

# Esmée

by Daniel Harris

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Esmée sat alone at a table on the terrace at Marina Jack's in Sarasota. She had been there ten minutes and no waitress had approached her. Unlike the other female patrons who were dressed casually with plenty of cleavage and exposed thigh, Esmée was outfitted from another time. She wore a shirtwaist dress with long sleeves and a high neckline, stockings and heels. Her Titian-red hair, upswept and piled high, resembled some quaint heroine from a Renoir painting. A beautiful green-and-gold butterfly-patterned Hermes scarf graced her neck. It was well over eighty degrees and still two hours until sunset, but Esmée was cold. She had a weak heart.

—Are you here for drinks or to dine? asked the waitress, a busty young girl with hips too large for her tight short shorts. She shamelessly sported a roll of fat above the waist of her shorts.

—I'm waiting for some one, thank you. But may I have a glass of water and a hot tea with brandy?

—Do you think your friend will be dining?

—I really don't know, said Esmée, confused by the waitress's questions.

—Well, if you are not going to eat, then you will have to move up to the bar level.

—But I want to sit *here*. The person I'm meeting told me to sit *here*. I didn't know there were restrictions.

—This level is part of the restaurant. To sit *here*, you must order food, said the waitress with some impatience.

—Very well, then. Bring me a glass of water, a glass of ice, Earl Grey tea with a shot of Hennessy Cognac on the side, and a slice of pound cake.

- You want ice cream with the pound cake?
- No, thank you. Just the pound cake.
- Pound cake, Hennessy, Earl Grey tea.
- Yes, and a glass of water and a glass of ice.
- Not ice water?
- No, a glass of ice and a glass of water.

Esmée taught remedial English at a local college. She knew how to handle the ignorant, slow and uncultured. Her patience could be infinite, but the waitress had tested her forbearance and her sense of feminine propriety. What self-respecting female would appear in public with her hams dangling below the hem of her shorts? And then that roll of belly fat over her belt. Who are these girls?

Two prosperous couples and an elderly man with an unkempt beard occupied the table next to Esmée's. The old man kept staring at her. Esmée adjusted her chair to face the bay, averting his gaze.

The waitress brought her the water, ice, tea and Hennessy.

—You want the pound cake heated? asked the waitress.

—Yes, I would, thank you.

—It will be a minute, sweetie.

Esmée was waiting for Marcello Sylvestri, the famous painter. Marcello, who was married to Eleanor and had a mistress Portia Biscotti, had proposed that Esmée pose for a portrait. He claimed to be fascinated by her perfect features and abundant hair.

—I will meet you at Marina Jack's on Sunday evening at six, Marcello had told her. We can discuss the painting and agree on a modeling fee.

—This is not a nude, is it? asked Esmée.

—Oh, no. I haven't painted a nude since art school, said Marcello. I doubt you will even recognize yourself after I've finished with the picture. It's your face and hair that fascinate me.

Esmée looked at her watch. It was a quarter to six. She had planned on putting the brandy in the tea, which would evaporate the alcohol, but instead she sipped half the shot from the large snifter. It gave her warmth and courage.

The old man was still ogling her. Esmée reached in her bag for her cell phone. She called her friend Isabella. Isabella was a stylish beauty who lived with Sarasota's other famous painter, Anatoly Gringovitch. Isabella's cohabitation with Gringovitch was such a scandal that Isabella had been forced to quit her job as a kindergarten teacher. She was now Gringovitch's very successful full-time agent and dealer. People couldn't believe the transformation from a lullaby-singing kindergarten teacher to a tough, hardheaded businesswoman dealing with ruthless art dealers, gallery owners and museum curators in New York and the world.

—Hello, Esmée, said Isabella, what trouble are you in *now*?

—Oh, Bella, you know me too well. I agreed to meet Marcello Sylvestri at Marina Jack's at six tonight. He wants to paint my portrait.

—Is he paying you a modeling fee? asked Isabella.

—We will be discussing that when he arrives.

—Will you pose nude?

—Oh heavens no. You know all my problems. Besides I'm a little old for that. I'll be fifty-five in a month.

—Esmée, you look thirty. I don't know how you do it. Not even crows' feet around your eyes.

—Bella, my mother looked thirty when she died at eighty. It runs in the family.

—Count your blessings, Esmée.

—With my medical history, you have a strange concept of “blessings”. Throw in two failed marriages and a half-dozen failed relationships, it's a pretty sad back-story.

—But, Esmée, you look fantastic. You're a head-turner.

—Well, there is some smarmy old man at the next table undressing me with his eyes as we speak.

—Is he with other people? asked Isabella.

—Yes, two flashy couples. The women look like sisters. I'll text you a photo.

—OK, I've got the photo, said Isabella. That old man is Carl Peltmeister, the photo-realist painter. The two couples are his daughters and their husbands. Carl went mad around the time I started dating Gringovitch. He has been in some institution since then. He's actually a wonderful person, though very eccentric. All his money goes into a trust. His daughters are living off his legacy, which is growing daily. They married successful creative types. One lives in Beverly Hills, the other in New York City. They must be in Florida to visit Carl.

—Well, *you* may think he's wonderful, but I feel like he can see through my clothes.

—He probably can, said Isabella. He was famous for his nudes.

—Here's Marcello. I'll call you when I get home.

Marcello was a tall man who moved lithely through the crowded terrace. He had a mane of flowing black hair, a fine aquiline nose, full lips and a dancer's grace.

—Ah, the beautiful Esmée, said Marcello, kissing her proffered cheek. I hope you haven't waited long.

—No, I just arrived, she said diplomatically.

A different waitress approached the table. She was a typical young Sarasota waitress: blond, early twenties, nice figure, athletic, engaging smile.

—Mr. Sylvestri, welcome back to Marina Jack's. What may I bring you?

—Bring me a double Glenlivet neat, with a glass of ice water on the side. And refresh her drink, said Marcello. What are you drinking Esmée?

—Hennessey.

—And a double Hennessey for the lady.

—A single is plenty, said Esmée. I don't wish to lose control in a business meeting.

—Ah, you've found me out, said Marcello, amused at Esmée's strict decorum and old-style attire.

The entire adjacent table was riveted on Esmée and Marcello.

—Marcello, said Carl, the old man at the adjacent table. Don't you say hello anymore?

—Dad, leave the people alone, said Lorraine, Carl's older daughter.

—Carl, I didn't recognize you, said Marcello rising out of his chair and walking over to greet the senior painter.

Marcello helped Carl from his chair and gave him a warm embrace.

—What happened to you, Carl? asked Marcello. You used to be a snappy dresser. Your paintings are selling for high prices, you should be rolling in moola.

—It all goes into a trust. Have you met my daughters? This is Lorraine. The younger one is Lauren, named after her mother.

—This is my husband William, said Lorraine and the guy in the goofy Elton John sunglasses is Lauren's husband Bill. Bill is a comedy writer and William is a graphic novelist who publishes under the name *Stiletto*.

—I know that name, said Marcello. Didn't some big company make a video game from one of your novels?

—Yes, they did, said William. I'm pleased to know one person in this burg knows my work.

—Oh, excuse me, said Marcello interrupting. May I introduce my friend and favorite model, Esmée. She's an English professor at USF.

—Pleased to meet you, said Esmée. Marcello is being a bit premature; I haven't actually sat for him yet.

—You are one fine example of womanhood, said Carl, staring at Esmée.

—Dad, scolded Lauren. You don't even know Esmée.

—I know beauty when I see it, said Carl. To my eye, she is the very sum of all beauty.

Esmée blushed.

—If I had a studio, said Carl, I'd make your face famous.

—Don't mind dad, he's a little obsessive in his old age, said Lauren.

—Marcello, said Carl, if you paint her, skip the expressionist hype, make her glorious.

—Carl, I intend to. She is a beautiful and gracious subject.

Esmée rapped the table with her open hand.

—Wait one minute. You two are talking about me as if I were a piece of meat. I won't stand for this. Show some respect.

—I'm sorry Esmée. Are you interested in the menu? said Marcello, changing the subject. I've been working in the studio all day and am famished.

—Not particularly, said Esmée. Let's talk business, and then I want to go home. I have been insulted enough for one afternoon.

Lorraine's husband, William, summoned the waitress and asked for the check.

—We have to take Carl back to his assisted living center before dark, said Lorraine. It was a pleasure meeting you Esmée and Marcello. Sorry for the rude comments from dad, but I'm sure he meant well. The critics attacked him the last few years and his health has declined rapidly. At his facility, he paints the old, infirm and mutilated inmates. His perspective has changed, but he still pines for the days when he painted glamorous models.

—Don't sugarcoat it, Lorraine, said Carl. I paint the truth about the mutilations the medical profession ruthlessly exacts upon people.

—Yes, dad, said Lorraine and your canvases can be quite alarming. Not to everyone's taste. We must leave. Say good-bye to these nice people.

—Marcello, do right by this woman, said Carl, as Bill, Carl's son-in-law, gently ushered the old master toward the exit.

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Esmée and Marcello sat at their table watching the five of them leave the terrace.

—Sad about Carl, said Marcello, shaking his head slowly. He is one of America's distinguished painters.

—Oh, really? said Esmée. He was giving me the creeps.

— Esmée, he is a photorealist painter and he has made some astounding portraits and nudes of women. His portrait of the famous super model, Sand, established her career.

—Really? He did that painting? said Esmée.

—None other. Listen, I'm going to order a steak. Do you wish to order?

—Maybe some soup. I'm a little drunk and I still have to negotiate with you.

—Negotiate?

—Well, you don't think I'm going to pose free do you? I'm a beautiful woman. You're a man with a wife in New York City and a girlfriend in Sarasota. I don't expect any fringe benefits, if you catch my drift. Your girlfriend Portia introduced us. She doesn't want me to jump into bed with you, or even pose nude. Eleanor, your wife, certainly doesn't need another rival for your money or affection.

— Esmée, I think you are reading too much into this. You are a lovely subject and I want to paint your portrait. I want to paint you in a stately neo-Van Dyke style. End of story.

—That's not your reputation, Marcello. You are a serious Lothario. The Italian stallion that charms with his brush and then with his...oh, never mind.

—And you are the perfect model for my project. I will pay you \$100 per session with a minimum total of \$1000. Of course, I will own the painting and have all rights to it.

—Only head and shoulders.

—No. The whole Esmée, said Marcello.

—Three thousand minimum, said Esmée.

—Will you take \$2500?

—\$5000 and you can paint me nude.

—Are you sure? Before you said no nudes.

—Write it up before I change my mind, said Esmée.  
—Chaperone?  
—At the first five sessions yes, then maybe.  
—Portia, your friend and mine, is she okay as a chaperone?  
—Yes.  
—My lawyer will send you a contract tomorrow. Now. What are you ordering: clam chowder or cream of asparagus soup?

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Portia, Esmée and Isabella were lunching at the Burns Court Café in Sarasota.

—Cynthia makes the best quiche, said Isabella about the proprietress.

—Yes, and they have gelato for dessert, said Portia.

—On days I teach, said Esmée, I grab a gelato for lunch. I love cherry peach.

—Too rich for me, said Isabella. I can look at gelato and gain five pounds.

—Esmée is amazing, said Portia. She was posing for Marcello two days ago and she has the body of a young woman.

— Esmée, you were posing for Marcello Sylvestri nude? said Isabella her eyes and mouth open wide.

—Yes, said Portia, You should have seen the look on Marcello's face when she dropped her robe.

—You were there Portia?

—Yes, I was the official chaperone. Esmée demanded a chaperone. They agreed on me.

—I can't imagine, said Isabella. Did he know you had two large lumpectomies?

—No, said Esmée. Marcello did not respond. He was perfectly unfazed and respectful. He kept sketching and asking for different poses.

—He had to have noticed, said Isabella.

—Of course, said Esmée, but what is he supposed to say? Sorry I see some surgeon has butchered your breasts, but I can paint them as I imagine they were.



—Poor Esmée, said Portia putting her hand on her friend's hand, has had so many surgeries that the front of her body is covered with scars.

—Besides the breast cancer surgeries three years ago, said Esmée, I had a heart valve operation when I was thirty-six and two Caesarian deliveries in my twenties. I look like a bayoneted war victim. Other than that, believe it or not, I've been in perfect health. I never get colds or flu, only cancer and heart problems, stuff that can kill you.

—Yet, you are so beautiful and your skin is so smooth and clear, said Portia. Life is just not fair.

The women sat in silence looking out the window at the passing parade of tourists.

Did Marcello say anything to you about Esmée, said Isabella to Portia.

—No, but I asked what he was thinking. He said he was thinking about what Carl Peltmeister said to him on Sunday. Carl said he was painting all the old people and their scars and amputations in the assisted living center where he lives. Marcello has in mind a classical allegorical painting. He mentioned the title *Wounded Sister*. He was up most of the night drawing.

—I hope he isn't using my repulsive, mangled and tortured flesh for some voyeuristic purpose, said Esmée.

—You are hardly mangled, Esmée, said Isabella.

—Well, I've had some horrid experiences with men, said Esmée. One even vomited when he snuck up on me naked in the shower. Men can be such pigs.

—Serves him right, said Portia. Yes, men are such bastards. Like *their* scars are battle medals that deserve our love and pity, but *women's* scars and mutilations render them undesirable.

Esmée began to weep quietly.

—Let's change the subject, said Isabella, taking a small pack of tissues from her purse and handing them to Esmée.

—I will tell Marcello to stop this project, said Portia.

—Yes, that's best, said Isabella. A fully dressed portrait is fine, but the nude has to go.

—It's only fair that I hear Marcello's explanation before I cancel the painting, said Esmée.

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Esmée and Portia sat in Marcello's studio. Life sized drawings were arranged on tables around the room.

—Here's my plan, Esmée. I will make a trope of Michelangelo's *Pieta*. I shall paint you without surgeries in the position of Mary. You *with* the surgeries will be in the place of Jesus. The title of the work is *Wounded Sister*. Your beauty before and after will carry the painting. Look at these sketches. Are they acceptable?

The two women were agog at the sketches. Esmée was beautiful and melancholy as Mary and unmercifully disfigured, her wounds graphically depicted as the wounded sister.

How could I, or anyone, physically hold *that* pose of the wounded sister for any length of time? asked Esmée.

My assistants will make a special couch for you to lie on as the wounded sister. It will be a comfortable couch, but you will look tortured. The drawings I've made of you nude will suffice. You need only wear a leotard so I can capture your body's contours.

—So no more nude posing? said Esmée

—No, said Marcello. And no need for a chaperone.

—Not so fast Marcello, said Portia. I'm not sure I can trust you alone with Esmée.

—What's that supposed to mean? said Marcello and Esmée simultaneously.

There were too many elephants in the room, thought Portia. Marcello is married with a mistress, so his chances of wining Esmée are slim. Yet, Esmée's wounds were the other elephant in the room since they represented a long-term health liability. Any chance of a love affair would require acknowledgments and compromise on both sides. Worse, Esmée and I are close friends. Marcello would have to sacrifice everything to win over Esmée.

Esmée was cold and not willing to admit her feelings towards Marcello. Since she had seen the drawings of the project, she was beginning to regard him with respect, even affection. But Esmée would not admit any of this to herself. Marcello was talented and could make her famous in art history, but he was not desirable to Esmée — he was of a coarser grain and an unrepentant Don Juan. Curiously, she thought of him constantly though she was determined that Marcello would never conquer her, except with his brush.

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—Marcello, excuse me, but I have to use the bathroom, said Esmée. Will you help me up?

—Absolutely, said Marcello.

Esmée was lying on the special couch Marcello and his assistants had constructed for her to pose upon.

— Esmée, are you all right? asked Marcello helping her into a sitting position. You look very pale.

—I'm okay. I need to stand up. I get a little light-headed lying in that position for so long, said Esmée. I also need to use the bathroom.

Marcello lifted her to her feet. Usually when he helped her up from that pose, she was nearly weightless. Today, she seemed heavy.

—Are you sure you are okay, Esmée?

—Yes. Where is Portia? I would like her to accompany me. I'm a little dizzy.

—Portia went out to the grocery store and to Lowe's for some supplies for her pool. I guess she trusts us.

—Well, will you walk with me to the bathroom and wait outside?

—Of course. We can stop for the day if you wish, said Marcello.

—No, I know we are behind with the painting because I can't hold that pose for long periods of time.

— Esmée, bend over and put your hands on you knees. You are white as a sheet, said Marcello with touch of panic in his voice. He held her around the waist.

They stood there in that position for a few minutes. Finally the color returned to Esmée's face and she stood erect. She turned and

faced Marcello. Standing on her tiptoes she gave him a full kiss on the mouth. Marcello bent down, wrapped his arms around her, and gently pulled her close to him, returning her kiss.

—I've wanted to give you that kiss for so long, said Esmée out of breath.

—And I have waited so *long* for that kiss, said Marcello.

—Walk me to the bathroom.

They stopped and embraced three times on the way from the studio to the bathroom.

—I'll wait here for you, said Marcello. Please call me if you feel sick or faint.

—You worry too much. Your kisses energize me.

—I hear Portia's car in the drive. I will tell her you don't feel well.

—No, no. I will be fine.

Marcello could hear the front door of Portia's house slam from his studio, which shared the same parcel of land.

—Esmée, will you be okay while I get Portia?

—I'm fine. Give me one last kiss and then find Portia.

—There? In the bathroom?

—Yes, hurry.

Marcello opened the door. Esmée was on the floor, her ashen face now in a panic. Her arms clutched her chest.

—My chest hurts, Marcello. It's a different hurt. I need my doctor. Marcello bent down to gentle her.

—Marcello. Marcello. I wasn't going to love you.

—Easy, sweet Esmée. You will be fine. The doctor is coming.

—Has your kiss wounded my heart? Or, whispered Esmée, her voice trailing off into unintelligibility.

—Portia, Por-ti-a, shouted Marcello, as he ran across the drive to Portia's home. Portia! Quick. Call 911. Esmée ... something dreadful has happened.

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When *Wounded Sister* was exhibited at Galleries Florentine in Chelsea, it was a *cause célèbre*. The painting was on the cover of *Time*, *Artforum* and *Art In America*. There was a two-page spread in the Sunday *New York Times*. The uproar was national. Marcello gloried in the publicity, both pro and con. The President of the United States weighed in by saying: “*Wounded Sister* is not an image consistent with America's relentless search for better health care for its citizens, nor its citizens' compassion for the ill.” Pope Mendaciti II declared *Wounded Sister* “A foul desecration of a famous and beloved icon of the Christian world”. Nowhere did the detractors mention the mutilation of millions of women. Feminists soon adopted *Wounded Sister* as a signature image for breast cancer treatment.

Alert marketing executives at the London office of a worldwide advertising firm purchased *Wounded Sister* for two million. Marcello donated his earnings from the sale to cancer and cardiac research institutions. The owner of the advertising firm licensed the image and has given the proceeds to breast cancer research. But then ...

June 18, 2014  
Sarasota, Florida  
Associated Press

### **Marcello Sylvestri, Artist, Dead At 64**

Marcello Sylvestri, the Italian-American painter of the controversial painting *Wounded Sister* and the outsized *Imaginary Landscapes* paintings, was found dead in the Casey Key swimming pool of his long time associate and companion, Portia Biscotti. The Sarasota County Sheriff's office gave the cause of death as self-inflicted gunshot wound to the head.

According to Ms Biscotti, Mr. Sylvestri had been in a state of serious depression ever since the model Esmée Montesquieu

succumbed to a pulmonary embolism while posing for Sylvestri's controversial painting, *Wounded Sister*. The painter's estranged wife, Eleanor Sylvestri, said her husband had been undergoing treatment for "debilitating depression" and that the medications made him suicidal: "Marcello blamed himself for Esmée's death. He believed the long periods of motionless, contorted posing required for the painting brought on the embolism."

Marcello Sylvestri burst onto the New York City art scene in the early 1970's with his bold expressionist portraits of the famous and near-famous in the Punk Rock movement. During the 1980's and 1990's, collectors and museums eagerly sought his mural-size *Imaginary Landscapes*. Christie's sold his 1998 surreal painting, *Imaginary Landscape: New York City Below the Schist*, for \$23M, the highest sum ever paid, to date, for a painting by a living American artist.

But ultimately it was *Wounded Sister* that made his name a household word. He was equally vilified and honored for the painting.

Mr. Sylvestri is survived by his wife of twenty-five years, Eleanor Sylvestri; two sons, Augustus 22 and Dante 19; and a daughter, November Sylvestri Angus, 33, by his first wife, the late ex-super model and exotic dancer, Vestal

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Portia, Isabella and her husband, Anatoly Gringovitch, were waiting in the boarding area at JFK for the JetBlue flight back to Sarasota.

—Damn, said Gringovitch to no one in particular.

—Yes, said Isabella. Damn it to hell.

—The jackal paparazzi turned Marcello's memorial service into a circus, said Portia. What a terrible way to mourn and celebrate the life of such an important artist: all those flash units going off, pushing and shoving, shouting and heckling.

—Yes, and the mob shouting out things like: Artist's whore! And: Hey Portia, did you shoot the bastard? But the one that got me was the one who shouted out: The Anti-Christ is dead! said Gringovitch.

—Eleanor Sylvestri told me Cardinal Bailey refused to allow any Catholic police to participate in crowd control units because of the so-called blasphemy of *Wounded Sister*, said Isabella.

—There were *no* police, said Gringovitch. The whole scene was complete and total anarchy.

—Where are Marcello's ashes? asked Portia.

—I have them with me in my carry-on, said Gringovitch. I didn't trust anyone to forward them.

—Let's have a small gathering on the beach where we scattered Esmée's ashes, maybe they will find each other's spirit, said Isabella. Portia, who had lost a friend and a lover, wept, her face a veil of tears.

