

## Antônio XERXENESKY

From the novel *F* (2014)

### Chapter 3

I don't know how long the flight from Rio de Janeiro to Los Angeles was, but when I landed at LAX I felt completely out of touch with reality, as if I wasn't really awake, and I put it down to the fact that I hadn't slept a wink on the flight, just as I hadn't slept the night before, uptight as I was about flying for the first time and apprehensive about the surly immigration officers and military police at the airport in Brazil, scrutinizing those who dared leave the homeland. I went to the carousel to retrieve my suitcase, which felt as light as an empty box, even though I'd packed enough clothes for a six-month "exchange program." My uncle was waiting at the arrivals gate, amidst a throng of people. Although he didn't make a single gesture or wave like the dozens of parents, siblings and girlfriends waiting for loved ones, although he wasn't holding a sign with a name on it like the drivers of businessmen and executives, although he didn't move, his face partially hidden behind a pair of Ray-Bans, I recognized him in a matter of seconds. I ran up and threw my arms around him, a gesture he accepted rather awkwardly — a very different reaction to his effusive greeting at my father's funeral. When I let go, I saw that he was smiling. Without a word, he put his arm around my shoulder and led me through the enormous airport to the car park.

I had imagined my uncle driving a cool sports car, a Corvette or a Mustang. A Jaguar, perhaps. Even a Maverick would have been nice. We passed several amazing cars that looked like they were straight out of spy movies until we reached a smaller, box-shaped vehicle. He noticed my disappointment and tried to compensate by showing me his modern sound system. He took out an enormous cassette tape and slotted it into the panel. "Led Zeppelin," he said, and I realized those were the first words he'd uttered since I arrived. "You probably haven't heard it yet, but it's out of this world." For the next ten minutes, I was obliged to listen to one of the longest, most tiresome songs I've ever had the displeasure to hear. "That's rock!" he exclaimed excitedly. If that's rock, I hate rock, I thought, but didn't say anything. I just stared at my uncle and wondered, once again, if he really was my father's brother, because no two people could have been more different. His hair, black as motor oil, had grown since the funeral, and once it was past a certain length, it began to curl. Near his scalp it was straight — a few centimeters down, curly. He seemed proud of his hair.

The drive from the airport to his house felt like a dream. Certain aspects of the city reminded me of Rio, while others looked like scenes from postcards. I found it hard to comprehend what I saw through the car window and again attributed it to my lack of sleep.

When we arrived at his house — which struck me, at first, as a good distance from the city — he showed me to a room full of chairs, which had a pool table standing on end leaning against a wardrobe, books, stacks and stacks of books on the ground, dusty vinyls and cassette tapes, and a bed squashed into the narrow space by the wall. "Voilà! Your humble abode!" he said. "You look tired from the trip. Why don't you have a little rest?" I nodded. While my uncle hadn't said much, I'd said even less. We were far from our customary loquaciousness in writing. I closed the door and flopped onto the bed, thinking that coming to Los Angeles was possibly one of the biggest mistakes I'd ever made.

The first five days were strange, uncomfortable, full of weird silences. Maybe my uncle wasn't someone I could talk to. Maybe I'd written so much in my letters because it was like writing to myself. On the weekend, he decided to have a barbecue in the backyard. By barbecue, I mean grilling hamburger patties. It was the first time I'd set foot in the

backyard, as he'd only briefly shown it to me the day I arrived. There was no swimming pool. The lawn was straggly, unpleasantly long, and blades of grass tickled my ankles the whole time. There were stumps of wood lying around and shards of glass everywhere. "Why are there so many broken bottles?" I asked. He smiled. I thought he wasn't going to answer me (silence between us had become par for the course), but eventually he said:

"I like to do some target practice."

He must have noticed how my eyes bulged.

"It's a good way to let off steam," he added.

He opened a can of beer and took a sip.

"Can I see?" I asked.

He lowered his head and the can at the same time to avoid spitting out his beer.

"See?"

"Sure. Why not?"

"Fine. After lunch."

The hamburgers were horrible; one patty was charred, with dark stripes from the grill. After lunch (with no dessert, different to the way we did things at home) he went into the kitchen and came back with four bottles, positioned them on top of the stumps of wood (after knocking what was left of the shattered bottles to the ground, any old which way) and went inside again, this time to get his gun. I expected to see an ordinary revolver, but he came back with a black pistol that looked like the ones used by the NYPD in action movies.

"A friend got me the license," he explained. "Semi-automatic. A lot of people prefer Magnums. They make a good impression: stylish, long barrel, men like to be seen with them. But I'm a practical guy, at least as far as guns go."

He gestured for me to step away a little. He walked as far back as he could, took a deep breath, aimed at the first bottle, squared his shoulders and fired. The green glass shattered that very instant. He took aim at the second, a wine bottle. The bullet caused the top of the bottle to break off entirely from the bottom, and the two halves toppled to the ground. The same happened with the third. Before firing at the fourth and last bottle, he glanced at me, proud of his performance. I gave him a little smile. He squared his shoulders again and took aim. I didn't see where the bullet went, but I know he missed. He exhaled noisily, rolled his neck around, took aim and fired. Another miss. I could see he was getting annoyed. He took a deep breath, placed his index finger on the trigger, and I interrupted him:

"Can I have a go?"

He put the thumb safety on, lowered the pistol and eyed me suspiciously.

"I don't think that's a very good idea, you know."

"Why not?"

"Of the many things your mother wouldn't like you to do, firing guns is one of them."

"But it looks like fun!"

"Firearms exist for a number of reasons, but fun isn't one of them."

"Didn't you just say you liked to do it to let off steam?"

He stood there for a moment, then glanced around as if someone might be watching us, went to the side wall and peered over it to see if there was anyone in the neighbor's backyard, and came back.

"Fine."

I thought he was going to give me the gun to fire at the last bottle, but what he did was knock the fragments of the others to the ground, get three more bottles and position them on top of the stumps.

He gently placed the gun in my hand, stepped aside, and told me the safety was on. He gave me a few basic tips on posture, holding my arms up, and recoil, and asked me to aim at the first bottle. He told me to release the safety and then said I could pull the trigger. I did.

The recoil was stronger than I'd anticipated, and I must have taken a step back. He thought it was funny. He said that if I'd been holding a rifle, I'd have broken my arm. Your little body wasn't made for this kind of thing, he said. The bottle remained in place, intact.

I was irritated and didn't think much before firing again. I didn't hit anything.

"Whoa," he said. "It's hard to get it right if you're in a hurry." He stopped, scratched his chin and said, "You must have too many things on your mind. Too much going on in that little head of yours. Relax. Relax your shoulders. That's it. Aim carefully. Now, empty your mind. Don't think about anything."

That's impossible, I thought. Sleep always eluded me because the wheels of my mind never stopped turning. I'll never hit a thing. Then I remembered my technique for getting to sleep: to read a book until the words took over the space of my thoughts. But there were no books there. So I tried to remember a passage of something, a poem. The first thing that came to me was a few lines from a Drummond de Andrade poem, which, to be honest, I thought kind of silly.

*if I were called Raymond  
it'd be a rhyme, not a good start*

I fired. The bullet hit the top of the bottle, which broke discreetly, leaving the rest intact.

"That's it!" said my uncle, as I continued:  
*even vaster is my heart.*

"Bull's eye," he exclaimed, when he saw me destroy the bottle with my second shot. I grinned broadly, pleased with myself, and moved my shoulders stiffly, pointing at the second bottle.

*No one knew the world was going to end  
(only a child noticed and kept quiet),*

Lines that didn't rhyme. They didn't need to. I blew away the second bottle with one shot. My uncle was so surprised he let an expletive fly.

I chuckled and planned ahead: for the remaining bottles, I would mentally recite "Áporo," from *A rosa do povo*, a book that my father, although he prided himself on his eclectic collection, had always refused to buy; the first book I stole from a public library. As planned, the forth bottle shattered as I recited the last line.

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On the very first day of the Orson Welles film festival in Paris, I watched three films. I'd never done a movie marathon before, and I came out exhausted. The films were: *The Magnificent Ambersons*, a lovely, simple film that Welles directed right after *Kane*; *The Trial*, an at once respectful and creative adaptation of Kafka's novel of the same name; and, last of all, a film that was screened as *Confidential Report*, but which I later learned went by other titles, such as *Mr. Arkadin*. In fact, what I saw was one of several versions of the film. And there really were a lot: Antoine and Michel told me that there must have been more than ten cuts of the film, including some with different actresses, spoken in Spanish rather than English. The festival curator must have been conservative and decided to screen the Warner-approved version.

"That's probably why the film's a mess," I said.

Michel made a brusque gesture with his hand that I took to mean "Americans!" and thus ignored.

Antoine was more argumentative and said, "But it's an interesting mess, isn't it?"

I began to replay the film in my head. The problem with spending the day at the cinema is that you confuse the films you've just watched. What kind of film was *Confidential Report*? A tragic noir mystery, with strange characters. A tragic film. Once again, Welles' character is larger than life. He never played ordinary men; rather, he seemed to prefer grandiose roles. The film is short, an hour and a half, and the cuts all

seem abrupt, the plot convoluted, and the pace hurried. It takes viewers through many different countries. Spain, Mexico, Morocco. A 90-minute ride on an out-of-control train.

"I don't know if it's interesting. I know it's a mess. And those angles, everything in diagonal..."

"The Dutch tilt," said a sober Michel, before retreating back into silence.

"But who would make such a mess?" asked Antoine.

"I don't know. Any bad, untalented or amateur director could make a film that's all over the place, no?"

"I'm not so sure. I think *Confidential Report* has its own very particular chaos. Welles was in a nomadic phase in Europe. The film is nomadic like him."

"But what does it matter? I'm a viewer who wants to be wowed. I don't want to know if the director has a stomach ache or if his mother's just died."

This time even Antoine was quiet for a moment.

"Well, that's your take. Films only move me if they show evidence that there's a human being behind the camera, not an automaton, a machine," he said.

"Like in Hollywood," grumbled Michel.

"Does that mean I should applaud every film ever made as long as it's by a person who chose filmmaking as their means of expression?" I asked.

"*Non, non.* You're rationalizing it too much, looking for a general rule," said Antoine. "That's not how it works. Look, cinema is an act of love. Making it as well as sitting in a dark theatre watching films like these. An act of love."

"But I don't love Orson Welles!" I said. I felt like adding, "In fact, I've only just met him!" but I kept my mouth shut.

In a more soothing voice, Antoine said, "Don't worry, you will soon."

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My success with a pistol in hand sent my uncle into a flap. He paced the backyard in circles, stared at the broken bottles, walked over the splintered glass, repeated a thousand times that he didn't believe it, that it was incredible, that I was a born natural. Then he went into the kitchen, came back with a can of beer, opened it, took a long sip, looked at me and offered me some. I was a little perplexed, as I'd never drunk beer before. Hesitantly, I accepted the can and took a sip. I thought it tasted horrible, but I didn't show any reaction and just handed it back to my uncle, who said, "Oh, crap, I shouldn't have given beer to a minor. But, hey, I've just given a firearm to a minor, so what the fuck!" He really was beside himself, and began to talk non-stop in a way that reminded me of his letters. "I just swore! Did you hear me? I said 'what the fuck.' But it doesn't bother you, does it? Ha! If your father were alive!" And he choked on a laugh. "At any rate, at sixteen you're almost an adult here."

He drank about seven cans of beer in a row. Night fell. Swaying from side to side, he asked if I wanted to see something really, really awesome. I said yes, and he led me to the dark garage, turned on the light, and pointed at a metal wall covered in tools. He pulled a side lever and part of the wall swiveled around, revealing a hidden panel of weapons. I didn't know anything about weapons, so I only recognized the types: a shotgun, a rifle with long-range sights, a long-barreled revolver and a machete. "Wow," was all I could say. My uncle couldn't walk in a straight line. "Badass, isn't it?" He had a brief insight into the absurdity of the situation, gave the lever another pull and the weapons returned to their hiding place. "Let's go, you must be hungry again. I'll fry up an egg."

I wasn't remotely hungry. As he heated up the frying pan, I sat at the table and asked:

"Why such an interest in weapons?"

"Oh, it's a habit I picked up from the Americans."

"Really?"

He cracked an egg.

“No, not really.”

“And where did you learn to shoot?”

The egg sizzled in the pan. He sprinkled salt on it and pushed it around with a spatula.

“I hope you don’t like it sunny side up ‘cause I’ve just popped the yolk.”

He handed me the bug-eyed egg on a plate, together with silverware and a slice of bread. He sat in front of me and sighed.

“Well, to be honest, it has a lot to do with your dad.”

“You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to.”

But he wanted to. Or he was too drunk not to. He warned me, of course, that I couldn’t tell anyone. Seriously. He said I was going to hear a big secret. Absolutely no one could know about it. I agreed. And then he began to talk about all the dissident groups, the groups that had opposed the dictatorship. He said that my father, after he’d had children, had become a real stick-in-the-mud, even more conservative than before. Reactionary, authoritarian, boorish. He wanted an ideal world for his two little girls; he wanted them to grow up like princesses, marry good husbands, and so on and so forth. My uncle was another story. He was an amateur actor and hung around with what my father referred to as riff-raffs. Crazyes, artists, people who talked about painting, films and music as if they were talking about God. The two brothers fell out. My uncle was beaten up by the police during a protest. A fellow demonstrator recognized in him a desire for rebellion and introduced him to a fledgling guerilla group.

I frowned, not really sure what he was talking about. I had, of course, heard stories about terrorists and kidnappers. My uncle said it was a matter of perspective. He’d gone to Cuba, where he’d trained in guerilla warfare with experienced fighters. He’d learned dozens of ways to kill a man.

“And I got involved.” My uncle suddenly went quiet. I sat there waiting for the rest of the story, but he must have felt he’d reached a limit.

“Have you ever killed someone?” I asked.

He looked at me.

“What difference does it make?”

I didn’t know what to say.

“What matters, my dear Ana, is that now I’m here in L.A., where I can have barbecues, I’m a free man, no one’s going to come and arrest me. There aren’t soldiers all over the place here. I can take a pop at my bottles and live a nice life. When I met you at the funeral, I thought I could do something good for my family. Your dad was a complicated man, and the situation in your country is complicated. I wanted you to come to L.A. so you could understand that another life is possible. It wasn’t my intention to tell you any of this. But now you know. I hope you don’t tell anyone. I hope you understand the trust I’m placing in you.”

I nodded.

“You might come to hate me. You might think I’m just a big fuck-up and that your dad was right. But you can’t know only one side of a situation. See? Do you understand? Eat your egg. There’s nothing worse than cold egg.”

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After the triple billing, we went to a discreet nearby bar. Michel ordered a shot of cognac and Antoine, a bottle of Bordeaux for the two of us. Michel downed his cognac in two gulps and said he was going home. As soon as he was gone, Antoine changed places so that he was sitting next to me. We made small talk and he kept moving closer, letting his arm brush mine, and finally taking my hand. We had drunk a little more than half the bottle and he suggested we finish it back at his place. I said I thought it would be better if we didn’t, at which point he let go of my hand and pulled away a few inches. We polished off the bottle

and I returned to my hotel. We arranged to meet the next day for the *Citizen Kane* matinee. He said goodbye rather awkwardly, looking confused.

The night before, at a nightclub, at around 3 a.m., he had kissed me enthusiastically, a determined tongue kiss, and I'd had too much to drink, and the strobes were flashing too much, and the song was never-ending — one of Duran Duran's "night versions," so named perhaps because certain types of music only make sense at night. The band knew their fan-base well and didn't want some anonymous DJ to come along and remix their songs, so they recorded extended versions specifically for the dance floor themselves. And, at that moment, I had a kind of revelation, a glimpse of the future. There in front of me was a young man who was good-looking, interesting, etc., etc. It would have been easy to fall in love with him. It would have been easy to imagine a context in which I left behind a life governed by death and moved to Paris, where I'd dance to New Order, Soft Cell and Human League in nightclubs, drink Bordeaux, Beaujolais and Bourgogne, learn all about cheeses, hide under the covers in his miniscule apartment during the harsh Parisian winter, stare out the window at the snow falling and, if he got bored, we'd have a *ménage à trois* — in the ladies bathroom I'd overheard some women saying that everyone was doing it these days.

It was an easy vision to put together, employing every cliché about French culture (painstakingly maintained by the locals, who insisted on going around with baguettes under their arms) and mixing them with a little idealization of what a relationship can offer. I saw it all and went back to my hotel room at about 4 a.m., alone, and refused him when he made another move on me in the bar. Maybe we'll sleep together some day, but not now, I'm not nonchalant about it like Parisian women, I can't do it, I thought, it all goes more smoothly after the first time, but the first time is never easy, it's never easy to undress in front of a man who's never seen you naked, it's never easy to see how his eyes react to your body, your breasts, and further down. It didn't stop me feeling a little sad when I saw Antoine head home not understanding a thing. I don't know him well enough to make love to him, I told myself again. It would have been horrible for both of us. If somebody had paid me to kill him, it all would have been much simpler.

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One Saturday, a friend of my uncle's showed up at his place in Los Angeles. He was an old friend, Brazilian, who was now living in a small town in Idaho. My uncle had decided to have a fancier barbecue than usual in Norberto's honor and had stocked the fridge with at least thirty six cans of beer. But beer wasn't in Norberto's plans.

"Look what my daughter brought from Brazil!" he exclaimed when he arrived, holding up a bottle of *cachaça* from Minas Gerais before he even stepped through the door.

"Dude. Duuude. Duuuuuude." My uncle looked like a child being handed a toy by Santa.

"I've also got some kickass wee..." Norberto stopped short when he noticed me lingering in a corner of the room.

"And who might this be...?" he asked, eyeing me curiously.

"Drop the pomp. The girl's my niece. She's come to stay for a few days."

Norberto — a bald, obese man, the sort who always looks sweaty, even when he's just had a cold shower, who has to buy shirts in special stores — greeted me affectionately, as if I were a member of the family.

"And how old are you, young lady?" he asked ever-so gallantly.

"Sixteen."

"No *cachaça* for you, dear!"

"It never occurred to me to drink that crap."

"Careful how you refer to this jewel. This here is worth millions. Straight from Minas. Where do you hail from?"

"Rio."

“Beautiful city. But complicated.”

“You sound like my uncle.”

They looked at each other, smiled, and embraced again.

Before the first food was ready – a sausage with more white bits of fat than meat – my uncle and Norberto had drunk half the bottle, while making ever-more bizarre toasts. They toasted friends who weren’t present, people with names of assorted nationalities; they toasted an incredible moment they had shared in Cuba; they toasted the move, life, the world, the dream of better times, times that were worth living in.

By the end of the meal, my uncle was wobbly on his legs and his speech was slurred. Arm in arm, he and Norberto lurched across the lawn, away from me, as if wanting to discuss matters that they couldn’t in my presence. They soon returned and sat at the table again. My uncle sighed, looked at me and said, “This girl’s got a talent you won’t believe, man. It’ll blow your mind. Unimaginable.”

I blushed and looked away, praying he’d drop the subject.

“Yeah? What talent?” said Norberto, expecting my uncle to say something appropriate for a sixteen-year-old girl, like calligraphy or ballet.

“You gotta see it to believe it, man. I’m going to get my pistol.”

Norberto’s thick eyebrows knit into a frown. “What do you mean, pistol? What’s a pretty young lady like this going to do with a firearm?”

“Dude, you have to see it. Seriously.”

I didn’t say a word, gazing at a fixed point in the grass at my feet.

With great difficulty, knocking everything over, my uncle set up the firing range, with the empty *cachaça* bottle as my first target. Norberto watched it all in silence. I glanced sideways and saw the pistol in my uncle’s outstretched hand.

“I don’t want to.”

“Leave the girl alone, José.”

“Come on, just one shot. Just one.”

“No, I don’t want to.”

“Just one. For my pal here. Come on.”

“No, I just said I don’t want to.”

“The *cachaça* bottle. Go on. Just do it. It’ll be fun.”

“For fuck’s sake, no!”

It was the first time I’d sworn in front of my uncle. I noticed that, even in his inebriated state, he was taken aback. Irritated, I stood, took the pistol, loaded it, released the safety, pointed it at the bottle and fired. I didn’t think of a poem, I was too furious. The clear glass of the *cachaça* bottle shattered into hundreds of pieces.

“Fuck,” muttered Norberto.

*We won’t sing about love for now*, I thought, hitting the second bottle. *We’ll sing about fear*, third bottle, *we won’t sing about hatred*, fourth.

I tossed the gun on the ground and marched inside. Out of a corner of my eye, I saw Norberto’s gaping mouth. I poured myself a glass of water in the kitchen, from where I could hear them talking. Norberto said a talent like mine shouldn’t be wasted, it should be honed. He said I could be trained, become an ally. I also heard my uncle asking him to let me be. I slowly returned to the backyard and heard the noise of a match being struck, my uncle lighting the cigarette dangling from his mouth and inhaling at length.

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Seeing *Citizen Kane* at the cinema in Paris was like watching a film I’d never seen before. What I hadn’t noticed the first time around, the way one image fits into the next in transitions, the action taking place in the background, breathtaking angles when you least expect them, it all leapt out at me from the darkness of the theater. I left in ecstasy, weak-kneed, and it seemed as if the park next to the cinema complex had taken on different colors, more vibrant and intense. I had cried at least three times during the film, although

it's far from being a sentimental tear-jerker. The plot doesn't inspire tears. The soundtrack doesn't swell into a crescendo of plaintive violins. Nothing of the sort. It's a film charged with an otherworldly force, an uncommon vigor, a violent energy. It is like watching atomic fusion on the big screen: a brutal release of energy capable of distorting your sense of time. Two hours went past in a fraction of a second. I left feeling spent, speechless, incapable of answering the simplest of questions about whether we were going to a café now or what we were going to drink.

"She'll have a glass of water," Antoine told the waiter. "Are you OK? You look so... pale." I nodded. "*F for Fake* doesn't start for another hour. Why don't we have some wine?" I nodded again and Antoine ordered a carafe of Côtes du Rhône, the cheapest wine in the house. The waiter disappeared and before I knew it there was a full glass of light-red liquid before me. I drank it as if it was water and I'd been in the Atacama Desert for a week. "Are you sure you're OK?" he insisted. "Yes," I mumbled, and I got the feeling that he thought my unusual state had something to do with the fact that I hadn't wanted to sleep with him the night before.

"Wow!" was all I was able to say. "What a film!" I finally exclaimed. He smiled with half his mouth and said, "I get it."

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It was very clear to me what was going to happen next. My uncle would try to protect me from life, his friend would invite me on a trip, an apprenticeship with his comrades. I rarely have this kind of premonition about the future. I am generally surprised at my own ignorance and the fact that I couldn't have prevented things from happening. But listening to their conversation, I understood everything. I understood the forces of resistance, the friction that tries to preserve inertia, and the forces of movement in opposition. I saw the game that was unfolding and concluded that there was only one way out of the dispute.

Norberto left without saying much. He and my uncle talked by phone all week. Tense conversations, which I half-heard from a distance. I wasn't able to make out their actual words, but my uncle's tone of voice left no doubt as to the topic under discussion. The next weekend, Norberto came over again and spoke to me directly, treating me as something more than my uncle's weird niece who had shown up out of the blue in that house in Los Angeles. He said I had an undeniable talent with firearms, and asked if I'd be interested in honing my gift and putting it to good use in the name of democracy, freedom and justice. I didn't give a rat's ass about freedom, democracy or justice, which to me were words that only made sense in French novels. I said yes, I was interested. He smiled and my uncle struck a match to light a cigarette.

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*F for Fake*. Orson Welles facing the camera, acting like a magician. He promises that everything we are about to see is the absolute truth. Then an avalanche of FAKE! comes crashing down the screen.

Everything that *Citizen Kane* is *F for Fake* isn't. It isn't grandiose, magnificent, calculated or perfect. *F for Fake* is fast, frenetic, jumbled, desperate. *Kane* is a jigsaw of precise dimensions. *F for Fake* is a patchwork quilt stitched together by a man with calloused hands and a peculiar aesthetic.

*F* isn't centered around a man who tries to control the world and win the love of the people, like Charles Foster Kane, but two professional forgers: Elmyr de Hory, who painted Picasso and Matisse with the ease of a child slotting together Lego pieces, and Clifford Irving, who wrote about Hory and also authored a false biography of Howard Hughes. Strictly speaking, it's a documentary, but Welles' film has nothing in common with a traditional documentary. It is a reflection in which the author looks at the camera and thinks out loud, a record of facts narrated at breakneck pace, more so than the wildest 80s

action movie. It's a film that knows it's a film, about a forger who wrote a book about another forger. Even more memorable than the roles of Hory and Irving – who are, after all, the subject of the documentary – is that of Welles himself, in scene and off. I am referring not only to the end of *F for Fake*, which takes a detour into fiction and features Oja Kodar, the director's lover. Welles leaves his indelible mark on the film when he interrupts the action and recites, in his unique, inimitable voice, a poem by Rudyard Kipling. In the poem, Adam is in Eden, happily scratching at the ground with a stick, until the Devil appears and whispers, "It's pretty — but is it art?"

In the film, the question pokes fun at the specialists responsible for determining what is or isn't art. Elmyr de Hory painted perfect Matisse imitations in a matter of minutes, but was considered a fraudster rather than an artist. Clifford Irving penned a biography of Howard Hughes, claiming he'd talked to the reclusive millionaire, but the interviews had never taken place. Were Irving and Hory lesser artists? What is art if not that which the specialists define as art? This inquiry is clear in the context of Welles' film, but his declaiming of Kipling's poem transcends such reflections. Welles's intonation, his singular pronunciation as he asks, "It's pretty, but is it art?" unveils a question that, taken out of context, can become a contagious formula.

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A small plane with noisy propellers flew me to Miami and a rusty boat with a panting motor took me to Cuba. All the way there, my uncle's friend asked me questions, endless questions, wanting to know what I thought about my uncle, my father, Brazil, the military, the dictatorship. I didn't have a lot to say because in all honesty I didn't know what I thought about Brazil, the military or the dictatorship. There were people like my father, who thought that only order would bring progress, and there were people like my uncle, who listened to Led Zeppelin, shot at bottles in their backyards and thought the opposite. What was my opinion? At the age of sixteen, I'd never stopped to think about it.

When I arrived in Cuba, a beaten-up car, as mutilated as the boat and plane, took me to a clearing deep in dense jungle. There I met the men who conducted the guerilla training and realized that knowing Portuguese didn't go very far towards helping me understand Cuban Spanish. They spoke slowly so I could follow. They repeated themselves, politely, patiently. In the previous two years, the number of Brazilians trained in Cuba had dropped significantly, they said, but due to linguistic difficulties, I was unable to fathom the reasons or causes.

I slept in a tent for the first time in my life and fantasized that it was like camping out with a school friend. But the person who shared the tent with me was my uncle's friend, who, as I'd anticipated, snored like a damaged motor.

I remember the three months I spent in the jungle as a mixture of dream and nightmare. I found myself surrounded by strangers, who spoke in Spanish about "the cause," called each other "comrade," repeated words that moved them, such as freedom, equality, the human rights of the people, of the proletariat, and who loudly decried Yankee imperialism, the military, repression, Pinochet and Médici.

I learned a lot during those months. Not necessarily about politics, but practical things, such as how to light a fire with sticks, use binoculars, hold a rifle correctly, rig a tent in just a few minutes, sleep in the open air, cross swamps, hold my breath under water, knock a person unconscious, fight off an attempted rape, fire a simple revolver, fire a shotgun, fire a hunting rifle, conduct reconnaissance, extract venom from a snake bite, recognize poisonous snakes and spiders, take an enemy by surprise, move quickly through the forest, hack branches off trees with a machete, the quickest way to kill a person with a knife, the quietest way to kill a person with a knife, the quietest and most effective way to kill a person with my bare hands, set home-made landmines, build home-made landmines, plant dynamite, deactivate communications systems, operate a radio system, and, I just remembered, it was also during training that I had my first kiss, with a seventeen-year-old

boy who spoke neither Portuguese or the language of the imperialists, a clumsy, muddled kiss, but which counted as a learning experience nonetheless, and I also learned how to obstruct a road with fallen trees, fell a tree, aim at the tires of a moving car, distinguish military hierarchies based on uniforms, drive a jeep, pick locks with hairclips, get out of handcuffs, prepare a Molotov cocktail, recognize types of ammunition, distinguish bullet marks, aim at the head, always the head, whether I was moving, whether the target was moving, aim at the head and fire at the head, thus attaining what they called a “clean” death.

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The last film of the Orson Welles festival that I watched was *Chimes at midnight*, also known as *Falstaff*. The soundtrack was damaged (at least I thought it was a problem with the projection, as opposed to the film itself and its erratic production) and I was unable to grasp much in the dialogues; that is, I had only the images to go on. Although Welles was a filmmaker who sought to say everything with the camera, I confess I hardly understood a thing, which may have been the fault of the insane cauldron of Shakespearean plays seething away in the plot. As we were leaving, my companions told me a curious anecdote: the film had been nominated for a Palme d’Or in Cannes, and Welles, who considered *Chimes* his best work, better even than *Kane*, was sure he’d win, especially with a jury of French friends who, he believed, understood his work better than the Americans. But the Palme d’Or went to Claude Lelouch’s debut film, *Un Homme et une femme*, which Welles despised. He was furious, of course, and put it down to the fact that the French, in the 1960s, due to all the political turmoil of the time, didn’t dare give the prize to an American, no matter how much they admired his work. Immediately afterwards, he learned that he was to be given a special award, a kind of consolation prize. Somewhat disgruntled, he went to the ceremony. When the Palme d’Or was handed to Lelouch, the audience stood and booed for ten minutes. When Welles received the special prize, he received a standing ovation for fifteen minutes. That’s the end of the anecdote, and when they finished telling me, Welles’ face materialized in front of me, with a smile that could not be contained, a man who saw his theory confirmed: critics and specialists are a farce, the audience knows who matters. Like Charles Foster Kane, it was the people’s love he wanted in its entirety. Years later, on the magician’s face in *F for Fake* shone a smile that, I imagine, was identical to the one plastered across his face during the ceremony in Cannes. A smile of contempt for the critics and specialists who had failed to appreciate him.

I ruminated on the anecdote for some time, sensing that there was a great truth to be found in it, something to do with the complex relationship between Welles and the Europeans. I was unable to draw any conclusions, however, and thought that perhaps I was too tired to reflect on such matters. At that moment, I needed distance on Welles and Paris.

When the festival was over, I received a phone call in which the nameless voice asked when they should book my return flight to the United States. This was the moment when I should have requested a flight for the next day and started to pack. But, defying all logic, I replied that I wanted to stay on in Paris for two more weeks, if possible, for research. I was learning a lot about filmmaking, which was essential if I was to work my way into Welles’ confidence and carry out the job to perfection. The voice agreed and said I would receive some extra francs to help with expenses. I thanked the voice and hung up.

I opened the newspaper to see what films were playing. What to watch post-Welles? How to get his images out of my mind? I chose films in English (it wasn’t as easy as I had imagined: boy do the French like dubbing!), but the truth was that languages came so easily to me that I was already able to understand a lot of what they said in French (watching films by Welles with subtitles had been useful), and I think I’d have been able to understand much of a film in the language. If I wasn’t in such a well-paying — and interesting — line of work, I might well have taught Portuguese or English in Paris, or even

studied languages. Except for one detail: few things struck me as more tedious than attending a university.

In my search for English-language films I discovered that an obscure, seedy Paris cinema screened midnight horror doubles.

Without much effort, I began to watch three to five films a day. Sometimes I invited Antoine, who started to refuse my invitations, and, when he accepted, kept trying to get me into bed.

One night, we watched a film by George Romero and another by John Carpenter. Antoine was enthralled by Romero's film, *Dawn of the Dead*. In response, imitating Orson Welles' voice, I said: "It's pretty. But is it art?" He turned to look at me, his face a big question mark, and asked if I was serious.

"No," I replied. "Well, actually, I don't know."

"It's a magnificent film."

"Yes. Excellent."

"I thought it was better than *Night of the Living Dead*."

"I don't know. No. Hum. No."

"At any rate, magnificent."

"It's pretty, but is it art?"

"You can't be serious."

"Is it art? It's a simple question. Come on. *Dawn of the Dead*. Is it art or isn't it?"

"That's a subjective question."

"Of course, there's no clear, stable definition of what art is. Bla bla bla. Everyone knows that. It's a subjective question. To hell with the specialists. Do you, Antoine, think it's art?"

He thought a little. "No."

We walked along in silence. I noticed that we were heading for his apartment. I didn't make any effort to change course.

"What about the other one?" he asked suddenly.

"What other one?"

"The other film we just saw. *The Thing*."

"Is it art? You decide."

"No, I want to know what you think."

"It's definitely pretty." I began to recall scenes from the Carpenter film, the tension in the blood test scene, the desolate white of the snow, the minimalist soundtrack. "Art. I think it's art. Yes."

"Yeah. Maybe."

Welles' face appeared in my mind's eye, looking at the camera, reciting Kipling.

"But it's no *Citizen Kane*."

"Only *Citizen Kane* is *Citizen Kane*."

"I know. It's a shame, isn't it?"

We reached Antoine's building. He opened the door and I helped him push it open, making it clear that I was going to spend the night. It was four thirty in the morning and I was too tired to refuse any sexual advances. He placed a hand on my waist and with a diagonal movement of the head pressed his lips to mine. I didn't offer any resistance, not even when he began lifting up my dress.

Was it good? That's what men usually ask afterwards, and I never know what to say. Perhaps, I don't know. But is it art? Ha! Antoine, as I had expected — as anyone would expect, as society would expect — proved to be an attentive, obliging lover, but after twenty minutes I felt like I was having sex out of inertia. I could tell he didn't want to finish before I'd gone through some ritual of moaning and squeezing my eyes shut and digging my nails into his back, but there wasn't a single orgasm on the horizon, and I'm not the sort to fake it. I ran my hands all the way down his back to his buttocks, which I pressed to make him go faster. He pulled out a few minutes later and soiled the entire bedspread. I asked him to lie down next to me, closed my eyes and pretended to fall asleep (he didn't

know I was an insomniac) before he could recover and want to go again. Outside, some birds were twittering. It really pisses me off when I hear birds chirping in the wee hours, as if they're laughing at those of us who lie awake all night trying to blot out the things in our minds and fall asleep. Every peep is a guffaw. I often think about taking an air gun and picking off the offending aves one by one.

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When the guerilla training was over, I went back to stay with my uncle, who knew I'd soon return to Brazil for good, to my boring life with my mother and sister, who could never have dreamed of the things I'd done while I was abroad. At least until I turned 18. My relationship with my uncle changed a lot after I'd been to Cuba. He was more reserved and always seemed to be wondering if it had been a good idea to take me out of my mundane life as a middle-class teenager in Rio. In some conversations, he mentioned how much he liked samba and Brazilian hospitality. I wondered if everyone who took up exile in another country came to see their place of origin through the filter of stereotype. Samba and hospitality? All that was missing were soccer and carnival. The year was 1976, but not even in 1985, during the time I spent in Paris, would I understand how people related to their national stereotypes, those easy fictions designed to bestow meaning on people, places and experiences. Of course, I didn't think these exact words at the time, but I shuddered every time I heard my uncle talk about samba. He of all people, the lover of rock music who didn't have a single MPB record in his house, and who had once scoffed at the fact that musicians had staged a protest against the electric guitar at the beginning of the dictatorship. It was clear to me that his comment about Brazil had more to do with the fact that he no longer knew what to do with me and feared he had ruined me.

He also tried to talk to me about politics, a subject, I confess, that was proving more and more incomprehensible to me. Everyone around me in Cuba saw the dictatorship as a big enemy, and it really did seem to be just that, although, with the exception of my brief stay in the United States, I only knew what it was to live under a dictatorship, for I'd seen jeeps and soldiers all over Rio since I was a child, and since I was a child I'd heard silences and tensions among adults who may have been happier individuals if they hadn't had to worry about who might overhear the thoughts they dared utter out loud. But I didn't understand what the guerillas wanted to install in its place, or how the ideals of justice and freedom would become a reality. This wasn't the worst problem, however. The problem was that I was unable to become enthused about a "cause," no matter which one.

Nevertheless, nothing stopped me from taking the job I was offered when I received an unexpected phone call in Los Angeles, in which a voice (whose?) asked me when I'd be back in Brazil and if I was interested in putting to use some of the things I'd learned in Cuba. I said yes, of course, and he said it was for the cause, the cause I didn't care about, which got so many people all fired up. I took the job because I was good with guns and knives and thought I should make the most of my talent. Everyone has a special gift and it would have been a waste not to use it.

*Translated from the Portuguese by Alison Entrekin*

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