grabs me under my arm.

“You have some strange friendships, Rosita,” Lepore tells me, dusting off his coat, which had brushed the pavement when he bent down to help me to my feet.

“She wasn’t a friend,” I reply. The idea that he could have witnessed the scene worsens a situation that is already quite painful.

“The lady was rather angry.”

I hope he won’t ask me what happened, or why the woman was so upset with me. I couldn’t take that too, not after such a scene, and especially not from someone who has a knack for talking about subjects that put me on the spot.

Instead he says with some conviction: “For some time now you’ve seemed different to me.”

I look at him in amazement.

“I’ve seen that you readily go home in the clothes that earlier you never wore outside the office,” he goes on, “and that sometimes you’re wearing a skirt and heels even before you get here. You’re taking better care of your appearance.”

I think about it. It’s true. But what does that have to do with anything now?

“Sometimes,” he murmurs, “a certain kind of metamorphosis and a difficult situation like the one you just experienced may be connected,” he says, vaguely gesturing in the direction in which Maurizio and his wife have disappeared.

I’m completely bewildered.

I wait for him to explain what the hell he means. But he simply turns and walks away. He moves off slowly, limping slightly. A hateful, tired, lame old sadist. He leaves me standing in the middle of the street without asking if I’m all right, or if I need anything. It was merely a spectacle for his personal amusement.

I might even think that the scene was his doing. But it’s not so, he has no need to orchestrate; he even explained it to me. *The game is in the hands of the players at all times, I remain on the outside.* The force of his cynicism produces slime without him doing anything specific to provoke it.

My hands feel like they are on fire. I look at them: they are red, inflamed. Dermatitis again. I start scratching between the thumb and forefinger of my left

hand, then between my other fingers. The itching doesn't let up, and I keep at it. I don't stop even when my hand is covered with tiny drops of blood.