

# Ben Clarone: Prologue Part 2

*by* Daniel Harris

**December 29, 1975. 12th Arrondissement, Paris**

The man, a tall handsome Russian-American artist with jet black hair, full lips and soft dark eyes, sat at a table in a cozy non-descript bar near Gare de Lyon. The room consisted of a six-stool bar with three tables along the opposite mirrored wall. Ice from the freezing rain covered the small table outside on the sidewalk. Two prostitutes sat at the bar smoking and drinking wine. The sleet blanketed holiday decorations and rendered the Monday evening rush hour streets and sidewalks treacherous. From his position behind the bar, the bartender, a short stocky man with a Stalin mustache and thick blond hair, watched the sleet and rain blur the reflected automobile lights in the bar window.

This was not the bar that the artist usually frequented. He preferred Bar Sanglier for its comfort, neighborly atmosphere, and proximity to his atelier. He was meeting a prospective renter of his painting/living space on nearby rue Charenton. He eyed the two prostitutes. One was on the heavy side, but with a pleasant face. The other was consumptive, with an acne-scarred face, long stringy hair, and oversized breasts. He wondered if they were beginning their night, or taking a break between their afternoon and evening work. The artist reached into his leather musette bag and took out a wire bound sketchbook, a dip pen, and bottle of black ink. He made several sketches of the girls and then saw that the barman had moved so that there was a strong triangle of figures. Just as he had finished sketching the trio, the consumptive prostitute reached down to adjust the strap on her pumps. The multiple angles of her arms, legs, breasts, hips, head and hair were graphically compelling. Gringovitch made a quick gesture sketch of her adjusting her pumps. He then made a new drawing of the bar trio with the

consumptive girl in the more interesting pose. When he was satisfied with the figures, he sketched the details and background.

The barman walked around the bar and approached the man.

—Another pastis, monsieur?

—Please, but with ice this time.

—Of course. You are an artist?

—A painter. My life is a line.

—May I see your sketch?

The man turned his sketchbook so the barman could see the drawing of the trio. The barman studied the drawing with a smile on his face.

—A pastis for this drawing?

—Sure.

The man took an Italian Stiletto switchblade from his pocket and carefully cut the drawing from his sketchbook. He signed the drawing. On the back he lettered: **Bar: Rainy Afternoon: Paris, 29/xii/1975**

The barman returned with a generous pastis on ice and a small carafe of water. The liquor was turning white from the melting ice.

—What is your name? asked the artist.

—Nikoloz, said the barman.

—Nikoloz? Are you Russian?

—Georgian. My mother's family was from Tbilisi, said Nikoloz in Russian.

—My mother and father are Russian, said the man replying in Russian. I was born in Leningrad. We defected to Chicago where I grew up. I divide my time between New York, Paris and Rome.

The barman took the drawing and showed it to the two women. They turned and smiled at the man. The heavier one slid off her barstool and walked over to the artist.

—I like your drawing, she said, giving the man a seductive smile and displaying most of her chubby bosom. Will you draw me?

—If you sit, I will draw your portrait in one minute.

—One minute?

—Exactly.

She sat, primped her hair, and pulled the yoke of her dress down to reveal maximum cleavage.

—Nikoloz, said the girl. Tell us when one minute is up.

—Don't move, said the artist. He drew swiftly and surely. He signed his name just as Nikoloz called the time.

—Let me see it, said the girl.

She turned to compare her face in the mirrored wall with the drawing.

—I like this. What is your name?

—Gringovitch. Anatoly Gringovitch. You may keep the drawing.

—*Merci. Merci bien*, she said. She rose from her chair walked to Gringovitch, bent down and gave him a big kiss on the cheek pressing her plump bosom into his arm.

—*Bonne année*, said Gringovitch, wiping her lipstick off his cheek.

A powerful-looking man, accompanied by a slender woman dressed in business attire, entered the bar. The man had an aura of authority about him. He was over six feet tall and radiated great physical strength. His large head was hatless and he wore a full-length black leather coat. His grey-flecked black hair was cut in the style known as a Chicago boxcar. He scanned the room with narrow eyes. His physical bearing and alert eyes suggested he was either a cop or a felon. He was both relaxed and wary. The woman with him was dressed in a tan Burberry trench coat, silk scarf, dark red beret and tight-fitting wine-dark red leather mid-calf heeled boots. She wore her dark hair in a short stylish cut. The man looked to be in his early forties, the woman perhaps a few years older. Their coats were almost dry, indicating they must have arrived by taxi. Under his arm, the man carried a painting wrapped in brown paper. They walked directly to Gringovitch's table. Gringovitch stood to greet them.

—Dan Sarras, said Gringovitch. You made it. And this must be the beautiful and elusive Celine Crissé.

—Yes, she said smiling and proffering a gloved hand. I arrived from Rome this morning.

—Pleased to meet you, said Gringovitch, clasping her hand warmly with both of his hands.

—Celine, this is the nearly famous painter, Anatoly Gringovitch. Celine, meet your future landlord.

—Pleased to meet you, said Celine in French-accented English. Dan Sarras told me many wonderful things about your paintings.

—I'm sure he exaggerated, said Gringovitch, giving Celine a smile and a wink. After all, he is my art dealer.

—Madame Crissé is also an art dealer, said Sarras, helping Celine out of her coat. In fact, if she takes your studio, she may make an art deal with you. We spent the last hour in your studio. She thinks it is perfect for her needs.

—Excellent, said Gringovitch, wondering if Sarras had bedded Celine in his studio.

—It has marvelous light and is perfectly Spartan, she said. I hate clutter.

—The neighborhood is working class, said Gringovitch, but it is safe and convenient. I have owned the flat since 1964, over ten years, and never had any trouble. But now, I have little use for it, Dan, my dealer, is in New York City and I live mostly in Rome. It is little more than an unused *pied a terre*.

—I would like to rent it for five years, said Celine, removing her leather gloves. I am willing to trade an Arshile Gorky painting for five years' rent.

—A Gorky painting?

—The Chilean painter, Roberto Matta, was my lover in Rome for several years. When I became tired of his endless philandering, I took this painting as payment for years of emotional torture. He has never asked me to return the painting. It dates from the last days of Gorky's life.

—What is the painting?

—It's titled *The Unfaithful Wife*, said Sarras. Matta stole it from Gorky's studio the day Gorky hung himself. It's not listed in any catalog of Gorky's works because it was completed two days before the suicide and was only seen by Gorky, Matta and later a few visitors to Matta's various studios. There is mention in one provisional catalog *raisonné* of Gorky's works that there was a

slashed painting in Gorky's studio, but it isn't clear if the cataloger meant Gorky's studio in Sherman, Connecticut, which had burned down, or his Union Square studio in New York City. This painting was slashed. Matta had it repaired by the best conservators.

—It's an authentic Gorky. Now you know the provenance Anatoly. May I call you Anatoly? Celine asked, brushing an errant hair from her eye.

—But of course, said Gringovitch. He marveled at the calculating sexuality of this woman.

Sarras caught Gringovitch's expression and raised an eyebrow

—May I buy either of you something to drink? said Gringovitch.

—I'll take a brandy, said Celine.

—Their best scotch, said Sarras.

Gringovitch went to the bar and gave the barman their orders.

—Are you going to draw me? asked the consumptive prostitute, coughing cigarette smoke into the back of her hand.

—I'm so sorry, my dear, but I'm in a business meeting at the moment.

—You're so mean, she said, giving Gringovitch a playful slap on his arm.

Gringovitch returned to the table. Sarras had unwrapped the painting. He handed it to Gringovitch.

Gringovitch examined the painting in what light there was in the bar. It looked authentic and he could see on the back where the canvas had been stitched together. The repair was invisible from the front. He wasn't sure repairing the knife slash was the correct thing to do. Given the title, subject matter and the angst of the painter, leaving it slashed may have been the better choice. The signature and title looked like what he remembered of Gorky's printing.

—Dan, what's your read on this? asked Gringovitch. Do you believe it's authentic?

—As far as I can tell, said Sarras. Before I flew to Paris, I spent three days looking at all the Gorkys I could find in New York.

—Oh, it's genuine. I'm sure it is worth at least \$50,000; probably more if it were better documented and came with papers, said Celine.

—I would think a Gorky of this quality and provenance would be worth even more to the right collector, said Gringovitch. In spite of its sexuality, it is painted with a jealous vengeance. The brush strokes and palette knife work are brutal and full of rage. Not typical of Gorky, but then, he was losing his mind, as well as his health and his wife. The viewer is not a voyeur of an impending sex act, but rather an outraged cuckold imagining his unfaithful wife's tryst. The fact that Gorky slashed the picture indicates how angry and out of control he was. The damage is part of the content, essential to the ethos of the picture. Too bad Matta had it repaired.

—It's hardly an "over-the-mantle" picture, but not *inaccrochable*, said Sarras. As you say, Anatoly, to the right collector it is an essential Gorky, perhaps *the* essential Gorky.

—*Inaccrochable*? asked Celine

—Unhangable, replied Sarras. I'm not sure it's a real French word, but Hemingway mentions Gertrude Stein using the word to describe certain paintings not for general viewing.

Gringovitch handed the painting to Sarras and took a sip of his pastis, giving the glass an approving look.

—How much rent did you expect to receive for your atelier? asked Celine.

—5,000 francs a month. That's about a thousand dollars a month, cheap by Paris standards for a 200 square meter flat even in this arrondissement.

—Well, I think the exchange of the Gorky for five years' rent on the studio is a good deal, said Celine giving Anatoly a winning smile. You retain the Gorky and at the end of five years you still have your atelier.

—Yes, but I must continue to pay the taxes and upkeep out of my pocket.

—Anatoly, it's like buying a famous painting on an installment plan, said Sarras. Surely you're not hurting for money.

—No, but Francesca and I are negotiating to buy my Rome atelier which includes a 220 square meter living area. The seller, a Mafioso, demands cash.

—As your American art dealer, I think you should accept the Gorky for five years' rent. Even if you only sell a few of your paintings from your one-man show in April, you'll have plenty of money for real estate investments.

The barman brought the drinks and another pastis for Gringovitch. Sarras rewrapped the painting.

Gringovitch wondered if Crissé and Sarras were working a scam on him. Sarras had a history of questionable deals and he didn't know Crissé. She was a handsome woman in an androgynous way. Prominent cheekbones and large brown eyes accented her regular boyish features. She possessed a charming smile and was naturally flirtatious.

Sarras had been his dealer since he came to New York in the early sixties. Sarras had several Rolodexes filled with the names and numbers of serious and casual art collectors. Sarras didn't pay Gringovitch a monthly stipend, but he could be counted on to sell enough paintings to net Gringovitch over a hundred grand a year. Sarras told Gringovitch that if his star kept rising he would be selling over a million dollars worth of his paintings a year in five years.

—Do we have a deal? asked Celine.

Gringovitch sipped his drink. He took his pen and made a finished drawing of the consumptive prostitute adjusting her shoe. When he looked up, Sarras and Crissé were looking at him in anticipation.

—Well, said Sarras.

—Sure. January 15, 1976, you can move in. My lawyer will draw up the papers.

—I think it's a good deal for both of you, said Sarras.

—Here's to good deals, said Gringovitch, raising his glass.

They clinked glasses and drank to the deal. Gringovitch looked up to see if the two prostitutes were still at the bar, but they were gone.

On the way out, he gave the drawing to the barman and told him to give the drawing to the consumptive prostitute.

Part 3 next.

