

# The Ringlet: Part II

by Daniel Harris

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Ashford

Ashford Garth Willingsham IV stood looking out at the Gulf of Mexico from his mansion on Longboat Key. In his right hand was a letter from his divorce lawyer, Reynard Foxx, informing him that Foxx had successfully negotiated a divorce from this third wife, Phaedra, for the cool sum of \$2M and Ashford's luxury condo on Majorca. Legal fees of 25% were not included in the stated sum. Sign the papers and he would be free. Contest the agreement and it could cost him upwards of \$6M. The fact that Ashford had set-up his oldest son by his first marriage for a tryst with Phaedra for the express purpose of this divorce looked like it could save him over four million dollars. He hoped his son, Ashford Garth Willingsham V, had enjoyed his romp. V as he was differentiated from his father IV, was a New York City metro-sexual of indeterminate and all-encompassing sexuality. Ashford knew Phaedra could handle both sides of any sexual equation.

Ashford's cell phone rang. He looked at the caller ID: Phaedra.

-Yes, Phaedra, said Ashford in a tired sarcastic voice.

-Are you going to sign the divorce papers, or do I sic my lawyer on you for another four million of your grandfather's money?

-They're signed, he replied.

-I'm keeping all the furniture and the paintings in the Majorca condo.

-You furnished the place so keep them. I'm not contesting anything with the condo. The papers say as is, and as is it shall be.

-Very big of you.

-Are you still seeing V?

-Yes. His dick gets hard without pills or pumps.

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-He's still young, said Ashford wearily.

-So am I, said Phaedra.

Ashford did not reply.

-Dad says I should sock it to you for all I can get, said Phaedra.

-You're already worth forty million. How much money do you need?

-You can never be too rich, replied Phaedra.

-Let's not go there, answered Ashford.

-You're such an asshole.

-Enough, replied Ashford. In this market you should be able to get two million for the condo. (Unless, he thought to himself, you still like fornicating with Majorcan goats and want to live on an island of pod people.)

-I have some things in the Longboat house. You will send them to me, she snipped.

-That's not part of the agreement, he reminded her, but I will have the Lexus shipped to your father's Bucks County home.

-What about my clothes? I have some expensive fur pieces.

-I'll put them in the car.

-Those rednecks will steal them from the car.

-Not my problem, Phaedra. You should have thought about that before you decided to test the family virility.

-You are such a bastard. No wonder all your women leave you.

-Good-bye Phaedra. It was a good run, but now it's over.

He ended the call.

Ashford was standing on the beach in front of his home waiting for the green flash that occurs the instant the sun falls below the horizon. His cell phone rang. The caller ID said Christie's Auction House. Ashford didn't want to be distracted from a possible green flash sighting. He ignored the call.

An hour later, the same caller ID appeared on his cell phone.

-Yes?

-Mr. Ashford Willingsham? My name is Conway Pursethwaite. I'm with Christie's Fine Art Auction house in New York City.

-What do you want? asked Ashford.

-We have a recently consigned painting that that we think might be of interest to you.

-Is that so? said Ashford.

-Yes. A number of months ago, you sent us an inquiry for a sexually explicit painting. One of our clients has deceased and his estate has offered an absolutely unique painting for sale by auction. Given the nature of the subject matter, it will be a closed auction: invited bidders only.

-Who is the artist, may I ask?

-An artist well known in this field, Carl Peltmeister.

-I don't think I know the name.

-He's quite well known among a small coterie of connoisseurs. At one time he lived in Sarasota, Florida, but his current whereabouts are unknown. He must be over seventy if he is still alive.

-What is the subject matter?

-Well, I don't know how to put this, but it is very sexually explicit.

-Tell me, I'm not a child, said Ashford.

-A twelve-foot pudenda.

-What's the medium?

-Acrylic on canvas. May I text you a digital image?

-Sure, but don't expect me to bid, said Ashford

-When you see this masterful painting, you will be an eager bidder. It is an exceptional piece titled: *The Ringlet*.

-Not some dyke with a ring in her clit is it? scoffed Ashford.

-Oh, no, very subtle, even respectful.

-Send me the photo. When's the auction?

-In two weeks at our Rockefeller Center auction room. You will need a fifty thousand dollar marker, returnable should your bid not be successful. The estimated selling price is 100,000 to 500,000 dollars.

-Send me the photo. If I think it is worth acquiring, I'll send you a check.

-There is a pdf file that is the bidding contract. Please print it, complete it, and mail it with your check or a wire transfer to our

bank account. Our SWIFT account number is on the form should you choose to use a foreign bank.

-Just send me the picture, said Ashford. I know the drill. He had suffered enough money haggling in the last six months.

-Only two hundred select former clients have been invited to bid. It is a rare opportunity. The artist sold the painting for ten thousand dollars five years ago. If nothing else, it would be a terrific investment.

Ashford realized he had made a big mistake. He was the only bidder in the room who was not an agent for someone. When he saw the digital picture that Conway Pursethwaite had texted him, he knew he had to own *The Ringlelet*. He had saved about three million on the divorce from Phaedra after he paid Foxx. It wasn't new money, but money saved, which he now felt he could spend. All in all, if he were the successful bidder, it would be the cheapest woman he ever had.

The auction came down to three bidders: Ashford; a beautiful Asian woman on a phone acting as the agent for some rich Chinese businessman; and a Christie's employee dressed in a Chanel suit, also on a telephone, who represented some hedge-fund mogul. At 750 thousand, the Chinese businessman's agent quit bidding. It was down to Ashford and the anonymous hedge-fund jerk. Ashford won the bid at \$1.15M.

Ashford called the interior designer Phaedra had contracted for the Longboat house. The designer had a one-name handle, Stick. He was light in the loafers and obnoxiously gay, but knew his craft.

-The bedroom is the only place for this painting, simpered Stick.

-Do you think any woman would want to sleep in my bed with this painting on the wall? asked Ashford.

-How many nights do you want a woman to stay around? asked Stick. You've had three wives. It's time you had women for pleasure only. They will want to compete with the painting. If they think they are a better amusement, they will have the painting removed. You

will move it to the den, which will become your special *sanctorum sexualis*.

-This painting is too unusual to hang on a wall. Can you think of a good way to display it?

-Mirrors. You will be engulfed in 360-degrees of perfect pudenda.

After the painting was reframed and hung in Ashford's bedroom, he threw a party for his close male friends. When the group was appropriately lubricated with wine, whisky and weed, Ashford led the group into his bedroom.

There was a collective gasp. Appreciative comments, as well as salacious ones, were quick to the lips of the viewers. All the men agreed that the three dimensional pudenda was a great aphrodisiac.

After the guests had departed, Ashford and his friend Derek, who Ashford had known since prep school, sat in the living room looking at the moon over the Gulf.

-Ash, I wonder if that is a real girl or one that Peltmeister made up in some alcohol or drug aided hallucination? asked Derek.

-Yes, it's almost too perfect. I've never known any woman to have such perfectly formed symmetrical parts, and I've known quite a few.

-Do you know where Peltmeister painted this painting? asked Derek.

-According to the papers that came with the painting, it was painted about five years ago in Sarasota.

-Well, if he used a real model, she must be in the area somewhere, said Derek.

-You are probably correct. But it's not like I would recognize her face on the street. That is not the view of a woman one often sees. Even vulgar strippers don't get this explicit. How do we find this woman? asked Ashford.

-Ash, first you have to find Carl Peltmeister, said Derek.

-Yes, that is the key, agreed Ashford.

Finding the artist turned out to be easier than either man thought. That Sunday's *Herald-Tribune* had a feature article about Carl Peltmeister, who had satirized Seward Johnson's painted aluminum statue, *Unconditional Surrender*, a kitsch rendering of the

famous photo of the sailor kissing the nurse in Times Square. *Unconditional Surrender* was installed on Sarasota's bay front and the object of considerable controversy. The article mentioned that Carl was a Sarasota resident. Carl's painting, *Forceful Surrender*, was part of a career retrospective at a Chelsea art gallery in New York City. *Forceful Surrender* had the sailor raping the nurse while a marine held a bayonet to her head.

Ashford contacted his friend, the Sarasota tax collector. She gave him Carl's address. When he knocked Carl's door there was no answer. A woman who lived across the street saw Ashford standing in front of Carl's house. She came out to her front yard.

-Are you looking for Carl? asked the woman.

-In fact I am. I bought one of his paintings. I would like to talk to him about it, said Ashford.

-He is a sick man.

-What do you mean sick? Physically or otherwise?

-Otherwise, spat the woman. He paints big pictures of women's privates and now he desecrates a hallowed American image.

-I think that's the man I'm looking for, said Ashford.

-Who are you?

-An interested party. What's your name?

-My name is Marge. If you are looking for Carl, you will most likely find him in his studio on Orange Avenue, said Marge realizing she had said too much.

-Thank you Marge. You have been very helpful. I want to invite him to a party.

-Carl doesn't deserve a party. He's a sick man.

-At his age, it goes with the territory, said Ashford trying to soften up Marge. Did Carl ever paint you?

-Don't insult me. I would never let that a man look at my privates much less paint them the way he does.

-Has anyone ever filed charges against him? asked Ash.

-Not that I know.

-Has he ever ruined a woman's reputation?

-Not that I know. You are asking too many questions.

Ashford looked at the woman. She was in her late twenties or early thirties, a little on the heavy side and definitely not cultured. She probably listened to country western music, watched daytime television and ate chips out of a bag.

-If I invite you to a party on Longboat will you come?

-Maybe. What kind of party.

-I'm showing my recent art acquisitions. One is a painting by Carl Peltmeister.

-Yuck. No thanks.

-You can bring a friend. There will be live music, dancing, good food and drink.

-What kind of music.

-The Allman Brothers.

-You're kidding.

-I kid you not. It will be a great party. What's your last name so I can put you on the guest list? You will get a formal invitation in a week.

-Marjorie Turner. You can see my address on the mailbox. The Allman Brothers? mused Marge. Are you for real? Or are you a pervert like Carl setting a trap to lure young girls into your house?

-There will be over a hundred guests. Please don't come into my home if you don't feel comfortable. And, yes, it will be the Allman Brothers Band live.

Carl told Ashford he never went to parties. He felt the press of time. He had paintings he had to finish and he needed every spare minute of what remained of his life.

-Photo-realism is a very demanding, time-consuming *métier*, said Carl.

-If you change your mind, I will send a car for you. You only need to stay long enough to confirm something about a painting of yours I purchased.

-Do I have to come to the party? Can't I do it some other time? asked Carl.

-You will understand when you arrive at the party. You only need to answer one question.

-I will come after eleven. Send a car to my studio on Orange Avenue.

On Friday nights, Marge and her friend Isabella had dinner together. This Friday, they ate at Burns Court Café, a French bistro not two blocks from Marge's house. Since it was the second Friday of the month, there was a jazz combo playing. It was also when they had an art opening. The bistro exhibited art and changed the exhibit monthly. This month's artist was Anatoly Gringovitch. To Marge, Gringovitch looked like a bomb-throwing Russian Jew right out of a Nazi propaganda poster. His paintings were wild abstracts dripping with sexual innuendo. Gringovitch was working the bistro explaining his pictures to any patron showing an interest. Gringovitch even borrowed the reed player's flute and played *Norwegian Wood* with the band.

When Isabella asked about one of the paintings, Gringovitch was all over her, acting silly and telling tall tales about his life. Isabella was beautiful, but not pretty. Her perfectly proportioned features were a little too big for cute, yet they were not coarse. Her red hair was pulled back in a large French twist. She was very flirtatious with Gringovitch and engaged him in snappy word play. Marge had to pull Isabella away from Gringovitch.

-He's way too old for you, scolded Marge.

-But I like his eyes and wit. I think I'm in love, replied Isabella. It's the first time I've been excited about a man in years.

-You've had too much wine, said Marge.

When Marge received the invitation to Ashford's party she was conflicted. What if the paintings were Carl's porno pictures? She would be mortified to be seen there. If she were photographed attending, or saw someone she knew from work, she might lose her job. Isabella could lose her teaching job. Someone might think they posed for those sex paintings. On the other hand, to be at a private party where the Allman Brothers Band was playing was very



tempting. She and Isabella went back and forth for days. They finally decided to risk it and attend.

-We'll be back for a second set, announced Greg Allman.

The audience gave the band a loud round of applause with much shouting, whistling and stomping of feet.

Carl entered the front door accompanied by the chauffer who drove him to Ashford's mansion.

-Mr. Carl Peltsmeister, announced the butler to Ashford.

Ashford gave Carl a warm handshake and greeting.

-Where is the painting? asked Carl.

Ashford showed him into the bedroom.

-Yes, a clever display. Too much like the circus, but then, this is a circus town, said Carl dryly.

-How would you hang it? asked Ashford.

-By itself in a man's den, replied Carl, or donate it to MOMA.

-I see, said Ashford. You think this is too garish?

-Not to my taste. It is no longer art, just an entertainment for conjugal visitors.

Ashford was crestfallen.

-Did you see the girl among the guests when you walked through the house? asked Ashford.

-Yes. She has red hair in a French twist and a green mini-dress, replied Carl. Now I must leave.

Ashford escorted Carl to the limo.

-Goodnight, Carl, and thank you for attending. I love the painting.

-Leave the girl alone. She is an ingénue, a naïf. Let her live her poor miserable life, said Carl from the backseat of the limo.

Ashford did not find Isabella immediately. He took a glass of champagne and worked the room: glad-handing here, slapping a back there, air-kissing women and flattering them on their beauty. Acting the role of the gracious generous host.

The band was tuning up on stage for the second set when Ashford spotted Isabella.

-What is your name? asked Ashford.

-Isabella. Who are you?

-I am the host. My name is Ashford, but you can call me Ash.

-What do you want? asked Isabella.

-Isabella I have something to show you, said Ashford.

-Can I bring my friend?

-Sure, but you will be happier if you didn't, replied Ashford.

Ashford escorted Isabella to the master bedroom.

-I will stay outside. You can stay as long as you want.

Ashford opened the door to the bedroom. Isabella walked into the bedroom. It was dimly lit. When she was in the room Ashford closed the door behind her. The lights came on for maximum effect.

Isabella tried to shriek, but no sound left her mouth. The red ringlet was multiplied into a score of blood-red garrotes. Overwhelmed by the psychedelic multiple images of her most private femininity, she clutched the locket containing the lone red hair and collapsed on the bed.

