

The Nude Pianist: A Novel:

Chapter 42

by Daniel Harris

Angelique Brody, 49 Champion of Modern Art, Dies in Plane Crash

By Sheldon Warner

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Yesterday's crash of American Airlines Flight 625 from New York's JFK to Harry S. Truman Airport in St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands claimed Angelique Brody, one of America's most visible and influential art dealers and fine art attorneys.

Called the Doyen of Madison Avenue by peers and artists, Ms. Brody was president of Brody Artist Management. She proved a tireless champion for America's resurgent post-war artists. Over her twenty-four-year career, she managed the careers of many *avant-garde* American painters and sculptors, guiding their careers as an art dealer, attorney, and confidant. Her most recent success is Francesco Martinelli, whose career she steered to the top of the U. S. art world.

Angelique Brody was born in Manhattan in 1927 to the late Charles Brody, a Manhattan labor attorney, and FDR advisor. Her mother, the late Martha Elmsworth Brody, was a skilled amateur painter and tireless fundraiser and board member of New York City's Art Students League. Angelique Brody graduated from Barnard College ('48) and Yale Law School ('51).

Ms. Brody leaves no surviving relatives. Her artists plan a memorial service at a future date. In lieu of flowers, donations may be made to the Martha and Angelique Brody Fund for the Arts, New York, NY.

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Frank sat in Anatoly Gringovitch's front parlor in Park Slope, Brooklyn. He'd traveled to Brooklyn to seek advice from the older, more experienced painter. Since connecting four years ago, they had become good friends. The relationship had been good for their art, their careers, and they genuinely like one another.

—Now I'm really screwed, said Frank, tossing the newspaper onto his host's couch. I'm losing my loft, and Angelique Brody is dead. I checked my bank account yesterday, and I only have \$12,200. Brody's assets are frozen until they probate the will, which no one seems to be able to find.

—I thought you told me you had a net worth of over \$200,000, said Gringovitch with a wry grin, lighting a Balkan Sobranie cigarette.

—Well, I thought I did. Angelique told me I had almost a quarter mil in equities, but when I contacted her attorney, Emma Peyole, she said that the books were a Gordian knot of complex funds, trusts, and investments.

—But she was so together, how could this be?

—Well, I remember Angelique asking me to sign a paper that let her pool her artists' earnings to make more money on the stock market. According to Peyole, there are records for whose money went where. So far, no one has found her will, which further complicates the issue. Meanwhile, I've been told all the funds are frozen.

—Her fucking lawyer doesn't have a copy of her will? said Gringovitch. Sounds fishy to me.

—Well, that's what Emma Peyole told me. The will wasn't in Angelique's safe deposit box, and Peyole didn't have a copy of Angelique's will or the irrevocable trust documents. Peyole suspects Angelique had them on the plane with her.

—Jesus, Frank, how does this shit happen to you? asked Gringovitch. My dealer, Dan Sarras, is a convicted felon, but I don't have any problems with him at all.

—Worse, Peyole is having trouble getting Angelique's body transported back to New York City. It's in a special morgue in St. Thomas as part of the crash investigation.

—That's fucked up. Wana a beer?

—Got any whiskey?

—I think there's a bottle of Jack Daniels.

—On ice, if you have it.

—This isn't some downtown loft, my friend. This is my home. It's fully equipped and stocked. Your wish, my command.

Frank walked around the parlor inspecting the six-foot square Gringovitch abstracts that hung on the walls.

—Are these paintings recent? I don't remember them from the last time I was here.

—Three of the four I painted in the last two months, said Gringovitch from the kitchen. The one over the fireplace is about a year old.

Gringovitch brought a tray of ice and glasses, setting it on a sideboard along with a plate of crudités and spicy hummus. From a glass door liquor cabinet, he took an unopened quart of Jack Daniels.

—Can I trust you to drink this and not destroy my fucking house? asked Gringovitch, giving Frank a faux punch to the chin.

—Not to worry, I haven't been manic in years. I've got no desire to be in a straight jacket in Bellevue subjected to electro-shock therapy. If I start getting rambunctious, put me in a cab. I'm on a two-drink limit.

—Go slow then, I'd like to talk shop.

—No more than one drink per hour, said Frank, putting his glass down on a side table.

—Hey, asshole. Use a coaster that's an expensive antique. What are you some fucking Wisconsin farmer, said Anatoly in mock anger.

—Sorry, said Frank, wiping the wet ring with his sleeve. I guess you just can't take some people to a nice place.

—No problem Frank, I was pulling your chain. I found that table on the street. You can see I replaced one of the legs.

—So, said Frank, raising his glass. I propose a toast to Angelique Brody.

—Here's to Angelique, said Gringovitch, the only class act in the art world.

The two men drank the toast. Frank stood up and paced the room.

—You know, the weekend before Angelique died, said Frank, she invited me to her apartment. I ended up filling a large sketchbook of drawings of her.

—Clothed or unclothed, asked Gringovitch, giving Frank a leer.

—Both. When we went to meet with the Whitney Museum people, I noticed that she had lost weight and was looking quite good. She told me she slimmed down, not that she was ever heavy, so she could wear a bikini when she got to St. Thomas. I asked her if I could paint her nude. She acted insulted, but I could see the idea working on her.

Fast forward to last weekend. Angelique visited my loft to see my new series of paintings I'm calling *Atmospheres*. Well, I hadn't eaten anything that day except half a stale bagel. She offered to make me a gourmet meal if I came to her apartment. She had her driver stop at all these specialty food shops.

—Stop with all the petty details, already. Did you bone her?

—Jesus, Anatoly, show some respect. Anyway, we made this great dinner together and drank a lot of wine. As you suspect, we ended up in the sack.

Afterward I made some nice drawings of her sleeping, and later *à la toilette* as the frogs say: bathing, combing her hair. Like Degas nudes.

—So, how was she?

—What do you mean? As a model or lover?

—Both.

—She was a so-so model but got into it with some coaching. She was starved for affection and an affectionate lover. Very refined.

—Refined? What the hell is that? Did she wear pearls and white gloves?

—Well, it wasn't like Elaine Aster who tried to separate me from my dick.

—Oh, you mean nice slow old-lady sex.

—You're incorrigible, said Frank, shaking his head. Christ, show some respect for the dead, you sex maniac.

—Need a refill, asked Gringovitch.

—I'm still good.

—So, Frank, what are you going to do for a gallery to show your work?

—I haven't the faintest. Elaine Aster wants me back, but I'm leery of her, especially now that I don't have Angelique to protect me.

—I'll ask Dan Sarras to check out your paintings. What you're doing now is what he likes to sell.

—That might be okay. I don't know, though. You said he was a convicted felon.

—He's never cheated me. If he can deliver it in person, he pays immediately and in cash. Saves a bundle on taxes. My freezer compartment is full of Tupperware stuffed with Franklins.

—Aren't you worried that the boys will steal from you?

—They and my wife, Francesca, live full time in Rome. The schools here are just plain dangerous: drugs, guns, knives, and gangs. We had to do something, so I'm renting a big space in Rome. They go to a private school there. Three residences and two sons keep me working.

—Does Francesca work?

—No, she's traditional Italian. The boys come home for lunch. She's a full-time, stay-at-home mom, a terrific cook, and she tutors the boys, whose Italian is straight street. I don't understand half of what they say.

—Do you still have the place in Paris?

—Yes, but I rented it to a woman for five years. She paid with an Arshile Gorky painting. Actually the last picture he painted. It's called *The Unfaithful Wife*, a rare and valuable item.

—Wow, you own a Gorky original? Is it here?

—No. Dan Sarras has it and is doing some restoration work on it. He's a skilled restorer. Forgers have to know all facets of the trade.

—I'd love to see it when you get it back.

—It depicts Gorky's wife Agnes Magruder, about to get boned by Roberto Mata, the Chilean painter. They were lovers, a fact that drove Gorky to commit suicide.

Both men took a sip of their drinks.

—Try this hummus, said Gringovitch, helping himself to a broccoli floweret, which he dipped in the hummus. I made it myself.

—Thanks. I'll try it with the celery, said Frank. Gorky was a tragic case.

—Gorky mentored De Kooning, who turned on him after his suicide, said Gringovitch. By then those Abstract Expressionist painters were beginning to taste success, drink heavily and fight among themselves.

—Not to change the subject, but do you have any leads on a space for me? It's May, and I only have 'till the end of June.

—Glad you asked. There's a cheap space on Van Dyke Street in Red Hook.

—The street's got the right name.

—It's an industrial site, so there's that issue, but Red Hook is pretty much abandoned except for a few chop shops and public housing. Back in the 19th century the building was a sail-making loft. Until a few years ago, it was a ship propeller fabrication and repair shop. The offices were on a balcony floor, which you could convert to living space. The drawback is you'll have to use artificial light unless you cut a skylight in the ceiling. Nice oak floors, unfortunately, stained with cutting oil, but easily restored.

—How much are they asking?

—Here's the deal: some mafia guy owns it. He occasionally parks stolen cars there. But he's willing to rent the space for \$500 a month. It's wired for 400 Amps and has an electric meter, so you won't have to steal electricity. There's one sink and a toilet on the balcony floor.

—Sounds like a regular place. When can I see it?

—Are you sober enough for a short train ride and a long walk?

—I'm following you.

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There was a cold wind blowing off New York Harbor, only a block from where they stood. The building was near the corner of Van Dyke and Conover Street.

—Probably brutal in the winter down in this part of Brooklyn, said Gringovitch.

—Probably, but it's better than a cardboard box on the street. My Greene Street loft has no heat. I've been seven years with a single space heater.

—You weren't this close to the water, Frank. It's damp and bone-chilling cold being so close to the water. The wind rifles across the harbor.

—How do we see the inside?

—I know where the emergency key is hidden.

They didn't need the key. A large Italian man in a Camel Hair coat exited the building. The man wore a fedora and a suit under his unbuttoned coat.

—Wadda yuse want?

—I'm Anatoly Gringovitch, Mr. Zambrano, remember I talked to you about my friend renting this space. This is my friend Francesco Martinelli.

—Martinelli? Ain't you the painter?

—Yes, sir.

—You gotta learn how to paint pretty pictures. You never gonna sell them weird paintings.

—Yes, sir.

—Can we look at the space? asked Gringovitch.

—Yeah. Help yuseselves. Make sure the door's locked when ya leave.

—Thank you, Mr. Zambrano.

—Martinelli, is it? You don't look Italian.

—Yes, sir.

—Martinelli, here's my card. If you wanna rent, call me. \$500 a month plus first and last month. 1500 clams up front. You artist types got a bad rep.

—Yes, sir, said Frank, taking the proffered card.

At first glance, the space was disgusting, but Anatoly pointed out how to fix it up. With improvements, Frank imaged how he might make it a great studio but a poor home.

—I think you should take it, said Anatoly.

—You think so?

—Absolutely. I'll help you fix it up. I have good relations with the suppliers around here. I restored my house on 3rd street, so I know the good guys from the shysters.

—Is it safe here?

—Frank! Your landlord is a fucking notorious crime boss. You think some street hoods are going to mess with you? They'll sleep with the fish if Zambrano knows one of 'em laid a hand on you.

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It was after midnight when Frank returned to his loft on Greene Street. In the mail was a bill for \$2400 from Grillo Moving and Storage: \$1200 past due, and \$1200 for June.

—Well, Bounder, Frank said to his cat, 1200 bucks a month, that's how much Angelique was paying for storage. That's got to end. First thing tomorrow, my paintings come here. I'm going to have to rent that space in Red Hook. Looks like we're movin' to Brooklyn, Bounder. What do you think, big guy?

—Meow.

—Bounder in Brooklyn. Has a nice ring to it. You want your din-din?

—Meow.

—Thought so, me, too.

To be continued.

