

Augustine's Concubine

TO CARTHAGE I came, where there sang all around me in my ears a cauldron of unholy loves. I loved not yet, yet I loved to love, and out of a deep-seated want, I hated myself for wanting not. I sought that I might love, in love with loving, and safety I hated, and a way without snares.

She was, in that cauldron of the dark and slim, fair enough to mock, with a Scythian roundness to her face, and in her curious stiff stolidity vulnerable, as the deaf and blind are vulnerable, standing expectant in an agitated room. "Why do you hate me, Aurelius?" she asked him at a party preceding a circus.

"I don't," he answered, through the smoke, through the noise, through the numbness that her presence even then worked upon his heart. "Rather the contrary, as a matter of fact." He was certain she heard this last; she frowned, but it may have been an elbow in her side, a guffaw too close to her ear. She was dressed compactly, in black, intensifying her husband's suit of dark gray, suiting her female smallness, which was not yet slimness, her waist and

arms and throat being, though not heavy, rounded, of substance, firm, pale, frontal. She had, he felt, no profile; she seemed always to face him, or to have her back turned, both positions expressive of not hostility (he felt) but of a resolution priorly taken, either to ignore him, or to confront him, he was baffled which. She was, he sensed, *new*, new, that is, to life, in a way not true of himself, youth though he was (*aet.* eighteen), or true of the Carthaginians boiling about them.

"Love your dress," he said, seeing she would make no reply to his confession of the contrary of hatred.

"It's just a dress," she said, with that strange dismissive manner she had, yet staring at him as if a commitment, a dangerous declaration, had been made. They were to proceed by contradiction. Her eyes were of a blue pale to the whiteness of marble, compared with the dark Mediterranean glances that upheld them like the net of a conspiracy, beneath the smoke and laughter and giddy expectation of a circus.

"Absolute black," he said. "Very austere." Again meeting silence from her, he asked, a touch bored and *ergo* reckless, "Are you austere?"

She appeared to give the question unnecessarily hard thought, the hand accustomed to holding the cigarette (she had recently given up smoking) jerking impatiently. Her manner, contravening her calm body, was all stabs, discontinuous. "Not austere," she said. "Selective."

"Like me," he said, instantly, with too little thought, automatically teasing his precocious reputation as a rake, her manner having somehow saddened him, sharpened within him his hollow of famine, his hunger for God.

"No," she replied, seeming for the first time pleased to be talking with him, complacent as an infant who has

seized, out of the blur of the world, a solid toy, "not like you. The opposite, in fact."

For this space of nine years (from my nineteenth year to my eight-and-twentieth) we lived seduced and seducing, deceived and deceiving, in divers lusts; openly, by sciences which they call liberal; secretly, with a false-named religion; here proud, there superstitious, every where vain!

At their first trysts, the pressure of time, which with his other conquests had excited him to demonstrations of virile dispatch, unaccountably defeated him; her calm pale body, cool and not supple compared to the dark warm bodies he had known, felt to exist in a slower time, and to drag him into it, as a playful swimmer immerses another. What was this numbness? Her simplicity, it crossed his mind, missed some point. She remained complacent through his failures, her infant's smile of seizure undimmed. Her waist was less voluptuously indented than he had expected, her breasts smaller than they appeared when dressed. She offered herself unembarrassed. There was some nuance, of shame perhaps, of sin, that he missed and that afflicted him, in the smiling face of her willingness, with what amounted to loss of leverage. Yet her faith proved justified. She led him to love her with a fury that scourged his young body, that terrified the empty spaces within him.

Strangely, he did not frighten her. She met his lust frontally, amused and aroused, yet also holding within her, companion to her wanton delight, the calm and distance of the condemned.

In those years I had one,—not in that which is called lawful marriage, but whom I had found out in a wayward

passion, void of understanding; yet but one, remaining faithful even to her; in whom I in my own case experienced what difference there is betwixt the self-restraint of the marriage-covenant, for the sake of issue, and the bargain of a lustful love, where children are born against their parents' will, although, once born, they constrain love.

Her husband, dark gray shadow, she did not forsake; nor did she, under questioning, reveal that love between them had been abandoned. Rather, she clave to this man, in her placid and factual manner, and gave him what a man might ask; that her lover found this monstrous, she accepted as another incursion, more amusing than not, into this her existence, which she so unambiguously perceived as having been created for love.

"You love him?" However often posed, the question carried its accents of astonishment.

Her hand, small and rounded as a child's, though cleaner, made its impatient stab in air, and an unintended circlet of smoke spun away. She had resumed the habit, her one concession to the stresses of her harlot's life. "We make love."

"And how is it?"

She thought. "Nice."

"Perhaps you were right. I do hate you."

"But he's my husband!"

The word, religious and gray, frightened him. "Is it as it is," he asked, "with me?"

"No. Not at all." Her white eyes stared. Was she sincere?

How often do you do it? In what positions? Are you silent, or do the two of you speak throughout? What do you say? The litany, attempting to banish the mystery of her rounded limbs so simply laid open for another, won

from her more tears than answers; it appeared, to this amorous youth whose precocious and epochal intuition it already was to seek truth and truth's Lord not in mathematics nor the consensus of the *polis* but in reverent examination of one's own unique and uniquely configured self, that the details eluded her, she had forgotten, they didn't matter. Incredible! His jealousy would not rest, kept gnawing at this substantial shadow, her husband. He permitted the scandal to become open, and her husband faded a little, out of pride. The man's attentions, sensed through the veil of her, became indifferent, ironical; still her husband lived with her, shared her nights, could touch her at whim, shared the rearing of their children, a sacred sharing. This could not be borne. Aurelius made her pregnant.

And the husband did vanish, with their common goods. The lover and his concubine traveled to Rome, and then to Milan. Their child they called Adeodatus. The name, surprisingly, came from her; it subtly displeased him, that she fancied herself religious.

. . . time passed on, but I delayed to turn to the Lord; and from day to day deferred to live in Thee, and deferred not daily to die in myself. Loving a happy life, I feared it in its own abode, and sought it, by fleeing from it. I thought I should be too miserable, unless folded in female arms . . .

Her compliance disturbed him. Her love seemed unreasoning, demonic in its exemption from fatigue. Years after she should have wearied of his body, he would wake and find that in their sleep she had crowded him to the edge of the bed, her indistinct profile at rest in the curve of his armpit. The city's night traffic gleamed and glittered be-

low; travelling torchlight shuddered on the walls. A cry arose, close to them. She would rise and smother the child with her breasts, that the father might sleep. Lying nevertheless awake, he felt her merge with the darkened room, in which there was this unseen horizon, of smallness and limit, of the coolness with which she assumed any position, placated any need, however sordid. Her spirit was too bare, like her face when, each morning, for coolness in the humid Italian heat, she pulled back her hair with both hands to knot it; her face gleamed taut and broad, perspiring, a Scythian moon of a face. She had grown plump in her years of happiness. He remembered her smoking, and wished she would begin again. He wished she would die. The blanched eyes, the blunt nose, the busy plump self-forgetful hands. Her lips, pouting in concentration, were startled to a smile by sudden awareness of his studying her; she would come forward and smother him as if he, too, had been crying. *Concupiscentia*. Its innocence disturbed him, the simplicity of her invitation to descend with her into her nature, into Nature, and to be immersed. Surely such wallowing within Creation was a deflection of higher purposes. Like bubbles, his empty spaces wanted to rise, break into air, and vanish. Their bodies would become one, but his soul was pulled back taut, like the hair at the back of her skull.

Meanwhile my sins were being multiplied, and my concubine being torn from my side as a hindrance to my marriage, my heart which clave unto her was torn and wounded and bleeding. And she returned to Afric, vowing unto Thee never to know any other man, leaving with me my son by her.

She had been, the mother of Adeodatus, strangely calm

in receiving the news, anxious foremost to understand, to avoid misunderstanding; her quest for clarity, which had made her appear rigid, frontal, iconic, brusque at the party more than a decade ago, had tunneled through all their intervening ecstasies. She was in his arms, her face tear-blurred but held back from his, contemplating his naked shoulder as if the truth might rest upon it like a butterfly. "Monica has found you a wife?"

"My mother deems it crucial to my salvation that I marry."

"And the betrothed—?"

"Is two years under the fit age."

"Not fit, but beautiful?" she asked. *De pulchro et apto* had been the title of his first dissertation, composed in Carthage and read aloud to her there. She was illiterate. Since, he had ceased to share his compositions, *De vita beata*, *De immortalitate animae*. He had felt these subjects as betrayals of her, prefatory to this great betrayal.

"Not beautiful, but sufficiently pleasing," he factually answered, unprepared for the sirocco of her grief. "But not you, not like you," were all the words he could call into her weeping, repeating, "Not like you at all," recognizing, at last, her firmness and smallness so close yet remote in his arms as that of a child, an unformed person. The recognition hardened his heart. His cruelty as he held her heightened him. He saw over her head, where gray hairs had come, scarcely distinguishable, to mingle with the fair, back to the fact that she had had a husband and had accepted that husband and her lover as if they were kindred manifestations of the same force, as if he himself were not incomparable, unique, with truth's Lord within him. For this she was rightly punished. Punished, nay, obliterated, as a heresy is obliterated, while love for the

heretic burns in the heart of the condemner. Aurelius grew immortally tall against her grieving; he felt in her, who had so often sobbed in love's convulsion against his body, the benign enemy he was later to find in Pelagius, who held that Adam's sin touched only Adam, that men were born incorrupt, that unbaptized infants did not go to Hell. Such liberal plausibilities poisoned the water of life as it sprang from the stricken rock. So with her softness, her stolid waist and child's small eager hands, the austerity of her dress, the brazen circlets she wore as earrings, the halo of fine white hairs her skin bore everywhere; the sum was ease, and ease was deception, and deception evil. So with her perfect love for him. There was more. There must be more.

Nor was that my wound cured, which had been made by the cutting away of the former, but after inflammation and most acute pain, it mortified, and my pains became less acute, but more desperate.

To Thee be praise, glory to Thee, Fountain of Mercies. I was becoming more miserable, and Thou nearer.

In Africa, the sky never shows a cloud. The heat the desert bestows upon its green shore is severe but not oppressive, unlike that heavy Milanese heat wherein she had pulled back her hair from damp temples. She, too, could taste the dry joy of lightness, of renunciation. She cut off her hair. She forgot her son. Nor would she ever make love again; there was no moderation in what mattered.

Among the women of the cenobium she entered, she moved not as one with a great grief behind her but as one who, like a child, had yet to live. Blue was the color of the order, her color, between Hellenic white and medieval black. *The beautiful and the fitting*: this, the first of Au-

gustine's dissertations, and the only one of which she was the substance, stayed in her memory and conspired, among these whispering gowned women and these sun-dazed walls of clay, to refine that aesthetic of rite and symbol with which half-formed Christianity, amid its renunciations, was to enrich the vocabulary of beauty. Though illiterate, she drew to herself, from these her sisters—the maimed and fanatic and shy—authority. Her limbs, veiled in blue, became emblems. Her complacency, that had never doubted the body's prerogatives, seemed here, in these corridors cloistered from the sun, to manifest Grace. Her shamelessness became serenity. Her placid carriage suggested joy. It was as if her dynamic and egocentric lover, whom she had never failed to satisfy, in his rejection of her had himself failed, and been himself rejected, even as his verbal storms swept the Mediterranean and transformed the world.

She was a saint, whose name we do not know. For a thousand years, men would endeavor to hate the flesh, because of her.