

The Loss of Options

Joseph Incardona

Novel

French



Geneva, on the threshold of the 1990s. Neoliberal society is flourishing, and much of the world has lost faith in everything but money, the single god that has taken the place of the old deities. Wealth, profit and power are the key components of an infernal machine in the shape of a novel, a machine running at full throttle. And only love, as essential as it is beyond reach, can attain the sublime, or destroy everything.

“Three hundred years ago, the Basel mathematician Daniel Bernoulli (1700–1782) noted that the benefits associated with an additional amount of money diminish as one becomes richer. That is what is known as the marginal utility of the franc. Aldo Bianchi hasn’t reached that stage yet.”

Title

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Author

Joseph Incardona, the son of an Italian father and a Swiss mother, was born in 1969. An author, scriptwriter, director and producer, he has written twelve novels, two collections of short stories and three plays. He is also the co-producer, with Cyril Bron, of *Milky Way*, a feature film which won the *Prix du film policier de Liège*. Joseph Incardona’s works have been translated into some ten languages. He lives in Geneva.

Photo: Sandrine Cellard

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Excerpt translated by Fiona Graham

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Baselines

When I see an Alfa Romeo go by,

I tip my hat.

Henry Ford

1

The man on the tennis court is him, Aldo Bianchi. The one in the love story.

One perk of his profession is that he can place himself behind his pupil, taking hold of her wrist so as to show her, slowly, how to make the correct movement. In a soft but firm voice he adds words to the gesture, almost whispering them into her ear. Inevitably, their bodies touch. The Indian summer means they can still play in tennis shorts and a short skirt. And God alone knows – well, God and Signor Sergio Tacchini – how thin sports-wear fabric is. Their bodies are still tanned. Bodies are the last to renounce and yield to autumn.

Aldo takes her hand in his, presses harder against his pupil's back and completes the forehand topspin shot with a flick of the wrist. The pupil feels the teacher's thigh insinuate itself in between her legs. Try as she might to hold her breath, she cannot avoid breathing in the scent of the pheromones released by his perspiring chest.

The pupil hasn't quite grasped the twist technique that imparts topspin.

The pupil is agitated.

In general, the pupil is a woman aged between forty and fifty-five.

Married – to a husband who's often away.

A mother – whose children are grown-up.

Rich – she leaves her jewellery in the changing room.

With a few good years still ahead of her, she senses she's wasting her time waiting. The high-maintenance routine: villa, garden, swimming pool, shopping, leisure activities. Maintaining her residence. Her body. Her mind.

Her emotional life. Her relationships. The passage of time.

And boredom.

Aldo moves back, withdrawing, and the pupil feels disoriented. The promise of his body is abruptly retracted. With a smile, Aldo tells her to fetch the basket and pick up the balls.

'Okay, Odile, fetch the basket and pick up the balls!' And Odile does as she's told. She has a housekeeper, an interior decorator, two gardeners and a life coach, but she obeys, this woman who doesn't even make her own bed. Submissiveness is buried deep inside her, as is the desire to be taken by this barely literate Italian stallion whose job it is to teach her how to hit a ball.

He won't have read *Madame Bovary*, that's for sure.

And it's equally hard to imagine Aldo falling in love.

A past master of the tricks of courtship display, he wipes his face on a cotton towel. He's over five foot nine, his blond-streaked chestnut hair styled like André Agassi's before Agassi went bald and starting wearing a wig on the circuit. His laughing blue eyes crinkle at the corners, as if in amusement at a life in the fast lane. A tiny diamond glitters in the lobe of one ear. The sole discordant note, the only flaw, might perhaps be his slightly nasal voice, at odds with his playboy physique:

'Last lesson next week, Odile!'

Odile looks around her. The yellowed trees, the lake down there behind the diamond shapes of the wire netting, just beyond the venerable Scots pines and chestnuts, the manicured lawn edging the park...There's a sort of weightlessness, a momentary consternation: the last lesson signifies the switch to winter time, darker evenings, loneliness setting in earlier. Presaging that other winter, longer and harsher, that of old age and decline. In a little while she'll be dining out at the 'Coupole' with her daughter and her daughter's fiancé, then returning to her house on the hill, her convertible in the garage – a villa among other villas, with an alarm system that has to be deactivated, then reactivated once she's safe indoors. Her husband has stopped over in Boston. What's happening, Odile? Everything you wanted, you've got – so what's this teenage fever, this metamorphosis that's taken ten years off you in an instant?

The leaves scattered over the clay court fall apart, rustling under the soles of her tennis shoes. Odile retrieves every last ball and returns them obediently to her coach. Aldo, who has zipped up his sports bag, takes his pupil's racket, which he has carefully slipped back into its cover, and swaps it for the heavy basket of fuzzy yellow Slazenger balls.

Aldo knows the moment of truth has come.

He's waiting for her next move on the chess board.

That's the game. There's no other possibility. Too spoilt, the object of too much attention, too much pity, too much mollycoddling, too much support. The coach, the housekeeper, the female interior decorator, the girlfriends. Too many women around her, too much shared condescendence. Instinctively – without being able to articulate any thoughts about liberalisation, increasingly uniform markets or their corollary, the atomisation of society – Aldo has grasped that the world is becoming female. That husbands and fathers are overworked, that their waists are expanding, that they are becoming short-sighted. And if there's anything to be gained in this world where everything is mixed up, he'll get it by staying male, by exploiting the paradox of female emancipation. What women gain, what they lose. His rivals in this field are the Latino immigrants brimming with testosterone who've been skimming the city since the start of the salsa boom, that miraculous opportunity to net white women.

But Aldo plays in a different category. His biotope is defined by the lines of a tennis court, a prelude to the bedrooms of one Madame Bovary after another.

The economic system of the dominant and the dominated is driven by denial and humiliation.

Odile lifts her face towards her instructor. He watches her, amused.

She isn't laughing.

Because all of this will go to rack and ruin, despite plastic surgery,
exercise regimes,
frustrating diets.

You know only too well how this will all end, Odile.

Okay, but there's something I'd like to say to you, sweetheart: what's all this for, if you're not to use it for anything?

What's it for, damn it?

The time has come to sacrifice the queen.

Odile raises her head, her features tensing as she takes her coach's hand and places it on her stomach.

'Here,' she says, 'I want you here.'

2

For Aldo Bianchi, the field is a tennis court measuring 260.75 square metres. The nine lines that enclose it contain a world that is within his reach. Being able to define your field is essential if you want to be a winner.

The field is the territory.

The territory is the hunting ground.

The hunting ground is the tennis court.

Q.E.D.

At first, of course, he wanted to be a champion: Björn Borg, Jimmy Connors, John McEnroe, Ilie Nastase...

The stars of his teenage years, when his dreams were still intact.

Second national team, after all. His best ranking: Swiss No 12 at the age of seventeen.

All things considered, tennis has been good to him: trophies, some modest national fame, an adolescence cocooned by Swiss Tennis, most of it far away from school. A mother devoted to her only son. A coach. A physiotherapist. A fitness trainer. All of them at the beck and call of a teenager as arrogant as he was capricious.

And handsome.

It was girls who made him lose faith in sport, in the spirit of sacrifice. A gradual yielding to the intrusive pleasures of sex.

He understood the impact his appearance could have at a very early age, when, at fifteen, he lost his virginity to a friend's mother in the family's pool house. There was this little button which he had only to press, and a world opened up to him. It was mostly women around forty who came out the winners, being bolder and more cynical in seeking and satisfying their desires.

Aldo had a good education. You don't forget your first few times. Aldo had learned how to act in bed. In some ways it wasn't all that different from sport: technique, stamina, creativity.

Forging your own style.

But above all, it was about exploiting his youth and vigour as if giving of himself. Allowing his older partner to believe that she retained that youth, that it was perpetuated even after the act of lovemaking. This was the reverse of the fear of decline: the hope of eternal youth, transmitted by fluids.

Yes, tennis has been good to him. And as often happens, you don't realise what you excel in until it's revealed to you. And that revelation wasn't *in*, but around *tennis*.

Right next to it. Close by. Tennis wasn't an end in itself, but a means to an end.

He's swapped racket strings for condoms. The racket has become a pretext. For Aldo, success means having money. Money brings everything else: women, property, comfort.

Money is the source. In Aldo's catechism, it's the origin of everything.

He has a foothold in it. He's working on it.

The territory.