

The Incendiary

Camila Mont-Rond

Translated from Portuguese by Dário Borim

To Hugo... for the sheer bliss of a short story.

UNCLE FRANCISCO DA ROSA was taking a nap on the shady porch by the door to his house. In smart clothes, he sat in the old canvas chair, under the tamarind tree. That's when the whole thing happened. It was past four o'clock in the afternoon, on that Sunday in May—a sun-drenched day like nothing but May days on the Island. I had gone there to cool off in the shade, as I used to do every other Sunday, with Mother's consent, right after the nine-o'clock mass. For me it was an excitement that would always begin Saturday afternoon with my persistent request for permission to go. I'd be hoping that she would not change her mind the next day. I waited until dinner time, with my father at the table, to ask her in a slow voice and in a well-rehearsed and sharp Portuguese phraseology: "Moth-er-would-you-grant-me-per-mis-sion-to-spend-Sun-day-in-the-Aunt-Nela's-home?" (I hadn't learned that the correct way of saying it was "at Aunt Nela's home"—I did learn it, but it was much later, when I had stopped going to my uncle and aunt's house and they had already passed away.) Mother would first pretend she didn't hear a word from me. She continued serving my father's plate, and then the kids', before she helped herself. I repeated my request raising the pitch of my voice and being very careful with the pronunciation of every word. Without lifting her eyes from what she was doing, she then replied: "After dinner we will talk about this. You are at dinner table now!" Father would clear his throat to show that he had nothing to do with the consent or the denial that would come later from Mother. That allowed him to gain momentum, make himself understood, and start a quarrel with his old lady: "It's too much freedom to do exactly what one pleases. What is this whole story about? To spend Sundays at somebody else's home? Yes! Even if it is at Nela and Francisco's home! Doesn't this girl know how to stay home? And, besides, you know very well how Nela is. She says anything in front of children, without the least concern!" In that regard the old man was right. I would invariably return home late on Sunday afternoon loaded



A Tentação [The Temptation]. Oil on canvas. © José Maria Barreto

with stories. The latest rumors of the land came with me: who went out with whom; the woman who whelped—and that was the way Aunt Nela would put it—a child who, according to the townsfolk, was not the son or daughter of the alleged father, but actually a child fathered by the mother’s cousin’s husband; the woman who proved to be a hermaphrodite, hook-and-eye—in Aunt Nela’s terms—from night to day; the guy who was caught dancing on the patio in a house in Patim, with lit candles all around him, while invoking his great aunt’s soul, the one who had deserted him on the eve of her death. Goodness! I had walked down the way between Fonsaco and Feijoal, through the neighborhood where we lived in my grandfather’s two-story house, trying to memorize those stories that I wanted to tell my brothers and sisters, and my cousins too, as soon as I arrived. That would make me look like the wisest girl, and for a few moments, like an older person, as long as my repertoire lasted—and did I want it to last.

That Sunday afternoon was extraordinary, though! I had the paramount privilege of becoming an eye-witness! My mother, poor thing, got really wor-

ried: “This girl is going to end up in court as a witness!” I could already picture myself, face to face with His Honor the Judge, telling him what I had seen on the porch on that Sunday. After listening to my progenitor, I ran toward the large mirror placed on the closet’s door—the same mirror, on that old and bulky furniture, in which several of my paternal ancestors had seen themselves. My image there reflected a serious face. Yes, I had learned that in front of the judge I should neither laugh nor open my mouth too wide! In addition, everything had to be spoken in correct Portuguese, since right next to us there would be a lady putting down everything I said.

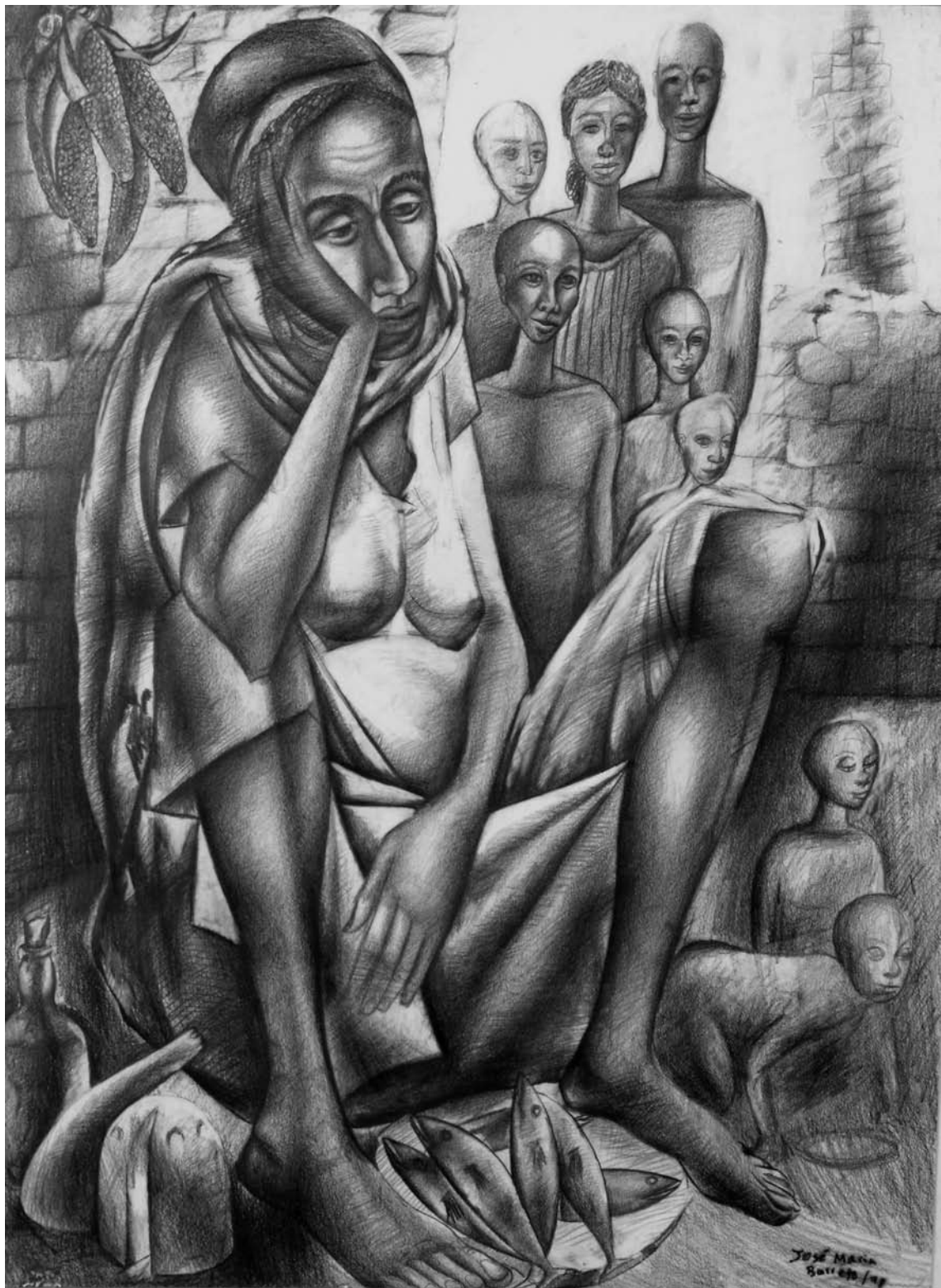
My younger brother, Irineu, really liked the stories that I brought home on Sundays. Actually, he was the one who appreciated them the most. His godfather, our cousin Adalberto, would tell Irineu to follow him to the store on the weekends, when the place was not busy. While opening the store,

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Adalberto asked Irineu about the grade he had gotten on Friday’s written test in school. That grade had to be good—fair was not enough—for Adalberto to give him bonbons and chocolate bars of the best quality available. A sizeable amount of those goodies he gave to me, though, without my having to sweat for it. They

were the reward for the tales I told him. We sat on the veranda that commanded a view of the dwellings and the sea embellishing the coast far away, exactly underneath Feijoal. Our house stood on one of the highest and furthest removed points of the area. My grandfather wanted to live far from noise, in a pleasant climate, on a shady spot, and, above all, “away from the eyes and the proximity of the curious”—that’s how he’d put it. I would start my narration with stories of lesser interest—slowly, in no hurry. Sometimes I pretended I had forgotten a detail. I’d go back to the beginning. I looked at the faces of those who listened. I could only see the eyes that moved around, according to their interest and the story’s crescendo. Ah! On that Sunday, though, our mother had to ask us to go to bed several times before we would leave the veranda. Our bedtime had passed long ago, but nobody was sleepy! No wonder!

My cousin Zinha, Uncle Francisco and Aunt Nela’s daughter, received magazines from America. For me, those were strange magazines, but I read them—that is, I devoured the photographs and other images in earnest. They were Black-American magazines. The women—some had great hairdos; others wore huge and beautiful hats. They were all smiling while attending high society functions. Men, in turn, appeared in their elegant suits, with their shining hair, plus straight and immaculate teeth, with airs of great success! My cousin would tell me that one of her mother’s brothers, Uncle Noronha,



Vida Difícil [Difficult Life]. Graphite on paper. © José Maria Barreto



Sonho [Dream].
Oil on canvas.
© José Maria
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had emigrated in the 1930s. He had become the president of one of the societies promoted in the magazines. It made me a bit perplexed that her uncle belonged in a Black-American society. How had he got in? As far as I was concerned, Uncle Noronha was neither American nor Black. His skin was actually the lightest in his family! True that he had kinky hair... but his complexion was fair! That was the opposite of Aunt Nela's looks, who was darker and had Indian's hair. Cousin Zinha tried hard to explain to me that in America he was considered a colored man. Over there, she concluded, that issue was different from the way it was on the Island! That did not cancel any bit of the interest I had in going to Uncle Francisco's house on Sundays and

looking through those American magazines that my cousin collected. What had happened on that day did not compare at all to Aunt Nela's gossips! Everything else was short of that strange happening that I witnessed!

Uncle Francisco, who took a daily siesta in the canvas chair by his house, had a secret side to his life. It was a somewhat dark phase. Nothing (or very little, in disguise) was said in the family. Still quite young and recently married he was banished from the country and sent to Angola, where he served a sentence for allegedly having set fire to a retail store. That business belonged to a lady who would later become his Aunt Nela's sister-in-law, the one married to Uncle Noronha. Nela's brother, Noronha, was the grand baron of the magazines that increased my delight

and desire to spend more Sundays at Francisco and Nela's house. Of course, the subject was a great taboo in the family. We, by the way, were convinced that the person who ignited the fire was not Uncle Francisco, but Aunt Nela, instead. The fact of the matter, though, was that he became the one who sat in

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the defendant's chair and took all the accusation. Aunt Nela, pregnant at that time, waited for her husband's return and took care of the couple's proprieties, including the large store they had opened. According to public opinion, she replaced her future sister-in-law's burned out store with a better one. All this was the past when I started hanging around their house on a regular basis. Well, on that unforgettable Sunday in May, as was habit, Cousin Zinha called out loud from the road right after her Nazarene Sunday School classes. I came to the window to give her the positive sign that I was ready to come down and walk with her. Totally content I noticed that under her left arm she carried a parcel with some of those magazines. They had just arrived by the hands of Mr. Hud, the pastor that had recently returned from America.

I confess that I was intimidated by Mr. Hud's appearance—very tall, red hair (fire-colored, really) and a pale complexion. His gestures alarmed me, especially when he directed prayers with his distressed and exalted voice during Tuesday services, which I attended with Cousin Zinha. She had a lovely voice. Usually, she was the one who did the solos on the chants from the pulpit. I liked listening to her and tried to imitate, at home, the sharp sounds she produced on certain hymns.

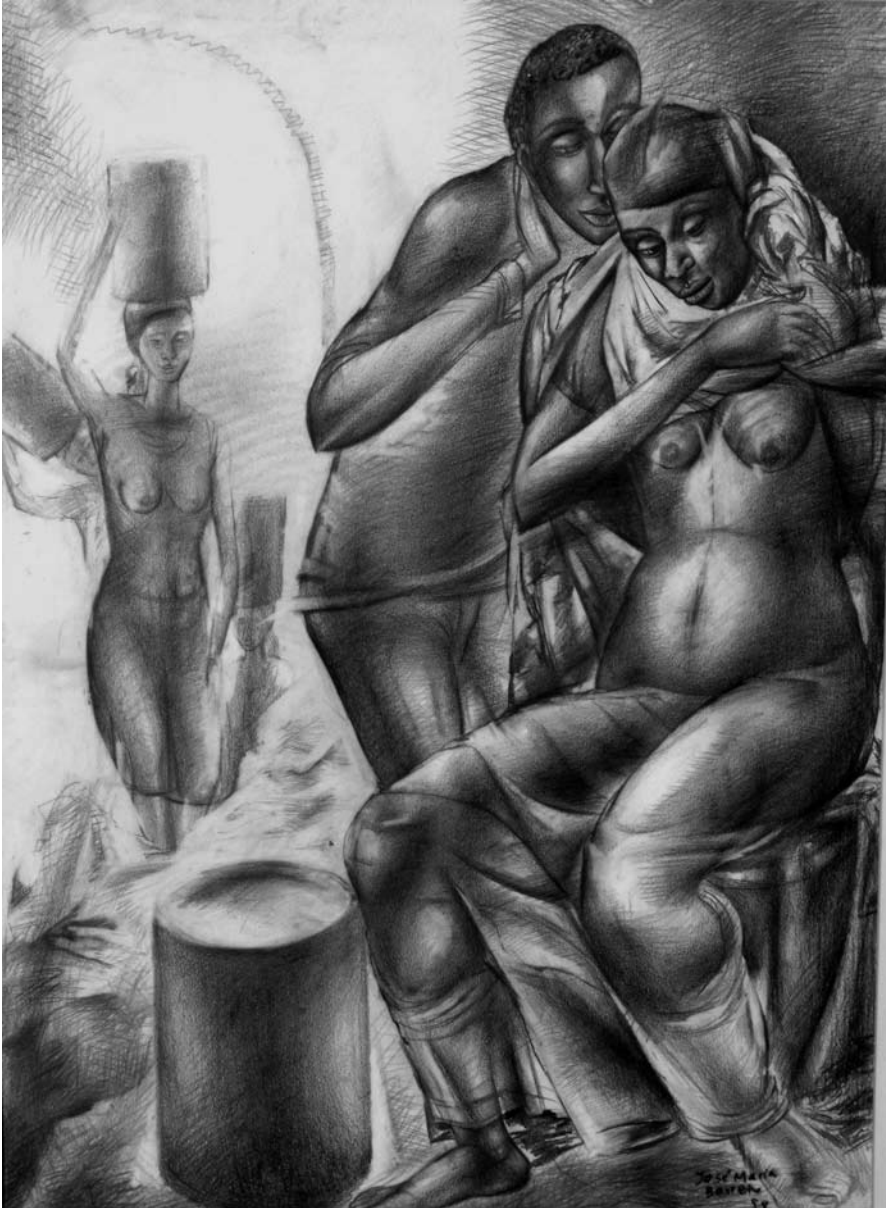
Now back to the magazines. A long time had passed since Estela (Uncle Noronha's wife) had died from cancer and Nela's brother had stopped sending those periodicals to his sister. It seemed that things were getting back to normal now. Interestingly enough, the letter that had announced Estela's death had been directed to Aunt Nela, who made sure nobody else saw it, in compliance with her brother's request (a fact that she herself explained

to the family). Not even Francisco had seen the content of that letter. All he knew about it he learned from his wife's mouth. His wife's behavior did not surprise anyone. She was really the one who ruled in the house.

One must add, in honor of the truth, that her husband had for her... great respect. Aunt Nela was overweight, bulky, and extremely tall, while Uncle Francisco was not exactly short but rather skinny and fragile. They made a funny couple. When they walked side by side, they seemed like the characters Laurel and Hardy, from the movies that Father Simões showed to us every month in Cousin João's large back yard. Ah! Those movies that Father Simões brought in for special occasions. How we waited for them anxiously! Sometimes it was Christmas, sometimes Easter, or another special occasion that celebrated

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a patron saint—and there he was, Father Simões rolling up through Espigão Road. He pulled in, on horseback or a motorcycle, from the city of São Filipe, carrying in his backpack that machine we regarded as supreme magic: the movie projector. The already familiar roar of the motorcycle engine crossing the village toward Fajazinha, where the priest lodged, caused a generalized commotion. Intense excitement overwhelmed us. We left our homes running to announce the good news to anyone who hadn't noticed the important arrival. For us, Father Simões was a very special priest. In our imagination we placed him either on the pedestal of an artist that composed and interpreted songs with his tenor voice; on the pulpit of a religious man who, at the ceremonies which he directed, sang more often and better than anybody else; or in João's backyard cinema, where a magician promoted the seventh art. Because of our love for movies, unrest, then, would settle in town. We discussed ways of obtaining money for the tickets. If it could not come from our parents, it would be from our aunts. We patrolled the gate to Cousin João's house in order to learn the title of the next movie. We guessed: *Charlotte, Laurel & Hardy, Marcelino Pan y Vino, or Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves*. Which one would it be this time? We approached the priest who still didn't know the title. It depended on Tuta Melo and Bitá's arrival. The priest would smile in light of our anxious faces. He didn't want to produce excessive expectations since things could go wrong, as had happened so many times! The issue could be the cargo that had to go to different harbor, or the agitated seawaters, such a recurrent problem. The rental of the film copy might be denied as well... and Bitá sometimes did not show up! People always waited for the boat with great apprehension! During school vacation or on holidays we would get up early in order to search for Bitá's silhouette on the horizon. We prayed for the sea not to get too rough, for Miramar to provide the copy of the film, and for our aunts to be in good moods. We all became very helpful while delivering messages and doing other tasks that we received at home.



Conquista
[Conquest].
Graphite on
paper. © José
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And nobody could afford to misbehave! That was the order among siblings and cousins. Such recommendations applied especially to those who possessed a kind of personality similar to a volcano in eruption. There was complicity hovering in the air... only that way could we fulfill the first part of the deal. The other part was on the condition of Father Simões: “If Bitá arrives, there is cinema. If Bitá doesn’t arrive, there is not cinema.”

Speaking of Uncle Francisco again, I should add that people got their kicks from saying that he was often beaten up by his mighty wife. My brothers were very eager to know if I had ever had the good chance of watching one of those

scenes. No, I never was present at one. I even thought that on Sundays, at least when I was there, they talked decently to one another, without any grudge. And the Sunday of the special event was no exception in that regard. In fact, Aunt Nela was more playful, compared to the way she had normally been! We had eaten a good variety of pork cuts for lunch. A large pig had been killed that day. In the back yard, several aromas were mixed, ashes got buried, pots cooked on full blast, and frying pans sizzled. The lard we had collected

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was enough to fill up God-only-knows-how-many huge cans. Tote Matador, taking advantage of Aunt Nela's walk into the house, told me with his mouth wide-open: "Your aunt should be sad rather than cheerful as she is. She's lost a relative!" The kinship to which he alluded was the obesity of my aunt and

the dead pig. Startled by his remark, I ran away without laughing in front of him. I would save all this for later, the time when I'd tell my brothers the day's adventures. It's just that on that day there would be no time to tell the rest. The main event overshadowed everything else. I treated myself to a few cracklings before lunch. At the table, I also ate well. In the middle of the confusion that was installed in the house later, Aunt Nela and Cousin Zinha said that I got all mixed up because of too much food I had eaten. They contended that I had even complained about stomachache, and that children made up a lot of stories when their bellies were too full...

Well, Uncle Francisco was sitting in his canvas chair, now snoring loudly and happily. Zinha was in her room, also taking a siesta. I was sitting on top of a wall in the house's back yard. My legs were turned toward the road, while my feet rested on the tamarind that gave us such great shade. The limbs of that tree stirred to the winds passing through. No human steps would break the quiet of the road. In the meantime, I leafed through the new magazines. In one of them there was picture of Uncle Noronha. Sitting in an armed chair and looking serious, he appeared to have lost weight and to me it seemed he had too many rings on his fingers. From the pocket of his coat hung four pen caps.

The house was now immersed in the delightful silence that normally followed Sunday luncheons. From nearby yards there came the crowing of fighting cocks. I noticed the half-open door of the house being opened with care by someone who was obviously avoiding any noise. Soon, I saw Aunt Nela's chubby hand turning the handle. Approaching it from behind, she moved closer to the canvas chair where Uncle Francisco continued to raise and lower his abdomen rhythmically, snoring out loud with his half-open mouth. I saw it at a glance. I can't swear on it. I saw Aunt Nela rub, very quickly, the back of the canvas with something that looked like a piece of an oil lamp's wick. I'm almost sure that was it. The smell of kerosene hit

my nostrils, from top to bottom. My aunt's hand moved. Uncle Francisco did not wake up, nor did he change his position. Now what I cannot guarantee is whether the fire was set by a match or by a lighter. I can only recall the dazzling brightness that enveloped the chair and my uncle. In my ears I have stored the memory of his screaming. Quite strangely, I could not see my aunt anymore. She reappeared on the left side of the yard, coming from the gate, in her attempt to help her husband. I was standing, my legs shaking and unable to get me close to my uncle. It was all very fast. Only later, at night on the veranda, when I told my brothers the story of what I had witnessed, could I remember and repeat the words that Aunt Nela had said, looking at me half-smiling, while executing that macabre action that brought death to Uncle Francisco.

“On her deathbed Estela requested that I reestablish balance—justice. Since I had burned her store, I should also punish by the same token the other person that caused my jealousy. The moment had come. Noronha's photograph with the two pens in the coat's pocket and his two golden rings in his left hand was the code. One should not deny a dead person's wish. Otherwise, the soul has no rest! Let them settle the case between themselves now!”