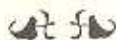


## A Maiden



She is the same age as Shakespeare's Juliet—fourteen—and, like Juliet's, hers is a tragic and romantic story. She is beautiful, especially when seen in profile. Her long, exotic face, with its high cheekbones and big, slightly almond-shaped eyes, suggests a remote Oriental heritage. Her mouth is open, as if to defy the world with the whiteness of her perfect teeth, which protrude slightly, lifting her upper lip in a coquettish pout. Her very long black hair, gathered in two swaths, frames her face like a bride's cap, and is then plaited into a braid that falls to her waist and circles it. She is silent and still, like a character from the Japanese theater, in her raiment of fine alpaca. Her name is Juanita. She was born more than five hundred years ago, somewhere in the Andes, and now she lives in a glass box (which is, in fact, a computer in disguise), in a glacial cold of nineteen degrees below zero, protected from the touch of humans and decay.

I hate mummies, and every one I've seen, in museums, tombs, or private collections, has seemed utterly repellent to me. I've never felt the emotions aroused in so many human beings—not just archaeologists—by those trepanned skulls riddled with holes, their eye sockets empty and the bone calcified, bearing witness to

past civilizations. What they mostly remind me of is our mortality and the horrid matter into which we are converted if we don't choose to be cremated.

I agreed to visit Juanita at the small museum constructed especially for her by the Catholic University of Arequipa because my painter friend Fernando de Szyszlo, who is fascinated by pre-Columbian history, was eager to make the trip. But I was convinced that the sight of her ancient child's body would turn my stomach. I was wrong. As soon as I saw her, I was moved, and enchanted by her beauty; if it hadn't been for fear of what the neighbors might think, I would've stolen her and set her up in my house as mistress and life companion.

Her story is as exotic as her delicate features and ambiguous pose, which could be that of a submissive slave or a despotic empress. On September 18, 1995, the anthropologist Johan Reinhard, accompanied by the Andean guide Miguel Zárate, was scaling the summit of the volcano Ampato (20,702 feet high), in southern Peru. They weren't looking for prehistoric remains but were trying to get a close-up view of the neighboring volcano, snowy Sabancaya, which was erupting just then. Clouds of smoldering white ash were falling on Ampato and had melted the permanent snow cover at its summit, which Reinhard and Zárate had nearly reached. All of a sudden Zárate spotted a blaze of color in the snow among the rocks: it was the feathers of an Inca cap or head-dress. After searching the site a little longer, they found the rest: a funeral bundle which, because of the erosion of the ice at the summit, had surfaced and slid two hundred feet from the place where it had been buried five centuries before. The fall hadn't hurt Juanita (so christened after Reinhard, his first name being Johan); it had merely torn the top blanket she was wrapped in. In twenty-three years of climbing mountains—eight in the Himalayas, fifteen in the Andes—in search of traces of the past, Johan Reinhard

had never felt anything like what he felt that morning, at 20,702 feet above sea level, beneath a blazing sun, when he held the Inca girl in his arms. Johan, an amiable gringo, told me the whole story of the adventure with an archaeological glee that (for the first time in my life) I found completely justified.

Convinced that if they left Juanita exposed on the mountain-top until they came back for her with an expedition they ran the risk that she might be stolen by grave robbers or swept away in a flood, they decided to take her with them. The detailed account of the three days it took them to descend Ampato carrying Juanita—the eighty-pound bundle well lashed to the anthropologist's backpack—has all the color and excitement of a good film, which it will doubtless become sooner or later.

In the slightly more than two years that have passed since then, the lovely Juanita has become an international celebrity. Under the auspices of the National Geographic Society, she traveled to the United States, where she was visited by a quarter of a million people, among them President Clinton. A famous dental surgeon wrote: "If only North American girls had teeth as white, healthy, and complete as this Peruvian young lady."

Juanita has been surveyed by all kinds of high-tech machines at Johns Hopkins University; examined, probed, and puzzled over by armies of experts and technicians; and finally returned to Arequipa in the coffin-computer specially built for her. All these examinations have made it possible to reconstruct, with a precision that borders on science fiction, almost her whole story.

The girl was sacrificed to Apu (the Inca word for god) Ampato, on the very summit of the volcano, to pacify his rage and to ensure prosperity for the Indian settlements of the region. Exactly six hours before her execution, she was given a vegetable stew to eat. The recipe for this dish is being reconstructed by a team of biologists. Her throat was not cut, nor was she strangled. Her death

was the result of a precise blow to her right temple. "So perfectly executed that she must not have felt any pain at all," I was assured by Dr. José Antonio Chávez, who co-directed with Reinhard a new expedition to the area's volcanoes, where they found the tombs of two more children, also sacrificed to the voracity of the Andean Apus.

It is likely that after being chosen as a sacrificial victim, Juanita was venerated and paraded around the Andes—possibly taken to Cuzco and presented to the Inca emperor—before climbing from the Colca valley in a ritual procession, followed by bejeweled llamas, musicians, dancers, and hundreds of worshippers, up the steep slopes of Ampato to the edge of the crater, where the sacrificial platform stood. Did Juanita feel fear, panic, in those final moments? To judge by the absolute serenity stamped on her delicate features, and by the calm arrogance with which she receives the stares of her countless visitors, one would say that she didn't, that perhaps she accepted her fate with resignation and maybe even rejoiced at the brief, brutal procedure that would transport her to the world of the Andean gods, transformed into a goddess herself.

She was buried in a sumptuous robe, her head covered with a rainbow of braided feathers, her body wrapped in three layers of dresses finely woven of alpaca wool, her feet laced into a pair of light leather sandals. Silver brooches, engraved vessels, a bowl of *chicha* (an alcoholic drink made from fermented maize), a plate of corn, a little metal llama, and other sacred or domestic objects—all recovered intact—accompanied her in her centuries-long rest at the mouth of the volcano, until the chance warming of Ampato's icy cap melted the walls that protected her slumber and practically delivered her into the arms of Johan Reinhard and Miguel Zárate.

There she is now, in a little middle-class house in the quiet city where I was born, embarked on a new stage in her life, which will

last maybe another five hundred years. In her computerized coffin, preserved from extinction by its polar cold, she testifies—depending on how you look at it—to the ceremonial riches and the mysterious beliefs of a lost civilization, or to the infinitely cruel ways in which human stupidity once exorcised its fears, and often still does.

*Arequipa, November 1997*



# The Language of Passion

SELECTED COMMENTARIES

MARIO VARGAS LLOSA

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