

The Nude Pianist: A Novel:

Chapter 30

by Daniel Harris

Click on my name above. It will take you to my home page where you will find links to more stories and previous chapters of "The Nude Pianist."

* * *

Anatoly Gringovitch took a swallow of beer, thoughtfully put the cap on his Ferrari da Varese custom fountain pen, and launched into his story:

—Well, my early success came through friends of my family. I was twelve when my parents and I made a daring escape in 1946 through Turkey from the Soviet Union to Lima, Peru. A year later we immigrated to Chicago. My mother, who was fluent in Russian, French and English, became a schoolteacher in the Chicago public schools. Russians are big on keeping friends and countrymen close. The parent of one of her students was a Russian political refugee who had a small art gallery on Michigan Avenue. Mostly he sold Russian and Ukrainian folk art, but his brother painted big bold blocky abstract paintings. When my mother showed him some of my work, he ditched the folk art and only showed his brother's work and my paintings. Soon after he starting showing and selling my work, I graduated from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and then moved to Brooklyn, New York where I squatted in an abandoned clock factory.

One day a man came to my studio with a painting of mine. He wanted me to sign it on the front. I usually only sign and date my pictures on the back. I explained that to him, but he said he owned the painting and wanted me to sign it on the front. He said he was an art dealer and he knew that paintings sold easier if the artist's name and date were on the front. He was a big guy, very

intimidating. He really got in my face. I told him to get lost. He said he'd leave after he'd seen my paintings.

I showed him into my studio. He left four hours later with thirty-five paintings. He paid me \$500 for each one. He gave me a fat roll of hundred dollar bills, \$17,500 to be exact. It was a fortune in 1962. I bought my current house in Park Slope, Brooklyn, with that money. He promised that when he sold the paintings, I would get the balance of my 50% cut. He was as good as his word. The rest is history.

—Who was this guy? asked Frank.

—Dan Sarras. He's still my dealer.

—Is that the same Dan Sarras who was arrested for counterfeiting around the time the Berlin Wall went up in 1961? asked Jake.

—That's the guy. He served about six weeks and was released under mysterious circumstances. Jake, you may remember this you're old enough:

There was a scandal over a Soviet mole in a high-level position at the State Department about that time. Since Sarras had strong KGB connections, after all, he made the plates for the counterfeit Franklins the Soviets used. Sarras saw his chance to get out of jail by fingering the mole. JFK's back was to the wall, he ordered Bobby Kennedy to drop the charges against Sarras. Pretty daring since Sarras was accused of not only counterfeiting, but also aiding and abetting an enemy of the state. That's treason, a capital crime. Those hundred dollar bills Sarras gave me were Soviet forgeries made from Sarras's plates. Like every other bank in the world and even the US Treasury, my bank took them without a problem.

—So does he always pay you? asked Frank.

—Absolutely. He doesn't pay a retainer, but he pays my share of the sale the next day. Checks from him show up all the time. I now own outright an atelier in the twelfth arrondissement in Paris and a brownstone on 3rd Street in Park Slope, Brooklyn. My wife and two boys live in Brooklyn. I divide my time between Paris and Brooklyn. My wife, who's Italian, wants to live in Rome, so we're looking for a space there.

—So you saw Elaine Aster in Paris? asked Frank.

—Yeah, last Friday. She met me in a bar near her gallery dressed to kill. She asked me to convince Sarras to allow her to sell my work in her new Paris gallery. She offered generous terms. I told her there was no way I was going to jeopardize my relationship with Sarras.

—What did she say?

—Not much. I could tell she was disappointed. She tried the woman's seduction thing, but I was uncharacteristically in no mood for sport. After hearing what you told us, I'm glad I didn't cut a deal with her. Even though Sarras is a known shady character with all kinds of unsavory international entanglements, he's never stiffed me.

—So, when did you come back to New York?

—I flew into JFK Sunday evening.

—I've never been to Brooklyn, said Frank, much less Europe. I've been to Japan though.

—How was Japan? asked Gringovitch.

—I went there because Michiko was sick and asked me to come take care of her, said Frank. I filled a lot of sketchbooks and took hundreds of photos. I also bought some incredible handmade paper.

—I'll bet you ate some great sushi, said the non-pipe smoking professor. I think that's all I ate when I visited a few years ago.

—We actually only had sushi and sashimi once after Michiko recovered enough to go out to eat. I preferred the noodle shops. The clientele was more diverse and the faces more interesting.

—I have a question for you two, said a young sculptor who made elaborate constructions from found objects.

—Talk, but don't move, said Gringovitch. I'm sketching you now.

—Well, that's the question. Both of you paint these big abstract or surreal abstract paintings. Why do you fill your sketchbooks with people?

—Good question, said Gringovitch, relishing the chance to instruct. But don't fucking move.

With a flourish Gringovitch finished the portrait, signed and dated it, and asked Albert to pass it to the sculptor.

I don't know what they teach at the School of the Art Institute these days, continued Gringovitch, but when I was at that place, there was this crazy Czech painting instructor, Morton Slobovian. His mantra was "When you paint don't draw, and when you draw don't paint", meaning painting is a different animal than drawing and vice versa.

—I remember Morty admonishing students in his painting class with that saying, said Frank. He also used to say drawing is about line, painting is about color, form, and emotion.

—So then, why do I draw, continued Gringovitch, first because I like to draw. When I was six I could draw better than most amateurs in St. Petersburg, USSR. When I arrived in Chicago and took my drawings to the Art Institute, they didn't believe a fourteen-year-old kid could draw with that perception and skill. The admissions people took me into the museum and had me copy paintings and sculptures. Needless to say I blew them away.

—Well, you sure put on a drawing demonstration tonight with these sketches, said the pipe-smoking professor. I noticed you drew my portrait in the style of Leonardo and you drew it left-handed. Are you left-handed?

—No, but Leonardo was. I practice drawing left- and right-handed. You see, drawing is not about making marks, it's about seeing. By practicing drawing with both hands, I force myself to see more exactly so that my non-dominant hand has an exact idea of what it has to do. I recommend it to all of you. It's a good exercise. Actually my good friend, the amazing artist, Julia Kay, hipped me to drawing with both hands.

—For me, said Frank, drawing is all about seeing. When you learn to draw, you learn to see. If you are seeing accurately, the actual making of the lines becomes easy. It's as if the pencil, pen or chalk becomes part of your eye. When you can see the world like a good drawer, you see people for what they really are. Their very souls. You can see the humor, craziness, follies and terrors of the world. It's those big emotions and messages I discover while drawing that I put in my paintings.

—Speaking for myself, said Albert, I never thought about drawing that way. I know about the seeing; but my drawings, as Frank knows, look more like architectural mechanical drawings, than free-hand sketches. It's just how I see the world.

—I think Albert has a ruler permanently affixed to his retina, said Frank. He is the master of the straight line. His amazingly complex canvases reflect his drawing style, which reflects how he sees the world. Thankfully we all see the world slightly differently, or the world would be quite dull and predictable.

—Let's not forget, said Gringovitch, raising an eyebrow and winking, I find spending an afternoon drawing a naked woman a perfect aphrodisiac.

—Doesn't happen in my life-drawing classes, said the pipe-smoking professor. I only hire old drunks for my models. There's plenty of character and wrinkles on those faces and bodies, but not much to provoke a boner.

—More beer? asked the Guggenheim curator. My treat.

—Not for me, said Gringovitch. I have to get back to Brooklyn, and I want to see Frank's studio. Is that the plan, Frank?

—Yeah. I'll pick up the tab, said Frank.

—No, we'll pay, said a chorus of voices. Gringovitch gave each of us a portrait. That's the least we can do to reciprocate.

—It wouldn't be a gift if you paid, said Gringovitch to the group. Turning to Frank he said, You don't have to pay Frank. I've got plenty of cash.

—My dinner is on the tab. You are *my* guest. Besides, paying makes me feel righteous and prosperous plus, you didn't draw a portrait of me, so were even Stephen.

Frank and Gringovitch walked the two blocks to Frank's studio.

—Christ, it got cold, said Gringovitch.

—I thought you were a tough Ruskie from Chicago, said Frank, punching Gringovitch on the shoulder.

—Right, but I'm only wearing this Fisherman's sweater. The humidity makes the wind chill colder.

—In Wisconsin we call this cold after leaving a bar, the beer chill factor.

—Wind chill, beer chill, it's still colder than a witch's tit.
To be continued.

