

# The Caselvetrano Olive

by Daniel Harris

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He spotted her in Sarasota Whole Foods surveying the artichokes. She wore a black dress whose cut enhanced her modest breasts. The length of her skirt revealed strong, shapely legs. She would never see forty again. Her bearing bore witness to generations of privilege and pedigree.

She gave him a glance and then a second longer look. She looked vaguely familiar to him. Better than that, she seemed interested. But he held back: she was nearly six feet tall, he was but five nine.

He saw her again near the olive bar and noticed she was wearing heeled platforms, so maybe they were the same height. She had large dark eyes, as big as a deer. Not cutesy Bambi brown, but black as oil cured Greek olives.

—Do you know these olives? She was pointing at the shinny green Castelvetrano olives.

Who was she speaking to? He assumed she was addressing a friend or a store clerk.

He scooped some Castelvetrano olives into a plastic container.

—Excuse me. Do you know the name of these bright green olives?

He was startled to realize that she was talking to ... him.

—They are called Caselvetrano. They have a wonderful taste, he said. He took one from his container with a plastic spoon and handed it to her. She savored the olive with obvious pleasure. She was a woman who appreciated fine things.

—An astonishing flavor, she said putting the pit and the plastic spoon in the refuse bin. What are they called again?

—Caselvetrano. They're Sicilian.

There was a silent interval while he scanned her whole body, especially her face and legs. He saw that the intensity of his gaze threw her off balance.

—My name is Ashley Brewster, *née* Walsingham. And yours?

—Anatoly. Anatoly Gringovitch.

—Aren't you the almost-famous painter?

—The very same, he said, smiling at “almost-famous.”

—Do you live here in Sarasota, or are you visiting?

—I moved here two years ago. I lived in Brooklyn and Paris for the past thirty years, Chicago before that. I was born in the Soviet Union. How do you know I'm a painter?

—I went to your show last year in New York City at the DeFresca Gallery in Chelsea.

—Were you at the opening?

—Yes, I wore a green dress. My husband was dressed like a jerk in a dull brown suit and argyle vest.

—Ah, I think I remember you. Wasn't there a younger man with you?

—Yes, my son Sebastian, a beautiful young man.

—He seemed a bit delicate.

She ignored his innuendo.

—I saw you, she continued, but my husband was jealous of all men, especially exciting creative ones like you, and he knew I was leaving him, so I didn't introduce myself. I told him I wanted your painting, *Orange in a Time of War*. He bought it a week later hoping to hold onto me.

—You have good taste. He bought that painting for a song. Sotheby's has listed it for their autumn auction of New American art at \$250 grand.

—My marriage is over, she said. He owns the painting, so he put it up for auction. My lawyers treated him harshly.

—But you have this big rock on your left ring finger.

—It's glass. I wear it to keep men from hitting on me.

—Oh, really. So what are you doing right now with me?

—Hitting on you, I guess, she said with a laugh.

—Do you always look for men in Whole Foods?  
—No. I prefer private clubs. But occasionally I find an interesting man at the olive bar. She gave him an enticing smile.  
—Do you find me interesting?  
—I know you are interesting and probably rich, two very good qualities in a man. You do seem a bit unvarnished though.  
—What are your best qualities?  
—I'm rich and I know how to sleep with a man.  
—Fair enough. What are your plans after Whole Foods?  
—Lovemaking.  
—With whom?  
—You.  
—What if I'm a violent person who likes sadistic sexual practices? What if I want to paint you nude for the world to see?  
—Try me.  
They left Whole Foods in her white Mercedes convertible.

Ashley walked around her pool with a glass of Pinot Grigio. After three months of their affair, Gringovitch convinced her to pose nude for him. He was to arrive in a half hour to begin the painting. She telephoned her son in New York City.

—Sebastian, darling, do you think I should pose nude for an artist?  
—Mother, why would anyone want to paint a nude of a forty-eight year-old divorcée?  
—He's famous and I'm his lover.  
—I guess that's reason enough. But it probably won't be flattering.  
—Why do you say that?  
—Well, if he is your lover, he knows all your physical defects. It might not be pretty. Remember Rembrandt's portrait of his mistress, Hendrickje Stoffels as Bathsheba? Not flattering.  
—But if he loves me, it could be stunning or at least conversational.

—Mother, insisted Sebastian, who wants to see a painting of a naked forty-eight year old woman? Puh-leese!

—Well, he said a nude, which is different from naked. It might be arty and flattering. Besides, how many sons get to see a portrait of their mother nude?

—Spare me.

—Well, I'm going to do it. If nothing else, it will annoy your father. No one wants to see his privates.

—They aren't all that bad. I'm proud of the package I inherited.

—Spare me your boasting. It's the man not the tools.

Gringovitch arrived with two female assistants. They arranged the bedding, lights and adjusted the Venetian blinds controlling the sunlight into the room. Gringovitch gave Ashley a hug and a kiss.

—Nervous? he said

—Yes, plenty.

—Don't be. It will be boring for you.

The first day, Gringovitch did sketches and outlined her on a canvas. It was a large canvas, about 7/8ths life size. Gringovitch kept asking his assistants for measurements they made of her with a caliper. Gringovitch did the math conversions in his head. At the end of the first session, the outlines and the basic shape were sketched.

The assistants packed up the tools.

—How bad was it? said Gringovitch.

—It was different. Your eyes are so intense when you look at me, she said. Like you can see my soul.

—This painting is not about your flesh, but your soul. You have such hauteur and bearing it will be a wondrous painting. If I can capture your face correctly, the rest will follow like cygnets behind the swan.

After six weeks of sessions, the painting was finished.

—You make me seem so regal, said Ashley.

—Well, my dear, you've been regal since I've known you.

—What are you going to do with the painting? Sell it?

—No, it's yours. You may sell it or donate it, but please do not destroy it. It will prove to the critics that an abstract painter who is a trained artist is capable of realism and palpable emotion.

—You make me seem so erotic.

—Well, you are. See this curve? You can't get womanlier. The arch of the breasts and the rise of the *mons*, nothing but female seduction, he said, pointing out those places on her body with the handle of a paintbrush.

Ashley was touched. Tears welled up in her eyes. The assistants removed the lights, paints and brushes. The painting rested on the easel in her bedroom.

—Does it bother you?

—No, I never realized I could be so alluring. Did you paint the truth?

—I paint what I see. What I saw was a paragon of womanhood.

—Maybe you should have painted me in bondage, she said.

—No, that would have been a political statement. I wanted something different: A beautiful woman of a certain age, still confident in her womanhood, haughty and sensual.

—This all started because I asked you about an olive, she said laughing.

—What better reason to paint a picture?

