

Essence for Ms. Venus · Sena Jeter Naslund

AFTER THE CORN was cut in Iowa, when the game was fat, I stopped at a provincial courthouse to get my hunting license. I signed the license *Diana* and shoved the form across the golden-oak casement to the clerk.

“You’ll have to put down both names, Miss,” she said.

“In some locales,” I replied, “for some personages, a single name is sufficient. For poets.”

“What name?”

“Homer, for example.”

She quickly inscribed an *H* in the blank space.

“Wait,” I said. “Not Homer. *Hunter*.”

“Even poets got last names here,” she said. She lifted her eyes and nodded toward the open window at my back.

Through the courthouse window, in the distance, I saw hordes of brightly dressed college students jostling each other on the sidewalks of the town. As though every student were a poet.

The clerk frowned to see me take my traveller’s check from a quiver instead of from a purse, but she lay out the stamps for the license anyway. There in the quiver was the reminder to take cousin Venus a bottle of perfume. (The impedimenta one is asked to cart home; it’s enough to make one think twice about travelling.)

While I signed the check, my eye was distracted by the beauty of the duck stamps—tinted Aegean blue and the green of olives—and my ear by a divorce proceedings down the hall. I heard certain words, thundered in a legal male voice: “And it is your firm belief, is it not, that, as stated in your joint petition for divorce, the marriage is irretrievably broken?”

“Now your husband’s not allowed to hunt on your license,” the clerk chirped in my other ear.

I stooped to tie my sandal.

“I have no use for husbands.”

Irretrievably broken? Hearts are irretrievably broken, but not legal contracts. Maybe modern hearts are tougher—made of molded vinyl.

Yes, I would investigate their sense of broken.

Why marry, indeed, but why, having done it, divorce? A million reasons, of course. Of all the reasons, the one that offends me most is a lack of chastity in marriage. Adultery, to put the Hebrew slant on it.

I strode toward the courtroom—a janitor left off swabbing the marble floor to gawk at my stature—and I entered, at the rear.

Their courtroom was empty except for the essential configuration. The bald judge in his black robes sat round as a pumpkin, with his head bent. The woman with her oval face blank, frightened, staring, unseeing, was facing me. A long softly-braided rope of brown hair hung over her shoulder, lay in loops in her lap. She was thin and had no bosom to speak of. Her lawyer, a scrawny nervous type from Legal Aid, asked the necessary questions. The fourth and last person present was the woman's witness, a friend mythologized for the occasion into middle-class innocuousness; she wore a tan wrap skirt and a nearly-matching beige summer pullover.

His presence not being essential, the husband was absent from the amicable proceedings. Off hunting, perhaps, as I should be.

"Mitch wanted other women."

Wanted? Immaterial, I'd say. Behavior—that's the question. I've never held with the Christian ethic that what you do in your heart is as bad as done, *fait accompli*. What is chastity but a bright girdle for the physical being? But I have no quarrel with the imagination, the light of the moon, the fragrance of perfume, with wanting.

"Are you saying your husband was unfaithful to you?"

"Yes."

Her face was turned up, she was seeing Mitch. Probably he was ugly as a toad, but the lost and shining one for her.

She was wearing a dress she'd made herself—the princess style, seams curved to maximize bosom. The fabric background was neutral as skin and the cloth was coarsely woven in imitation of homespun. It was printed all over with flowers of the gayest hues—red daisies, yellow snapdragons, blue cornflowers with all sorts of green leaves and vinery twining around. Anyone could see that she'd chosen the fabric to remind herself of Botticelli's *Primavera*. But spring was past now; it was hot midsummer, and later. It was the hunting season.

When the stag turns for the marsh, when his heart-shaped hooves suck out of the spongy earth, when the hound is at his short-haired flank, then I slip the arrow to the string, draw the feathers to my ear.

"How often was he unfaithful?"

"Repeatedly."

She bowed her head; the part of her hair shone like a scar.

A gang of men I passed in the country had been haying with an old

overshot haystacker, and I saw again the great ropes that dangled from the haystacker, and then the woman's braid of brown hair. How many unfaithful among them? Now those men, fraternal as a legal club, were peacefully sitting in the shade of the stack, were lounging, drinking sun-tea from quart jars. One of the ropes moved slightly in the hot air. Their draft horses were standing apart in the sun rubbing their bowed necks together, stamping flies off their fetlocks.

The young lawyer fussed in his notes; he seemed to have forgotten the next question. The judge's massive head slowly swung toward her. His voice croaked up from a frog-belly throat.

"And did you object to this behavior?"

She turned to him, forgot her ritual lines, confessed.

"I tried not to. He believed it was *natural*. With Mitch it was many women. I couldn't help it. I was jealous. After Easter, when he told me about having them, he said he wasn't going to stop. He said he wasn't going to sneak around anymore either. But I was jealous. He said I was going to have to choose. If I couldn't take it, we'd have to divorce."

I am transfixed by her quiet and intense speaking. Inexplicably, I envy her her pain. Like the moment when the arrow enters the hind, her moment is sternly real. And that past moment of revelation—he would have taken her to some natural grove, a circle of hickory trees clustered like a gazebo above a pond, a grove frequented by the hare, the dove and the lecherous sparrow, a grove where wood-hyacinth pushed through the leafmold. A natural setting for an instinctual ultimatum. *It was real* in my imagination, too. Past them thunders a herd of wild rams, which I will hunt, kill. From the black robes, judgment intoned.

"Do you have further questions, Mr. Jones?" The judge's face, pale as the underside of a harvest-ripe vegetable, revolved toward her. His mouth opened like a strange navel. "Speaking of the natural, wolves mate for life, my dear."

She was dismissed, dazed again, from the witness chair, and her friend replaced her.

Her friend understood these proceedings perfectly. Her voice was beige. The point had been made; she wished only to echo; she knew the decorum of divorce, probably had helped more than just this time. She swore that she had known the couple for a year, saw them struggle for reconciliation. I knew that she had known the woman two months, had never seen the man. As a witness, she was perfect.

The judge granted the divorce, stated that the man ought to pay the

court costs, \$12.50. But of course he was in Texas, in bed with his red-headed lover.

I leave the room, hurry through a marble-paved hallway and down the granite steps. The collegiate men mill on the sidewalks of the town, forget the farms they left, the metal corncribs, the countryside crossed with game. On the green around the courthouse, two young professionals—lawyers, doctors, judges—play frisbee in their white shirt sleeves. The noon hour, almost—time for a little boyish recreation before growing portly, wearing black robes, knowing they know.

As their red disk flashes through the air, I snap my fingers and my hound lunges for it.

A cross-bred greyhound, his muscles are like nothing they have ever seen. His teeth are triangular, the jaw is a wedge, his heritage from a shark. His white teeth close on the frisbee in mid-air, between the men. One of them approaches him—“Here dog, give it to me.” My hound slings their toy from side to side; beneath his hide all his muscles squirm in excess of power; he puts his paw in their vinyl saucer, lifts his head and holds up a jagged, torn-off half for me to see.

Good dog. They run down the browning courthouse lawn.

I hide behind a myrtle bush. Here come Selena, brokenhearted, and her wise friend Fortuna, her beige voice autumnal gold.

“If he gets us the new house, the one with the indoor swimming pool . . . I’ll stay.” (Chastity, I wonder, or a slave’s bargain.)

Selena’s face shines blankly as a silver coin, round and valueless. Her brains have been sucked out Egyptian style, through the nostrils, her eyes replaced with ornamental glass.

Their lawyer passes them, mounts his bicycle to hurry inexpensively back to Legal Aid. The big-footed judge paddles down the walkway from a side door to his limousine. They are pleased with their civilized hearing, the modest cost. They are content with so little suffering—so little justice. Those spinning feet, their mechanical justice—all can be changed and hunted.

Yet my neat, small points are for the hare rushing under the blackberries and for the ring-neck pheasant whirring out of dry grass. And beyond the field is the forest where the rumps of deer brush past pale birch, and my big bow is tuned to two-hundred pounds of pull. I let the mortals go.

I lift my eyes to the pale sky. The cloudy ghost of a full moon floats

there. Behind me, their ridiculous courthouse, a solid rectangle of red sandstone with a superfluous square spire rising above the county and the nothing of a town.

I reach in my quiver, rummage among the broadheads. Here is that round perfume bottle, blown from milky glass. Translucent here, clear there, thick-sided. Heavy enough for a paperweight, it would subdue a stack of legal papers, their edges lifting weakly in a breeze. Heavy enough for a throwing stone, well able to break through bone, if I should choose to hunt that way. If I should choose to hurl it to Texas.

I open its glass stopper. All the perfume of this trivial, provincial place—where they claim the hunting is worth a trip—flows into the bottle. Its milky sides are streaked with blood.

I will seek my doe-eyed cousin in the woods. Let her sniff this essence. Essence of Human Intercourse—her specialty. What do I know about it? And what name have they given her now? Not Aphrodite, or Venus. Something more modern? Venita? Vinnie?

Perplexed, I touch my face. Like ripened fruit, like the moon, I have two cheeks. Is it time to turn the other cheek? The dark-sided one? Here, where the bow string has twanged and snapped and thwarped for years, the flesh has grown slick and hard. Black and tough as shoe leather. It has an odor now. It smells . . . unchaste, ravenous, promiscuous.