

Too, Too, Too Divine

LET'S TALK ABOUT THUMBS. ANYONE WHO'S EVER READ TOM ROBBINS' 1976 ode to the lure of the road, *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*, will instantly feel the frisson of recognisance on this very topic. The heroine of his acclaimed novel, one Miss Sissy Hankshaw, hitchhiker extraordinaire, had, you see, found herself blessed — or, as some may say, encumbered — with a pair of thumbs proportionately on the scale of Dumbo's ears. Jumbo, grade A, extra-large-size thumbs, thumbs larger than any one man's desires, perfect for snaring a ride on the highway and leading Sissy on a journey from New York City to the Rubber Rose Ranch on the Dakota Badlands, an odyssey which is finally reaching the screen under the direction of Gus (Drugstore Cowboy and My Own Private Idaho) Van Sant.

Which brings us back to thumbs. Uma Thurman, actress extraordinaire, who plays Sissy, is getting her thumbs removed. Unpeeled, actually. She is sitting at a table next to the crew member, jokingly referred to as the "thumb wrangler", who is gingerly wiping with an alcohol solvent the fleshy part of her palm where the fake thumb is invisibly meshed to her real skin. It is a meticulous, boring process and Thurman's sat through it patiently 66 times before on Sissy's 66 previous shooting days, so there's nothing new about it in the slightest unless, like me, you're numbly fascinated by the mechanics of prosthetic removal from the slim hands of a movie star. Yet the latex pseudo-flesh of the thumbs themselves, when they've been removed, is creepily lifelike, hiding the metal mechanism underneath that allows Thurman to move these extensions in a lifelike manner.

"My hands will never be the same," she jokes with a wry smile. "But still," she adds, longingly looking at the packet of cigarettes she is as yet unable to smoke, "having the thumbs put on became my private time to become clear before I went in to work."

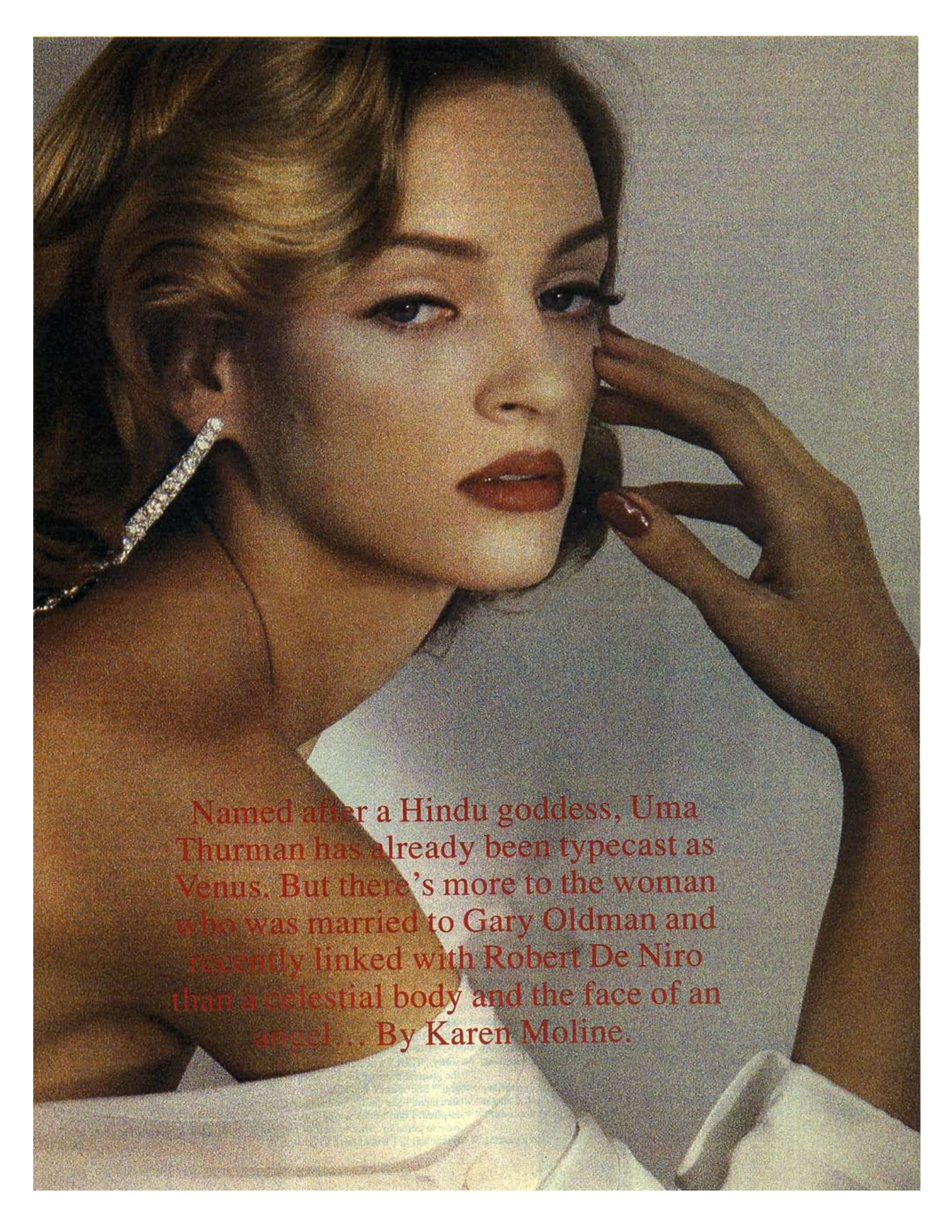
Remaining clear at this very moment does seem to be posing a slight problem for Thurman, who is admittedly press-shy and wary, and constantly apologising for what she obviously feels is a somewhat scattered demeanour. "Sorry," she explains, "I had the flu so I'm a bit addled." She does not seem the least bit addled. Thurman possesses a unique beauty and unusual composure, as if guarding some intensely powerful artfulness, one which is not especially sexual, but potent in its secrecy. She seems far older than her 23 years. Blonde, willowy and statuesque, she is, for once, quite astonishingly the physical embodiment of a character as described by an author (except a little taller): "A perfect compromise finally had been worked out between her predominantly angular features — high cheekbones, classically fine nose, fragile chin, peaceful blue eyes — and her decidedly round mouth," wrote Robbins of Sissy. "Her figure had come to correspond to the average measurements of the high-fashion model: she stood five-nine in her socks, weighed 125 and taped 33-24-34; one of those bony beauties of whom wags have said, 'Falling downstairs, they sound like a cup of dice.'"

Unlike those models, however, Thurman claims that she doesn't "really pay attention to fashion". Nor does Sissy Hankshaw. Thurman's costume for the day is a hideous amalgam of grubby, travel-stained brown suede jumpsuit with red stripes down the sides, fastened with a long zipper (since Sissy's thumbs most certainly cannot manoeuvre a buttonhole), clumpy brown boots, and an oversize, filthy red backpack. Her hair is lank and greasy, making her the epitome of grunge before the word was even invented.

Thurman is friendly, if guarded. "When I was younger, all anyone ever wanted to do was the 'ingenue' piece," she explains, as if she's so old right now. "And they would become quite frustrated that the material was not forthcoming. They just wanted garbage to build a piece on, and then you really get pushed around."

Which may explain why I was warned not to ask any questions about actor/husband



A close-up, artistic portrait of actress Uma Thurman. She is looking slightly to the right with a soft, contemplative expression. Her hand is raised, with her fingers gently touching her cheek and jawline. She is wearing a large, ornate diamond earring that curves around her ear. Her hair is styled in a short, layered cut. The lighting is soft and directional, highlighting the contours of her face and the texture of her skin. The background is a plain, light-colored surface.

Named after a Hindu goddess, Uma Thurman has already been typecast as Venus. But there's more to the woman who was married to Gary Oldman and recently linked with Robert De Niro than a celestial body and the face of an angel... By Karen Moline.

Gary Oldman, who left his wife and infant son, Alfie, when he met Thurman in 1989. They married in 1990 after a discreet romance but are recently separated. (Back in happier days, the couple split their time between Thurman's base in New York and Oldman's in London, where, at one point, Oldman claimed that they "loved watching bad movies together at home". They had even planned to make *Dylan* together, a biopic about the Welsh poet Dylan Thomas and his wife Caitlin, until financial and "artistic" problems pulled the plug just before filming was meant to start. Too bad. Oldman recently characterised their relationship to a journalist as: "You try living with Venus". Guess they won't be working together any time soon.) Thurman answers all questions thoughtfully, using phrases that from anyone else might seem pretentious but from her are spontaneous, although her habit of referring to herself or ideas in the third person — using "one" instead of "me" or "you" — is rather a disconcerting peculiarity of language for a woman who's been living on her own, working as a model and an actress, since the age of 16.

Perhaps it's an unconscious affectation, left over from growing up as she did in an academic yet offbeat household. When Thurman was born in 1970 — named for a Hindu goddess, the wife of Siva, the god of arts and knowledge, dancing and gaiety; Uma can also mean "May She Never Suffer," or "Bestower of Blessings" — her mother was a teacher and her father taught Tibetology at Amherst College in Massachusetts, not far from the family home in Woodstock (yes, that Woodstock). Now a professor of comparative religion at Columbia University in New York, her dad was also the Dalai Lama's first Buddhist monk in America. Many other monks stayed with the Thurmans, and the family often travelled to India.

"I don't think we really knew what normal suburban life was, growing up, and moving around as much as we did," Thurman says. "We had a family that was quite insular, quite on its own, so it wasn't about the community. And, as a child, I enjoyed plays and acting and dancing. It is a child's dream. I chose it as a child."

After moving to New York, she appeared in the cult film *Kiss Daddy Good Night* in 1986, followed in 1988 by her stunning child/woman virgin victim, eager to be sacrificed to John Malkovich's nasty gamesmanship in *Dangerous Liaisons*, and a glowing Venus in the *Adventures of Baron Munchausen*. Only then did she begin to believe, at the exalted age of 18, that acting might actually become a career.

"I didn't have that much invested in it when I started, or expect to be fulfilled, so I thought why not," she explains. "After *Baron* I decided I would pursue being an actress, for however long, because I saw that making a film as a cultural object — not that films are all like that, because they're not, and no career is made up

of them, solely, at least not for an actor — was incredibly exciting. Creating something, and so imaginatively... I think every actor wonders why am I here. Of course I had that very badly," she adds, exhaling deeply from the cigarette she is finally able to light. "I was still a teenager, and felt very awkward in my skin."

Her subsequent roles have been an elective mish-mash — June Miller in *Henry and June*, a troubled, glorious beauty until she opens her mouth to a stream of ghastly Brooklynese; a spoiled rich kid in the comedy *Where the Heart Is*, a strong-willed Maid Marian opposite Patrick Bergin in a dark and dirty *Robin Hood*; two recent forays into more mainstream Tinseltown thriller territory: opposite the hair-flinging theatrics of Kim Basinger, playing her maniacal sister in *Final Analysis*, and as a threatened blind woman in *Jennifer 8*.

"Thrillers are not fun," Thurman states. "I was interested in the genre. I do like this genre, but more in its original form of film noir or Hitchcock. Unfortunately, modern thrillers are such a successful genre that they have their own rules and regulations and necessary punches to be pulled and let go of. It's too prescribed. I don't believe in the thriller concept."

"The endangered woman is a cliché, but also a reality, so using her in a thriller is not a complete fallacy," she quickly adds. "I feel endangered myself. I do get nauseous with the repetition of that being used as a tool in films, but I don't think it's an absurdity..." How exactly does she feel endangered?

"When I'm in my house alone at night," she replies. "Walking into a parking

lot. Walking down the street sometimes. In general just a feeling of endangeredness. I would be afraid now to live in the apartment I rented when I first moved to New York, exposing myself to something like that. Some cities like Paris and Rome and San Francisco have a good street life, but London is very scary, the emptiness, the desolateness at night sometimes. You don't see anyone walking, and I certainly wouldn't want to knock on a door, and ask for help."

The character she plays in *Mad Dog and Glory*, directed by John MacNaughton, is certainly endangered — a grown-up version of Little Miss Marker, indentured to a gangster played by Bill Murray. When Murray's life is saved by the wimpy cop embodied in Robert De Niro, he loans *Glory* (Thurman) out to poor Mr De Niro for a week — naturally, complications ensue.

Playing an involved lovemaking scene opposite Robert De Niro could have been a discomfiting (if not terrifying) experience, but Thurman thrived on the challenge. "Working with De Niro was wonderful," she says. "I found him to be so incredibly generous, and that was really inspiring. So although I was uncomfortable, I liked the sex scene because it seemed to belong in the film, and it wasn't

a hyped-up Hollywood false, glossy display of sexuality. Instead, it seemed like a meaningful, painful, uncomfortable engagement between two sad and desperate people. Usually I am disgusted with sex scenes, one way or another."

Far more controversial is what many question as *Mad Dog's* rampant and gratuitous woman bashing. "The film doesn't support her decision; it's the structure of the story, a very unpleasant situation, and she wants out from the beginning," Thurman says. "But to argue that it's misogynist, I would say is not the case. It's about misogyny, which is a part of life, unfortunately, but because it was a stretch for me as an actress I really liked it."

Another taboo topic is the purported relationship between her and notoriously press-shy De Niro. A flurry of rumours were swirling around New York after sightings of the two together at David Mamet's play *Oleanna*, at an A-list-only bash for Giorgio Armani, and at other events where paparazzi were certain to be in abundance. Still, De Niro's preference for entanglements with women of colour, like supermodel Naomi Campbell and ex-girlfriend Toukie Smith, is well-known, and seems to imply that only friendship is in order. Thurman certainly isn't talking. She's here to talk about playing Sissy Hankshaw, a character with whom she deeply identified after reading the novel, who could allow her to display a comic, grown-up, womanly tenderness her other roles have not yet permitted her to play.

"Sissy is lonely, but you can say that about 2000 million people," says Thurman, lighting up another cigarette. "She's a recluse, basically, and as much as everything she does seems heroic, she's also anti-heroic, hiding from having to be part of that society with her deformity. Sissy is not attuned to her sexuality; she's a first-hand witness, an observer... Some actors are actors all the time, and some are just at work. I kind of prefer the ones who are actors at work, and live and engage and think and feel."

"I also believe in story-telling, like Sissy's story, which is why I've done so many types of films," she adds. "I want to see in my own nature what each one is going to be about. But... I don't actively pursue having a 'career'. I want to have a life, man."

Somehow, it isn't difficult to doubt that Thurman, with her cool beauty and deep reserve of aplomb, as well as her fierce determination, will seize the challenges life throws her way.

"I've always had really good company; I've never been without it," she says softly. "There's a beautiful karma of what I've done — to me it's beautiful because the greatest thing of all is to work with people who in one way or another inspire you." She shakes her head, and laughs, embarrassed. "Now that was a corny statement." She shrugs, and stubs out her cigarette. "But what I like most is being inspired. I don't think acting's worth doing unless you're inspired, and that's not easy to come by. That feeling of inspiration is the most wonderful pleasure, and if that left... I would have to go with it."

