



O VÉU – THE VEIL

Luis Eduardo Matta

English version
Selected excerpts

Part 1/Chap. 1 – Pages 25 - 27

On June 14, 2007, the house in Barra de Maricá burned down in a mysterious fire, killing Lourenço Monte Mor and destroying most of his work. In addition to spending the next six months in tears, Araci also lapsed into ill-health for a period of weeks.

The police never discovered the real cause of the fire, or whether, more importantly, it had been criminal or accidental. However, many of the events prior to the fire suggested arson, chiefly because *The Veil*, a work Lourenço had recently presented to the public in Paris, had become the subject of virulent controversy among Islamic leaders, clerics and extremists, who considered it an affront to the purity of Muslim women. Lourenço Monte Mor was branded an enemy of Islam and his head was called for during various protests in Europe and the Middle East. Depressed and hurt by the vehemently negative reception given to his work – which was also panned by the European critics as appellative, conservative, ridiculous and mediocre – Lourenço returned to Brazil and holed himself up in a beach house. He started drinking and smoking a lot, and police began to suspect that the fire may have been caused by a cigarette carelessly handled while Lourenço was drunk.

For Araci, however, it was hard to believe that a fire of such magnitude, capable of incinerating a whole house, could have been mere accident. For her, it was

far more likely to have been the handiwork of some extremist group out for revenge against the blasphemous painter. Coincidence or otherwise, it was around this same time that rumors began to abound that Azadi, a terrorist organization that had slipped into oblivion after the assassination of its leader in Jeddah, was resuming its activities, now under the command of a woman: the lethal and implacable Umm al-Hakika. She, Araci thought, was quite possibly the source of the order to eliminate Lourenço and his work.

For months it was thought that *The Veil* had been lost in the fire. However, shortly before his death, Lourenço sent the painting to Aníbal, who, in turn, entrusted it to Araci, who hid it away in the back of a wardrobe in her apartment and forgot all about it.

Only months later, with the news that the painting was to go under the hammer at Casa Quintanilha Auctioneers, did the public learn that *The Veil* was still intact. It proved to be an announcement that would signal the beginning of Araci Quintanilha's own private hell.

She had no way of knowing that the painting harbored a terrible secret, and could never have foreseen the dangers that now besieged her. It was all beyond her wildest imagination.

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It had been lashing rain since early afternoon.

Suddenly, successive bursts of fog-shrouded lightning lit up the top of the Corcovado, as peals of thunder shook the air. The resplendent statue of Christ the Redeemer flashed momentarily through a thick pall of cloud, as if struggling in vain to stay visible in that vast darkness, only to be swallowed back into a night sky eager to snuff out the last remaining resistance to the early fall of winter over Rio de Janeiro.

It was the somber night of June 8, the coldest of the year so far. The sea was in a rage, repeatedly threatening to storm the beaches. Biting, wind-driven rain swept the muddied, melancholic streets. Rio de Janeiro, empty, silent, looked rather like a ghost town.

When the last few guests left Casa Quintanilha Auctioneers and Art Agents, São Clemente Street was deserted, save for the occasional car speeding across the wet asphalt. The stragglers, a pair of couples who had likely overdone it with the free wine and champagne, giggled their way down the marble steps of the entrance and turned onto the street. The doors closed behind them. Everyone was gone. The lights went off in the tall windows of this imposing 18th-century mansion house, leaving only the garden torches alight. An uncomfortable mist, laced with a sickly sweetness from the churning ocean and the pungency of wet grass, hovered amongst the boughs of the surrounding trees, blurring the beams from the streetlamps and headlights and recasting it all in a ghostly haze.

(...)

Suddenly, a wrenching clatter broke the silence of the sleeping neighborhood, making the ground shake. One by one, the lights went on in houses and buildings, as frightened residents craned and peered in search of some explanation. But it was not over. There was a second, weaker blast, and the piercing wail of a siren filled the air. The alarm had gone off at Casa Quintanilha. From the grounds of the Portuguese consulate a wispy column of smoke could be seen rising from one of the palace's lateral domes.

It did not take long for the military and civil police, bomb squad and fire brigade to arrive noisily at the scene, but even they were piped to the post by a group of journalists who had already somehow managed to breach the railings – with little or no resistance from the stunned security guards – and fan out across the garden. While a burgeoning fire was swiftly put out at the epicenter of the pair of explosions, the photographers seemed to be more interested in clicking the striking sequence of graffiti that had stained the right side of the mansion’s façade with a crimson, almost blood-red scrawl.

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As her knees quivered with fear, Araci turned the four keys that kept the front door locked as tight as a safe. In the vestibule, she punched in the numbers that deactivated the alarm and scanned the hall for signs of tampering or telltale traces on the floor or walls. The heavy auction catalogs were exactly as she had left them, piled up on the table, and the scent of cocktails still lingered on the air.

She advanced slowly through the hall, encased in an oppressive silence punctured only by the sibilant hush of her own breathing and the sound of her footsteps on the polished floor. (...) Through a steamed-up windowpane Araci saw the leaves of a palm tree swaying in the wind. On the spur of a sudden gust, it rapped the glass and Araci took a start. She made her way cautiously along the corridor toward her office, dreading what might await her there (...) One of the door panels was ajar. Araci swallowed dry and held her breath. She took two more steps forward, but was afraid the intruder might still be inside and register her presence. After all, there was nowhere else he could be but there.

There was definitely someone behind that door, she could feel it. And she was intent on finding out who, right now.

Groping in the dark, she grabbed a marble paperweight off the secretary's desk and held it firm in her right hand. She edged closer, rested her left palm upon the half-open door and peered into the room, redeemed from pitch blackness only by a pale glow from the streetlights that managed to seep in through the window. (...) Araci's panic reached fever-pitch, and in one brusque movement she threw the door open and lunged into the room. She had no time to think; a hand was grabbing hold of her arm. Her legs grew weak and she issued a muffled scream, before letting the paperweight fall to the floor.

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As they crossed the grand hall toward the exit, she saw Emílio standing dead still before a painting, hung as a centerpiece among the rest of the auction fare. The canvas seemed to command his morbidly wide-eyed stare, and he was utterly absorbed in it.

Araci felt a shiver run down her spine. Her father was transfixed, his head cocked, his body motionless. (...) She approached Emílio with caution, but ended up doing precisely what she had hoped to avoid: she was standing face to face with that painting.

The Veil.

Araci closed her eyes to prevent that oppressive sensation of sheer weight from engulfing her. That face was undeniably seductive; it seemed alive and alert to every movement around it. The eyes were large, deep and smoldering; two perfect green orbs, watchful, all-seeing, sinister and terrifying, emanating a ferocious lust that did little to mask an underlying and disconcerting agony, an expression that almost begged for mercy. The painting was shrouded in its own myth. Many viewers had fainted beneath that glare; some had even sunk into a momentary trance. Then there were the tragic deaths attributed to it, leading many to believe it was cursed.

Rallying her wits, Araci gently laid her hands on her father's shoulders and asked:

— Are you looking at this thing again, dad?

Emílio glanced sideways at Araci and groaned:

— You are right when you say there is some dark spell about this painting. Right this moment I feel a strange agony mixed with pleasure...Is it really such an exaggeration to say the thing is cursed? After all, so much has happened because of it... So much death, so much misfortune...

Araci had still not come to terms with Lourenço Monte Mor's death, and the painting never failed to remind her of her adored nephew, the son she'd never had.

Her eyes welled with tears, but she managed to hold them back, thanks partly to the whisky she'd downed a while before.

“Lourenço... My poor Lourenço... Gone so young! Sometimes life isn't fair. It's tough. Real tough.”

Despite his premature death – or perhaps because of it –, Lourenço Monte Mor had consolidated a reputation as a wronged artist, the precursor and sole exponent of a movement known as polyfigurative hyper-realism. *The Veil*, his masterpiece, incurred the wrath of Islamic fundamentalists, who publicly blasted it as one of the most offensive works of western art of all time for portraying a Muslim woman in a scandalously sensual light.

Part 2/Chap. 11 – Pages 153 - 162

Professor Mitra Rahmani, 46 years old, drove her impressive blue Samand onto the campus of Shahid Beheshti University in the north zone of Tehran, the Iranian capital. Though there were many parked cars, she still found a place in the shade of a leafy *chenar*. (...)

It was going on eight-twenty on the morning of *shambé* (Saturday), the day after the weekly day of rest, *jom 'é*, the equivalent of the Christian Sunday, when all the shops, schools and government offices close throughout Iran. Yet there had been no rest this *jom 'é*, as the Iranians had gone to the urns for the four-yearly presidential elections. The atmosphere in Tehran was one of heavy expectation. (...)

Mitra entered the Computer Science Department and sat before one of the terminals hooked up to the Net, scanning some Iranian sites in search of news of the election. The count was nearly complete, with almost 80% of votes tallied, so the result would surely be in later that morning. (...) Mitra glanced across the headlines (...). Suddenly, she fixed on a small byline near the top of a page, no more than two lines long, tiny compared to the massive headlines on the Iranian election. It made her stare in stunned silence.

The report spoke of the mysterious disappearance of Professor Mohsen Khajepour, only moments before the opening of a conference on Iran, where he was to launch the translation of his latest book, *Le grand parjure*, in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. According to police sources in the city, kidnapping was the most likely scenario, though they hoped to shed further light on the case by early the following week.

(...)

As she walked back across campus toward her car, Mitra glanced at a group of students in the middle of heated conversation, their books and notepads shoved underarm or balancing on their laps. The subjects must have been varied, but certainly did not yet include the disappearance of Mohsen Khajepour. She wondered how they would take that news.

She had a sense of foreboding as she took the bustling Vali Asr Avenue, which crosses Tehran from north to south. The crazy traffic, the shop windows, the pedestrians on the sidewalks, the traffic cops gesticulating wildly at the cars in the vain hope that

someone might obey them, the election posters plastered all over...Despite the apparent normality, a cloud of tension hung above Tehran. The radio brought news of violent protests breaking out at certain flashpoints throughout the city, which meant the election results had obviously just been released. For some reason, Mitra felt even more apprehensive. It was as if some catastrophe was about to occur.