

The Veiled Vase
Mehdia Ait Daoud

On the whole the furniture in the house looked well arranged, the kitchen clean and bright, except for an obscure corner where a vase stood neglected and at odds with the rest. Layers and layers of dust had accumulated on its surface, which was sticky with the daily steam and grease sprayed on it from the close cooker. The smell of over-cooked food, burnt olive oil, onion and garlic was rising from its rotten robe. The stench was so strong that it attracted and trapped moths and insects hovering in the atmosphere, adding more embellishment to it. Strangely enough, the vase looked like the mummy of a Pharaoh princess embalmed with various spices that were meant to preserve it from decay and oblivion.

Ever since his wife had left in mysterious circumstances, he had not set his feet in the kitchen. Having no experience in cooking, he took all his meals in restaurants. But what really put him off the kitchen was the object in the corner. Whenever he happened to find himself there, and as soon as his eyes fell on the vase, he would turn away and dash out as if escaping from some appalling beast. "Why didn't she take her stupid vase with her?" Hundreds of times he decided to fling it out, just out of his sight, but something detained him. Were they her last words? "It was *first* meant for you. Please, leave it there!" Nothing could he remember of her now except those words—and the vase. Nothing else whatsoever.

The disgusting smell was spreading from the kitchen, overwhelming the whole house and stubbornly lingering in the air he breathed. It was in the living room, in the bedroom, in the bathroom, and everywhere. Even his clothes smelled of onion and garlic. Every day he took a bath—still he sensed the stink exuding out of his body and defeating all the perfumes he lavishly sprayed on his skin.

Then came a time when he could no longer stand it. The first thing he did one good morning was to burst into the kitchen and snatch the vase by the neck. He rushed out and thrust it in the arms of the first man he saw staggering along the street, a drunkard who must have lost his direction. He shut the door behind him with a great sense of relief. The stranger was not even given the opportunity to thank him for the boon. The lucky man cuddled and kissed the vase mistaking it

for a large bottle of wine. His lips were glued to the object as if it were returning his kiss with an even more generous one.

For all the momentary relief he felt after washing his hands of the vase, the man still did not have the heart to go into the kitchen. Dying for breakfast, he stood at the threshold of a world that used to feed him. Instead of going in, he turned away to the nearest couch, stretched himself and lit a cigarette. The smoke only increased the pain in his empty stomach. He imagined the delicious meals she used to cook for him, especially the exquisite French cuisine, but the smell of the vase spoiled his appetite and pushed away his fantasy.

After many attempts, he eventually summoned up his courage and forced himself into the kitchen. A deep and bottomless gap had opened where the vase used to stand. He was suddenly seized by a peculiar fear that he was on the verge of falling headlong into the gaping hole. It was more unbearable than the vase and its smell. But solutions were never wanting. Suddenly it dawned on him that he would find another object to fill that chasm. Immediately he thought of the museum and a new vase to enliven his hearth and radiate his house. He shaved, wore a new shirt and suit and anointed his body with the best perfumes he had.

He walked about in the museum, contemplating the objects on display. Nothing special captured his eyes for some time, until he found himself glued before one particular vase. *He had never seen it before!* It arrested his whole being, appealing to something that was lurching and until now dormant within him.

There the vase stood in the centre of the hall, looking him straight into the eyes with an air of defiance, of pity and anger. It was inviting him: "Come and take me home!" Laid upon a soft, silky napkin and decorated with two fragrant roses, the vase was bathing in golden light emitted by a bulb on each side and one hanging from the high ceiling. Everything about it was challenging, alluring yet repulsing, proud yet humble. Right in the middle of the multi-coloured vase was a white oval frame in which a beautiful eye was drawn. The more one looks at it, the more one realises that it was Mona Lisa's eye in a new fashion; it was frilled with thick and dark silken lashes aesthetically tracing its borders. The iris was like the meeting line between sea and sun, waves wedded to rays, blue in intercourse with red, red with blue—all engendering unimaginable shades of colours. At the centre rose a full-moon pupil regulating the ebb and flow of the

eye's emotions. Smiling, or so it looked, the eye was like two parted female lips ready for a kiss. *Oh, he had never seen that before either!*

Vivaldi's "Four Seasons" filled the air in the hall, soft and charming. And yet even that did not distract him from what he was contemplating. He put on his glasses to check the reference ticket with the price, but the neck of the vase was free. He walked round and round, screwing up his eyes till a little mark, right at the bottom of the picture and almost invisible, arrested his sight and shook his heart. The blow was so sudden, so powerful that his heart responded in beats that frightened him. Vivaldi seemed to have stopped in the middle of his masterpiece, interrupted by the loud and discordant heartbeats. They were echoing louder and louder in the large hall. He turned around afraid the visitors were directing their forefingers at him accusingly. The signature was like a hand that had suddenly taken off the veil from the vase. He had seen it all before, for ten years, and yet he had not seen it at all, for his vision had never gone beyond the veil. That was her vase in shape, in substance and signature, the very one that had left a crater in the kitchen, a gaping gap that no other vase would fill or fit in. Here, in this hall, it looked clean, majestic and fascinating. Why hadn't I seen this before? What devil had whispered in my ears to give it away to a drunkard!? And this marvel of all marvels was lying beneath the dusty, greasy veil! Why didn't *we* take care of it? These were questions he would never be able to answer.

Meanwhile, he was watched, closely observed from a reasonable distance by an assistant. He had not budged from his spot for almost one hour. Finally she approached him with a soft smile and asked:

"Can I help you, sir?"

Yes, he was in desperate need for help, and here was someone offering it. His optimism flared up.

"I don't see any ticket on this vase."

"Oh, it is a newly acquired one. I'm afraid only the patron can inform you."

"Can I see him?"

"Please, follow me."

A gentleman was relaxing in a large sofa in his office, wearing a black suit and smoking a cigar.

"Take a seat. What can I do for you?"

"I'm interested in an article in your collection."

"A portrait?"

"A vase."

"Which one?"

"It has no label."

"Oh, you mean the new one?"

"That's what your assistant said. I am ready to offer any price you propose."

The patron looked him squarely in the eyes and laughed, puffing smoke through his large nostrils.

"Listen! That one has no price. Therefore, it is not for sale."

His tone said it all. His words were absolute, so clear and dismissive that the visitor's dream of regaining the vase had evaporated for good. He left the office downcast, and a cloud of smoke seemed to follow him, pushing him towards his house until he fell into that deep dark hole, never to see light again!