

A Little Love Story

ROLAND MERULLO

Shaye Areheart/Crown,

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In the traditional love story, young naïve lovers meet, fall into an idealized state of love, and encounter an impossible barrier to their love in the form of family, illness, class, or geography. One of the pair then dies, leaving the survivor (and the audience) forever and hopelessly bereft. Think *Romeo and Juliet*, Erich Segal's *Love Story*, or Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*. The formula allows the reader to cathartically enjoy the idealized state of love (Romeo's "smoke raised with the fume of sighs" [Act 1, Scene 1, l. 196]) while simultaneously watching the impending disaster, helpless to prevent it. We know Juliet must die, as must Kristin Scott Thomas and Ali MacGraw, and we're powerless to stop their deaths. The formula requires us to watch from the sidelines and weep at their ecstasy and innocence. *A Little Love Story* tinkers with the traditional formula—the lovers are neither innocent nor naïve, nor completely helpless in the face of their impossible barrier—to produce a love story for the 21st century. Merullo's fifth novel circumscribes a dramatic arc that takes in 9/11, media saturation, lecherous men in politics, ethnic family stereotypes, adult-onset dementia, and (it is a love story, after all) terminal illness in the relatively young. This is an utterly charming, beautifully told, completely affecting story that is one part love story, one part medical thriller.

The protagonists in *A Little Love Story* are Jake Entwistle and Janet Rossi, both in their late 30s. He's a portrait painter and carpenter; she's a spin doctor to the governor of Massachusetts and, until she meets Jake, the governor's sometime mistress. The story is told from Jake's perspective. As it begins, he's been dateless and celibate for the last year. His last relationship, with a woman named Giselle, ended in betrayal. She perished in a plane crash with the man she said she had stopped seeing. He wonders if he's capable of being in a relationship. He's at that place in life where he realizes that what he thought

was a Zen detachment turns out to be naked fear. [He'd] had one serious love relationship in [his] life and it had ended in a tragedy, and the tragedy had broken something inside.

He meets Janet on a rainy Cambridge night at Betty's, where Jake has gone for a donut,

a quick burst of feel-good [for your eighty-five cents]. No soul connection. No quiet walks. No long foreplay sessions in a warm one-bedroom. No extinction of loneliness. No jealousy. No fights. No troubles. No risks.

On her way out, Janet crumples the fender of his ancient 1949 Dodge truck, and the story takes off.

When they meet a few days later for a real date, Jake has a

sense that there was something vast and wrong in her life,

some shadow so enormous that it covered her and me and half the tables in the [restaurant].

He learns later that she has cystic fibrosis and is slowly drowning to death. In spite of their shadows, though, they like each other: He's weird within normal boundaries and though she's not exactly a "good long-term investment," she has

some kind of monumental courage, a courage [Jake can feel] as clearly as if another creature lay breathing between [them] in ... bed.

Love in the new millennium is neither idealized nor innocent. Jake and Janet understand loss, vulnerability, and the tender fragility of life.

The advantage to meeting and dating [when you're young] ... is that ... there has not yet been too much trouble in your romantic life, or in your dates.

Later in life

you could start out with someone who had already been through such horror and misery in other relationships that the hope and eagerness in her had been kicked to death before you even had your first kiss.

In the "weird complicated tango of modern relationshiping" death and loss mark both Janet and Jake. They each have their own vulnerabilities and losses: Janet has a progressive and usually fatal illness and her seemingly tawdry relationship with the governor; Jake has a family you wouldn't describe as a dating advantage (a demented mother, a monkish, cloistered brother, and a drug-addled sister) and an old girlfriend, Giselle, whose death by misadventure still haunts him.

Merullo compresses the story into four short months near the end of 2002, matching the progressively colder and worsening Boston weather to Janet's progressively worsening illness and the couple's increasing attachment to each other. Merullo's description of a New England fall foreshadows and personifies Janet's impending death and the couple's increasing closeness.

In Boston, October is the month where you have to stop pretending to yourself that the good weather will go on and on. The leaves catch fire and fall, and swirl out gold and lemon patterns at the bases of maple trees, but it's just a last show meant to take your mind away from the fact that things are dying all around. ... The cold Halloween air has an unsympathetic quality to it. Lights blaze out from storefronts and third-floor apartments, but the darkness seems to swallow them after they've traveled only a few feet so that they feel cut off from each other, isolated pockets of warmth that offer themselves happily and optimistically but really are only hoping to make it through another night.

Jake and Janet's story takes a turn when she signs up for an elective and largely hopeless double-lung transplant that offers her a slim and desperate chance to escape her incur-

able illness. The hitch is she's 18th on the list and will not last long enough to find a donor. Jake knows "she wouldn't live to the next summer [and is sure] she knew it, too." By the winter solstice, Janet has been hospitalized and Jake's world is growing blacker and bleaker.

[T]he sky was colored in winter pastels—robin's-egg blue, a smoky scarlet, streaks of willowy yellow—all of it swinging and splashing in a broken-up reflection in the deep river basin just in front of me. Every few seconds a little more of the color would leak out of the sky, and the water would take on more purple, blue, and black.

As time runs out and Janet wastes away in a Boston hospital bed, Jake discovers an alternative to the standard, cadaveric, double-lung transplant. The lobar lung transplant, however, requires that he find two living and suitably matched donors, bribe a retired surgeon with a painting to perform the delicate surgery, shame the governor into lending his considerable resources, and buy a wedding ring that will fit Janet's emaciated finger. Just before surgery, he asks her to marry him.

She looked at the ring and looked at it and then looked up at me finally, with such a gleam of joy and love on her face that it almost didn't matter to me what happened after that. . . . The world was speckled and mottled and full of pain and evil, but during those few months we had stumbled into this little bright room together, and stayed there for a while. That was almost enough.

Merullo writes graceful and polished prose that effectively conveys both the details of the medical process and the internal experience of loving another. He has created a wonderful story of love and death, pain and courage, and loss and redemption that leaves the reader believing that we are not just "isolated pockets of warmth," and that real love and human connection are still possible in the 21st century. ■

REVIEWER: **Jay Kenney** is an assistant editor at TBR.