

The Nude Pianist: A Novel:

Chapter 29

by Daniel Harris

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When Frank entered the Maple Tavern, he saw four tables pushed together. At this newly constructed long table sat a dozen men listening raptly to one man. The assemble group was a jarring mix of struggling and emerging artists, a pair of art professors, a few established artists, and a curator from the Guggenheim Museum. The painters, photographers and sculptors at the table worked in a variety of avant-garde styles. Word had gotten out that Anatoly Gringovitch, a rising star in the international art world, would be visiting the Maple Tavern that evening.

The air in this dimly lit bar was heavy with cigarette and pipe smoke. The funk of wet wool, stinky feet, reeking armpits, stale beer and fried food created a bohemian feter. The stench of the poor. Most of the men were impoverished young struggling artists, though they did not live in that hopeless condition known as poverty. They were culturally rich, professional, creative and ambitious. Their only fault, if it could be called that was: they had no money.

All eyes were on Anatoly Gringovitch, a tall handsome Russian-American painter with jet-black hair, full lips and soft dark eyes. He held a fountain pen in his right hand and was drawing on his placemat. One could tell from the grace and confidence of his pen strokes that he was a master drawer. The drawing was a portrait of the Guggenheim curator sitting across the table in the style of Picasso drawings. There were three other drawings on separate placemats, all portraits of people sitting at the long table, each made

in different styles: Leonardo, Rubens, Goya. Gringovitch made these drawings almost as an afterthought. He never stopped addressing the table with the glib ease of a gifted storyteller. When Frank arrived, Gringovitch was relating a story about dining with Picasso in a restaurant in Antibes.

—So, I asked the master, “Here you are, 87 years old. Why are you painting and drawing these childlike pictures?” The great man looked at me with those large all-seeing eyes. “When I was a child, I could draw like Raphael. It’s taken a lifetime for me to draw like a child.”

—I think he was pulling your leg, said the Guggenheim curator.

—No, he was serious, said Gringovitch. His Mougins studio was filled with these very naïve primitive drawings and paintings. Except each picture always had one clue — an eyelid, a turn of the lip, some small line or brush stroke — that was the sign of the master.

—This must be the great Gringovitch, said Frank, approaching the group and putting a hand on Gringovitch’s shoulder. Jesus, don’t you ever stop showing off, man. Those drawings are amazing.

—Frank Martin, said Gringovitch, rising from his chair and embracing Frank. You’ve grown famous since I last saw you ten years ago in Chicago.

—Hardly. I’m still trying to get to your level, said Frank. I see you guys have emptied one round of three pitchers of beer already.

—It’s your turn to buy, Martinelli, said a drunken younger artist.

—I need to eat. I’ll order a sandwich and three more pitchers. Bass Ale good enough for you guys?

—Works for me, said Gringovitch. And have the waitress bring me more placemats. I want to draw everyone who’s here.

Frank returned to the table, followed by a waitress who carried a tray with three pitchers of beer and a sheaf of placemats under her arm. The group made room for Frank next to Gringovitch.

Frank and Gringovitch were the cream of young American oil painters. Even though easel painting was not *au courant*, they garnered great admiration from other artists. Gringovitch’s talent was once in a generation. Frank had equal talent, but his mental

illness with its crushing depressions slowed his progress. Both of them were museum-quality painters.

—You look good, Frank, said Gringovitch. How's the art business treating you?

—Much better than four years ago when I was living on less than \$100 a week.

—You know your gallerist, Elaine Aster, opened a gallery in Paris, said Gringovitch, pouring Frank a beer from one of the pitchers. She contacted my agent, Dan Sarras, about selling my art in her new space. He thought she was pretty ballsy pitching him like that.

—Sarras has a gallery on Madison Avenue, interrupted one of the younger artists. Does he also have one in Paris?

—Rome, said one of the professors, studying the bowl of his pipe.

—Gringovitch, doesn't Sarras handle all your European sales? asked a well-known serigrapher, his hands stained with ink.

—Sarras handles *all* my sales, said Gringovitch. In fact I'm his *only* artist. He occasionally brokers sales for other galleries, but I'm his only permanent artist.

Turning to Frank, Gringovitch continued, isn't your agent Angelique Brody?

—Yes. Angelique is my agent, but Elaine Aster sells my art in her gallery on West Broadway here in SoHo. At the moment we have an issue with Elaine.

—What's that?

—I'll bet she's not paying him, said Frank's friend Albert, who looked like Giacometti's *Walking Man*.

—You got that right, said Jake, a man in his sixties whose large beard and weathered face could be a double of Claude Monet in his last years. I signed on with Elaine, Jake continued, when she first started out in 1960, after I left Tarzanian. She did nothing for me. I had to sue her to collect my money for the one painting she sold. I ended up making about five hundred dollars after I paid my lawyer. Elaine Aster, what an act!

Frank was made aware that all the artists at the table knew more about the *business* of art than he did. He was clueless about which

gallery handled which painters. He had to start reading the art journals, he told himself, he always thought it better to *create* art than to read about it. He only had a copy of *Art Forum* in his studio because he was mentioned in an article about School of the Art Institute of Chicago. The commercial side of the business repulsed him, now more so than ever because of the fraudulent machinations of Elaine Aster.

—Well, everything's somewhat okay, said Frank, except I discovered that Elaine Aster sold at least two paintings and hid the sale from Angelique and me. I was never paid for those two paintings. Angelique is investigating this, but Elaine is in Paris.

—You know, Frank, said Gringovitch.

—You have to call him Francesco Martinelli these days, interrupted Albert. Elaine changed his name.

—He's still Frank to me, said Gringovitch. I use Stiletto as a Do Business As name for my erotic drawings and cartoons.

—These guys sitting here practically reamed me a new one when they discovered I was being marketed as Francesco Martinelli, said Frank.

—I thought we *did* ream you a new one, said an effete younger artist.

—Close, said Frank grinning.

—Are you *serious*? asked Gringovitch, ignoring the levity. Elaine Aster is not paying you?

Gringovitch finished a portrait of Albert in the style of Matisse; signed it, dated it, and casually handed it to Albert.

—You're just *giving* this to me? asked Albert, surprised and honored.

—Of course, it's a memento of this evening, said Gringovitch. Keep it. It might be worth something after I die.

—Getting back to Elaine Aster, said Frank, I don't know all the facts, but let's say there are two paintings I'm aware of that she's sold and not paid me. But she *has* faithfully paid me my \$1500 monthly stipend, and she *is* selling about one or two new paintings a

month for good coin. Not for as much as I'd like, but she says she's building a market.

—I've heard *that* one before, said Jake, and not only from Elaine.

—You know, Frank, said Gringovitch, Angelique Brody is the *crème-de-la-crème* of agents and lawyers. I tried to hire her on everyone's recommendation, but she told me she didn't take new artists, only established ones. So, how the hell did *you* con her into taking *you* on as client?

—Dumb luck, said Frank looking at the faces around the table.

—Well? asked Gringovitch.

—Yeah, Francesco, demanded four or five of the group. Just how *did* you manage to hire Angelique Brody?

Frank explained how he came to know Michiko Mita and how Michiko introduced him to Carlo Sylvestre.

—So you slept with a Jap piano virtuoso who introduced you to an art collecting orchestra conductor who told *his* friend, Angelique Brody, to take *you* as a client. Is that what I'm hearing? asked Gringovitch.

—That's about it. Life can be stranger than fiction, as they say.

—Wait a minute. Not so fast, said Jake. So how did you hook up with Elaine Aster? Did you sleep with her, *too*?

—No, it's much more roundabout than that: I went crazy. I really did. Straightjacket, incarceration in a nut ward, the whole nine yards.

Frank explained that he was in manic mode after three weeks of hard drinking and painting, got into an argument with some pro Vietnam War construction workers and tore up a bar in August of 1968. It took five cops and an injection to subdue him. The police took him bundled him in a straight jacket off to Bellevue Hospital. His shrink, Dr. Andrea Jawarski, went to his studio to see his paintings, hoping to discover anything in his work that would give her clues about his illness. She told her friend, Elaine Aster, about Frank's paintings. When he was released from the hospital, he returned to his studio to find Elaine Aster examining his paintings.

That night Michiko introduced him to Sylvestre who told Angelique Brody to take Frank on as a client.

—Christ, I can't believe your luck, said Albert, all these chance encounters. It *is* crazy.

—Being crazy is not lucky, Albert, it's a fucking *death sentence*, said Frank glaring at Albert. Frank spat out “it's a fucking death sentence” syllable by syllable.

Frank had spoken so vehemently that all conversation in the bar ceased.

—Easy, Frank, said Gringovitch, putting a hand on Frank's shoulder. No disrespect intended. But you have to admit you *did* have some, shall we say, fortuitous encounters, though at a horrible price.

—Yes, but I was prepared. Luck is when preparation meets opportunity. I've been making art nearly every day since I was about five. That's thirty years of honing my skills. Thirty years of concentrated preparation. Albert has been to my studio numerous times. He's always amazed at how much work I produce. I don't *play* at being an artist, I *am* an artist. Well, by a strange set of circumstances, finally I came to the attention of people who appreciated my work and could help me. But I still paint and draw every day for eight or more hours. I may not have Gringovitch's talent, but I probably work harder at art than all of you clowns put together.

Frank realized he had changed a happy gathering into a glum one. He grabbed one of the pitchers and refilled everyone's glass.

—Here's to crazy luck! said Frank raising his glass. He needed to smooth over any hard feelings. He really had no argument with Albert, his best friend in SoHo.

As soon as the toast was drunk, the usual barroom thrum resumed.

—So, Gringovitch, asked Jake, hoping a change in conversation would restore joviality to the group, how did *you* get your break?

To be continued

