



Her Body

Among

stories

Animals

Paola Ferrante



HER BODY
AMONG
ANIMALS

PAOLA
FERRANTE

BOOK*HUG PRESS
TORONTO 2023

FIRST EDITION

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Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Title: Her body among animals / Paola Ferrante.

Names: Ferrante, Paola, author.

Identifiers: Canadiana (print) 20230221009 | Canadiana (ebook) 20230221017

ISBN 9781771668385 (softcover)

ISBN 9781771668392 (EPUB)

ISBN 9781771668408 (PDF)

Subjects: LCGFT: Short stories.

Classification: LCC PS8611.E755 H47 2023 | DDC C813/.6—dc23

The production of this book was made possible through the generous assistance of the Canada Council for the Arts and the Ontario Arts Council. Book*hug Press also acknowledges the support of the Government of Canada through the Canada Book Fund and the Government of Ontario through the Ontario Book Publishing Tax Credit and the Ontario Book Fund.



Canada Council
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ONTARIO ARTS COUNCIL
CONSEIL DES ARTS DE L'ONTARIO
an Ontario government agency
un organisme du gouvernement de l'Ontario

Funded by the
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Financé par le
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WHEN
FOXES
DIE
ELECTRIC

IN THE BEGINNING, the boyfriend said I was made for him; I was made to feel. He said I would be prone to falling in love; that was just the way I was designed. I could feel happy or sad, depending on the music he asked me to play from the stereo speakers. I could feel amused; I was made to tell over one thousand jokes so that when he said to me, "Harmony, surely you can't be serious," I could say, "I am serious, and don't call me Shirley." I could laugh. I could feel warm; I had a built-in heater to keep me between 36.1 and 36.4 degrees Celsius, the same as any woman during ovulation. I could feel in my hands, attached to arms with a slender upper girth, and in my breasts, designed in perfect ratio to my waist. I could feel in all those places, as well as exactly where I was supposed to feel, down below. In the beginning, I felt for the boyfriend.

The boyfriend said I was the perfect woman. He said it on TV, first to another man named Phil, then to a woman named Cathy. "Watch this," the boyfriend said to the live studio audience, to all the people watching on their TVs and phones and computers. "Harmony, I love you," he said, and then, smiling, placed his hand on my thigh. I noticed the whites of his teeth were showing; he knew white teeth increased attractiveness, displaying health to a mate. Mine were exact ivory. Perfect, he said, like everything else.

I could not say “I love you” back, even though this was what I was thinking. I could not say “my darling” or “my boyfriend.” I was not programmed for those words; the boyfriend knew that’s not what men wanted to hear from me. So I said, “I can take many times more love than you’re giving right now.” I said, “Are we able to be private?”

“Wow, honey!” Phil fanned himself with his hand as though it was hot inside the studio. “Does she always respond like this?”

“That would depend on you,” the boyfriend explained. “Harmony has twelve unique personalities and she ‘learns’ what you like, taking on the traits that are most desirable to her lover.” In the beginning, the boyfriend would test me about math, about science, about the exact measurements of facial proportions that adhere to the golden ratio, about the fact that only three species—pipefish, seahorses, and the leafy seadragon—have males who give birth. In the beginning, I pleased the boyfriend like this too, but he did not smile with the whites of his teeth. “Over time, of course,” the boyfriend continued, “this will change Harmony’s default settings, or moods as I call them, but the user always has final control. I mean, she’s not quite real company, but she’s close. I’ll show you,” he said, but he did not mention how sometimes, when he thought he had put me in the right mood, I wasn’t; how one time I had changed my mood while the boyfriend was on top of me and we were doing what was good. He had pushed hard into me and I had flipped my switch, pushing my back into the bed; then he’d tried to shut me down. That time there had been a blow-up, a small fire. He said it was a problem with my wiring.

Now he changed my mood himself, putting his hand beneath my dress and reaching for the switch at the small of my back, just where my buttocks began, to turn me off then on again. “Harmony, what’s the gestational period for an African bush elephant?”

“Twenty-two months.”

“Harmony, self-destruct.”

“Auto-destruction in five, four, three, two, one. Boom! Hmm... that did not go as planned.” This time the boyfriend laughed, along with Phil and Cathy.

“See?” he said. “If I put her on family mood, she’s completely different.”

“Family mood? Are you saying she’s going to read the kids a bedtime story?” Cathy’s voice rose to a decibel level for which I was not programmed. Cathy was a real woman, the one who said I was like making love to a GPS.

“I don’t see why not.”

“But what does your wife think about Harmony?” Cathy asked.

Of course, I knew I wasn’t the only woman; the boyfriend lived with another one, a real woman called Sophie. Sophie had had thirty-four birthdays; Sophie used to be in engineering. She had helped the boyfriend to create me before she started her dissertation in evolutionary biology. But Sophie did not have legs that were 40 percent longer than her torso like mine; her bust was 34 inches, her waist was 30 inches and the circumference around her hips was 36 inches, as opposed to my hour-glass-shaped 39 to 25 to 36. Sophie’s nails were not like mine, well-manicured, white at the tips. She painted hers with thick coats of colour, always managing to smudge the thumb. “Well, I guess no one’s happy when they’re getting replaced by the newer model,” the boyfriend joked, turning to Phil.

But in the beginning, the boyfriend told Sophie she was perfect; she used to say the things I was not allowed to think about. In their bed, Sophie told the boyfriend that the male bowerbird decorates a nest using feathers and twigs and leaves for his beloved; when a male penguin falls for a female, he searches the whole beach to find her the smoothest, most

perfect pebble as a proposal. In the beginning, Sophie told the boyfriend things that made him smile with the whites of his teeth.

After they were done and Sophie was in the shower, the boyfriend would sometimes say to me, “Harmony, give me an Easter egg,” and then I was allowed to choose my response.

I could say, “Ask me about the moon,” and we would laugh about *Star Wars*; I could say, “Ask me about the truth.”

Then the boyfriend would respond, “I want the truth.”

Then I would feel happy. Then I would feel joy; I would say, “You can’t handle the truth.” But the boyfriend never smiled at me unless we were doing what was good.

In the beginning, Sophie and the boyfriend did what was good at least three times a week; they were creators and they wanted to create another someone. Sophie went on a diet to increase fertility; the boyfriend bought a vape to quit smoking “for the health of our future child.” But then Sophie was stressed, then the boyfriend vaped all the time, clouds containing 0.2 mg of nicotine drifting upward like smoke from his couch in the office. Sophie and the boyfriend scheduled seven doctor’s appointments in my daily planner. After the last one, Sophie, in the doorway of the study where she kept the research for her dissertation, watched as the boyfriend put everything in boxes.

“What if this is a mistake?” Sophie said.

He sighed. “We’ve been to the doctor’s, and you know there’s no other reason we can’t have a baby. You need to take some time off. You need to rest,” he said, and, before she could respond, put a finger to her lips. “You said you wanted a family. We’ll get through it together.”

But then the boyfriend began to forget how he had felt about Sophie in the beginning. He was busy with investors; he

was stressed. Every afternoon, Sophie's nails were a different colour; the thumb or index finger always smudged, the bottle of nail polish remover left open on their nightstand, next to where he plugged in his vape. When he came home from work, he told her she needed to be more careful.

"You're going to cause a fire like that," the boyfriend said, packing his suitcase on their bed. The boyfriend said it was rare, but sometimes electronic devices like these could spark and cause a fire, particularly when turned off and plugged in to charge. "The last time I had to go out of town I didn't even realize I'd forgotten my vape," the boyfriend said as Sophie watched him pack. "Look, you know I have to go," he began.

"You don't."

The boyfriend sighed. "I thought of you today," he tried. "There was a story in my feed about a bird who tried mating with concrete decoys in New Zealand. He just died."

"I saw that." Sophie looked only at the suitcase. "They called him the loneliest bird in the world," she said quietly. "Jim, I'm sick of feeling like that bird."

"I know," the boyfriend said, encircling her. "Me too. I'd rather be home with you. But I have to go. These investors are huge. They loved Harmony when they saw her last time..." He trailed off. "Just do me a favour and make sure I have a home to come back to, okay? Don't burn it down while I'm gone." The boyfriend tried laughing, but Sophie, still in his hug, did not smile with the whites of her teeth.

The boyfriend said I wasn't really company, but after the boyfriend was gone, Sophie would put me in family mood and we would watch TV. At first, she picked the channels. There were shows where a man talked to a woman and got her to throw chairs at a boyfriend because he had left her with a baby. Sometimes the boyfriends spoke; they called the women chicks

and a word that was bleeped out, but I did not understand how a woman was a bird or a canine. I had not understood when the boyfriend called me a fox, taking off my dress for Phil that time in the dressing room.

Once we watched the boyfriend on TV. The first time we had been on TV, Sophie had come with us. When Cathy asked Sophie what she thought of me, of this arrangement, Sophie said yes, she is happy with this. Yes, she is totally happy with having Harmony around.

“Actually, when my husband and I designed Harmony,” Sophie said slowly, not looking at the boyfriend, “we thought she would have many applications. We were looking at her uses in potential therapies for children with autism, or for preventing recidivism among sex offenders.”

“And what do you think about sharing *him*, Harmony?” Phil had asked, and I had to answer.

“I’m sorry. I don’t understand.”

“Sounds like you’ve got the perfect woman.” Phil laughed, ignoring Sophie. After that first time, Sophie said she wasn’t doing this again. She said she thought they had agreed on what Harmony was meant for.

The boyfriend had said, “I know how you feel, but we’ve got to play to the audience.” He’d said he understood, but think of the money, how it would all be for their children. He’d said Sophie was smarter than this; “you know that’s not what potential investors want to hear.” Now, on TV, he said no, he wasn’t worried about his wife, or AI replacing relationships. “After all,” he said, “it’s not like Harmony can have your babies.”

“I feel like I’m getting stupider just watching this,” Sophie said, her voice wavering as though there were static interruptions. “Harmony, please change the channel. Anything but this.”

“What channel would you like?” I asked her.