

RUMBLEFISH PRESS (/)

HOME (/)

ISSUES

CURRENT (/CURRENT/)

PAST (/PARTNERS/)

LITERARY

DAILY (/DAILY/)

PAST (/PAST/)

SUBMIT (/SUBMIT/)

CONTEST (/CONTEST-1/)

FILM

DAILY (/DAILY-1/)

PAST (/PAST-1/)

SUBMIT (/SUBMIT-1/)

CONTEST (/CONTEST-1-1/)

SUBMIT

LITERARY (/LITERARY/)

FILM (/FILM-1/)

CONTEST (/CONTEST-3/)

Literary

DAILY (/DAILY/)

PAST (/PAST/)

SUBMIT (/SUBMIT/)

CONTEST (/CONTEST/)

DAILY

NEW CONTENT EVERY TWENTY-FOUR HOURS

The Divorce (/Divorcefp.pdf) by Norbert Kovacs (/norbert-bio.pdf)

Cover artwork by Rachel Gardner
(<https://www.rachelgardnerart.com/>)

RUMBLEFISHPRESS@GMAIL.COM (MAILTO:RUMBLEFISHPRESS@GMAIL.COM)

Powered by Squarespace ([http://www.squarespace.com?
channel=word_of_mouth&subchannel=customer&source=footer&campaign=4fd1028ee4b02be53c65
dfb3](http://www.squarespace.com?channel=word_of_mouth&subchannel=customer&source=footer&campaign=4fd1028ee4b02be53c65dfb3))

"The Divorce"
By
Norbert Kovacs

At the kitchen table, Nathan Salle ate the breakfast he had prepared alone, a half bowl of oatmeal and a small glass of pink grapefruit juice. He usually had a full bowl with toast, milk, orange juice, and coffee, but he had run low on oatmeal, there was no more juice in the fridge, and he was out of everything else, so he had settled for the little before him. He ate slowly, making the most of the meal, but, at the end, was dissatisfied and barely felt full. Jan would have made me something bigger and better, he told himself. However, he could not rely anymore on his wife. Months ago, he had moved from their apartment, their animosity at its height, and been living by himself ever since. This day that he was having his meager breakfast he would meet Jan at the local courthouse and finalize their divorce.

After finishing his food then brushing and washing in the bathroom, Nathan went to his bedroom to change. He walked down the apartment hall, his head bowed slightly over the uneven, cracked floor. He was a thin man with a dark, glossy mop of hair and very dark, round eyes. His long, narrow mustache cut a line through his lean, pale face. At his sides, his hands hung down, fine, long bones showing strong, the nails cut almost too low. In his bedroom, Nathan picked the best clothes from his closet and changed into them. His pinstriped shirt, the one he yet had clean, was wrinkled down the front. Since living in his new apartment, he had left the shirt crumpled on his dresser many

times after work and rarely hung it in the closet. He had not minded until now. He checked but saw no others he could use. The dark suit jacket he put on next fit uncomfortably, its sleeves an inch short. The jacket squeezed him in the crook of his elbows. The pants with the suit had loose seams on the sides. When he had problems with past suits, his wife took them to the tailor. He had meant to take this one himself before the court date, but had kept pushing it ahead and did not. The tie he put on was canary yellow. He had other ties that matched his dark suit better, stowed in a bag from his old apartment, but never had unpacked them. He wore the yellow now because he knew he must appear formal at the proceeding. The dark shoes he stepped into were scuffed; a long crease ran down the insole of the left. He did not strike a very good figure for a court appearance in his outfit. Still, he did not believe with his other clothes he could have created any much better a look. He fetched his black blazer, donned it, and tied the strap belt at the waist. He saw his thin figure in the mirror pressed by the close fitting coat. At least the blazer will hide everything while I'm bundled, he thought.

Nathan went down the stairs of his apartment building to the street. Outside the sun shone in a very blue sky. It was cold and when he breathed, his breath left in a cloud. On the other side of the street were a few, dark, bare trees. He walked slowly up the street for the subway station. He kept a slower pace than he would going to work and let many other walkers go by him. He walked faced toward the grey sidewalk spotted by countless shoe scuffs and patches of old gum. I don't need to get to the courthouse too quickly, do I?, he asked himself studying the ground. Jan will be there. I can say I was

taking time to be ready for her if she asks. He came to a newspaper stand less than a block from the station. He surveyed the papers for sale, bought a copy of the *Daily News* and opened it a few yards away. The first story he saw was "Mayor in New Bind". Above the title was a photo of the city mayor, his face, tired and frustrated, as he pressed a fist into his cheek. Nathan tried to read the story but could not. The words did not stay put and he gave up trying for them. He turned the page with a jerk of his hand and discovered the headline, "Demonstrators Ask for New Policy". The photo with the story showed several people carrying signs as they listened to a man speak outside city hall. A woman in the crowd had been yelling by the camera when the photo was taken and her angry face seemed set on Nathan as he read. Beyond the newspaper, he heard the steps of the people passing in the street. As he slowly read the story, he felt the sharp cold bite at his hands and sink down the sleeve of his shirt into his arms. No, he thought, I can't keep this up. I won't make myself freeze. He folded the newspaper and stuffed it in his blazer pocket. He turned and walked up the street toward the subway station. The entry and the first concrete steps down showed dim and dingy before him. He descended. On the platform, he put his newspaper in the recycling bin and edged toward the track to await his train.

When it arrived, Nathan stepped inside with a small group and sat in one of the hard plastic seats by the wall. The car doors closed and the train started uptown. Nathan leaned forward hoping to sit comfortably. Above, he saw the reflections of the other passengers on the windows as the train advanced underground. The images appeared

and disappeared as lights were passed along the route. He saw a woman with a shopping bag sulking a few seats to his right. A man in a white shirt and khakis appeared to him close by studying the car floor. Who were these people and why were they here?, he asked himself. The train raced whining along the track and its bottom clacked hard as it passed between sections of rail. The noise sung in his ears. He considered he was moving fast toward the next station, his destination. His back tensed. The train slowed and pulled to a stop at his station. The standing passengers moved toward the door and those seated stood. Here I am, he thought, his heart beating hard. When the car doors opened, the passengers stepped onto the platform. He rose, drawing breath, and went toward the doors then out them. The passengers that had exited the train walked toward the turnstile and the stairs leading to the street. Nathan followed, keeping behind them. He passed through the turnstile and ascended the grey concrete stairs. The sky and a lamppost showed past the stair top and he breathed harder. The people on reaching the street dispersed. Suddenly alone, Nathan cut a sharp right and crossed the street.

He reached a small park and spotted the courthouse immediately beyond. The courthouse was a long, granite building of three stories set on a small rise of land. A pediment, like a long, stately ledge, topped its front, and rows of framed windows extended along its sides. The large compact granite blocks that made up the building presented a near seamless face. The place had a formal, solid appearance. Nathan drew to a stop well before it. In the park around him was a grove of bare maple trees by the

courthouse street. The grass beside the trees was still a bit green despite the winter and a few young children, who had come with their parents, called and ran along the paths. An equestrian statue in the park center had several pigeons strutting around its base. One bluer pigeon flew onto the marble figure and roosted. Nathan stood admiring it. He wondered for a moment what it would be like to be the bird. I would go where I will if I was, he thought. I'd fly anywhere without asking anyone if I should. I would feel free. I never feel I can now. He watched the bird hop and descend from the statue, then fly away. Nathan dropped his eyes and walked for the courthouse across the street.

In the building, Nathan took the stairs to the second floor and walked straight down the hall for Room 251, the courtroom where he was to have the divorce finalized. His wife Jan sat on a bench beside the room door at the hallway's end. Jan was a large woman with wide, blue eyes and curly, blonde hair bunched high on her head. Her heavysset face was soft at the cheeks beside her pressed, dark pink lips; her chin, a thick slope of flesh, melded to the middle of her neck. Beneath her tan blazer Nathan spotted the end of her dragon green dress and black shoes. She doesn't give me any good feeling, he thought, drawing near her.

When he first met Jan years ago at a social luncheon, Nathan had liked her. He had never been a skilled talker but, as they chatted that day by the sandwich table, she made him feel that he simply could listen to her without being a bore. He found she liked sharing her opinions with him. On her career, theatre, politics: she ranged the gamut. This made it easy for a quiet man like him to have a relationship. As they dated,

he came to appreciate how she helped him make decisions. On her advice, he had picked his first formal suit to wear for business and created interview questions for his magazine stories that always got interesting replies. She taught him how to defend himself against annoying colleagues. She seemed intelligent about that many things; in marrying her, he trusted she would become something like a guide for life. Jan proved up to the task, especially in the beginning when living together in a one-bedroom apartment was new to them. However, Nathan discovered that Jan, as she managed their finances and get-togethers with friends, took to judging him hard and sometimes without reason. While no writer or reader, she nagged him over his magazine pieces. She fingered the drafts on his desk and asked, "How can you word things so? How begin an article like this? Who would read past the opening?" One time she informed him, "You're not up to the prose you did once." Nathan had bowed his head and taken her criticism silently. Self-doubt told him he should have tried to improve his writing anyway.

After Nathan had showed how low he felt in her regard, Jan made an easy pass to bossing him casually. She did not let him stay out late with friends claiming he would end up drinking "until he became ridiculous as a hyena in a suit." He had never drunk much but decided to part with his friends early to please her. Soon after this concession, Jan said Nathan must not bring up his personal writing in conversation because he "tired people with it." He cut short mentions of his magazine work while in company, though it left him hard up for conversation. Then, Jan made him come visit Sue and Irene, uppity

friends of hers in Yorkville that he had said he disliked. When he said it would not be fair after he had bent on his friends, she said hers were different. "Mine can think seriously on more than the sport page," she insisted. Jan's dark opinion struck him as wrong for a first time and he became increasingly upset at her as a result. He thought to defend himself one afternoon. He left her at home and went walking in the city alone. He did several major avenues between Fifth and Eighth. She yelled at him when he returned. In fact, Nathan cringed hearing her. He went alone to his room. When she asked later that he come with her to visit her mother, he refused. In a fit of childlike fear and anger, he cried, "I won't. I won't." They had more arguments and, with each, the tension at his heart rose.

When their bickering hit its height, Nathan told his wife, "If it's this bad between us, dear, why don't we just get a divorce?"

Jan straightened. "The idea had been high on my mind."

"Then I think we should."

Nathan stayed from Jan in the apartment in the following days. He researched places to move to and finally chose a room in Gramercy smaller than he had hoped but the one that presented the least trouble acquiring. He moved his things on a day Jan was at work; he could not have with her there, he felt. Once at his new place, Nathan kept in it except to go to the magazine office or to buy groceries, too timid else to venture out alone. Invited to a first party in years, he declined. He read happily about the shows he

wanted to see at the theatre but did not go to them. He felt stuck and did not know how to escape.

Jan smirked when Nathan reached the bench at the courthouse. "Nice to see you come. You are late if you don't know. The judge would have asked for us already if he had not been kept up."

"I'm sorry. I took longer than usual to get ready. I didn't mean to be late."

Jan did not reply. Nathan sat on the bench, leaving a respectful distance with her. The two held silent and stiff as they listened to the mumble of proceedings that seeped from the rooms around them. The bailiff came after several minutes and called them into the hearing room. The two walked past the empty audience seats to the front tables; Jan took the one for the plaintiff and Nathan the defendant's across the aisle. The judge to hear them sat at the bench reading their case file.

"I learn from your paperwork," the judge said after he called the court to order, "that the two of you seek a divorce after enduring several personal problems in your relationship. Mrs. Salle writes in her statement, that she has long had difficulty because you, Mr. Salle, have not taken your tie with her as seriously as she believes you should. She says, among other things, that you have neglected her on multiple occasions to wander the city by yourself while she stayed home. She states that these times she had expected you both could have been together fostering the connection she is sure a husband should have with his wife.

"She adds that you no longer talk with her beyond discussing the things the two of you must, like paying your monthly bills. 'Mr. Salle,' I quote, 'does not talk about his doings in the day nor his acquaintance, addresses me tersely, has little interest in me, and refuses to draw out topics I raise in conversation.' She claims this makes her feel you limit her. She thinks currently she cannot be 'a fully realized person' because of it."

Nathan furrowed his brow. How could Jan be offended for his keeping from her after all she had said and done to him?, he thought. How could she go claim she cared when she had disliked him so long?

"She has been held back careerwise, she believes," the judge continued, "because of the upset the marriage has caused her. When she sought your emotional backing for her job endeavors this past year, she states you did not provide it. Mrs. Salle found your responses to her discouraging. She believes you owed her the courtesy of listening..."

The problem seemed more like I had listened too much, Nathan thought.

"Mr. Salle in his statement," the judge pursued, "cites the major problem with the marriage lies with you, Mrs. Salle, namely your character. He finds you have become pushier and more demanding than he can tolerate."

Jan turned scowling to Nathan. "I am hardly pushy with you."

Since the judge had begun proceedings, Nathan had held quiet through all the unflattering remarks in his wife's statement. To hear Jan deny his words as soon as they were read upset him worse than he expected. He had asserted what was true in his statement; even if she disliked hearing it, he felt he had the right to say it. After all that

had happened he thought it more than right. He answered her therefore, "But you are." He said it that quietly the judge did not hear, in fact, had read on in the casework. Jan made no reply, but Nathan knew she had heard.

"Due to the long standing problems faced in your marriage," the judge said, "both of you have agreed to divorce. In discussions prior to today, the two of you outlined how you would divide the assets shared between you, which you have rather evenly as I think. Your agreement stipulates further that, as there were no children in the marriage and each of you is employed self-sufficiently, Mr. Salle will not pay any alimony. The court has reviewed your case and consents to the divorce and its terms without reservation. You are both dismissed." The judge handed the case paperwork to the clerk who approached the bench.

Jan turned to Nathan. "So that's that. Well then, we haven't much left to say."

"No it doesn't seem."

"Right then...Goodbye."

Nathan made no reply. Lifting her head, Jan walked up the aisle from the courtroom. Nathan lingered, studying the floor by his feet, before he went slowly up the aisle too.

He left the courthouse and took the subway downtown. At Union Square he got out and went to the park there. Jan had brought him here many times as it was one of her favorite places to go, so he knew it well. By one of the park's many statues he sat on a bench. Before him was the brown brick of a path and across it an oak with wide spread arms, black in the bark. A young couple walked a distance away, their toddler inspecting

the grass. Two solitary adults bundled for the cold appeared close together chatting, farther down. He opened the large side pocket of his blazer and pulled out several odd scraps that had collected there: a used, crumpled napkin, a coat button, some lint. Amid the junk was a small paper card. It was a reminder to fetch pictures at the Photo Hut two blocks from his old apartment.

Nathan remembered that months ago Jan had him submit the pictures online to be developed, but that he never had gotten them. The photos were from the vacation they had taken not long before they descended to bickering. He recalled that in one of the shots he had photographed Jan by a canyon side, a broken red mesa in the background. They had gone to the canyon with a group of other travelers and several of them had been taking photos nearby. Nathan had squatted to take his of Jan. He was not very good with a camera, especially that new one, and had taken a long time to get the perspective right. He still was trying when Jan had called from the ridge side, "Are you stuck squatting? Why don't you take my picture?!" A number of their fellow travelers had heard this and turned. Nathan, red in the face, had snapped the photo no longer thinking if it would turn out well or not. How embarrassed he had been, he realized now.

Really she had been angry with me for no serious reason the whole trip, he decided as he studied the reminder card. He told himself, frowning, that since he was not obliged to her anymore, she could get the pictures herself if she even remembered them. He dropped the reminder and the junk from his pocket into the trash beside him.

Nathan left the park and walked idly onto a side street. He passed several buildings and noted their grey and drab brown colors. Two blocks down, he reached a pub that had opened early and went inside. The lights were still off and the interior was shady. Two men spoke quietly at a table near the far wall where they sat almost in the dark. A young man hunched over a drink at the bar near them. On a shelf, voices spoke indistinctly from a radio. Nathan took the seat at the bar closest the door. The bartender, a broad-chested man with red hair, came and Nathan ordered a large pretzel and a whiskey. He got the pretzel doughy and hot from the microwave behind the bar and the whiskey in a fat glass. His head bowed, he tore a long, thick piece from the pretzel. He broke this into bits that he chewed slowly one after another, following each by a sip from his drink. When the bartender checked on him, Nathan asked, not feeling it out of order, "What would you say if I had another drink?"

"Of course, let me get you one."

"But do you think I should have another one?"

"Have another drink?"

"Yes."

"If you're in the mood, why not?"

"Well, I don't know if I am in the mood. This is why I'm asking."

"I think you're in the mood."

"Why then?"

The bartender smiled as if on edge. "Listen, it's just a drink. I won't push you to have one if you'd rather not."

Nathan stared at the bartender. "Alright, I'll let you know if I'd like the drink." The bartender relaxed and backed down the bar. Nathan studied his empty glass considering. The two men at the table were talking louder and one looked over at him. No, it wouldn't be wise for this afternoon, he thought. I'll stay sober. He rose, paid, and left the bar.

Nathan walked to the subway and took the train downtown. He wandered several blocks through Greenwich following his own steps with no destination in mind. Late in the afternoon, he caught an F line train and connected to the 6. He disembarked at a corner crowded with glassy skyscrapers and walked to the one that housed his employer, the magazine publisher. Work was letting out and people streamed from the tinted glass doors onto the sidewalk. He waited for Frank Iannoccone, his good friend and another writer from the magazine. He could talk to Frank better than anyone else so had arranged to meet him this afternoon. Frank showed, saw Nathan and went to him.

"It's done," Nathan said. He had told Frank earlier about his court date with Jan. The two started up the street slowly, Nathan with his narrow face toward the sidewalk. Frank, tall and heavysset, stooping as he spoke.

"Don't sound too happy about it."

"I'm not."

"I guess that's how it is. Brian Hallahan in sales was the same when he split with his wife. He got awfully blue. But the mood won't last; definitely not too long with you. You had plenty of good reasons to break with Jan after all her complaining."

"I will no longer have to put up with her."

"And now you have your own apartment too. Stay up to exactly when you want without anyone to remind you of work. Go out where you choose. Write without being interrupted. You did get your things out from your old apartment?"

"I did that even before the divorce."

"Sounds like you are doing well then."

Nathan shook his head. "I don't know. I've had this strange feeling since this morning. I don't know what to do now I'm without Jan. She seemed to make all the real choices for me. I've got to do that alone now."

"Nathan, you worry too much. You'll be better off than if you had stayed with her. Jan was a shrew. You should be glad you don't have to put up with her anymore." Frank elaborated several awful things Jan had done and said to Nathan as if to prove it. Nathan pretended to listen but was thinking of his new life. I'm alone in my new apartment, he considered, cooking for myself, cleaning, keeping up the place. And I have to decide what I do there. I decide what happens there and how I will act. I decide who I'll be. How can I listen to Frank when I'm faced with this of a sudden and pretend I'm not worried?

The two men reached the street corner where Frank would cross for his train home. Frank had finished his tirade against Jan and said, "I think it would do you some good to celebrate that being rid of her. Why don't you come out with me and Regina tonight? We're seeing a show as it happens and I'm sure she'd be happy if you joined us."

"A show?"

"Some comedy. It's supposed to be pretty funny."

Nathan knew it wouldn't be right, not on the day of his divorce. "A nice offer, Frank, but I'll have to pass."

"Suit yourself."

After the two friends parted, Nathan went a few blocks to the subway. He took an uptown train that had very few people though it was rush hour. The lights underground flashed through the windows more, he thought, than if the car was full. He disembarked at a station north of Gramercy and making street level took an avenue that he usually did not walk. He followed it south toward his neighborhood. On the streets he trekked after work from the magazine, he walked in long streams of people, the street lit by the low, clear sunlight in the winter. This avenue was different. Shadows fell over the buildings, the sun having fallen, and made them a quiet grey and purple. Several people were passing though not as many as he was used to see. He went by them with easy, slow steps. I needed to walk elsewhere than I usually do, he thought. I cannot take the same tired way. He walked going toward the part of Gramercy where he lived.

Darkness had come when Nathan turned the corner and arrived by the flower shop. Grouped flowers filled its window—roses, daisies, and tulips sorted and bunched in big bouquets, wrapped in clear cellophane. Light from the inside of the shop hung over them; the faint pink of the roses, the yellow of the tulips, and white in the daisies came soft and rich through the glass. The flowers were all fresh and crisp, cut just that day. He saw by a sign on the door that the shop was still open. I will go in and buy myself flowers, he decided. He felt a small twitch of embarrassment. I can guess already what anyone else would say, he thought, that it is not right for a person to buy himself flowers. Jan would insist that flowers never interested me and ask how I could get any. I won't care about that though. I could stand flowers on a day like today. The ones in this window are too beautiful to pass up.

Nathan entered the shop. The place was small and tight but had many shelves full with arrangements. The light seemed bright after coming from outside, and the scents of all the flowers came to him together. Behind the counter was a young woman, the shop clerk. She was thin, freckled, and had long, brown hair that shot loose about her head. No one else was there. Nathan went and inspected the flowers for sale in the aisles before the counter. His head moved from stands of roses to tulips to lilies.

"Looking for anything?" the clerk asked from the counter.

Nathan half-turned. "Just something for myself."

The woman eyed him carefully. "Anything in particular?"

"I don't know. I'll have to look around for it."

As if losing interest, the woman walked down the counter and sorted through some crumpled flowers by a garbage pail.

Nathan went up the aisle and moved into a corner crowded with arrangements. Most of these were large, dense bunches of one flower mixed with one other for variety. There was one made of red and white roses that had a few lupines stuck among them. He went past these and discovered a smaller arrangement in a wicker basket. In its center was a large, red sunflower head with a wide face and creased petals. Ringing it were short, skinny orange tulips, thick yellow roses, and purple hyacinths. I'll have this basket for the many colors and the sunflower, Nathan decided. And when I'm home, I'll put it on the kitchen table where I eat breakfast. How different the table will seem for it! I won't worry even if Jan would have disliked it. He lifted the arrangement and walked with it down the aisle.

The clerk stopped sorting her garbage and raised her head. "Is that the one you'll have?" Her voice was half-doubtful.

Nathan set the arrangement confidently before her by the register. "Yes, this is my choice." He reached for his wallet, ready to pay.

About The Author

Norbert Kovacs lives and writes in Hartford, Connecticut. His stories have appeared or soon will appear in *Westview*, *Foliage Oak*, *Squawk Back*, *Wilderness House Literary Review*, and *No Extra Words*.

"The Divorce"

Feedback

Dear Mr. Kovacs,

This is a wonderfully written piece of literature, rhythmic in itself and wholesome as a story. The descriptions, the meticulous accounting of scenes, scenery, and observations, not a syllable flows past without a composite of tunes tearing through like a mellifluous trumpet—that after a time, though beautiful still, gains in the habit of telling what's grim. Norman Mailer once wrote of Truman Capote's *Breakfast at Tiffany's* that he would not change a word of the work.

The same goes for this.

On the matter of works, the one I would most compare it to (but hold it far from derivative) is Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho*. It's the itemization of life. The matter-of-fact here's what it is, humanity that underlies apparent indifference.

The ending works well too as an anti-climactic sendoff to a piece that's more about the general sentiment, the atmosphere, than the actions that take you there.

A few of my favorite descriptions in the piece are:

(1) *At his sides, his hands hung down, fine, long bones showing strong, the nails cut almost too low.*

(2) *Before him was the brown brick of a path and across it an oak with wide spread arms, black in the bark.*

(3) *In its center was a large, red sunflower head with a wide face and creased petals. Ringing it were short, skinny orange tulips, thick yellow roses, and purple hyacinths.*

Lines like these help elevate your writing in a way that puts the trees parallel with the forest. That is to say every sentence is alive, much like the story alone.

So, thank you for entrusting us with "The Divorce." We are dependent on writers like you.

Please keep us close to mind in the future.

Gratefully,

Patrick Hackeling
Editor-in-Chief
RumbleFish Press